

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

JAN VEENHOF

In this contribution we will deal with the significance of the Holy Spirit for hermeneutics, namely the hermeneutics of Holy Scripture. We are confronted immediately with various questions which come to the fore in discussions about hermeneutics; discussions which occur within theology, but primarily within philosophy, literature and linguistic sciences. I would like to remind you briefly of some aspects of these discussions, which are important for our subject.

In accordance with the original meaning of the Greek root, 'hermeneutics' indicates the theory of explanation and interpretation of texts. To this belongs the knowledge of the language of the text and its grammar, feeling for the individual use of language of an author, attention to the scope of a text and to the context of the text, and so on. This meaning remained dominant until the nineteenth century. In this sense the term was also used within theology as an indication of a special discipline, dealing with the exegesis of the Bible. Often the distinction was made between this theological hermeneutics as *hermeneutica sacra* and hermeneutics in a general sense, *hermeneutica profana*. Later I will return to this distinction.<sup>1</sup>

In the nineteenth century a change comes in the picture, which continues in our century. This change caused a great expansion of the content of the term. Under the influence of men such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey an intensive reflection began on questions which previously only implicitly came into discussion. All these questions revolve around the idea of understanding. What is the essence of it? Under which

---

1. Cf. for this distinction S. Greijdanus, *Schriftbeginselen ter Schriftverklaring*, Kampen, 1946, pp. 11f. The New Testament scholar Greijdanus (1871-1948) who was a pupil of Kuyper and Bavinck and taught in Kampen for many years defends here the justness of a specific *hermeneutica sacra*.

conditions is understanding realised? Which historical changes are evident in these conditions? These are the questions, which in recent times – I mention here only the name of Gadamer – are analysed intensively. This does not imply that the old conception of the task of hermeneutics has been completely put aside. But it has been integrated now in a broader context, in which exegesis and understanding are discussed together. This connection seems justified. As we will see in the following, there is a continuous interaction between them, although it is not correct to equate them.<sup>2</sup>

Exegesis and understanding – they certainly influence each other. To perceive this it is only necessary to realise what is

- 
2. The literature about hermeneutics is overwhelmingly extensive. I must restrict myself to the mention of the following publications which offer a general and fundamental orientation: J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb, *New Frontiers in Theology*, I *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, II *New Hermeneutics*, III *Theology as History*, New York-Evanston-London, 1963-1967; F. Mussner, *Geschichte der Hermeneutik von Schleiermacher bis zur Gegenwart*, in M. Schmaus a.o. (editors) *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Band I Faszikel 3c (2. Teil), Freiburg-Basle-Wien, 1970; H. Cazelles, *Écriture, Parole et Esprit. Trois Aspects de l'Hermeneutique Biblique*, Paris, 1971; E. Hufnagle *Einführung in die Hermeneutik*, Urban Taschenbücher 233, Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-Mainz, 1976; L.D. Derksen, *On Universal Hermeneutics. A Study in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, (Dissertation, Free University, Amsterdam), Amsterdam, 1983; G. Scholtz, *Die Philosophie Schleiermachers*, Darmstadt, 1984. Other publications are mentioned in the following footnotes. As for the relation between interpretation and understanding I should like to point here to the fact that a man like O.A. Dilschneider stresses the difference against tendencies to level both, cf. his *Ich Glaube an den Heiligen Geist. Versuch einer Kritik und Antwort zur Existenztheologie*, Wuppertal, 1969, pp. 46-51. Whatever may be said about the relation, the fundamental nature of understanding in my opinion cannot be questioned. Interpretation finds its origin in understanding and intends to lead to understanding.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

inherent in the idea of understanding. Profiting from the insights, developed by Gadamer and others, in Dutch Reformed circles H.M. Vroom has clarified this in his writings. I should like to draw attention to several elements of his exposition. For the understanding of what another says it is necessary that I am involved in the matter about which the other speaks, and I must have an idea of the context, the situation, in which the other says what he does. Furthermore, there are important questions either sociological or psychological, which can enable us to understand – or can block understanding. Especially important are the values which are accepted. They form an essential part of the frame of reference within which we understand. This frame of reference is of decisive significance for the question whether and how we take in and employ new information. We can summarise all these factors with the term 'horizon of understanding'. This is a technical term, which indicates all that we have brought with us as our cultural, mental and spiritual baggage.<sup>3</sup>

All this is true in a specific way for the understanding of written texts, including texts of the past, of which the Bible is one; but especially when these texts not only afford objective information but touch elementary questions of life. The writers of the Bible had another horizon of understanding, they lived in another world from ours. And it is necessary that we be conscious of it, because otherwise we read our own insights into the Bible – especially in the area of religion.<sup>4</sup>

---

3. H.M. Vroom, *Naar letter en geest. Over het beroep op de Bijbel*, Kampen, 1981, pp. 93-97. This publication affords the elaboration of a number of insights, which he defended with an expanded scientific documentation in his book, *De Schrift alleen? Een vergelijkend onderzoek naar de toetsing van theologische uitspraken volgens de openbarings-theologische visie van Torrance en de hermeneutisch-theologische opvattingen van Van Buren, Ebeling, Moltmann en Pannenberg*, (Dissertation, Free University, Amsterdam), Kampen, 1978. Cf. for the viewpoints recorded by me especially pp. 221-231.

4. *Naar letter en geest*, pp. 97-102.

That is one side of the matter: our horizon of understanding, if we are not conscious of it, can block or restrict the understanding. But there is also another side. Our horizon of understanding plays also an indispensable role in a positive sense in the understanding of texts. We understand a text only as we bring into play our own life-experience, if we actualise the content of the stories in connection with our own situation.<sup>5</sup>

It is the task of the professional historical critical interpretation to clarify the horizon of understanding of the writers of the text of the past. This interpretation serves the understanding but is not this understanding itself. The real understanding lies in what Gadamer indicates as the coalescence of both horizons. The text and our own time and world come together. 'The penny drops'. 'It clicks'. 'It catches fire'. We see and hear in the text something that touches us. To say it better: the text becomes a word which grasps us. So the story of the text becomes an impulse in the formation of our life-story.<sup>6</sup>

So far these considerations of Vroom. We can deduce from them that present hermeneutics indeed deals with the whole process of understanding. Now you could ask the question, why this was not explicitly discussed earlier. The reason may be that the horizon of the understanding of the reality and of the human self-experience since the time in which the text came into existence, had not undergone great changes. Of course there were already changes, and of course there was the act of translation necessary, which is according to the root of the verb the bringing of something from the one area to another. But these changes took place slowly; so slowly that often they were unconscious.

The fundamental problem of understanding was felt only after the rapid change of the horizon in later times, as a consequence

---

5. *Naar letter en geest*, pp. 102-104.

6. *Naar letter en geest*, pp. 104-108.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

of which the questions of a text from the past, and still stronger the notions and images which stamped the answers in the text, were felt as strange. In that case the question arises: what has that to do with our life? When we reflect about it the question arises: under what conditions is it possible for people of different times to understand each other, especially in that which touches their essential existence? This situation, in which we observe the accelerated changes in life and in the experience of reality, has arisen in the last two centuries; and in the twentieth century it is more manifest than ever before. From this we can explain the rise of the new hermeneutics.<sup>7</sup>

In the light of the new hermeneutics we can describe the whole process of interpretation and understanding as a connection of different but interdependent elements.<sup>8</sup> I can summarise now the most important ones.

1. *The so-called 'previous understanding' (Vorverständnis)*, the consciousness (perhaps vague) of the matter dealt with in the text. The interpreter brings such a consciousness with him and presupposes it also in those for whom he interprets and who have to receive the possibility of genuine understanding. This consciousness is not sacrosanct, unassailable. In the task of interpretation and understanding it has to be risked, at any rate tested. Were it not so, the text would not be able to say anything new, anything relevant. In that case the interpretation (*sc.*, the understanding) would only confirm the opinions we have already and would be senseless. So the question is how we can prevent that previous understanding from dominating in such a manner that our interpretation – including our understanding from the very beginning – is stamped by our own prior convictions and preoccupations? In this connection one often speaks about a hermeneutical circle. It would be better to speak of a hermeneutical spiral. 'Circle' implies that the

---

7. These insights are a dominant factor in the structure and elaboration of the Christological concept of E. Schillebeeckx.

8. Cf. the surveys in the publications of Mussner and Cazelles mentioned in n2.

previous understanding in the process of understanding, as it were, returns to itself. But that is – happily – not an absolute necessity. The understanding of a text can also do something with the interpreter, reader, hearer; can transform them.<sup>9</sup>

2. *A leading interest.* All interpretation takes place from a certain interest, with a certain intention and expectation. This interest is one of the determining factors of the question which is directed to a text. The interest of the interpreter, reader, hearer meets the interest of the text, so that the question of the relation between both interests becomes actual.<sup>10</sup>

3. *The historical reconstruction.* This reconstruction intends to make a picture of the horizon in which the texts come into existence. This takes place by means of historical analysis. Here the technical rules of hermeneutics come into play. Such historical analysis is not easy. Complete objectivity is, with the exception of certain details, unattainable, because the researcher always brings with him his own horizon of understanding. But nevertheless openness is possible which does not interpret away what is strange – whether in an historical, ethical or religious sense.<sup>11</sup>

---

9. Cf. for the idea of *Vorverständnis* e.g. O. Weber, *Grundlagen der Dogmatik*, I, Neukirchen, 1955, 144. Weber points to the fact that since Dilthey the relationship between the author and the interpreter is acknowledged as a presupposition of the understanding. Formerly the term 'congeniality' (cf. n34) was used as indication of that presupposition. The philosophy of existence placed instead of the term 'congeniality' that of *Vorverständnis* in the centre.

10. This viewpoint is a dominant aspect of the Latin-American theology of liberation, cf., e.g. J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads. A Latin American Approach*, London, 1981.

11. Cf. the well-documented expositions of Colin Brown in his contribution 'History and the Believer', in Colin Brown, ed., *History, Criticism and Faith*, Leicester, 1976, pp. 147-216.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

4. *The discovery of scope.* The scope is the central idea or intention of a greater or smaller unit of text. Interpretation is not reproduction of a conglomerate of statements, but the approach to a coherent understanding from the centre which this idea supplies. With 'scope' is not meant an arbitrary perspective, but the fundamental point of view of the texts themselves.<sup>12</sup>

5. *Translating into the horizon of the present.* Only when a text is interpreted and understood is it possible to relate its statements, especially its scope, to the viewpoints and questions of the interpreter's own horizon of experiences.<sup>13</sup>

We return now to theology, and ask how the hermeneutical problem presents itself within theological reflection. Older theology distinguished, as I have already indicated, between *hermeneutica sacra* and *profana*. This distinction recognises, in the first place, that the object of the *hermeneutica sacra* is different principally from all other writings because of its divine origin and character. In the second place this distinction recognises that for interpretation according to the rules of this *hermeneutica sacra* the assistance of the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary.<sup>14</sup> This conviction lived within post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy. Orthodox theology wished to establish, with its strict doctrine of inspiration, the divine origin and character of Scripture: the Bible is in every respect the book of the Spirit. Orthodoxy taught that the 'objective' historical knowledge of Scripture already requires the assistance of the Spirit, although this knowledge is not yet connected with *fiducia*

---

12. Cf. for the idea of 'scope' G.C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift I*, Kampen, 1966, pp. 175-180 and *De Heilige Schrift II*, Kampen, 1967, pp. 95-100.

13. Cf. H. Ott in his contribution 'Hermeneutik als Fundament der Pneumatologie', in O.A. Dilschneider, ed., *Theologie des Geistes*, Gütersloh, 1980, pp. 97-107.

14. W. Schmithals, 'Wissenschaftliches Verstehen und Existentielles Verstehen im Geiste', in Dilschneider, ed., *Theologie des Geistes*, p. 114 (see note 13).

(confidence). Scientific exegesis has to be 'pneumatic' exegesis.<sup>15</sup> Early 'classical' Pietism laid less stress on the connection of the Spirit with the book. Rather it accentuated in a new way the connection of the Spirit with the interpreter, reader and hearer of the book: the personally experienced operation of the Holy Spirit is a precondition for the understanding of Scripture. The similarity with Orthodoxy lies in the conviction that no understanding of the Bible is possible without the Holy Spirit. But according to Pietism – and here lies the difference – the Holy Spirit is not primarily connected with the Word but with the understanding man. Only a reborn Christian is able to understand the Scripture truly.<sup>16</sup>

An essential change was brought about by the arrival of historical critical investigation on the scene of theology. The first representatives of historical criticism – I think of men like Eichhorn and Semler – were of the opinion that the distinction of *hermeneutica sacra* and *profana* could no longer hold. Insofar as the Bible is an historical book, it has to be interpreted in an historical manner as much as other historical writings, without any dogmatic preoccupation. And for this the Holy Spirit is not necessary. This does not mean that these men deny the operation of the Holy Spirit, but they give it another role. So Semler distinguishes the scientific understanding and the work of the Holy Spirit as the natural true correct understanding and the supernatural living understanding. The

---

15. Schmithals, *op. cit.* p. 114. See for the doctrine of Scripture in the Post-Reformation theology my *Revelatie en Inspiritie. De Openbarings - en Schriftbeschouwing van Herman Bavinck in vergelijking met die der ethische theologie*, Amsterdam, 1967, pp. 13-28.

16. Schmithals, *op. cit.*, p. 114, *cf.* G. Maier, *Heiliger Geist und Schriftauslegung*, Wuppertal, 1983, p. 10: in the period of Pietism 'rückt die Person des Auslegers in den Mittelpunkt des Interesses, in dem die theologia regeneratorum betont wird'. The accent was thus shifted – to a certain extent – from the inspired Scripture to the inspired interpreter.



## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

illumination of the Holy Spirit affects only the living understanding.<sup>17</sup>

This view became increasingly the dominating one in theology. The old distinction, which I mentioned before, was pushed into the background. The opinion became predominant that there is only one hermeneutics. For the interpretation of the Bible the same principles and methods are valid as for all interpretation of texts from the past. Often the distinction was made – in manifold variation of the distinction of Semler – between a historical objective and an existential subjective or personal understanding. The former is a matter of methodological reflection, accessible in principle to everyone. It is certainly not a purely intellectual understanding. It may be a congenial understanding, which observes the appeal in the text. Another question however is, how someone reacts on this appeal. This is no longer a matter of methodological reflection, but the expression of a personal engagement. Such an engagement is characteristic for the personal understanding.<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult to select here the right terms, because the impact of those terms depends on the content which is given to them. Authors use many varying descriptions. But in some way or another they speak of two 'phases', two 'dimensions', or whatever qualification may be given. Some authors distinguish even more than two phases or dimensions. What is common to all of them is the conviction that such a differentiation is possible, justified and indeed obligatory.<sup>19</sup> Personally I plead for the correctness of such differentiation, which is – and I like to stress that! – different from a separation. It seems to me that the formal structure of the hermeneutical process within

---

17. Schmithals, *op.cit.*, pp. 115f.

18. Cf. G. Maier, *Wie legen wir die Schrift aus?*, Geissen und Basel, 1978.

19. Cf. e.g., J. Barr, *Explorations in Theology*, 7. *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, London, 1978.

theology is the same as elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> The elements I mentioned before confirm this. To this extent there is no specific Biblical hermeneutics. At the same time there is in the hermeneutical theological approach to the Bible something specific. The expectation with which, within theology, interpretation deals with the texts is of a specific nature. This expectation is : *via* human statements of and in the texts the voice, the calling of God will grasp us. This expectation is confirmed by the experience of the church in its 'conversation' with the Bible. The deepest foundation of this expectation is the promise, testified in the Bible, that in the word of the witnesses the Lord himself will be present. I am conscious of the fact that this implies an *a priori* of faith. And I do not hesitate to say that openly, seeing that no one is without an *a priori*.<sup>21</sup> Through this expectation the interpretation within theology gets its own direction. It is the aim to interpret the texts in such a manner that the Word, which brought forth these texts, is conserved in its continuous identity and at the same time in its steadily actual relevance. The Word is the Word of God, who comes to men in Jesus. This implies the permanent identity of the Word, for Jesus Christ is the permanent ground, content and norm of faith. No interpretation can be the true one which detracts from that permanent identity. This permanent identity however does not mean that the Word is bound to or even imprisoned in a past period, or restricted to a past culture. Jesus is the same, yesterday, now and in eternity (Heb. 13:8). That means that he in all the phases of history is who he was during his stay on earth; the One who is surprisingly new. Jesus is never antiquated. He is permanently actual and relevant. And the same is true of his Word. In close connection with the changing situations in which men find

---

20. In this opinion I am confirmed by the observation of the fact that defenders of a specific biblical hermeneutic nevertheless make several reservations, *cf.*, Greijdenus *op cit.*, p. 12 and Maier, *Heiliger Geist und Schriftauslegung*, pp. 36ff.

21. I will mark off with emphasis this *a priori* in the sense of a previous judgment that contains a preoccupation which blocks the way to understanding.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

themselves, it speaks in a new way to us. We may say it also like this: in close connection with these changing situations we discover new things in that word.<sup>22</sup> As for this discovery, it must be taken into account that God's revealing of his saving truth and our discovery of it are not two separated phenomena. God will reveal himself in the way of our seeking and finding, in which process God has the permanent initiative. It is said rightly: 'In the insights which men find a creative process of seeking – these insights are concrete truths – the staying Truth of God comes to us.'<sup>23</sup>

The secret of this comprehensive event is the work of the Holy Spirit, who on the basis of the revelation in Christ will guide the disciples into all truth (John 16:13). The Spirit is the One who bridges the distance between the past and the present and lets us see and meet Jesus, the Son of God, sent by the Father; and in Jesus the Father himself. That is the greatness of the work of the Spirit, that in all reflection about hermeneutical questions in connection with the Bible comes to us as a surprising and overwhelming reality.<sup>24</sup> Now it is important to keep in mind the nature of this work. I kept a distance before from speaking about a *hermeneutica sacra*. In the conception of such a hermeneutics the endeavour manifests itself to mark off the acting of God in and through men, as it were 'quantitatively', from all that is being done in, with, and by men. A similar endeavour can be observed among those who at any cost will 'fix' the specific nature of Christian ethics 'substantially', 'materially', in virtues and deeds which can be found only in

---

22. Cf. my *De parakleet. Enige beschouwingen over de parakleet-belofte in het evangelie van Johannes en haar theologische betekenis*, Kampen, 1977, pp. 22-25.

23. J.G. Schaap, *Samen leren leven en geloven. Een godsdienstpaedagogisch onderzoek naar het omgaan met kernwoorden van geloven in situaties van dialogisch leren en begeleiden* (Dissertation, Free University, Amsterdam), Gravenhage, 1984, p. 171.

24. Cf. my *De parakleet*, p. 32.

Christians.<sup>25</sup> Or also among those who, at any cost, will maintain the 'supernatural' character of the New Testament *charismata*, to mark them materially off from all so-called 'natural' gifts.<sup>26</sup>

But none of these efforts succeeds. It becomes clear that the work of the Spirit cannot be described in terms of 'addition', as if the Spirit would give or cause a new 'quantum', a new 'substance'. On the contrary the work of the Spirit must be described in terms of relation and interaction.<sup>27</sup> According to this view man is brought by the Spirit to a new situation, characterised by his relation to God. This view is confirmed by what the Biblical testimony says about the work of the Spirit. From very different points of view and in very different ways it comes to expression, that the Spirit brings about our relation to God in Christ. It is by the Spirit that we can know God in Christ, and so can come into relation to him.<sup>28</sup> I confine myself here to the explicit reference in the passage 1 Cor. 2:10-16, which is of fundamental importance for our subject. In this massive passage, packed full with thoughts about the Spirit, Paul stresses the facts that all that is mediated by the Spirit – the whole revelation of God in Christ – can be discerned and accepted in its true nature only by spiritual, 'pneumatical', people. Dilschneider points rightly to the fact that the central moment in this passage is the '*homoion*-thesis', which has been proposed from ancient times until now: the equal can only be

- 
25. Cf. for the discussions about a *proprium* of Christian ethics, D.E. de Villiers, *Die eiesoortigheid van die Christelike moraal* (Dissertation, Free University, Amsterdam), Amsterdam, 1978.
26. Cf. my contribution 'Charismata – bovennatuurlijk of natuurlijk?', in J.H. van de Bank e.a., edd., *Ervaren waarheid. Bundel voor H. Jonker*, Nijkerk, 1984, pp. 120-133.
27. See my contribution mentioned in note 24, p. 130; also J. Firet in his article 'Psychologische notities met betrekking tot de Geestesdoop', in *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 78 (1978), pp. 87f.
28. Cf. my article 'Pontifex Maximus' in *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 78 (1978) pp. 4-15.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

known and understood by the equal, *simile simili cognosci*. This thesis is formulated by Paul in its positive but also in its negative fashion. The pneumatical must be discerned, perceived pneumatically; and at the same time, the physical man does not accept what comes from the Spirit of God.

This *homoion*-thesis brings us, according to Dilschneider, into a specific epistemological position. It makes clear that we have to see the understanding in respect of the knowing of faith. At any rate it is clear that here the Cartesian subject-object scheme is broken. For the object of that knowing – the things of the Spirit – is that which determines the knowing human subject.

The man who knows by faith stands in the reality, in the field of operation of the Spirit, and is in his knowing fully dependent on that operation. This object remains always subject!<sup>29</sup> In Scottish theology this viewpoint has been expressed by Thomas F. Torrance in an impressive way.<sup>30</sup> As it is the Spirit who

---

29. Cf Dilschneider, *Ich glaube an den Heiligen Geist*, pp. 51-54. See also Dilschneider's contribution 'Gnoseologie oder vom Verstehen im Geiste' in *Theologie des Geistes* (see n13), pp. 59-68. The fact that God in the process of our knowing of him remains the Subject is testified with emphasis by such men as Kuyper, Bavinck and Barth.

30. Thomas F. Torrance says in his contribution 'The epistemological relevance of the Holy Spirit' in R. Schippers a.o. ed., *Ex auditu verbi. Bundel voor G.C. Berkouwer*, Kampen, 1965, pp. 282f, about our knowing of God as follows:

'so that the given Object of our knowledge is actively at work in our knowing of it creating from our side a corresponding action in which our own being is committed. That is why theological thinking is essentially a spiritual activity in which we are engaged in a movement that corresponds to the movement of the Spirit and indeed participates in it. It is a form of kinetic thinking in which the reason does not apprehend the truth by sitting back and thinking ideas, but in an act or movement in which it participates in what it seeks to know. Thus in order to know Jesus Christ, the eternal Word become flesh, the Truth of God in historical happening, we must know Him

*prays* in us (Rom. 8:15), so it is also the Spirit who *knows* in us. Meanwhile we may say at the same time, without hesitation, that *we* are those who pray and who know. For when the Spirit grasps and fills a man he does not suppress that man, but he lets him or her function in full humanity. It is man who believes and knows, but ... through the Spirit of Christ. Man is no longer an autonomous subject. Certainly the man himself believes, but not out of, or from, himself.

We are here on the track of thoughts which had fundamental importance in the theology of the Reformers. Luther, for example, said the following: 'If there is a true faith it is a sure confidence of the heart and firm acknowledgement with which Christ is apprehended. So that Christ is the object of faith, rather however not object but to say it in this way, in faith Christ himself is present.'<sup>31</sup>

In the act of faith we are, as it were, taken out of our position as subjects. Therefore the *extra nos* is fundamental for this theology. Luther formulates it so: 'Therefore our whole theology is sure, because it places us outside of ourselves.'<sup>32</sup>

It is not the autonomous man who decides from out of himself to know and to understand. The knowing is here embedded in the being known. And this being known is mediated by the Spirit. Dilschneider rightly reminds us in this connection of the central function of the idea of the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* in Luther and Calvin. The Spirit, under whose guidance the Bible

---

in a way apposite to that divine becoming and happening, in space and time, and therefore *kata pneuma*, as St. Paul said. This is what Kierkegaard used to call "the leap of faith", but it would be a grave misunderstanding to think of this as a blind or irrational movement, for it is the very reverse of that.'

31. See Luther, Weimarer Ausgabe 40, 1, pp. 228-229.

32. Luther, Weimarer Ausgabe 40, 1, p. 589. Cf. Dilschneider, *Ich glaube an den Heiligen Geist*, p. 56, where some more statements of Luther are quoted.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

came into existence and by whose illumination men came to the true knowledge of the Scripture, is also the One who 'seals' the saving truth of the Gospel to the heart of the believer. By the Spirit believers are assured and convicted that in the Scripture God's saving truth comes to men, and in particular to themselves.<sup>33</sup> The Spirit opens Scripture for us and opens us for Scripture.

If we would have to summarise this insight in a succinct formula, we could try the following characterisation: by the Spirit, and only by the Spirit, we learn to hear and – in a certain measure – see God in Scripture, as he in Christ will be our, my God. That is the authentic understanding of Scripture, namely that understanding by means of which I understand myself newly in the light of God's saving intentions or, to say it in the terms of Calvin in the famous beginning of his *Institutes*, by means of which I came to the true knowledge of God and of myself. I should not like to qualify this as 'congeniality'. For congeniality implies in this case, that someone has an inner understanding, a 'feeling' for religious expressions and for the experiences which lie behind those expressions. Congeniality with a Psalmist implies that I can understand his experience of faith. This congeniality is a condition for the understanding, but it is not yet the understanding of the matter itself, or better, the Person himself.<sup>34</sup>

---

33. Cf. for the doctrine of the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* of Calvin and later Reformed theologians my *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (see n15), pp. 489-499. See also G.P. Hartvelt, *Goed voor Gods Woord*, Kampen, 1969, pp. 54-57.

34. Cf., for the idea of 'congeniality', note 9. This idea can be traced back to Dilthey but still further to the interpretation-traditions of Schleiermacher and Pietism. An advocate from more recent times is the New Testament scholar E. von Dobschütz. In his book *Vom Auslegen des Neuen Testaments*, Göttingen, 1926, p. 28, he formulated it in a vivid way. 'Wie ein Abstinenz schwerlich der rechte Ausleger für die Lieder eines Anakreon oder der Sappho sein wird, so kann ein Mensch, der nicht gewisse Voraussetzungen mitbringt, sagen wir kurz, der nicht innerlich fromm ist, mag er noch

The one who understands genuinely is he who comes into a relation with the God about whom the Psalmist speaks. He or she recognises in what the Psalmist brings to expression his or her own experiences in the communion with God. He or she understands because he or she participates in the 'matter'. The interpreter who himself has a relationship with the God of the Psalmist asks, *via* the experiences and expressions of the Psalmist, of God himself. Such an interpreter discovers for himself that it pleases God to reveal himself by means of the faith-experiences and faith-expressions of men.<sup>35</sup>

So the true understanding realises itself in the relation with God. This relation belongs from a methodological point of view to the 'previous understanding' (*Vorverständnis*) of the interpreter. And just here I should like to place the function of the Spirit in the process of interpreting and understanding. This corresponds with the nature of the work of the Spirit as Founder of relations *par excellence*. As I indicated before, the Spirit founds the relation between me and the others. Men, fellow believers of mine participated in the making of the Bible. They experienced God. They have testified it. And they have described it. All that belongs to the one, great event of the acting of the Spirit. But that acting of the Spirit goes on. I come in touch with the Bible, *via* the proclamation of the Gospel or *via* other causes, and anew the Spirit comes into play to connect me with God in Christ, *via* the Scripture and *via* the

---

so gelehrt sein, das Neue Testament nicht ganz verstehen nicht kongenial interpretieren.' Karl Barth also desired a 'Kongenialitat mit den Zeugen der Offenbarung', cf. his *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, Munchen, 1927, p. 408. G. Maier, to whom I am indebted for these references, uses and defends the idea 'congeniality' in a sense which already encloses the knowledge with respect to the understanding of faith.

35. Cf. J. Firet on the operation of the Spirit through men in his *Het agogisch moment in het pastoraal optreden*, Kampen, 1974, pp. 154-176. See also M. Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, New York-Chicago-San Francisco, 1964, pp. 293-298, about 'The Spirit and Bible Study'.



## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HERMENEUTICS

men who come to the Word in the Scripture. So the Spirit places me in a *Ich-Du* relation, which God will maintain with men. This relation is brought about in the knowledge of God in Christ, which itself is owed to the illumination of the Spirit. For illumination, revelation and knowledge in Biblical thinking are no purely cognitive, intellectual concepts. God's revelation is not only a communication about God and his salvation. Rather God communicates in Scripture *himself* and his salvation. There God in his revelatory activity is not only dealing with the intellect but with the whole man. Just so is the knowledge of God, which is given to man by illumination, not only a taking notice of God and his work, but rather the annexation of his thinking and willing and working.<sup>36</sup> Illumination, revelation, knowledge are therefore 'relational' just because they are existential.

This knowing is a tremendous thing, comparable with creation itself, cf. 2 Cor.4:6. Just as creation has the spirit of God as its author so the recreation has as its author the Spirit of God, who is now the Spirit of Christ. The knowledge which a man like Paul had of Christ, has as its fundament of possibility his renewal, caused by the Spirit (Acts 9:17). The Holy Spirit is ready to grasp, transform and fill also the present interpreter, This does not mean the deprivation and elimination of all existing exegetical methods. It means no more, as I indicated before, the necessity of a new, pneumatological method.<sup>37</sup> I will quote with agreement a statement of Thomas F. Torrance, who stresses that our knowledge of God is a *human* knowledge. He says: 'Are we to think of this as somehow heightened or spiritualised until it becomes supra-rational or ecstatic? Surely not, for it is the miraculous nature of the Spirit's activity that while he creates in us the ability to know God beyond all creaturely and human capacities this does not involve any suppression of our rational and critical powers. If we are

---

36. Cf. K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV, 3, Zollikon-Zürich, 1959, p. 586.

37. It can be noted that most pleas for a 'pneumatic exegesis' in fact intend to plead for a 'pneumatic interpreter'.

enabled to apprehend God in his own divine nature, it is without having to take our feet off the ground, so to speak, or without having to transcend our human nature in space and time. In no way are we asked to take leave of our senses or to make irrational steps.<sup>38</sup>

Also in this connection we must take into account that the Spirit does not suppress our humanity, but rather will employ it in his own work. To that humanity belongs also those possibilities and methods which are at our disposal. It is not devalued but honoured. Meanwhile this does not exclude, but rather includes, that the work of the Spirit in, with and through us will influence the way in which we as interpreters use the various methods.<sup>39</sup>

So it is the Spirit who enables us to find the true understanding and so the right interpretation.<sup>40</sup> And because the Spirit is the Author, we have to pray: *Veni creator et recreator Spiritus, veni et illumina nos!* Come and illumine us! It is the same prayer which was uttered by the Psalmist, saying: 'Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law' (Ps.119:18).

---

38. Torrance, *op.cit.*, p. 275.

39. Therefore is to be welcomed the way in which the New Testament scholar P. Stuhlmacher (Tübingen) in several publications connects 'Spirit' and 'method'. Interesting for this viewpoint is also the contribution of F. Martin, 'The Charismatic Renewal and Biblical Hermeneutics', in John C. Haughey, S.J., ed., *Theological Reflections on the Charismatic Renewal. Proceedings of the Chicago Conference October 1-2, 1976*, Ann Arbor, Mich., USA, 1978, pp. 1-37.

40. M. Barth, *op.cit.*, sees as criterion for the righteousness of someone's exegesis the effects of it on other people.