

Developing a Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Interpreting the Mighty Deeds of God

Daniel Tomberlin ©2023

What is truth? Is there truth? Or, are there many truths? Postmodernism asserts that there is no single truth that should command the attention of humanity. Instead, humanity consists of various tribes, each with its own tribal story, and each story is an equally valid truth. But then again, maybe not. If one's tribe has been oppressed, its story is given priority. Allow me to illustrate.

God created a garden. Then God created humanity – male and female – in God's own image. Also, there was a snake in the garden. So, our story has four principal characters – God, Adam, Eve, and the snake (Genesis 3:1-19). According to the postmodern hermeneutic each character has a story and each story is truth. God's story is that God planted the Tree of Life (that is, knowledge of God) and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (that is, knowledge without God). God warned Adam and Eve that if they ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would die. The snake tempted Adam and Eve and they disobeyed God; therefore, God exiled them from the Garden. The original sin is idolatry.

Adam's story is that God provided a helper, Eve, so that they could share life in the garden in fellowship with God. But his helper convinced him to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. In Adam's story, the fall of humanity is the result of his sharing authority with a woman. The original sin is feminism.

Eve's story is that God placed her and Adam in the Garden together, but she was subject to male domination. Furthermore, the fall is God's fault because God created the snake. The original sin is patriarchy.

The snake's story is that it too was created by God. Like all other creatures, the snake was subject to human domination. But snakes don't belong in Eden, so it entered the garden surreptitiously and told its truth – that God was lying to Adam and Eve. The original sin is ecological imperialism.

According to postmodern hermeneutics the voice of the oppressed is given greater authority. The snake is the most intersectioned character in the story. Therefore, the story of the snake reveals the greatest truth. After all, the snake bore the harshest judgement and has been oppressed by humans throughout history. God is the privileged antagonist who sought to deny humanity the knowledge of good and evil. God unjustly persecuted the snake for its attempt to enlighten the human mind. God's judgement against Adam, Eve, and the snake is an act of divine injustice. God is the ultimate oppressor and therefore God's story must be suppressed. So,

the snake hopes for the day in which the world is decolonized of all human influence, humans become extinct, and the world is dominated by reptiles.

My tongue-in-cheek retelling of the Edenic narrative demonstrates that biblical and theological hermeneutics have become a postmodern tower of Babel in which there are many narratives that may not be faithful to the sacred metanarrative. History demonstrates that diverse epistemologies tend to provoke violent conflict. Likewise, a diversity of hermeneutical methods in the theological task tend to proclaim different gospels and promote schism within the body of Christ.

This paper will be a limited attempt to offer a hermeneutic that is faithful to the historic Christian Faith and informed by Pentecostal spirituality. My thesis is that because Pentecostalism is a restoration movement, Pentecostals should seek to recover apostolic and patristic hermeneutical methodologies and apply them to the present context. I propose to (1) discuss how the Pentecost event of Acts 2 informs Pentecostal hermeneutics; (2) offer a Pentecostal appropriation of Vincent of Lérins theological hermeneutic; and (3) offer reflections on how Pentecostal hermeneutics are significant to the local congregation.

The Hermeneutic of Pentecost

. . . we hear them speaking in our own tongues of *the mighty deeds of God* (Acts 2:11).¹

The primary distinctives of Pentecostal spirituality are *subsequence* and *signs*.² The distinctive of *subsequence* suggests that Pentecost is subsequent to Easter as an historical event, and that the reception of the fullness of the Holy Spirit is subsequent to repentance and confession in the *via salutis*. Subsequence speaks to the *ongoing activity* of the Holy Spirit in the redemption of the cosmos. Pentecostals insist that the Holy Spirit moves through history.³ Likewise, Pentecostal theology is dynamic rather than static. Pentecostal theology is developing; it is being formed, and will continue to be formed. Like all theologians, Pentecostal theologians read and reflect upon the spoken and written word in dialogue with other theological traditions. But there is an additional element in Pentecostal theology, that is, the Spirit continues to speak, to inspire, and to teach. The Pentecostal theologian seeks to listen to the prophetic voice of the Word and Spirit, to discern the truth the Spirit is speaking (1 Thess. 5:19-22). With this in mind, all Christian theologians are *pentecostal* in that the Holy Spirit inspires the ecumenical Christian confession that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

¹ Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quoted is from *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2020).

² Tony Richie, *Essentials of Pentecostal Theology: An Eternal and Unchanging Lord Powerfully Present and Active by the Holy Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2020), 169ff, 197ff.

³ Daniel Tomberlin, "Believer's Baptism in the Pentecostal Tradition," *The Ecumenical Review* 67.3 (October 2015), 423.

The distinctive of *signs* – wind, flames, tongues, miracles, healings, exorcisms – attest to the “mighty deeds of God” (τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ). We should also think in terms of sacramental signs – water baptism, Holy Communion, footwashing, and anointing – attesting to God’s mighty deeds. Tongues-speech informs the Pentecostal way of doing theology. The Holy Spirit inspires a diversity of tongues which must be properly interpreted and discerned. The Holy Spirit inspires words of wisdom and knowledge speaking “with the tongues of men and of angels” (1 Cor. 12:8-10; 13:1). The task of theology is to answer the question of a bewildered crowd – “What does this mean?” (Act 2:12). The theologian should be careful to remember that the best discernment, the best interpretation, is likened to seeing “in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). Therefore, the unity of the faith depends upon the primacy of love and embracing the diversity of theological tongues. In other words, a diversity of theological expressions within the Christian church need not signify schism. Pentecostalism resists homogeneous expressions of Christianity. Pentecostals are at home among the great multitude of “tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). Yes, the Holy Spirit speaks in *diverse tongues*, but there is *a singular soteriological message*. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the “power of God for salvation . . . to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). There is not a Jewish gospel and a Greek gospel. The apostles warned against those who proclaimed “a different gospel” and declared them to be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9; cf. 2 Cor. 11:4; 2 Pet. 2:1). The message of Christ speaks to, and transcends, all human cultures. The message of Christ transforms humanity so that with a singular voice the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve may proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

I suggest that the task of a Pentecostal hermeneutic is the proclamation and interpretation of “the mighty deeds of God.” This is a common expression in the Old Testament and is unique to Luke in the New Testament (cf. Luke 1:51; Acts 2:11). It consistently refers to God’s power and presence to deliver a helpless humanity. In Acts, “the mighty deeds of God” are expressed in the preaching of the apostles. Luke records the messages of three preachers – Peter, Stephen, and Paul – which contain early Christian proclamation (cf. Acts 2:14-39; 7:2-53; 13:16-41; 17:22-35). The early church was united in confessing a common faith proclaimed by the various apostles, prophets, teachers, and evangelists. These sermons form the metanarrative of the Christian faith. What are the primary hermeneutical themes of apostolic doctrine?⁴

- God’s mighty deeds are rooted in the redemptive history of Israel.
- God the Father has sent the Son and the Spirit to deliver humanity from sin and death.

⁴ Here, I offer an adaptation of C. H. Dodd’s apostolic kerygma. Cf. *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1964).

- With the coming of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has been inaugurated. Jesus was rejected, crucified, and raised from the dead. The risen Christ has ascended to the Father and rules as God’s anointed King.
- The reign of Christ is signified by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who empowers the church to fulfill the mission of God.
- Jesus Christ will return to raise the dead, judge this present age, and consummate the New Creation. The Spirit will fill New Creation with the glory and knowledge of God.
- All men and women are called to repent, be baptized in water, and receive the Holy Spirit.

The hermeneutical trajectory is the eschaton. This corrupted present age will, and must, die in order that God’s purpose be fulfilled in New Creation (cf. Is. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-5). Any hermeneutic that diminishes this eschatological trajectory is not faithful to the apostolic witness (1 Cor. 15:13-19).

Vincent of Lérins: Recovery of an Ancient Hermeneutic

The restorationist motif of Pentecostalism suggests that a Pentecostal hermeneutic should be the appropriation, or restoration, of an ancient orthodox method. Vincent of Lérins (c. 390-450 CE) was a fifth century monk, presbyter, and theologian renowned as “a man learned in the holy scriptures, and sufficiently instructed in the knowledge of ecclesiastical dogma.”⁵ His methodology represents the culmination of patristic hermeneutics. Vincent’s concern was straightforward. How can we discern between truth and heresy? How can we properly read Holy Scripture? To this end, Vincent wrote the *Commonitorium*.⁶ Vincent insists that the Faith is fortified by the canon of Sacred Scripture and the sacred theological tradition of the Church.⁷ He is not the first to suggest the priority of Scripture and Tradition in the theological task. Irenaeus (2nd century), declared that there are two essential elements in Christian theological reflection – *Scripture* as read through the received *apostolic tradition*.⁸ Likewise, Didymus the Blind (4th century) insisted that a proper theological method includes the primacy of Scripture in dialogue

⁵ Gennadius, *De Viris Illustribus*, 65. Quoted in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online* s.v. “Vincent of Lérins”

⁶ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, Volume IV: The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986), 546.

⁷ Vincent of Lérins. “Commonitories” 2, 29 in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Volume 7. Rudolph E. Morris, trans. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 267-332. Hereafter, *Commonitories*.

⁸ Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching* 3.

with the “the old ecclesial writers.”⁹ Even so, Vincent is the first to present a systematic treatment on Scripture and Tradition as a theological method.¹⁰

According to Vincent, Sacred Scripture is of divine authority and is therefore “complete and more than sufficient in itself.” However, Scripture can be difficult, and therefore “is not universally accepted in one and the same sense.” Scripture, used by the faithful and heretic alike, can be “interpreted differently. . . [and] it can yield as many different meanings as there are [interpreters].”¹¹ In fact, the primary method Satan uses to tempt the faithful is the misinterpretation of Holy Scripture.¹² With heresies abounding, Vincent sought to establish a proper hermeneutic which could discern theological truth. He encouraged faithful readers of Scripture to “hold fast to what has been believed *everywhere, always, and by all*” and to “follow *the principles of universality, antiquity, and consent*” (emphasis added.)¹³ The faithful *progression* of doctrine is Vincent’s fourth principle. The faith of the church can develop and mature, and yet “remain incorrupt and unimpaired, complete and perfect . . . so that it does not allow . . . any loss of its specific character, or any variation of its inherent form.” Theology must be perfected so that truth might “take on more evidence, clarity, and distinctness.”¹⁴

Vincent declared that the Rule of Faith required a right reading of Scripture as proclaimed by righteous bishops and doctors in faithful communion with one another. The Faith has been *proclaimed* by Spirit-inspired prophets and apostles and *received* by the universal Church. The Rule *unites* the church in message and mission. The Church *guards* the truth of the Faith with a singular heart, and *proclaims* the message with a singular voice. Vincent’s principles are derived from the ancient hermeneutical tradition that declares the Church to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Vincent asked, “What should the Christian do if some members of the Church have broken away from the communion of universal faith?” He offered a threefold method of discernment – (1) hold to the ancient faith; (2) give priority to the ecumenical councils; and (3) consult and compare reliable authorities who lived in different times and different places and have nevertheless remained faithful.¹⁵

Let us briefly consider how Vincent’s principles might be applied to Pentecostalism. Pentecostals have always understood themselves to be the restoration of the church of *antiquity*. They often appealed to the ancient theologians for support. In fact, when the New Issue controversy (denial of Holy Trinity) was raging within Pentecostalism, many Pentecostal leaders

⁹ Didymus, *On the Holy Spirit* 2.

¹⁰ Reginald Stewart Moxon, ed., *The Commonitorium of Vincentius of Lerins* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1915), xxxiii.

¹¹ *Commonitories* 2, 25.

¹² *Commonitories* 25-26.

¹³ *Commonitories* 2.

¹⁴ *Commonitories* 23.

¹⁵ *Commonitories* 3.

appealed to the ancient Nicene Creed and its defenders as examples of biblical orthodoxy. As one reads through the various statements of faith of most Pentecostal churches the influence of the Nicene Creed is evident. Also, Pentecostals appealed to antiquity in support for the doctrines of Spirit baptism and tongues-speech.¹⁶

Vincent's principle of *universality* insists that the true faith is confessed by the Church all over the world. One of the strengths of the Pentecostal Movement is its remarkable diversity. Pentecostalism has shown phenomenal power "to embrace and transform almost anything it meets *in the cultures to which it travels* is one of the qualities that give it such remarkable energy and creativity" (emphasis added).¹⁷ As of 2020, there are almost 650 million Pentecostals worldwide with adherents on every continent of diverse races and denominations singing the praises of Jesus the Lord.¹⁸

The principle of *consensus* requires that doctrine be acknowledged by "almost all" of the bishops and doctors of the church. This is a work in progress. Pentecostals have been engaged in ecumenical outreach as demonstrated by the work of David du Plessis,¹⁹ Cecil Robeck,²⁰ and others. The inclusion of Pentecostal denominations in the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals (1942)²¹ demonstrated a developing fraternal fellowship and cooperation. Pentecostals began ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church in 1972 "with the aim of promoting mutual understanding and overcoming of prejudices between Catholics and Pentecostals."²² Pentecostal pastors are engaged in micro-ecumenism throughout the world as they promote fellowship and cooperation with Christian ministers of diverse denominations in their localities.

The Pentecostal Movement has had a profound influence on the *progression* of Christian doctrine. For centuries the Holy Spirit was relegated to being the silent partner of Holy Trinity. I have previously written,

¹⁶ Wade H. Horton, *The Glossolalia Phenomenon* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1966). Kilian McDonnell and George Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991). Wade Horton appealed to examples of tongues-speech throughout history. The charismatic Roman Catholic scholars George Montague and Kilian McDonnell appealed to ancient theologians in support of the Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit baptism subsequent to regeneration with attesting charismatic signs.

¹⁷ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995), 147.

¹⁸ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 6–8, 26.

¹⁹ *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* s.v. "David Johannes du Plessis"

²⁰ *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* s.v. "Cecil Melvin Robeck, Jr."

²¹ Charles W. Conn, *Like a Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God 1886-1996* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 2008), 311-313.

²² Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, "Message of Pope for 50th Anniversary of International Catholic–Pentecostal dialogue" (July 2022). Online: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2022/2022-07-12-dialogo-cattolico-pentecostale.html>

Pentecostal theology is the reclamation of true Trinitarian theology. For some Catholics, the Holy Spirit has often been lost in discussions of church organization and liturgy; or identified with Marian devotion. Often, Protestant theology is more or less binitarian (Father and Son) as one can see by looking at many Protestant systematic theology texts . . . the Holy Spirit has often been lost in discussions about salvation . . . The Spirit has found willing voices among Pentecostals. The Spirit of Pentecost is not the gentle breeze of a silent God, but noisy “violent rushing wind” (Acts 2:1-14). It has been the advent of the modern Pentecostal Movement that have moved the Church to embrace once again a theology that is fully Trinitarian.²³

The twentieth century has been designated as the century of the Holy Spirit.²⁴ The Society for Pentecostal Studies was founded in 1970 giving a place for Pentecostal thinkers to engage the ecclesial dialogue with anointed minds and hearts on fire.

A Pentecostal appropriation of the ancient Vincentian principles of hermeneutics could help locate the Pentecostal Movement within the stream of classical Christianity, bringing Pentecostal concerns to the historic Faith, and allowing the classic faith to discern and challenge novel deviations within Pentecostalism.

The Hermeneutic of Pentecostalism

The hermeneutic of early Pentecostalism may be understood in terms of four sources of authority: *Scripture, experience, narrative, and mission*. **Holy Scripture** was assumed by early Pentecostals to be divinely inspired, infallible, and authoritative.²⁵ The inspiration of Scripture goes beyond inscription, translation, and transmission. Inspiration includes interpretation. Early Pentecostals believed that the Bible is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). Early Pentecostals believed that “the plain Bible, rightly divided” could “settle all controverted points” of dialogue.²⁶ In other words, early Pentecostals believed in a *right reading* of Holy Scripture. This implies that scripture can be *misunderstood*. In fact, Pentecostals dared claim that a misreading of Scripture led to the loss of the doctrines of Spirit baptism and tongues speech. A right reading requires “interpreting Scripture in light of Scripture” through a process of harmonization.²⁷ The Bible is “the basic rule of faith and practice” which “supplies the corrective and interpretive

²³ Daniel Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments: Encountering God at the Altar, Revised Edition* (Cleveland, TN: Cherohala Press, 2019), 48-49.

²⁴ Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal 1901-2001* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

²⁵ The Church of God *Book of Doctrines* is representative of early Pentecostal thinking. The authors declare that the Holy Bible is authentic, faithful in transmission and translation, attested by signs and miracles, and has stood the tests of time. *Book of Doctrines* (Cleveland, TN: Church of God Publishing House, 1922), 5-10.

²⁶ *General Assembly Minutes 1906-1914: Photographic Reproductions of the First Ten General Assembly Minutes* (Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House, 1992), 23.

²⁷ Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009), 101-102.

authority for all religious experience.”²⁸ But Scripture is more than “propositional and systematic,” it is transrational. The living Word interprets its readers and the Spirit flows through the Bible in mysterious ways. Therefore, the reader must be “open to surprises and even times of waiting” in the presence of God.²⁹

Experience, as the second source of authority for Pentecostal hermeneutics, means that the interpretation of Scripture is the project of the Christian community as believers are “moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:20-21).³⁰ The Spirit moves relationally and experientially within the community of faith to guide believers in the proper reading of the biblical texts.³¹ The “mighty acts of God” are properly discerned as the community gathers, prays, confers, and listens to the voice of the Spirit. The ongoing dialectic between the living Word, the inspiring Spirit, and the discerning community ensures that the church is the guardian of our experience.³² Experience is the lived hermeneutic through which Pentecostals interpret Scripture. Whereas, in Roman Catholic theology Scripture and Tradition are in dialectical tension; for Pentecostals, Scripture and experience are in a similar dialectical tension.³³ The *experience* of Spirit baptism means “that the Bible becomes a new book.”³⁴ Through the words of Scripture, God is encountered. The experiences recorded in the Bible are not mere history; rather, they are to be experienced in the present. The God of the biblical era is the God of the present.³⁵ French Arrington has written:

When the modern reader’s experience of the Holy Spirit reenacts the apostolic experience of the Spirit, the Spirit serves as the common context in which the reader and author can meet to bridge the historical and cultural gulf between them. The Bible is then a book for the believer. The commonality of the experiences of the modern reader and the ancient author lies in their shared faith in Jesus Christ and their walk with the Paraclete whom he promised.³⁶

Therefore, Pentecostal spirituality is verbally expressed, audibly experienced, and lived within the context of this present age, awaiting the age to come. For Pentecostals, the transforming encounter with Scripture shapes the lived experience, and the lived experience in turn shapes the Pentecostal understanding of Scripture. The authority of experience locates one’s salvific

²⁸ Scott A. Ellington, “Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture” in Lee Roy Martin, ed., *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 154.

²⁹ Rickie Moore, “A Pentecostal Approach to Scripture” in Lee Roy Martin, ed., *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 11.

³⁰ John Christopher Thomas, “Women, Pentecostalism, and the Bible” in Lee Roy Martin, ed., *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 82ff.

³¹ Ellington in *Pentecostal Hermeneutics*, 162.

³² Ray H. Hughes, “The Church and Your Pentecostal Experience,” *Church of God Evangel* 65.5 (May 12, 1975), 10.

³³ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 87.

³⁴ *The Apostolic Faith* 1.5 (January 1907), 3.

³⁵ Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 28.

³⁶ *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* s.v. “Hermeneutics”

encounter in the context of this present age. Human contexts are *universal* and *specific*. The *universal context* includes all humans. All humans have sinned, all humans suffer from systemic evil, all humans die, and all humans may be saved through Christ (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). The *specific context* identifies one's situation in life – Jew or Gentile, male or female, enslaver or enslaved. Just as the gospel of Christ triumphs over sin and death, the gospel reconciles humanity to God and unites humanity into a diversified whole – “for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God” (1 Pet. 2:10). Pentecostal spirituality is transhistorical and transcultural.³⁷ It transcends a history of human tribalism and violence. But Pentecostal theology is not primarily anthropocentric, rather it is primarily Christo-Pneumatic. Pentecostals acknowledge the universal fallenness of humanity, and the ubiquity of violence and oppression in human history. Even so, Pentecostal theology gives priority to the “mighty deeds of God” in the Incarnation and Pentecost. Pentecostal theology is the intentional reflection upon one's divine encounter.³⁸ Pentecostal theology begins and ends *from above* with the Father sending the Son down, and with the Spirit falling down, or poured out, from above. The descent of the Son and the Spirit effect the ascent of humanity into “the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6).

Miracles, exorcisms, healings, liberation, and freedom are attesting signs of God's kingdom breaking through into this present age. The eschatological yearning of Pentecostalism provokes a prophetic call for justice (Luke 1:51-54; 4:16-19). The Spirit is poured out upon all humans – Jew and Gentile, male and female, enslaved and enslaver (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:16-18). The Spirit's outpouring signifies the inauguration of New Creation in which Jew and Gentile, male and female, and enslaved and enslaver, are coheirs of God's kingdom. Acts of justice in this present corrupt age are signs of eschatological mercy and hope. The “mighty deeds of God” occur within history and anticipates the coming New Jerusalem in which “there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain” (Rev. 21:4). In Christ and through the Holy Spirit discerning believers hear the cries of the oppressed and speak prophetically on their behalf. Just as Christ has borne in his body the sufferings and sinfulness of all humanity; being the body of Christ, means that believers share the laments of the oppressed (Ro. 12:15; Eph. 2:13-17; Jas. 4:9). The Holy Spirit makes us aware of that which grieves the Spirit. The Spirit grieves when humans are oppressed and suffer violence, and those who are filled with the Spirit likewise grieve. If we fail to grieve as the Spirit grieves, then we are quenching the Spirit. God's mighty deeds might include the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, legal protection for the unborn, proper care for creation, et al. Even so, acts of justice, that is, works of the law, are insufficient to remedy the human problem – sin and death. Human cooperation with the divine purpose is insufficient to transform this present age. Freed slaves die.

³⁷ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 96.

³⁸ Douglas Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 9.

Enfranchised women die. Protected human fetuses are born and they die. All creation has been “subjected to futility” (Rom. 8:20), that is, creation that has been corrupted by sin and death has become meaningless. Only the God who “raised Christ Jesus from the dead” will give life to mortal humanity and will deliver creation from its “slavery to corruption” through the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:11, 21). This will be an unassisted and sovereign act of the omniscient Holy Trinity.

Narrative is the third source of hermeneutical authority in Pentecostalism. Narrative is the *testimony* of the redemptive story. Once the narrative has become established as an authoritative hermeneutic, it becomes theological *tradition* through which Scripture is read and discerned. Pentecostal doctrine is descriptive of Pentecostal experience in which belief arises from “intense individual and corporate experiences of the present action of God in the lives of Christian believers.”³⁹ The Pentecostal narrative summarizes the mighty deeds of God in a common testimony: “Thank God, I’m saved, sanctified, baptized in the sweet Holy Ghost, a member of the great Church of God, and on my way to heaven.”⁴⁰ Pentecostal spirituality has its own language informed by encounters with divine grace. To be *saved* is to be delivered from the corruption of this present age. To be *sanctified* speaks to transformed affections – loving not his world. *Holiness* is a way of living that glorifies God. To be *baptized in the Holy Spirit* is to encounter the fullness of God and be *empowered* for mission. Grace is encountered as believers “*pray through to the victory*” which signifies the *altar* as the place of divine encounter and the altar call as the climactic event of Pentecostal worship. At the altar, believers receive the *call* to engage in the mission of God. The believer is “getting ready to leave this world.”⁴¹ This language forms the central narrative convictions⁴² which inform the Pentecostal hermeneutic and must remain embedded in narrative and liturgy if Pentecostal spirituality is to flourish. Pentecostals must resist the temptation to sacrifice the “distinctiveness of their own worldview” and remember that “Pentecostal models of ministry must flow out of Pentecostal paradigms of truth.”⁴³ The tongues of Pentecostalism must be preserved.

The fourth source of authority in Pentecostal readings of Scripture is *mission*. Pentecostals are praxis driven⁴⁴ and pragmatic.⁴⁵ Pentecostal theology is practical theology driven by three questions: “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12); “What are we to do?” (Acts 2:37); and “Lord, is it at this time that You are restoring the kingdom?” (Acts 1:6). Pentecostal

³⁹ Ellington in *Pentecostal Hermeneutics*, 150.

⁴⁰ This is a testimony I heard repeatedly as a child reared in Pentecostalism.

⁴¹ Luther G. Presley, “Getting Ready to Leave this World” in *Church Hymnal* (Cleveland, TN: Tennessee Music and Printing Co., 1951), 116.

⁴² Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 156.

⁴³ Jackie David Johns, “Pentecostalism and the Postmodern World View,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 7 (1995), 96.

⁴⁴ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 100, 108.

⁴⁵ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 13.

encounter informs Pentecostal mission. Pentecostal mission is *driven by eschatological hope*. The Pentecostal metanarrative brings Acts and Revelation together – Acts is the historical precedent; Revelation is the eschatological preference.⁴⁶ Pentecostals have their feet planted firmly in two worlds – the already and not yet. The eschatological anticipation of Pentecostalism is a lived reality, an inaugurated eschatology in which the present and the future are fused. This fusion of present and future allows the believer “to travel backward and forward in salvation history and to imaginatively participate in the events that have been and are yet to be.”⁴⁷ The eschatological trajectory of Pentecostal spirituality suggests a hermeneutic that gives priority to the divine revelation of God’s mighty deeds over the human context. Incarnation and Pentecost have priority over the might of the Roman Empire. The contextual hermeneutic of Pentecostalism is New Creation. The Spirit of Pentecost empowers the church to be a witness of God’s eschatological kingdom in this present age (Matt. 24:14; Acts 1:8-11). The ultimate purpose of Pentecost is the Parousia of Jesus Christ. Ray H. Hughes has written,

There is no greater motivation for evangelism than the belief in the imminent return of our Lord . . . Our outreach of evangelism is proportionate to our vision of His soon coming . . . Any man who allows the return of our Lord to possess him and to grip him cannot live without a burden for the lost . . . When there is a waning interest in our Lord's return, there is a corresponding lack of interest in evangelism . . . For this reason, the church should renew and recapture the vision of His return.⁴⁸

Hermeneutical Challenges in the Pentecostal Congregation

Pentecostal believers are encouraged to read the Bible. There is a significant gulf between the hermeneutics of the Pentecostal academy and the Pentecostal pulpit and pew.⁴⁹ Many Pentecostals hold to a radical perspicuity – “The Bible is simple; the Bible is literal.”⁵⁰ Even so, more than three decades of pastoring has taught me that it’s just not that simple. Believers have questions. The Bible has many difficult sayings, tensions, and even contradictions. Jesus declared, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves” (John 6:53). The words angered his audience and even confused and offended his disciples. They said, “This is a difficult statement” (John 6:60). Many

⁴⁶ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 106ff.

⁴⁷ Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 97ff.

⁴⁸ Ray H. Hughes, "Until Men are Ready for His Soon Coming," *Church of God Evangel* (22 Oct 1973), 15-17.

⁴⁹ Scott Storbakken, “The Problem with Pentecostal and Charismatic Hermeneutics,” *Religions* 14.8 (2023). Online: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14080987>.

⁵⁰ Joey Grizzle, remarks at the International General Assembly of the Church of God (2022).

disciples left him because of these words (John 6:66). A simple literal reading of these words leads to cannibalism. So much for literalism. A discerning reading leads us to understand that Jesus is using the imagery of the Eucharist to explain the significance of his death on the cross. Jesus' disciples often did not understand his words (Mark 9:32; Luke 18:34). Peter warned, "there are some things that are hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:15-16).⁵¹ Even so, "hard to understand" does not mean unknowable. But it does suggest that the reader approach Scripture with great humility and the realization that omniscience is not a gift of the Spirit.

There are many difficult issues that challenge believers. I will offer just three. First, how should we read the Genesis creation narrative? A pastor publicly lamented that his teen son no longer believed the Bible. After some inquiry, I discovered that the son's offense was to reject his father's literal reading of the Genesis creation narrative. This is a common conflict, especially among Pentecostal university students. Second, issues of anthropology are raging through our culture, specifically issues of human sexuality. Some scholars are using various postmodern hermeneutics to affirm the LGBTQI agenda. Some Pentecostals have fused the issues of human sexuality and women in ministry and countered by offering their own heterodox solution – God is a gendered male. Third, with the recent war between Israel and Hamas, the doctrine of dispensationalism is revealed once again to be deeply embedded in the Pentecostal theological imagination. These challenges demonstrate that Pentecostals need the intercession of the Holy Spirit in charisms of knowledge and wisdom to navigate controversial issues.

I propose that diverse tongues (γέννη γλωσσῶν) and interpretation of tongues (ἐρμηνεία γλωσσῶν) might serve as a paradigm for Pentecostal hermeneutics (1 Cor. 12:10). Tongues-speech "is language of the unconscious . . . the gift of articulating buried longings, yearnings, and emotions"⁵² or "groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). The intercession of the Spirit is made necessary because of our inability to understand the mysteries – words sometimes fail us. The Spirit acts objectively in the worshiping community. The Spirit intervenes so that our liturgy and prayers have content which is pleasing to God and expresses itself in ecstatic practices *in such a way that not even the community itself can discern its full meaning*.⁵³ Through the charism of interpretation, the Spirit helps us to move from *unknowing* to *knowing*, from *inarticulate* to *articulate*, from *mysterious* to *revealed*. The interpretation is not merely a matter of vocabulary and syntax, but is transrational because the communication is spiritual – from one's innermost being (John 7:38). The interpretation of tongues is not limited to the translation of one known language to another, but can also be understood as giving verbal meaning to

⁵¹ I am aware that Petrine authorship is disputed.

⁵² Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 988.

⁵³ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 240-242.

inarticulate sounds or mysterious signs; or putting into words the utterances of an unknown language. Any caring parent can discern the non-verbal cries of an infant. Before humans invented written language they communicated through images and signs. The appreciation of art is often a matter of subjective interpretation. What does Mona Lisa's smile mean? One person can sometimes discern the thoughts or intentions of another by observing and interpreting body language. Years ago, I participated in a Communion service in a house church in Yangon, Myanmar. I could not understand a word being said, but when I saw the bread and cup, I *knew* the message because the bread and cup were common points of context. Even so, if I had attended the Catholic mass in Yangon, the message would have been the same, but the bread and cup would have different meaning. In other words, interpretations are sometimes subjective. When a Catholic sees the bread and cup the interpretation is *transubstantiation*. When a Baptist sees the bread and cup the interpretation is *memorial*. Same signs, different interpretation, *but same message* – Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ is coming again!

All communication happens through diverse symbols or signs – written, aural, and somatic. In every communication the message is riding on a medium. Sender and receiver must codify and decode the message. The sender codifies the message into symbols. The receiver who perceives the symbols needs to decode in order to grasp and understand the message. The sender and receiver must interpret the signs through a cultural filter, a personal filter, and the context of space and time.⁵⁴ In hermeneutics, the signs and symbols are contained within the biblical metanarrative.

In the field of Bible translation, *dynamic equivalence* is the “quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors.”⁵⁵ Hermeneutics is the art of understanding. To understand is to experience the world of the message originators.⁵⁶ So, proper hermeneutics is the bringing together of two worlds. Sometimes, words are so deeply embedded in the originating culture that there is not a direct, corresponding translation for the receptors. Interpretations become less objective, and more subjective. Subjectivity in interpretation does not mean that the message is altered. Rather, subjectivity allows for a dynamic equivalence in transmission so that the message may be properly received, understood, and acted upon. When diverse tongues are interpreted, through the intercession of the Holy Spirit, God's mighty deeds are proclaimed. When the sacramental signs of baptism, the Lord's Supper, footwashing, and anointing are properly interpreted, the salvific mysteries of God are revealed. Subjective differences in interpretation do not change the metanarrative, rather

⁵⁴ Alfred Neufeld, “Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives on Baptism,” *The Ecumenical Review* 67.3 (October 2015), 418.

⁵⁵ Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation, With Special Reference to Bible Translating* (Boston: Brill, 1969, 2003), 200.

⁵⁶ *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* s.v. “Hermeneutics”

subjective differences occur within, and are framed by, the Pentecostal metanarrative. Vincent of Lérins reminds us that *doctrine may develop within the Rule of Faith, but doctrine does not change* the metanarrative, or alter its trajectory.

Interpretation of tongues as a paradigm for Pentecostal hermeneutics signifies that the preacher must interpret the theological tongues (terms, signs, symbols) from the pulpit to the pew. The exegesis and exposition of the biblical text requires an adequate hermeneutic. Sometimes an explanation of how the text is to be read is helpful to the hearers. Therefore, an explanation of the hermeneutic must be included within proclamation. The Pentecostal interpreter should earnestly desire the charisms of knowledge and wisdom for the task (Pro. 1:23). Knowledge can be acquired and wisdom comes from God (Pro. 2:6; 18:15; Jas. 1:5). Exegesis without proper hermeneutics can be as confusing as tongues without interpretation. If the church is to be edified, the mysterious tongues (difficult sayings) of Holy Scripture must be properly interpreted. My experience as a preaching pastor has taught me that the congregation appreciates the clarity of an explained hermeneutic. When students learn to read the creation narrative as theology (an anti-idolatry polemic), they can embrace God as creator with great joy. A good interpretation means that one's hermeneutical horizons are broadened and the theological imagination is perfected. A proper hermeneutic leads the reader/hearer of the biblical story to declare, "God is certainly among you!" (1 Cor. 14:25).

The Apostle Paul excoriated humanity: "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind . . ." (Rom. 1:21-23). To my mind, postmodern paradigms that give priority to various human stories over God's story are little more than idolatry preferring one form of human oppression over another. The contextual stories of Adam, Eve, and the snake are limited by futile reasoning and darkened hearts. Fallen humans prefer to hide from God (Gen. 3:8). Theology (the revelation of God) must always have priority over anthropology. In Pentecostal spirituality, God comes down so that humans may be lifted up. In the metanarrative of Holy Scripture, God is both protagonist and antagonist, beyond human scrutiny, and utterly sovereign. The eschatological trajectory of the mighty deeds of God is fulfilled when God is all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

Bibliography

- Anderson, Ray S. *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001.
- Archer, Kenneth J. *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture, and Community*. Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009.
- Burgess, Stanley M. and Gary B. McGee, editors. *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989.
- Burgess, Stanley M. and Eduard M. Van der Maas, editors. *The New Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, Revised and Expanded*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002, 2003.
- Conn, Charles W. *Like a Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God 1886-1996*. Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 2008.
- Freedman, David Noel, editor. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995.
- Hughes, Ray. H. "Until Men are Ready for His Soon Coming." *Church of God Evangel* (22 Oct 1973), 15-17.
- _____. "The Church and Your Pentecostal Experience," *Church of God Evangel* 65.5 (May 12, 1975), 10-11.
- Green, Chris E. W. *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness, and Scripture*. Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2015.
- Irenaeus of Lyons. *On the Apostolic Preaching*. John Behr, Trans. Popular Patristics Series 17. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997.
- Jacobsen, Douglas. *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Johns, Cheryl Bridges. *Re-Enchanting the Text: Discovering the Bible as Sacred, Dangerous, and Mysterious*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023.
- Johns, Jackie David. "Pentecostalism and the Postmodern World View," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 7 (1995), 73-96.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983.

- Käsemann, Ernst. *Commentary on Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Keener, Craig S. *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016.
- Land, Steven J. *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.
- Martin, Lee Roy, editor. *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader*. Leiden, NL: Koninklijke Brill, 2013.
- Moxon, Reginald Stewart, ed. *The Commonitorium of Vincentius of Lerins*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1915.
- Neufeld, Alfred. "Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives on Baptism," *The Ecumenical Review* 67.3 (October 2015), 411-422.
- Nida, Eugene A. and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation, With Special Reference to Bible Translating*. Boston: Brill, 1969, 2003.
- Oliverio Jr., L. William. *Pentecostal Hermeneutics in the Late Modern World: Essays on the Condition of Our Interpretation*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022.
- Philemon, Leulseged. *Pneumatic Hermeneutics: The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2019.
- Quasten, Johannes. *Patrology, Volume IV: The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon*. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986.
- Richie, Tony. *Essentials of Pentecostal Theology: An Eternal and Unchanging Lord Powerfully Present and Active by the Holy Spirit*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2020.
- Rodriguez, Darío López. *The Liberating Mission of Jesus: The Message of the Gospel of Luke*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012.
- Smith, Christian. *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011, 2012.
- Stephenson, Christopher A. *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Storbakken, Scott. "The Problem with Pentecostal and Charismatic Hermeneutics," *Religions* 14.8 (2023). Online: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14080987>.

Synan, Vinson. *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal 1901-2001*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.

Tomberlin, Daniel. *Pentecostal Sacraments: Encountering God at the Altar, Revised Edition*. Cleveland, TN: Cherohala Press, 2019.

Vincent of Lérins. “Commonitories” in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Volume 7*. Rudolph E. Morris, trans. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949.