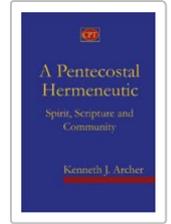


A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community (book review)

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The present title is Kenneth Archer's PhD dissertation submitted at University of St. Andrews, Scotland. It has been first published in 2004 by T&T Clark and republished by CPT Press in 2009. One does not need to think twice about whether to read it or not, as it seems to be one of the best books on Pentecostal hermeneutics so far, perhaps seminal for the ongoing discussion. Archer is a seasoned pastor, Pentecostal educator, and scholar. He currently teaches at Southeastern University.



Archer's major thesis in this book is that Pentecostal movement needs to retrieve and adopt its own specific hermeneutic which reflects its origins and inner dynamics. In other words, evangelical modernistic approaches are not enough (2). Archer is convinced that

there exists within early Pentecostalism an authentic Pentecostal approach to interpretation that is rooted in and guided by Pentecostal identity which can be retrieved and critically reappropriated within the current postmodern context. (3)

Chapter 1. Pentecostalism as we know it has developed from Topeka and Azusa revivals. It was extremely diverse at the beginning. Archer makes it clear that its theological roots were predominantly Wesleyan much rather than Reformed. “Pentecostalism was a development of Wesleyan thought. Pentecostalism could not have come from the Reformed tradition,” says Archer (22). Pentecostalism has protested modernity, cold cerebral Protestantism, and “the whole thrust of modern urban-capitalistic society” (23). Pentecostal evangelistic outreach was motivated by its premillennial eschatology. Pentecostalism did emerge from lower classes of society, but it was more than a refuge of the socially deprived. It contained some serious religious claims (32). Spirit baptism constituted a mystical encounter that “invested life with meaning” (43).

Chapter 2. At the break of 19th century (1880–1920), paradigm shift shattered American biblical scholarship and two different groups of essentially the same philosophical convictions emerged: Modernists/liberals emphasized the role of experience in religion and neglected the literal and objective sense of Scripture in favor of new scientific discoveries. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, refused these discoveries in favor of apologetically defended plain sense of Scripture. Pentecostals basically adopted both emphases: Religious experience backed by the plain sense of God's Word. Fundamentalists as Calvinists were essentially inimical to Pentecostals (61).

Pentecostals adopted what Archer simply calls “Bible Reading Approach”. It was a simple reading method, in which the reader basically searched the Bible for biblical topics with help of a concordance. This often resulted in theological method of proof-texting, although not necessarily (e.g. Traina). However, if Fundamentalists and Modernists shared a common modernistic philosophical background, Pentecostals followed a paramodern path. They gave up on apologetics and wanted simply “to live the Gospel faithfully before God” (87). From 1920's on, Pentecostals have left this paramodern path and attempted to align more closely with the Fundamentalist wing.

Chapter 3. Pentecostals were, however, no Fundamentalists. They were concerned with biblical religion unbound by rigid doctrines. They were radically noncessationist in every respect of their Bible reading and such reading was the only source of their practical Bible doctrines developed with help of their Bible Reading Method. This simplicity along with the constant emphasis on the Book of Acts gave birth e.g. to the Oneness Pentecostalism

For Oneness Pentecostals there is no difference between being born of the Spirit and the baptism of the Spirit. This was a new challenge to the theological position of both Holiness groups (Wesleyan and Keswickian) and Trinitarian Pentecostals. For Oneness Pentecostals, salvation was only complete when one experientially passed through the three phases. The three phases of the full salvation experience as outlined in Acts 2.38 included repentance, water baptism in the name of Jesus for the cleansing of sin, and Spirit baptism evidenced by speaking in other tongues (not necessarily an existing yet unlearned language: xenoglossa). (121–22)

Chapter 4. Every community has a shared memory, a story, a *raison d'être*. The primary organizational motif in Pentecostalism is the Latter Rain motif (136). Supernatural signs were welcome to reinforce this notion and the Latter Rain

prophetic motif was also an important principle in Bible reading. According to Myland, Scripture had not only two senses – historical and spiritual – but sometimes also a prophetic sense. The Bible was supposed to be studied with history.

Pentecostals

were marginalized people who heeded the call to empty themselves of ‘self-love’ and ‘self-will’ and embraced the ‘Latter Rain’ story, which was the restoration of the Gospel of Christ for the preparation and participation of the end time harvest. (150)

Archer defines Central Narrative Convictions of early Pentecostals as follows:

1. God poured His Spirit, but the Church turned apostate.
2. God withdrew His Spirit from the apostate hierarchical Roman Church.
3. The Latter Rain outpouring was the beginning of the end of the story.

Pentecostals were distant from dispensationalism, for dispensationalism is essentially cessationist, whereas Pentecostalism is radically non-cessationist.

As Gerald Sheppard points out, those Pentecostals who used dispensationalism violated its hermeneutical rules. A Pentecostal would read ‘both the Old Testament and the Gospels as a literal address to the Christian Church and to the contemporary arena in which Pentecostals did their theology’. (168)

Chapter 5. No one comes to the Bible as a blanket sheet. Biblical interpretation must be concerned with both historical horizon and with horizon of the reader and his community. Archer thus frowns upon admonitions of Gordon Anderson, who wants Pentecostals to take refuge in grammatical historical method of mainstream evangelicalism. Archer is simply not content with such an approach. Drawing on McLean, he suggests that traditional evangelical/Fundamentalist hermeneutic is essentially inimical to Pentecostalism and should hence be avoided by the movement.

A strict adherence to traditional evangelical/fundamentalist hermeneutic principles leads to a position which, in its most positive forms, suggests the distinctives of the twentieth century Pentecostal movement are perhaps nice but not necessary; important but not vital to the life of the Church in the twentieth century. In its more negative forms, it leads to a total rejection of Pentecostal phenomena. (172)

A Pentecostal believer believes not only in inspiration, but also in illumination by the Holy Spirit. She believes that it is not the reader who masters the text, but vice versa: text masters the reader. The false dichotomy of what the text meant and what it means must be overcome (sic! 192). Archer refers to Stronstad, who

recognizes that normative doctrinal positions cannot be validated by exegesis alone. The doctrinal positions must be livable and demonstrable within the Pentecostal community. In this manner, the community validates the understanding of Scripture. (194)

Archer takes an issue with the so called “principlizing”, i.e. peeling off the husk of historical-cultural conditioning from the kernel of the objective, verifiable principle. This practice is typical for historically oriented Evangelical interpretive methods. Its downside is that it jeopardizes narrative as the main genre of Scripture. Historical approach thus leads the movement in wrong direction and emphasis on historical concerns has led to the eclipse of the text itself and of the biblical narrative (207). Meaning is not something we discover, but something we construct (208).

Chapter 6. Archer proposes a strategy focused on narrative and on the relationship between the text and the community. Such an approach will incorporate text centered and reader oriented method. Meaning must be arrived at “through a dialectical process based upon an interdependent dialogical relationship between Scripture, Spirit and community” (214–15). Text centered approach is congenial to early Pentecostals. When mentioning the **text**, we are obviously talking about its final canonical form. **Community** members are those who share Central Narrative Convictions of Pentecostalism. Emphasis is put on narrative criticism, which unlike historical criticism invites participation of the reader. The text is undetermined and meaning is a function of a reading strategy (sic! 234–36). **Holy Spirit** speaks through community and Scripture.

My overall impression from this book is very good. It will most certainly find its way to my undergraduate syllabi. Archers style is clear and readable and his survey of the early Pentecostal reading practices and their theological roots is extremely valuable. He does make a case for a postmodern kind of reading and basically recommends Pentecostals to assemble a

critical reading theory and thus continue biblical scholarship within the movement, but he doesn't overstate his case and he does leave much space for further discussion. His primary goal is, moreover, to advocate for a distinct Pentecostal reading practice rather than for a philosophical hermeneutical position or for a specific postmodern ideologies.

If I had to make a recommendation, I would encourage Archer to balance his guarded rhetoric concerning historical approaches to Scripture. Granted that certain purportedly historical oriented practices have little to offer to Pentecostal approach (e.g. dispensationalism). But still historical approach to Scripture is extremely beneficial to Pentecostals at least in two respects. Firstly, it could tell them what the text could not possibly mean. In some cases this could seem limiting, but having heard of nonsensical frenzies of certain Pentecostal ministers, some limitations on interpretive freedom might take certain currents of popular Pentecostalism back on the track. Secondly, as radical non-cessationists, Pentecostals should be concerned with history probably even more than cessationist fundamentalists and mainline Protestants, because in order to proclaim non-cessation, one should first be able to tell with high level of certainty what it is that has not ceased and should continue in practice and experience of the contemporary Pentecostal communities. And if something has been lost and needs to be restored, one must first know how did it look in the first place.

My second recommendation would be to expand discussion more into the field of philosophical hermeneutics, where it belongs anyway. Even when the author makes allusions to these discussions (pp. 179, 182, 201, 206, etc.), he doesn't fully show us his Gadamerian trumps and Ricoeurian aces, as one would expect in a theoretical treatise which employs such a distinct philosophical elaboration. Absence of this discussion is not detrimental to Archer's overall argument, but its presence would improve clear delineation of his starting points.

As I said, however, this is an exquisite book on distinct Pentecostal biblical hermeneutics, one that I will be tempted to reopen time to time.

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