

Interpretive Communities of the Spirit in a Multicultural Context: Reflections on Pentecostal Hermeneutics

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Introduction

Since the inception of Pentecostalism in the early 1900s, it has witnessed phenomenal growth across the globe and has spread in all directions like wildfire. The precise pattern of its global spread might be difficult to trace (though not impossible!), but we can enumerate several vital factors responsible for its growth. Besides their missionary zeal, the operation of charismatic gifts among Pentecostals, and their eschatological orientation and quest to experience God through the Holy Spirit, the revelation of the Scripture they gained has played a very significant role in their story. In the movement's history, Pentecostal interpreters embraced a spectrum of interpretive approaches, spanning from the literal reading of the text to the current postmodern tools of hermeneutical engagement. Pentecostal hermeneutics has much to contribute to the broader academic fraternity in its ongoing discussion, but it is not free from its textual interpretation and self-articulation struggles. While Pentecostal interpretive praxis is potent to award a free hand to an interpreter to read into the text with one's unique spiritual experiences, scholars in practice have cautiously defined the scope and limits of its interpretive practice. For this reason, the interpretive community seems to play a crucial role in producing the meaning of a text based on its experience; the community operates under the authority of the Pneumatic illumination of the text. However, the identity of the Pentecostal interpretive community is often defined in theological terms. Such definitions tend to homogenize the broad spectrum of ethnic, racial, and cultural differences represented in the heterogeneous nature of the community.

So, we ask, should Pentecostal hermeneutics be informed by the multicultural context of its members in different parts of the world? If yes, how does a local interpretive community operate within and outside the established Pentecostal interpretive tradition? Is there sufficient Scriptural warrant to maintain the Spirit's use of non-Christian cultural, literal, and religious traditions in illumining human minds concerning the divine will? The discussion intends to reflect on the key issues without an in-depth analysis. At first, a broad overview of the Pentecostal interpretation as practiced in general is discussed. The second section

deals with the heterogeneous cultural composition of the worldwide Pentecostal communities that articulate their biblical understanding and faith in the native traditional and linguistic categories. Finally, the biblical and contextual validity of undertaking a pneumatic interpretation in multicultural categories is discussed.

The Trajectory of Pentecostal Hermeneutics

Pentecostal hermeneutics evolved from a populist hermeneutical approach to a postmodernism lenient hermeneutical praxis. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's short historical survey of the Pentecostal interpretation identifies four characteristic movements of the ongoing Pentecostal hermeneutical evolution: "1) Oral pre-reflective stage of early Pentecostal bible reading. 2) Trend towards Fundamentalist dispensational interpretation with alliance with Evangelicalism. 3) The quest for a distinctive pneumatic exegesis. 4) Emerging postmodern development."¹ We must remember that these interpretive movements continue among different pockets of Pentecostals even today. The first movement characterized the hermeneutical praxis of the earliest Pentecostals, who were populist in their approach to the text.² As Graham observes, "[t]his approach to Scripture challenged common people to open the Bible and interpret it for themselves."³ The supernatural Spirit experiences within the community preceded such interpretive engagements based on faith that the Bible is wholly trustworthy and can be authentically understood in the literal sense, here and now.⁴

The second movement was Pentecostal academia flirting with Fundamentalist and Evangelical hermeneutical presuppositions. This phase led to resentment among some Pentecostal theologians because it seemingly allowed the assimilation of Pentecostal hermeneutics into Evangelical interpretive practice. Many feared that it might lead to the demise of the Pentecostal distinctive.⁵ Kärkkäinen summarizes the fear of several Pentecostal hermeneutists, saying, "What they are not concerned about is the narrowing down of Pentecostal hermeneutics to the point

¹Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics in the Making: On the Way from Fundamentalism to Postmodernism," *The Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, 18 (1998): 77.

²Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009), 63-66; Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 265-276. Keener also discusses the contemporary forms of such populist Pentecostal-Charismatic hermeneutical engagements.

³Stephen R. Graham, "'Thus Saith the LORD': Biblical Hermeneutics in the Early Pentecostal Movement," *Ex Auditu*, 12 (1996): 123, 125-126.

⁴Kärkkäinen, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics in the Making," 77-79.

⁵Graham, "'Thus Saith the LORD': Biblical Hermeneutics," 124-125.

where its distinctives might be lost altogether.”⁶ So, the third movement proposed a distinct Pentecostal hermeneutics laying its epistemological basis in the work of the Spirit. Ervin, Fee, W. W. Menzies, Roger Stornstad, and Robert Menzies are some leading voices in the ongoing dialogue among Pentecostals.⁷ More recently, Pentecostal theologians have found Gadamer and Ricoeur more instrumental in critically articulating a postmodernism lenient Pentecostal hermeneutics.⁸ The nature of Pentecostal hermeneutics has been discussed and debated among Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal scholars. Israel, Albrecht, and McNally critique the Pentecostal search for unique Pentecostal hermeneutics. They argue,

[c]all for a unique Pentecostal hermeneutic seems to me misguided. Such calls seem to be motivated either by an ideology or by an epistemology of the Spirit.

*A Pentecostal ideology is no hermeneutic at all, it is the obliteration of the horizon of the text by the interpreter. What is most disconcerting is that distortions of language through ideology are typically unrecognizable by members of the community because they are related to power rather than to language itself. . . . Another motivation for a call for a Pentecostal hermeneutic is an epistemology of the Spirit. This view assumes that the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit enables understanding of Scripture by special revelation of the Spirit in a quasi-gnostic manner. If one is calling for a Pentecostal hermeneutics on this basis, one would also have to assume that only the Pentecostals have the Spirit. This belief borders on Pentecostal ideology.*⁹

William W. Menzies, a Pentecostal theologian, observes that in one sense, there is *no* Pentecostal Theology because Pentecostals have sought to lie in close “identification with the mainstream theology” to

⁶Kärkkäinen, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics in the Making,” 82.

⁷Howard M. Ervin, “Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies*, 3/2 (1981): 11-25.

⁸Paul W. Lewis, “Postmodernity and Pentecostalism: A Survey and Assessment,” *African Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 1/1 (2002): 34-66; Richard D. Israel, Daniel E. Albrecht, and Randal G. McNally, “Pentecostals and Hermeneutics: Texts, Rituals and Community,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, 15/2 (1993): 137-161.

⁹Israel, Albrecht, and McNally, “Pentecostals and Hermeneutics,” 144 (Emphasis added by author).

“gain the respect and attention of the larger church world.”¹⁰ However, he qualifies it by saying, “[y]et in another sense there is a uniqueness to Pentecostal theology” that is “a doctrine to be proclaimed and an experience to be experienced.”¹¹ This experiential dimension of Pentecostal theology plays an integral role in Pentecostal hermeneutical engagement with the biblical text. As a result, despite aligning with the Fundamentalist/Evangelical approach in interpretation, Pentecostals from their early stages have espoused a different understanding of various biblical texts due to their hermeneutical priorities. Of these unique Pentecostal hermeneutical distinctions, the key to interpreting the Bible is the centrality of the Spirit-experience of an individual and the community. Menzies, in his three-level framework for Pentecostal interpretive engagement, justifies verifying Pentecostal experience with biblical pieces of evidence after it happens.¹²

Assigning a significant role to experience in Pentecostal hermeneutics does not suggest a total disinterest in author-intention oriented historical-critical method of interpretation. Responding to the misunderstood critique of Pentecostals’ engagement with the Bible, Walter Hollenweger says, “[t]he critics of the Pentecostal movement who accuse it of neglecting the written word in favour of individual illumination by the Spirit are ignorant of the role which the Bible plays in the Pentecostal movement.”¹³ Howard M. Ervin, a Pentecostal biblical scholar, acknowledges the significance of intentionality in interpretation. He says, “[a] sound grammaticohistorical exegetical tradition has therefore been indispensable to hermeneutical methodology.”¹⁴ They have willingly subscribed to the view that exegesis is the first step toward correctly interpreting the Scripture.¹⁵ Thus, allowing the authorial intention to be recognized remains a critical task for any good exegete. Fee states, “good exegesis is so only as it seeks to discover and hear what the text is intending to say.”¹⁶ It has a twofold aim: to be a “*corrective*” and “construct our theologies in a truly biblical fashion.”¹⁷

According to Fee, an interpreter must recognize that God gave the Scripture to us with its bipolar nature, i.e., “its eternity and historical

¹⁰William W. Menzies, “Synoptic Theology: An Essay on Pentecostal Hermeneutics,” *Paraclete* 13/1 (1979): 14.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 15.

¹²*Ibid.*, 16-20.

¹³Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals: The Charismatic Movement in the Churches* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 321.

¹⁴Ervin, “Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option,” 14.

¹⁵Menzies, “Synoptic Theology,” 17; Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 42.

¹⁶Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, 42.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 43.

particularity.” Thus, a Pentecostal exegete must intentionally adopt a “radical middle” to draw the correct meaning of a text.¹⁸ Fee's significant contribution to Pentecostal hermeneutics is not merely setting authorial intentionality at the center. Instead, he suggests the road map of getting at it quite a lot built on the evangelical hermeneutical foundation. Fee counts it erroneous to formulate a doctrine of subsequence and initiation out of the New Testament's descriptive/narrative section (Acts 2) without ensuring authorial intention. Precedents alone do not suffice to interpret a text to verify the validity of the experience as normative. Establishing the normative value of the narrative is possible only by connecting it with the principle of action taught in other parts of the Bible.¹⁹ However, other Pentecostal scholars like William Menzies and Roger Stronstad have rejected Fee's proposal for interpreting the Acts of the Apostles. Stronstad argues that Fee's observation on the Pentecostal interpretation of the book of Acts is “misunderstood, and even misrepresented.”²⁰ For William Menzies, “Fee has unnecessarily restricted the theological opportunity by his agenda,” resulting in “severe reductionism.”²¹ Thus, it “leaves one at best with an impoverished Pentecostal theology.”²²

Pentecostals critique traditional hermeneutics for placing the Scripture “at the service of rationalistic and propositional theology. From an existential perspective, an equally notable weakness of traditional hermeneutics is its relative insensitivity to the numinous in the ethos mediated by the biblical text.”²³ Further, for Ervin, traditional hermeneutics suffers “dis-ease with the biblical world view,” while it also “robs exegesis of its critical-contextual historicity and facticity.”²⁴ Thereby, he observes that such hermeneutical exercise subjects the Scripture to human categories, denying the role of the Spirit in its composition and interpretation. As a result, the Scripture gets stripped of its status as the divinely inspired text.²⁵ Moreover, the subjective experience of the community influencing the construction of a passage's meaning is lost. The traditional hermeneutics oriented Pentecostal Scripture reading excludes the variegated experiences of Pentecostal individuals and communities living in multicultural, multi-religious contexts.

¹⁸Ibid., 35.

¹⁹Ibid., 83-99.

²⁰Roger Stronstad, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies*, 15/2 (1993): 216.

²¹Menzies, “Synoptic Theology,” 18.

²²Ibid., 19.

²³Ervin, “Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option,” 14-15.

²⁴Ibid., 15.

²⁵Ibid., 15, 18, 23.

Thus, a clear understanding of the nature and character of the pneumatic community of interpretation is necessary. Is the interpretive community assumed in Pentecostal interpretation merely a theological entity? Does it sufficiently recognize the potential contributions of the community's cultural and social character in interpreting the Bible correctly? Why is it important to consider the distinct cultural location of each local interpretive community of the Spirit?

Location of the Interpretive Community

Kenneth J. Archer and other Pentecostal biblical scholars and theologians attempt to explain the role of the community in its understanding of the Scripture. The enlightening discussions among the Pentecostal theologians identify the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and Community as the three essential components of a distinct Pentecostal interpretation. Archer contends that the Pentecostal hermeneutical “strategy will be a narrative approach that embraces a triadic negotiation for meaning between the biblical text, the Holy Spirit, and the Pentecostal community.”²⁶ He maintains that a dialectical process between the biblical text, the Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal community produces meaning which a Pentecostal community or member of that community can read, understand, and complete the process of communication. In the process of meaning production, the interpretive community *discovers* meaning and *creates* meaning by employing “a text centered and reader oriented interpretive method.”²⁷ In the words of Ervin, “[t]he Scriptures are now read within the pneumatic continuity of the faith community.”²⁸ The story of the community in a context will be the hermeneutical filter to draw the understanding of a passage. Such community centered interpretive enterprises grant value to subjective meanings in the process of interpretation. However, Archer argues that the freedom to draw different meanings does not give the community uncontrolled liberty to make the text speak what it “desires it to mean.”²⁹ The meaning constructed by negotiation of the triadic components of Pentecostal hermeneutics will require validation by the text. The validation of meaning includes clarity of the method employed in interpretation. The insight gained is subject to critical analysis, the corporate faith, tradition and narrative, cross-cultural application of the meaning, and openness to the possibility of scrutiny by all in academic communities, including those who are outside of the particular faith

²⁶Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 213.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 213-215, cited from 214.

²⁸Ervin, “Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option,” 23.

²⁹Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 214.

tradition.³⁰ In short, the activity of the Holy Spirit in and through the narrative of the community makes the Scripture heard aloud with clarity.

Among the current Spirit hermeneutics practitioners, Keener appears less enthusiastic and reluctant to the proposal like that of Archer. He cautiously words his reluctance to invoke the Pentecostal hermeneutical community to hear the authentic words of the Spirit, saying, “[w]hile there is *some value* in this approach, I believe that *it is limited*.”³¹ For him, the search for contextual fruit of the exegetical exercise is natural and legitimate. However, an appeal to an interpretive community inherently suffers “the danger of circularity.”³² Keener's reluctance is historically based on the interpretive positions that proved fallacious retrospectively.³³ Of course, he is right in highlighting the fluidity of defining the global Spirit community and the associated complexity in framing a definition of identity.³⁴ But the concern may be duly addressed beyond the complex nitty-gritty of doctrinal statements (like initial evidence of the Spirit baptism) in the space of broad Spirit experiences in the biblical fashion. In this sense, the Pentecostal hermeneutical community's definition is loosely based on one's self-identification and personal experience. It is not merely on someone's doctrinal confessions or an open attitude towards Charismatic pneumatology.

If so, Archer's proposal helps Pentecostals articulate a valid and distinct understanding of a passage while walking a tightrope between hearing the original author's voice discovered from the text in his context (objective meaning discovered) and the contextual meaning of the text created by a hermeneut (subjective meaning). It allows the text to have wider application to the community's life, including the “multicultural and multiracial” concerns.³⁵ Rodolfo Golvan Estrada III rightly contends that the identity of the community articulating meaning must not be limited to its theological identity. Still, every aspect of its contextual identity must be part of the authentic Pentecostal interpretation.³⁶ Its strength is that a loose definition of the Pentecostal community identity in the hermeneutical exercise enables articulating a relevant Pentecostal theological response to numerous other concerns connected to its identity.

³⁰Ibid., 252-260.

³¹Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 277, (Emphasis added).

³²Ibid., 279.

³³Ibid. Keener mentions the Moravians as an example.

³⁴Ibid., 279, 281-284.

³⁵Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 212.

³⁶Rodolfo Galvan Estrada III, “Is a Contextualized Hermeneutic the Future of Pentecostal Readings?: The Implications of a Pentecostal Hermeneutic for a Chicano/Latino Community,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies*, 37/3 (2015): 341-355.

For example, race, class, caste, and gender concerns tied to identity in a religious and cultural pluralistic context will set new agendas for responsible Pentecostal biblical reflections. It will be vibrant hermeneutical praxis articulating not just the theological identity but the social, cultural, religious, and political dimensions of a community's experience. It will help construct the contextual Pentecostal interpretation.

The clarion call of Estrada III inviting the Pentecostal academic fraternity to acknowledge the impossibility of articulating a culture-free Pentecostal hermeneutics is bold and poignant. He says that “no cultural group has a complete view of God and all cultural groups must come together and enter into conversation with one another as equals.”³⁷ Keener also recognizes the importance of input from all cultures in forming the Spirit-illuminated meaning of the text for us today,³⁸ a sort of celebrating the cacophony of the Spirit hermeneutical voices. He observes, “[b]elievers from all cultures must do our best to gather around the text and bring our varied readings to the table to learn from one another” without prioritizing any culture over others.³⁹

Estrada III's proposal and Keener's openness to gather all insights from other cultures on the round-table of Pentecostal theological/hermeneutical discussion is insufficient. They fail to construct a valid contextual Pentecostal theology without constructing the meaning of a passage in native vocabulary, worldview, and literary and cultural traditions.⁴⁰ Despite the best intention of such interpretive exercises, they only recognize voices emerging from many corners without acknowledging the visible marks of their unique accents, styles, and valid cultural expressions of the Spirit illuminated biblical insights. Merely lived experience of fissured migrant identity, socio-cultural vulnerability, oppression, etc., as spaces of constructing contextual Pentecostal hermeneutics will be shallow and not beneficial to the native Pentecostals' theological reflection. Such a weakness is enormously experienced in a pluralistic context like India, where cultural discourses are soaked in religious and secular literary traditions. Without such an incarnation of Pentecostal hermeneutical practice in the native tongue and color, it will be estranged from developing a robust local shape and appearance.

³⁷Estrada III, “Is a Contextualized Hermeneutic the Future?” 354.

³⁸Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 77-87.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁰Interestingly, Keener's acclaimed monograph, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, does not engage with this aspect of Pentecostal hermeneutical-theological reconstructions from the Global Pentecostal communities.

So, in the ongoing Pentecostal hermeneutical discussion, the repeated emphasis on the role of the community suffers a lack. The significant gap in Pentecostal interpretation is the lack of debate defining the interpretive community's actual social and cultural face and identity. One must not forget that all meaning drawing exercises are "determined by the cultural construction of the interpretive community to which the reader belongs."⁴¹ It is true in the case of even every text, which is a cultural product using cultural categories of thought and communication. Keener says, "Western churches and denominations often even divide today over which issues are cultural and which are transcultural, although all texts, whatever transcultural points they communicate, are communicated in culturally and linguistically specific ways."⁴²

While reasons beyond their choice do not typically predetermine individuals, the fact is not so with the interpretive community. According to Draper, "[a] reader may choose to belong to a particular community of readers with a particular set of ideological choices. Belonging to such a community is not predetermined by factors beyond one's knowledge or choice, it can be consciously done."⁴³ However, as a part of the larger social-cultural context, the interpretive community inherits a cultural face and social identity automatically. Its inherited cultural worldviews, categories of thinking, language, etc., influence its perception of the realities experienced within the new community of interpretation. Such "interpretive communities are important not only because they represent an *option* for the reader which she or he may consciously make, but also because they represent an accountability of the reader to that community."⁴⁴ The community functions as an authoritative agent assessing, appropriating, and authorizing the meaning of the commonly shared experience in the light of the Scripture and *vice versa*. In such a dialectical process of text-reader engagement, the biblical revelation drawn is mediated by the Spirit shaping and directing the interpretive community. In contrast, the interpretive community's story is foundational to interpreting the text. In other words, the community not only creates a faith tradition against which every form of interpretation of a text is tested, but it also causes the community to undergo a transformative experience.

The Global South, especially the South Asian region, is home to numerous cultures, languages, worldviews, and religious traditions.

⁴¹Jonathan A. Draper, "African Contextual Hermeneutics: Readers, Reading Communities, and Their Options between Text and Context," *Religion & Theology*, 22 (2015): 16.

⁴²Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 77.

⁴³Draper, "African Contextual Hermeneutics," 17.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 19.

They all possess unique worldviews that provide frameworks and categories to understand physical and abstract realities. Similar to the Jewish worldview during the New Testament time, South Asians recognize the intrinsic connection between the good and bad events in the historical world as the effect of the events taking place in the invisible/cosmic world. The popular religious-cultural myths and stories preserve their perception of realities. They produce knowledge that creates, sustains, and explains cause-and-effect relationships in matters that elude so-called modern scientific analysis. For example, in modern western rationalism, miracles are ancient myths not to be taken seriously. Western Rationalism and Existentialism drove critical biblical scholarship to reject the biblical miracle narratives as ancient myths.⁴⁵ Thus, the biblical miracle narratives were dubbed as mere vehicles for communicating universal philosophical truths. Bultmann denied the historical validity of gospel stories, including the salvific efficacy of Jesus' death and resurrection event. He proposed the program of Demythologization as a viable scientific option to draw the biblical truths embedded in the gospel events.⁴⁶ However, in non-western cultures, the encountered reality is rationalized and expressed enmeshed in the myths and stories.⁴⁷

Similarly, the grammaticohistorical approach of interpretation mistakenly limits the meaning of a sentence to the structure of a sentence. It fails to go beyond the lexical meaning of a word to the sense of the sentence. In this context, Hollenweger underlined the importance of a Pentecostal theologian/hermeneut engaging the biblical text mediated by the Spirit in an interculturally located Pentecostal community.⁴⁸ Many others have followed the trajectory by emphasizing the necessity of

⁴⁵See for a short introduction on the problem of miracles in modern approaches, Alan Richardson, *The Miracle Stories of the Gospel* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1941), 20-37.

⁴⁶See Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1952); Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCL, 1953); Reginald H. Fuller, *The New Testament in Current Study* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 1-24.

⁴⁷The South Asian scriptures like *Mahabharatha* and *Ramayana* were relegated to mere ahistorical mythical literature in the past western academic discourses. In recent decades, the native intelligentsia reject such western academic evaluation of their native literature and in public discourse argue for the historical validity of the events narrated in mythical language.

⁴⁸Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1997), 308.

contextualizing Pentecostal hermeneutics.⁴⁹ Undoubtedly, it is an urgent need to capture the academic vision of all Pentecostal hermeneutists. The interpretation of the biblical text aided by the Spirit to address contextual experiences like migration or marginalization is essential.

However, one needs to go beyond such attempts of contextualization. Pentecostal interpreters must explore native cultural and literary traditions, languages, and interpretive principles to inform the Spirit-illuminated local interpretations. It merits intense research and exploration because the Spirit-empowered communities worldwide would express the same experience in various local traditions. Although such theological expressions will have only local appeal, their essential unity with the Pentecostal theology as inspired and taught by the Holy Spirit would unify them with the worldwide Pentecostal interpretive community. In other words, the locally based interpretive community of the Spirit is always globally connected. So, Pentecostals living in the religious-cultural pluralistic contexts in Asia and Africa must explore new tools to express their understanding of the biblical text in native terms while bearing Keener's warning against exchanging "contextualization for syncretism."⁵⁰ Their unique context enriches them with vital categories of thinking through the native worldviews, cultures, and literary interpretive traditions. The necessity to interpret the biblical text in a local social and cultural milieu is born out of two realities: (i) the shift of Christian demography to the Global South, of which Pentecostals form a considerably large group. (ii) The biblical text includes real historical characters and surrounding non-Christian cultural realities of its origin.

The interpretive community engaged in articulating its experiences within the native traditions recognizes its limitations as a contextually conditioned theology. The Spirit illuminated reading of the Scripture within a specific cultural context expresses the essential biblical truths in available limited categories of the culture like images, stories, literary interpretive tools, cultural perceptions, etc. Hence, every reading is carried out cautiously and coherently, according to the theological nature

⁴⁹Duane T. Loynes, Sr., "Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Race in the Early Twentieth Century: Towards a Pentecostal Hermeneutics of Culture," *Constructive Pneumatological Hermeneutics in Pentecostal Christianity*, K.J. Archer and L.W. Oliverio, Jr., (eds.), (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2016), 229-248; Amos Yong, "The Science, Sighs, and Signs, of Interpretation: An Asian American Post-Pentecostal Hermeneutics in a Multi-, Inter-, and Trans-Cultural World," *Constructive Pneumatological Hermeneutics in Pentecostal Christianity*, K.J. Archer and L.W. Oliverio, Jr., (eds.), (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2016), 177-195; Allan Heaton Anderson, "Contextualization in Pentecostalism: A Multicultural Perspective," *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 41/1 (2017): 29-40.

⁵⁰Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 78.

of the community defined by the Spirit experience, without absolutizing one's culture. It gives birth to variegated forms of the reading experience of the text, which enrich the native mooring of the Spirit-filled community's theological roots and faith narratives. The production of the locally colored interpretation of the text happens in the participation of all the members, the academic and the non-academic. The theology of the people embedded in narratives provides necessary resources to the academic fraternity to formulate a narrative theology. Ultimately, to witness the Spirit illuminated biblical understanding of the text in the light of the deep Pentecostal experience is the core responsibility of the interpretive community of the Spirit.

This discussion requires us to turn our attention to the role of the Spirit in the illumination of the text here and now for the present readers in their native language and traditions. How should the community of the Spirit view the Bible? Are native traditions used by the Holy Spirit interpretively in the Bible to communicate the divine message?

Indigenous Traditions and the Spirit-Illumination

Pentecostal theology is a narrative theology that requires a conscious shift from the evangelical hermeneutical engagement with the text.⁵¹ For the former, the Bible is a story of God's work through the Holy Spirit in the life of the community. It is to be read and obeyed in the power of the Spirit. The Bible is a testimony of the faithful ones about the divine self-disclosure in the past. The Scriptural testimony of God's miraculous works of empowerment, repentance, and transformation can still be repeated in the mighty work of the Holy Spirit at present. Hence, the testimony of the Scripture verifies the community's present experiences. The mediation of the Spirit in the entire process yields a life-transforming engagement.

If so, how should one then understand the illumining/inspiring work of the Holy Spirit in a multicultural context? The answer lies in re-examining the Holy Spirit's illuminating function in constructing the correct meaning of the text for modern readers within their native cultural context. Pentecostals, as discussed earlier, firmly believed that the Holy Spirit played an essential role in the composition of the New Testament. Even today, the Spirit is involved in illumining readers to understand its meaning. Clark H. Pinnock argues that "the Spirit gave the Scriptures and then repeatedly gives them again and again to readers. God's breathing ought to be recognized both in the formation and in the

⁵¹See Timothy B. Cargal, "Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies*, 15/2 (1993): 182-184.

appropriation of the text.”⁵² The latter role of the Spirit in inspiring the readers to appropriate the text in a living and experiential way in the present includes an appropriation of the divine message in suitable native categories of thought. The Spirit who inspired the original authors remains active even in the present illuminating the correct meaning for his people's proper spiritual understanding of the divine words. The Spirit practiced such liberty by engaging extra-canonical material to warn and encourage the community of believers in Jude 9. So also, even in the present context, the Spirit-experiencing Pentecostal reading community, carefully attuned to the Spirit, must prayerfully indulge in appropriating the message of the Bible within the broader cultural and religious categories of thought. Such a Pentecostal hermeneutical praxis would make its theology give birth, not merely in western vocabulary, reason, and intellectual-cultural milieu but in a Spirit-breathed understanding *in* the local community, *by* the local community, and *for* the local community. It would foster the proliferation of multiple indigenous expressions of the Spirit-empowering Pentecostal experiences that inform one's hermeneutical engagement with the biblical texts. Moreover, such a hermeneutical praxis would overcome the gap between the text's horizon and the reader, aided by the Spirit, who knows the mind of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:10-12).

Since its inception in the Jesus movement, Christianity as a religion has been mingled with other cultural realities. Pieces of evidence within the New Testament, inspired by the Spirit, use philosophical, social, or religious ideas and traditions as suitable means to communicate God's mind. For example, John, the author of the Fourth Gospel, introduces Jesus to his community located in a Gentile context as “logos.” The logos idea in philosophical and religious traditions was familiar to Greeks and Jews. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, John used it to explain the identity of Jesus beyond his human existence contextually. The necessity of formulating such an intercultural Christology for John was his readers' pluralistic cultural and religious location in Ephesus. Chacko contends that John's Gospel was written in a cultural, political, and religious hybridized Ephesian context where literary voices in forked-tongues, mimicking-mocking, crisscrossed each other discursively.⁵³ The Spirit was sensitive to the context of John and his readers to inspire the author to interpret the Christological identity of Jesus in the native categories.

Similarly, Ephesians and Colossians explain the nature of the Christian household ethics in the three sets (husband-wife, parent-child,

⁵²Clark H. Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2 (1993): 4.

⁵³Biju Chacko, *Intercultural Christology in John's Gospel: A Subaltern Reading from India* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 3, see also 55.

and master-slave). In Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1, the mutual obligations, the scope of one's authority, and duties within the hierarchy of relationships existing in Christ are colored by the Greek household system.⁵⁴ Even the list of virtues and vices defining ethical behavior, mentioned in Ephesians 4:25-32, resembles “lists found in contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman literature.”⁵⁵ Ukwuegbu argues that the deeds listed under “the works of the flesh” (Gal 5:19-21) are sourced from the Hellenistic and Jewish philosophical and religious traditions. Moreover, except for “love,” the list of “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22-23) is found in Hellenistic philosophical and ethical discussions in the First century AD.⁵⁶ Hollenweger calls such interpretive use of native language, traditions, and cultures in Christian theological discourses “a theologically responsible syncretism”⁵⁷ within the Bible. He says that it is seemingly irrefutable that “Christianity (both today and in the New Testament) is a syncretism *par excellence*.”⁵⁸ Even today, a theologically responsible syncretism welcomes articulating Christian theology in native terms and traditions of the local interpretive community. So, the Pentecostal biblical interpreters in multicultural and pluralistic contexts must operate under the aegis of the Spirit's illumination within a context while interpreting the Bible.

What is the significance of a theologically responsible syncretistic interpretation of the Bible? What does it say about the Spirit's relationship with cultures? It signifies God's freedom to employ categories of thought, languages, stories, and cultural narratives from different cultures to reveal his mind as relevant to the community. Extracanonical religious traditions within the New Testament underline the Spirit's activities beyond every cultural boundary. It dismantles boundaries and resists hierarchies created by humans limiting the expanse of the Spirit's works. All cultures are equally open to the Spirit's activity depending upon the Divine will and the message to communicate. God of the Bible is the Lord of all cultures. He reigns above all cultures, traditions, and systems.

⁵⁴Bruce J. Nicholls and Brian Wintle, *Colossians & Philemon*, Asia Bible Commentary Series (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2007), 169. Similarly, on household ethics in 1 Peter, see David J. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter*, SBLMS 26 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1981), 63-121.

⁵⁵Brian Wintle, *Ephesians*, Asia Bible Commentary: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2020), 102.

⁵⁶Bernard O. Ukwuegbu, “Paraenesis, Identity-defining Norms, or Both? Galatians 5:13-6:10 in the Light of Social Identity Theory,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70/3 (2008): 548, 551.

⁵⁷Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide*, 308.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

Does the openness towards non-biblical cultural traditions to understand the biblical message threaten the spread of irresponsible interpretive processes in the name of the Spirit's illumination? Undoubtedly, the threat is real. A callous proliferation of native Pentecostal hermeneutical praxis can lead to the spread of a false and perverted gospel in the Church. Pinnock proposes "a controlled liberty" as an antidote to curb such a potential threat to the Church while continuing to appreciate the present inspirational role of the Spirit. He says:

I would say that the Holy Spirit, who inspired the apostolic testimony and binds himself to it, opens up the significance of the Scriptures for believers of all ages. Anchored in the Bible as canon, the Spirit opens up what is written there under the conditions of a controlled liberty. By controlled liberty I mean a freedom within parameters, a liberty which honours both the original what was meant by the biblical authors with a view to our understanding what God wants to say to us today.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Pentecostal hermeneutics has emerged as a respected interpretative system within academia. In the process of its evolution, the Pentecostal interpreters have struggled to learn and articulate ways in which their individual and community experiences could be imported to understand the text. Unlike evangelical interpreters, Pentecostals have recognized the inevitability of a certain degree of subjectivity while interpreting a biblical passage. Pentecostal interpreters have carefully balanced the interest to hear the text while doing so in the light of their community experience of the Spirit. However, the distinct social and cultural faces of the communities of interpreters among Pentecostals must be appreciated within the larger community, to hear. Their unique contributions, shared among others, would help to shape their theology in multiple categories of thought. Merely a theological definition of the community as an essential component in the triadic interpretive process is insufficient. As no interpretation is possible without the contribution of a reader's social and cultural influence, we must consciously seek to engage the native religious, cultural, social, literary, and non-literary traditions in interpretation. It would foster the celebration of theological unity in diversity within the worldwide Pentecostal community. The creative explanations of their experiences of the Spirit's empowerment

⁵⁹Pinnock, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," 9.

articulated in the native cultural categories will enrich Pentecostal theology. Consciously practicing a controlled liberty while doing a theological syncretistic interpretation with responsibility will demand mutual accountability between the text and the interpretive community to decide the correct interpretation of a passage.

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