The Word of God from Living Voices: Orality and Literacy in the Pentecostal Tradition

Jerry Camery-Hoggatt

But whenever someone who had followed the presbyters came along, I would carefully ask about the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or what Peter had said or what Philip or what Thomas or James or what John or Matthew or any other of the disciples of the Lord, and which Aristion and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord say too. For I did not assume that whatever comes from books is as helpful to me as what comes from a living and lasting voice.

— Papias, Exposition on the Oracles of the Lord

Introduction

I take my title from the famous quote that stands at the masthead of this article. The operative sentence is the final one: For I did not assume that whatever comes from books is as helpful to me as what comes from a living and lasting voice. Like Papias, I, too, come from a tradition that values the spoken word as a primary means of theological reflection, pastoral care, witnessing, and preaching. The operative word here is primary. All theological traditions recognize the importance of the spoken word, but in the life of Western academic theology, pride of place has been given to print.

My thesis is simple: I will argue that theological reflection based on the spoken word is fundamentally different from that based on print, that it deploys different strategies of argumentation and exposition that stem from different understandings of what it means for something to be “true,” and that it therefore leads to different dispositions toward spirituality and

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ecclesial life. I will further argue that the Pentecostal tradition is primarily a matter of orality, which is at the basis of some of our deepest and most entrenched difficulties as well as our greatest strengths. Within the Western academy, I will argue, theological education has been largely a matter of print, and to that extent has been speaking a somewhat different language from that spoken within the Pentecostal churches. So far, so good. To some extent, this is obvious. The final point I argue is less obvious: If we who are trained in the literature of theology wish to be true to the gospel we preach, we must learn to affirm the native strengths of the oral community. We must learn to listen to people who will never read our books. What is needed, in the end, is a sort of bilingual education that prepares pastors to function within both social worlds—oral and literate—and to translate easily between them.

I will pursue this thesis through a series of steps, each one involving something taken for granted within a different academic discipline. This procedure, I promise in advance, will be quite boring. I hope you’ll stay with me. We then move into some reflections on the nature of language and human understanding—if you will, the ways we human beings go about “doing business.” Following that, we turn to matters of theology and the formation of Pentecostal pastors.

Language and the Social Construction of Reality

Philosophy

We begin with some philosophical reflections on what it means to be human. It may not be insignificant that a great deal of contemporary theological and philosophical discourse is informed by the conviction that somehow central to our humanity is our use of language to structure and order our experience of reality. The entire enterprise of the so-called “New Hermeneutic”—epitomized in the works of Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling—attempted to take seriously the nature of the Word as word. Ernst Cassirer called humanity “animal symbolicum” and predicated his philosophy of symbolic forms on the notion that the intersecting point at