CHAPTER FIVE

THE CONTEXTUAL-PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTIC

Hermeneutics is not a postlapsarian phenomenon, coming upon the scene “after Eden.” Instead interpretation is found “in Eden” and is thus included in the pronouncement of goodness (Gen. 1:31). Hermeneutics, then, is not an evil to be overcome (or in the case of Derrida, an inescapable, violent state of affairs) but rather an aspect of creation and human life that ought to be affirmed as “good.”

– James K.A. Smith, The Fall of Interpretation (2000)\(^1\)

The contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic is the third hermeneutical type I will be characterizing. It represents a set of Pentecostal theological hermeneutics which are informed by the theoretical and existential concerns in the human experience of interpretation raised by contemporary philosophical or general hermeneutics. For a number of its proponents, this hermeneutic has developed through criticisms of the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutic. Its defining characteristic is an emphasis on the situation and context of the interpreter, going beyond the affirmation of the historicity and context of the biblical texts already present in the contemporary Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutic. Beyond this primary characteristic, however, these contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutics vary. Some define their approach by the rejection of the claim made by the adherents of the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutic that the “meaning” of a text is found in an original author’s intent, usually on grounds that such knowledge is impossible to achieve and that it oversimplifies the complexities of hermeneutics. Others will still see authors, at least ideally, as bearing significant weight upon interpretation while focusing heavily upon the role of the interpreter and the process of interpretation as a whole.

In addition to its emphasis on the conditions of interpretation in the present, the contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic also adjusts the project of theological hermeneutics away from the method of the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutic, which was largely constituted by moving from

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biblical theologies based upon the reconstructed intentions of the human biblical authors toward a systematic or topical arrangement of these findings. The self-understanding of the contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic is one in which theological hermeneutics is a discerning of realities in light of God. How the Scriptures are utilized as an authority thus shifts, and this shift is largely a result of the conviction among the advocates of this hermeneutic that the force of the interpreter's own context is not negligible. More will be said about this shortly in relation to Hans-Georg Gadamer and his influence (though predominately indirect) upon this hermeneutic.²

A third defining characteristic for the contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic is that what counts as a text, or thing, to be theologically interpreted is more than just written or spoken texts. Language is considered more broadly, at the level of human conceptualization of the world. This will thus cause these theologians to reconsider the languages or categories in which they think otherwise than as sacrosanct in and of themselves. James K.A. Smith, in particular, makes the case for the ubiquity of interpretation and the finitude of human theological articulations.

Finally, the contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic has begun to engage contemporary philosophical concerns, drawing Pentecostal theology into some of the classical concerns of philosophical theology which have often been ignored in Pentecostal circles, and with an orientation largely in line with the hermeneutical concerns found in the Continental philosophical tradition. Advocates of the contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic have engaged the stream of philosophy that initiated the “linguistic turn.”³ While I know of no significant engagement by a Pentecostal with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of its key figures, several of the other major figures associated with the linguistic turn, including Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty and Paul Ricoeur, have received at least some attention. Further, a debate over “postmodern hermeneutics” has taken place between those who are promoting this hermeneutic and those defending the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutic.

³ I also deal with the “linguistic turn” in my constructive efforts in Chapter Seven, offering a description of its claims and significance there.