CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN THE VEIL IS TAKEN AWAY: THE IMPACT OF PROPHETIC EXPERIENCE ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION*

John W. McKay**

It is now nineteen years since I was baptized in the Holy Spirit. For the first nine of these I was still lecturing in biblical studies at Hull University and so inevitably was much occupied with trying to fit my new-found experience together with the sort of biblical and theological study we do in our universities. It was no easy task.

I found the two uncomfortable companions, like neighbours who acknowledge each other’s existence but prefer to live separate lives, not interfering with one another, as it were on opposite sides of a garden wall. It could not be so with me, for in my life critical theology and committed prophetic/charismatic/Pentecostal experience had come together under the same roof and the ensuing tensions proved impossible to live with. The result was initially a lot of very deep rethinking and a total reassessment of what we are doing in teaching the Bible to Spirit-filled believers. The following discussion presents some of the conclusions.

My motivation is mainly to help students searching for a Pentecostal approach to studying the Scriptures, because I am convinced that there is an urgent need for a fresh approach to Bible teaching that will meet the needs of the revival of faith that today is running worldwide, almost all of it Pentecostal in origin and inspiration.

There are basically two ways of studying Scripture. One is objective and analytical, interesting in itself, but imparting little or nothing of the life of God to the student. The other, the way explored here, draws us to God

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* This article is excerpted from a book with the same title, published by Kingdom Faith Ministries. It omits the book’s chapters on shared experience of the life and ministry of Jesus, of the Lordship of Jesus and of the Fatherhood of God. Other chapters have been slightly abbreviated and only introductory and concluding paragraphs have been included in the sections on the biblical books as prophetic/charismatic literature and on the Drama of Salvation. Fuller treatment of individual books of the Bible can be found in McKay’s The Way of the Spirit (available at http://www.thewayofthespirit.com).

** Before his death in 2001, John McKay (PhD, Cambridge University) was Director of Studies at Roffey Place in Horsham, England.
and gives life. When I discovered new life in Christ through the infilling of his Spirit, I knew nothing else would ever satisfy.

I wrote the first draft of the book from which this article is taken about eleven years ago. Its theological viewpoint has been well tested since then, both in preaching and teaching, but in that time much has also changed. Today there is far more dialogue between charismatics and biblical scholars than there was in the 1970s. In some ways that is good, but in others damaging, for compromise resulting from dialogue has so weakened the charismatic movement that the term ‘charismatic’ now prompts correspondingly weak notions about experience of the Holy Spirit. It is, however, hard to find a suitable alternative. ‘Pentecostal’ evokes thoughts of denominational streams, ‘spiritual’ is not specific; enough, ‘revival’ fails to highlight baptism in the Spirit and the spiritual gifts. I personally prefer ‘prophetic’, though to some that might imply limiting the Spirit’s activity to one particular gift. In this discussion the terms ‘prophetic’, ‘charismatic’, ‘Pentecostal’, and ‘spiritual’ are for the most part used interchangeably, except when the specific reference of each is necessitated by the context.

Removing the Veil

But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit… (2 Cor. 3.16–17)¹

About the time when renewed faith was leading me out of academic theology to go and preach the gospel, the converse was happening with another Anglican priest/academic who said he had lost his faith. He felt it necessary to relinquish his holy orders, but did not feel any corresponding necessity to cease teaching theology in university. That is quite simply because academic theology can be taught and studied without faith. It is, after all, a purely mental discipline, in theory at any rate.

The Conflict of Theology and Faith

In a university theology department students are taught to analyse the text of Scripture as objectively and critically as possible. Efforts to stimulate faith are usually discouraged on the grounds that anyone, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist, agnostic or whatever, should be as free to study

¹ For convenience, biblical quotations are taken from the NIV, though I have occasionally retranslated an odd word or phrase (all acknowledged in footnotes).