

Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Review Article

By Paul Elbert*

Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community*. Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 28. London/New York: T & T Clark, 2004, xii + 219 pp., hardback, £40.00.

This book polishes a University of St. Andrews doctoral thesis supervised by Richard Bauckham, who observes that it provides “both an illuminating reading of the history of Pentecostal hermeneutics as well as an insightful proposal for the kind of Pentecostal hermeneutic that is appropriate to our contemporary context.” The argument, advanced in six well-articulated and understandable stages, is that in the development of the century-old movement there can be found an authentic Pentecostal hermeneutical approach which can be retrieved and reappropriated. It is necessary first to define this revivalist, restorationist, gender-insensitive, and multi-racial movement from the perspective of its origins. Its growth involved a rejection of rationalistic excess and instead offered wholeness, healing, and a frame of reference for understanding human experience and ultimate spiritual concerns. A passion for the Kingdom of God arose from a reading of the biblical metanarrative and a passionate desire for unmediated experience with the heavenly Jesus and with the Holy Spirit. Archer rejects secular definitions of Pentecostalism provided by historians who appeal to social forces or to an evangelicalized or rationally sanitized rewriting of Pentecostal history. Instead, Pentecostalism originated and progressed due to the logical coherence of the Five/Four Fold Pentecostal message validated by supernatural signs amongst the community and in direct opposition to the predominate worldview of rationalistic, philosophical, and cessationistic presuppositions traditionally applied both to narrative and to epistolary discourse in the New Testament. To validate this definition Archer appeals directly to personal testimony of the participants, making no attempt either to make their testimony conform to contemporary secular models of reality or to pour modern historiographical odium upon it. This seems particularly appropriate, given the one hundred-year celebrations of the Azusa Street phenomenon (1906-2006) now underway in Los Angeles and throughout the world.¹

Next, Archer elucidates the confrontational paradigm shift away from the dominant hermeneutical context of the early-nineteenth century, with both its intensive Enlightenment-oriented and dispensational thinking, toward an authentic Pentecostal hermeneutic. The Pentecostals said “yes” to both the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture and to the authority of experience based upon Scripture’s trustworthiness and reliability. Archer finds it unfortunate then that American Pentecostals, under the pressure of evangelicalization, joined the National Association of Evangelicals in the 1940s and reworked their doctrine of Scripture to

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embrace “inerrancy.” The hermeneutical effects of this embrace have been always been assessed negatively by Pentecostal scholars.² Archer believes that it caused a deleterious invasion of a “modernistic foundation already poured by the academic Fundamentalists at the turn of the twentieth century (which assumed that) the Pentecostals simply had to be educated into the modernistic thought and argument of the more ‘intellectual’ tradition” (64). Results of this evangelistically suppressing and shame-enhancing union may be observable today in the marginalizing of testimony, of tarrying, and in the propensity of some to be led more by their own acquisition of academic history than by dreams, visions, and the Holy Spirit.

In his fourth chapter, “Early Pentecostal Biblical Interpretation,” Archer works from original literature to discern a commonsensical Bible Reading Method that relied upon inductive and deductive reasoning skills to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture under the illumination of the Holy Spirit. According to Archer, this is different from the traditional scholastic Protestant Christianity, which employed more of a “proof-texting system” (74). The Bible Reading Method was thoroughly pietistic and synchronic, requiring all of the biblical data to be gathered and harmonized with respect to plot and context. The biblical past and the present could thereby potentially unite, contrary to traditional epochalistic-oriented creeds and ecclesiastical dictums that suggested, and even demanded, otherwise. Oneness (or Triunity) and Trinitarian Pentecostals saw the first Jerusalem Pentecost and its ensuing repetitions in the ministry of disciple-believer-witnesses as a “commanded promise” (91) for all Christians who were afar off, whether they be Jew or Gentile, a personal promise to all believers beyond narrative time.

How this reading method of the Pentecostal story forged a convincing hermeneutical narrative tradition and arrived at meaning is illustrated (99) by its contemporary employment in L. Daniel Hawk’s narrative study of Joshua.³ Plot encompasses the framework of the story and its detailed arrangement of incidents and patterns as they relate to each other. This understanding of plot also operates in the mind of the reader who then tends to organize and make connections between events. Hence, the narrative elicits a dynamic interpretive relationship between text and readers. One may note as well that the great narratives of Homer have long been read by classicists in just this manner, similar to how Homer was read by Greco-Roman students in the New Testament period. But of course Pentecostals were (and very much today are) engaged in a battle of interpretation with their Protestant forerunners who inherited a catechistic tradition of what may be considered to be “apostolic-age” hermeneutics.⁴ In this scheme the New Testament and Luke-Acts in particular was (and often is) read cessationistically through narrowly selected Pauline glasses and via the historically venerated imposition of epochalistic temporal carvings and the cocooning of narrated events, all of which were foreign to the Bible Reading Method with its emphasis on coherence, cohesion, and biblical metanarrative whereby the spiritual past and the spiritual present could be harmoniously fused.

Pentecostals allow for the biblical stories to challenge, reshape, and build their tradition and are comfortable with Central Narrative Convictions (114-18) like

“repetitive themes, aspects of narrated time, plot development, and characterization” (118). Archer suggests that an intuitive grasp of narrative features is probably facilitated among people who have a reliance on oral communication and who listen to how stories are told, perhaps being similar culturally to hearers in the first century to whom New Testament documents were read (and to such hearers in the majority world today). From the point of view of the Bible Reading Method and the concept of a Latter Rain from the Old Testament, a New Pentecost seemed (and seems) entirely realistic and right, “Pentecostal worship was more than it seemed. Outsiders saw only fanaticism, but insiders saw more. They discerned order within disorder, reason within unreason. Not a bad bargain for saints heaven bound.”⁵

The last two chapters, “Current Pentecostal Hermeneutical Concerns” and “A Contemporary Hermeneutical Strategy” focus on guidelines for the future. In hermeneutical concerns, six scholars (all Pentecostals like L. Daniel Hawk above) come to the fore, namely French Arrington, Howard Ervin, John McKay, Mark McLean, Roger Stronstad, and John Christopher Thomas. Archer skillfully highlights their important contributions to interpretative technique and method, to which should now be added the study of James Shelton.⁶ Archer too, in his words, hopes “to avoid the epistemological foundationalism of Modernity and reappropriate the active participation of the community and Holy Spirit in the interpretive process” (195).

Robert Menzies, who argues that Luke’s pneumatology is different from and is ignorant of a Pauline pneumatology, is assessed among Archer’s hermeneutical concerns as following “the hermeneutic of evangelicalism” (140), which might be otherwise labeled as an “apostolic-age” hermeneutic. Archer provides a penetrating critique of this “Evangelical Historical Critical Method” (148-54). Menzies’ argument, which does imitate, perhaps unconsciously, the intent of the epochalistic temporal carving of Luke-Acts and the supportive assumption of authorial isolation prevalent in Evangelical Protestantism, might also be reconsidered in light of reasonably expected theological and pneumatological links between Luke and his esteemed predecessor, with apologies for mentioning my own work.⁷

In his hermeneutical strategy, Archer offers suggestions as to how an interdependent tridactic dialogue between Scripture and its story world, the Holy Spirit, and readers in community can result in a negotiated meaning that is creative and practical. Archer wants to stimulate a hermeneutical strategy that is informed by an “early Pentecostal ethos” and to challenge a heretofore-uncritical acceptance of the “Evangelical modernistic approach” (195) among Pentecostals. Archer wants to de-emphasize the predominant attention in that method to discern “the past determinate meaning of the author’s intent” and to emphasize “the reality that interpretation involves both the discovery and creation of meaning for the present” (194). He undoubtedly feels that the Evangelical methodology, replete with the Spirit-extinguishing heritage of both Lukan and Pauline cessationism along with their divisive and contextually dangerous presuppositions, has leaned too much toward the world behind the text, perhaps overly concentrating, for example, on its historicity or on its presumed affixment to an “apostolic age,” rather than toward an

appropriate unity between the biblical text and the present context (193). In all of this Archer raises a significant point. However, one might observe that when a New Testament author's probable original meaning, as deduced by due and careful attention to the contemporary communicative procedures in the Greco-Roman world, comes into coincidence with present experience and divine action, the community would thereby find a sense of helpful assurance as well, another assurance which I am sure that Archer would indeed welcome and appreciate.⁸

In conclusion, Archer's critical hard-hitting thesis is not a simplistic or romanticized vision of the past or of the present. The cumulative impression of the evidence Archer adduces is that the Spirit, Scripture, and the Spirit-filled community can thoughtfully, experientially, and practically function together. Sometime Archer's presentation borders a bit on the socio-jargonistic side, but he kindly provides a short glossary of terms (197-98) with definitions for those unattuned to such worldviews. However, I find Archer's analysis to be easily navigated, entertaining, wonderfully succinct and plausible, filled with interpretive gems and insights that have an instinctive appeal. Therefore in the century ahead, as its title suggests, his thesis could provide a stimulating tonic to both hermeneutics and to faith throughout the major sectors of Christendom.

¹ See Estrelida Alexander, *The Women of Azusa Street* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Grant McClung, ed., *Azusa Street and Beyond: 100 Years of Commentary on the Global Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement* (Gainesville, FL; Bridge-Logos, 2006).

² Matthew S. Clark, "Pentecostalism's Anabaptist Roots: Hermeneutical Implications," in *The Spirit and Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Russell P. Spittler* (ed. W. Ma and R. P. Menzies; Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 24; London/New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 194-211 (206), observes that "Pentecostal interest in the accuracy of Scripture is based on a different concern to conservative evangelicalism: not to validate the great confessions of the church, but to inform a choice for a lifestyle of discipleship and witness."

³ L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contrasting Plots in Joshua* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

⁴ With respect to Evangelical Protestants, Dr. Archer was a participant in a recent five year dialogue with them as reported in "Pentecostal/Charismatic Themes in Luke-Acts at the Evangelical Theological Society: The Battle of Interpretive Method," *JPT* 12/2 (2004), 181-215 (n. 23). Previous to this Dr. Archer had already whetted our appetite for the details of his thesis that Pentecostal hermeneutics will enrich the study of interpretation in the twenty-first century via his observations that "Pentecostalism's contribution to hermeneutics is in the area of community participation and experiential understanding. There exists a promising Pentecostal hermeneutic rooted in the classical spiritual ethos of Pentecostalism" (Kenneth J. Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect," *JPT* 8 [1996], 63-81 [81]) and his argument that "Pentecostals used the Bible Reading Method with a desire both to believe and obey . . . nor did they create a new method" (Kenneth J. Archer, "Early Pentecostal Biblical Interpretations," *JPT* 18 [2001], 32-70 [69-70]).

⁵ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 111.

⁶ James B. Shelton, "Epistemology and Authority in the Acts of the Apostles: An Analysis and Test Case Study of Acts 15:1-29," *The Spirit and Church* 2/2 (2002), 231-37.

⁷ Paul Elbert, "Possible Literary Links Between Luke-Acts and Paul's Letters Regarding Spirit-Language," in *Intertextuality in the New Testament* (ed. T. Brodie, S. E. Porter, and D. MacDonald; New Testament Monographs Series; Sheffield: Sheffield-Phoenix Press, 2006), forthcoming. An expanded version of the thesis offered in Brodie *et al*, ed., *Intertextuality*, was presented at the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary (March 2006), entitled "Probable Literary Connections Between Luke-Acts and Paul Regarding Spirit-Language."

⁸ This approach, also quite commensensical as well by contemporary critical standards with respect to authorial integrity, would, I suggest, be substantially similar to a "bible reading method" with its inherent application of interpretive principles as cogently framed by Adele Berlin, "A Search for a New Biblical Hermeneutics: Preliminary Observations," in *The Study of the Ancient Near East in the Twenty-First Century: The William Foxwell Albright Centennial Conference* (ed. J. S. Cooper and G. M. Schwartz; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 195-207.