Gordon Fee and the Challenge to Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Thirty Years Later

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When one thinks of Gordon Fee, hermeneutics may come to mind as easily as New Testament studies per se, for throughout his career Fee has engaged the problems of interpretation and exegesis as readily as he has specific issues of biblical theology. For Pentecostals, most significant have been his efforts to spark discussion on the hermeneutics behind two of Pentecostalism’s most cherished doctrines, subsequence and initial evidence. The year 2002 marked the thirtieth anniversary of this debate, which essentially was begun by Fee with a 19721 presentation on historical precedent. This paper seeks to first examine Fee’s contribution to the discussion, and then to survey the Pentecostal response.

When assessing Fee’s understanding of a given subject, we must first delve into the hermeneutical guidelines he has set for himself. It will become apparent that with Fee, it is somewhat impossible to separate his theology from his hermeneutics, for in each instance, his theological stance has come from following his own interpretive principles.

General Hermeneutical Principles of Gordon Fee

Gordon Fee has been influenced by many of the recent trends in hermeneutics, from the work of Paul Ricoeur2 to that of Anthony Thistlethwaite.3 Although he has preferred the approach of the older historical-critical

1 Gordon Fee’s “The Hermeneutics of Historical Precedent” was originally written for the 1972 annual meeting of the Society of Pentecostal Studies. It was later published in Russell P. Spittler, ed., Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976).
2 Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).
method and E. D. Hirsch’s focus on authorial intent, his work nonetheless shows an awareness of the variety of modern approaches to hermeneutics, such as the New Hermeneutic’s emphasis on relevance. His willingness and ability to apply these hermeneutical approaches to Pentecostalism has been a hallmark of his work. He declares that “one does nothing more important in the formal training for Christian ministry than to wrestle with hermeneutics: the meaning and application of Scripture.”

The Inherent Ambiguity of Scripture: A Hermeneutical Challenge

Fee maintains that the specific hermeneutical issues faced by evangelicalism lie within its doctrine of inspiration. He notes that the evangelical commitment to seeing Scripture as both divine and human creates its own set of tensions. The intersection of the divine with the human produces far more ambiguities than some feel comfortable with.

The buck stops there, at the text and its intent, as to what is infallible. God did not choose to give us a series of timeless, non-culture-bound theological propositions to be believed and imperatives to be obeyed. Rather he chose to speak His eternal Word this way, in historically particular circumstances and in every kind of literary genre. God Himself, by the very way he gave us this Word, locked in the ambiguity.

In the debate between the natural unity and diversity of the text, Fee opts for what he terms the “radical middle.” Our doctrine of inspiration suggests that Scripture inherently contains ambiguity, accommodation, and diversity, each to varying degrees. Since God chose to give us his word in this manner, our task is to hold each end of the spectrum—historical particularity and eternality—with equal vigor. While we cannot generate the absolute certainty so sought by the fundamentalists, we can nonetheless move toward a higher level of commonality. The way toward this higher level is found at the crucial point of authorial intentionality, both human and divine. The task of the exegete and theologian is to discover and hear the word in terms of God’s original intent. Only then may we begin to ascertain its meaning for our own historical setting.

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7 Ibid., 35-36.