What Does it Mean to Read the Bible as
A Pentecostal?*

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Abstract
This paper seeks to identify and discuss some of the foundational principles and practices of biblical interpretation within the Pentecostal movement. It begins by pondering the traditional Pentecostal reaction to the Bible and their understanding of the role of Scripture for the Spirit-filled life, arguing that Pentecostals instinctively read the Bible to meet God in the text, interpreting Scripture ‘by encounter more than exegesis’. The second half of the essay explores how such a subjectivist, phenomenological model of reading can and does operate, and considers how the very nature of the Bible as a ‘generative’ and regenerative text invites personal and individual application, noting that the Pentecostal emphasis on community experience serves as a useful rejoinder to any egocentric isolationism and emphasising the importance for Pentecostals of action in response to our reading.

Keywords
Pentecostal hermeneutics, Bible, reading, biblical interpretation

I. Introduction

I have friends who have a plaque on their wall which I, being of Cambrian descent, have long admired. It reads: ‘To be born Welsh is to be born privileged; not with a silver spoon in your mouth but with music in your heart and poetry in your soul’. Those inspirational words have for me always reflected not only my Celtic ancestry but also my Pentecostal heritage.

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Pentecostalism was born, if not quite in the gutter, then perhaps not too far above it. Historically it has been a religion of the people, a faith of the underclass, and to this day, certainly in the UK but also in many other corners of the globe, the classic Pentecostal groupings share little of the prestige and wealth of some of the historic denominations. Yet the movement more than compensates for any lack in that area in its ‘music’ and its ‘poetry’, the fire and passion that are evident in the way Pentecostals go about every aspect of their spiritual lives—be it mission and evangelism, music and worship, preaching and proclamation, or prayer and prophecy.

But Pentecostal fires never burn more fervently than when they encounter the kindling of the biblical text. When Walter Hollenweger famously dedicated his great study ‘The Pentecostals’ to the Pentecostals who taught him to love the Bible, and the Presbyterians who taught him to understand it, he was undoubtedly right to note the deep and passionate commitment to the scriptures which Pentecostals have always had (if perhaps a little unfair to us by insinuation in the second part of the inscription). In fact I would suggest

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1 I should emphasise at the outset that the following observations arise from my reflection on the handling of Scripture in the British Pentecostal churches, and that increasing transatlantic experience is teaching me that, for all our similarities, there are significant and substantial differences between the cultures of Assemblies of God in the UK and the USA in this and many other regards. For instance, whilst I have heard American colleagues bemoan the lack of commitment to education that they sometimes feel handicaps their ministers, the US does now have an established and burgeoning academic tradition in the sphere of Pentecostalism, as the meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies demonstrates. Though the recent Research Assessment Exercise in the UK (published December 2008) highlighted Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies as an area of significant growth and development within British theological research over the last five years, still academic study of the Pentecostal movement in the UK is focussed essentially on the lifework of a few major scholars working out of really just two or three major centres, with a little support from the Bible and theological colleges. Standards of education and training in the ministry of AoG UK have been, for many years and by objective measure, the lowest required by any sizeable denomination or network in the British Isles (at least until a new training system was introduced during the last calendar year). It is important to note, therefore, that most of our ministers have had no professional training in exegetical methods and hermeneutics and essentially most frequently read the Bible without subjecting either the text or their reading of it to critical analysis. Also it is important to note that there is no British tradition of academic use of the text from a distinctively Pentecostal perspective at all. That alone results in a major difference of opinion and culture between the UK and North America in the field of Pentecostal biblical interpretation.

2 Dedication to Walter J. Hollenweger, The Pentecostals (London: SCM, 1972), p. xvi. Hollenweger’s little apothegm might be taken as something of a slight upon the Pentecostal academic tradition. If that was his intention then perhaps it was always slightly unfair, and nearly forty years on it seems completely unreasonable. North American Pentecostal theologians in particular now carry considerable sway and influence in broader circles (take the recent