Pentecostal Story: The Hermeneutical Filter for the Making of Meaning

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Devoted saints come from the HOLINESS church, bringing the message of Heart-Purity and the Coming of the Lord, and wonderfully blessed of God, as fruitage needing but one thing—the latter rain.

—Aimee Semple McPherson

Hermeneutics is an important subject for Pentecostals. Generally, the hermeneutical concern has focused attention upon the proper use of an exegetical method with the assumption that methods are somehow the neutral and objective means of establishing the validity of one’s doctrinal interpretation of Scripture. For Pentecostals of all generations, the issue of biblical hermeneutics always arises whenever the doctrine of Spirit baptism is discussed. Thus the proper biblical interpretation of Luke-Acts has

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1 This is a revision of my paper entitled “Pentecostal Story as the Hermeneutical Filter,” presented at the 30th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, March 8-10, 2001.
2 Aimee Semple McPherson, This Is That (Los Angeles, CA: Echo Park Evangelistic Association, Inc., 1923), 787.
5 For example, Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz, in his Theology for the Community of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, and Regent College Publishing, 2000), specifically challenges the Pentecostal view of Spirit baptism (the only community he directly takes on in this theological work) on grounds that Pentecostals have misunderstood the genre of Acts, misread the Luke-Act accounts, and cannot anchor their doctrine in the Pauline epistles. His charge is a restatement of the typical evangelical position. He offers three reasons for his rejection of the Pentecostal understanding of Spirit baptism as experience subsequent to regeneration. They are: (1) Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2 was a one-time non-repeatable event; thus, one is Spirit-baptized at the moment of regeneration (419, 422); (2) Acts is primarily a historical document. “Historical narrative alone is not necessary a sure foundation for doctrine” unless it can be “confirmed by the Epistles” (421); Finally, Grenz appeals to
become the primary front in the battle, with both sides believing that the war can be won by exegetically demonstrating either the inadequacy or the adequacy of the Pentecostal doctrine. When the discussion shifts from the so-called distinctive doctrine of Spirit baptism to whether or not there even exists an authentic “Pentecostal” theology, hermeneutical concerns surface again in the disguise of theological method. No wonder hermeneutics continues to be an important topic at the annual meetings of the Society for Pentecostal Studies.

The contemporary hermeneutical concern recognizes that the use of exegetical-theological methods must take into consideration the social-cultural location of the person using it. The hermeneutics and the methods are not isolated islands. Both the methods and the hermeneuts are socially, culturally, and theologically shaped entities that contribute to the making of meaning. In order for interpretation to take place, the reader must participate. Readers are not neutral observers but instead are engaged by the text. “Reading involves using both the information that is present on the written page, as well as the information we already have in our minds.” The reader does not come to the text as a blank slate. Comprehension of a written text involves both a discovery and a creation of meaningful understanding. Therefore, the way in which Pentecostals or any community goes about doing “exegesis” and “theology” has as much to do with their social location and theological formation as it does with their the apostle Paul’s writings, and because he cannot find the doctrine in “the explicit teaching of Paul” he rejects it (421). For a penetrating look into the origin of “initial evidence” see Gary McGee, ed., Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspectives on Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), chap. 6.

6 Simon Chan, in Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Tradition (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), correctly moves the discussion about “initial evidence” from the exegetical readings of Acts and Paul into a more robust theological integration into the Christian life. While he believes that exegesis cannot demonstrate the validity of tongues speech as the sign of Spirit baptism, he does argue that tongues can be shown to be the most natural and spontaneous response of Spirit-baptism experience, and he does so by approaching the issue from a broader theological perspective. See esp. chap. 2, “Glossolalia as Initial Evidence,” pp. 40-72.


10 See George Aichele et al., The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 1-8, which challenges the notion of the Enlightenment’s control of objectivity and stability of meaning.