CHAPTER SEVEN

PENTECOSTAL BIBLE READING: TOWARD A MODEL OF READING FOR THE FORMATION OF THE AFFECTIONS*

Robert O. Baker**

Introduction

James sits quietly in his room. He stares blankly out of his window. His slackened face yields no awareness of the world around him. During his bad spells he will go days without speaking or acknowledging that he is spoken to. On a good day, those times when he will interact with those around him, he speaks with a passionless, flat voice, never betraying any emotion. Like most chronic schizophrenia patients, James suffers from anhedonia, a syndrome that is thought to be caused by damage to the brain’s neural reward mechanism, rendering the afflicted individual unable to experience joy, affection, desire, pride, or humor.1 With the exception of the loss of pride, much New Testament criticism today would seem to be like the work of a schizophrenic on a good day.

New Testament scholarship in general has displayed at least one of the major symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. It lacks emotion. In their attempt to arrive at a scientific objective understanding of the text, scholars have inadvertently distorted the meaning of the texts they seek to explain. To seek to understand the ideational/rational content of a text without also seeking to experience and reflect upon its emotive effect is to skew the text’s message. A rational approach to the biblical text is in effect, then, a schizophrenic one. By committing to read the text objectively from a critical distance, the professional reader subverts the text’s evocative power or is at least unable to express the feeling that the text evokes in him or her.

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** Robert O. Baker (PhD, Baylor University) currently resides in Bradenton, FL USA.
Probably all of us have experienced certain affective responses as we have read biblical narratives, but these subjective feelings have not generally been seen as the domain of critical scholarship. Commenting upon the rational focus of contemporary reader-response criticism, Stephen Moore quoting Jonathan Culler has noted:

The experiences that modern audience-oriented critics ascribe to their hypothetical readers are in contrast to their ancient or Renaissance counterparts, ‘generally cognitive rather than affective: not feeling shivers along the spine, weeping in sympathy, or being transported with awe, but having one’s expectations proved false, struggling with an irresolvable ambiguity, or questioning the assumptions upon which one has relied.’

To focus on the affective impact of a text places the critical scholar into the subjective realm of the emotions, decentering him or her from the objective distance that the biblical studies guild values so highly.

Pentecostal scholars are in a unique position to deconstruct the Enlightenment myth and ideal of critical and passionless objectivity. As Pentecostals, we focus not only on orthodoxy (right belief), but also on orthopraxy (right action), and orthopathy (right feeling). Steven J. Land rightly notes that this threefold emphasis collapses the false dichotomy between reason and feelings. Pentecostal readings, being informed by such a synthesis, are more holistic than has traditionally been the case in scholarly circles. In the present intellectual climate of postmodernism and deconstruction, where there is a breakdown of metaphysical hierarchies—object/subject, content/form, body/soul, scholarly/confessional—it would seem that the biblical studies guild is now more open to the holistic readings that Pentecostal scholars can bring to the field. Our agenda includes pushing at the edges of traditional concerns, moving beyond the discovery of a history behind the text, or the ideology of biblical discourse, toward an articulation of the formative rhetoric of the Christian canon. In this paper, I hope to take a few modest steps toward articulating how reading the Bible affects readers in their entire person.

I realized the importance of the emotional impact of the Scriptures on a particularly painful occasion. Word came to my family that my pater-

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