

## The Holy Spirit and the hermeneutics of scripture in the community of faith.

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### *Abstract*

All Christian *theological* hermeneutics attribute a role to the Holy Spirit in the human understanding of theology and the scriptures. Views on the Spirit's role in interpretation differ markedly. Some see the Holy Spirit as self-effacing, working through human thought and traditions and others attribute more directly discernible interpretive activity to the Spirit. The Biblical witness is that the Holy Spirit is actively engaged in assisting followers of Jesus Christ to recall and understand Jesus' words and to interpret (and reinterpret) Biblical texts. Most theologians and church traditions alike agree that the fruits of interpretation can and usually should be moderated ecclesially. There is considerable diversity, however, as to how this should and might occur. I conclude that none of the established approaches to pneumatological hermeneutics should necessarily dominate. Rather, I would opt for something of an 'all of the above', reflecting perhaps the Spirit's own great diversity of action. The Spirit calls individuals to hear the Spirit's voice and to interpret and proclaim the Truth afresh. The Spirit interprets God to us 'spirit to spirit'. Nevertheless the interpretive work of the Holy Spirit—pneumatological hermeneutics—is above all the living experience of the community of faith.

All Christian *theological* hermeneutics attribute a role to the Holy Spirit in the human understanding of theology and the scriptures. A straightforward definition of 'pneumatic' or 'pneumatological' hermeneutics is "a scholarly approach attempting to account for the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation."<sup>1</sup>

Views on the Spirit's role in interpretation differ markedly. The Holy Spirit may be seen as the covert, self-effacing member of the Trinity, working quietly through the human endeavours of church and individual. Or the Spirit may be seen as overtly directing and guiding the individual as preacher and prophet, and the gathered community through testimony and spiritual gifts. In locating the Spirit's interpretive work, some give preference to individual reflection and scholarship. Others see the community of faith, the church, as the essential place where the scriptures and the faith of Christ are interpreted and understood—whether through magisterial hierarchy, the preservation of tradition, prophetic leadership, shared testimony or other ways to a shared understanding.

### THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

The Fourth Gospel, particularly chapters 14-16, speaks of the Spirit taking the place of

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1. Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright, editors, *Spirit and Scripture: Exploring a Pneumatic Hermeneutic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), xvii.

the formerly physical presence of Jesus in the world. The Spirit is sent in Jesus' name by the Father or by Jesus "from the Father" and represents Jesus and his words to us. The Spirit will teach the disciples and will remind us of all that Jesus said to them. The Spirit will "testify" on Jesus' behalf, and "not speak on the Spirit's own". The Spirit will glorify Jesus and be with the disciples eternally. Thus Michael Welker affirms that, "Through the Paraclete, Jesus and Jesus' word become and "remain" present in diverse structural patterns of life and experience—without giving up the concentration and authenticity of Jesus' palpable proximity."<sup>2</sup>

The Spirit who is poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:17) is also the Spirit of truth (cf. John 14:17; 15:26; 1 John 5:6). The Spirit testifies to the truth and leads those who seek after the truth into all truth (John 16:13). The Spirit's anointing is the capacity to bear witness to the truth (cf. Acts 1:8). The Spirit, being God, is both truth and witness to the truth. Thus Amos Yong declares that,

the Pentecost narrative provides for a pneumatology of encounter that preserves the integrity of religious truth beyond objectivism and subjectivism. ... Truth is not merely an abstract property that we possess epistemically, but rather a relational and interpersonal property that orients us properly to one another and comports us and the world rightly toward the divine.<sup>3</sup>

In Johannine terms, we know and are set free by the truth and we are to abide in the truth (1 John 2:27), which comes to us by the Spirit.

There are instances in the New Testament suggesting reinterpretation of scriptural understanding on the basis of fresh revelation by the Spirit and communal discernment of the mind of God. Peter reinterpreted Joel's prophecy by applying it specifically to the Pentecost event (Acts 2) and his reinterpretation allowed the Gentiles to be included in God's promises (Acts 10). Following the Council of Jerusalem, James's decision was recorded as seeming, "good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). Paul instructed that when prophets speak, others should weigh what is said (1 Corinthians 14:29). In Acts 13:2, the Holy Spirit is described as speaking in a way discerned by the group as the mind of God. Such instances indicate communal discernment as confirming the truth by the Spirit.

Biblical texts themselves acknowledge the work of God's Spirit in their compilation and in their interpretation of earlier texts; there are examples in the Old Testament,<sup>4</sup> during the

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2. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, translated by John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 223.

3. Amos Yong, "The Spirit Bears Witness: Pneumatology, Truth, and the Religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57, no. 1 (2004): 32,33.

4. Mark J. Boda, "Word and Spirit, Scribe and Prophet in Old Testament Hermeneutics," in Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright, editors, *Spirit and Scripture: Exploring a Pneumatic Hermeneutic*, 25-45 (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

Second Temple period<sup>5</sup> and in John's Apocalypse.<sup>6</sup> The Apocalypse also enjoins its readers to hear the voice of the Spirit in understanding and appropriating its message.

### THE SPIRIT IN THE BACKGROUND

Respected hermeneutical scholar Anthony Thiselton is a strong advocate of a 'background' role for the Spirit in interpretation. He is particularly concerned to address any appeal to the Holy Spirit that would dismiss the necessity of hermeneutics,<sup>7</sup> declaring that "hermeneutical procedure is demanding in all interpretation."<sup>8</sup> For Thiselton, "the Holy Spirit works through the normal process of human understanding," not independently or contrary to it.<sup>9</sup> The Spirit will not "short-circuit the problem of hermeneutics."<sup>10</sup> Thiselton engages seriously and respectfully with Pentecostal pneumatology in his book *The Holy Spirit*,<sup>11</sup> and also discusses pneumatology in *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*.<sup>12</sup> Thiselton does not dismiss the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics but simply affirms the Spirit as indispensable in addressing humanity *through* human understanding.

### THE READER AND THE SPIRIT

Scholars have long debated the relationship between the individual interpreter and discernment by the Spirit. Origen (184-254) said that wonders such as those that delivered the Israelites from Egypt can be understood only by an interpreter filled with the same Spirit that performed them. "For I do not think these various and diverse remarkable things are otherwise explained unless they are discussed in that same spirit by which they were done."<sup>13</sup>

A millennium later, Bonaventure (1221-74) wrote that as the Holy Spirit gives the faith by which we come to know Christ, this Spirit-enabled knowledge of Christ "becomes the main source of a firm understanding of the truth of all sacred Scripture."<sup>14</sup>

Søren Kierkegaard wrote of the heroic interpreter, bold in rescuing meaning from the evils of conformity. He writes of Abraham, who acted as a true individual because his

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5. Archie T. Wright, "Second Temple Period Jewish Biblical Interpretation: An Early Pneumatic Hermeneutic," in Spawn and Wright, eds, *Spirit and Scripture*, 73-98.

6. Ronald Herms, "Invoking the Spirit and Narrative Intent in John's Apocalypse," in Spawn and Wright, *Spirit and Scripture*, 99-114.

7. Anthony C. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: Collected Works with New Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, and Aldershot, Great Britain: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

8. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics*, 466.

9. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1980), 92.

10. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 91.

11. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit—in Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries and Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 316-393.

12. Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). 414-450.

13. Origen, "Homily IV: On the Ten Plagues with which Egypt was Smitten," in *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, translated by Ronald E. Heine (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 266.

14. Bonaventure. *Prologus: Opera Omnia* 5:201-2, as quoted in Andrew L. Minto, "The Charismatic Renewal and the Spiritual Sense of Scripture", *Pneuma* 27, no. 2 (2005): 262.

relationship to God, not to moral law, was primary. He was willing to sacrifice Isaac because he answered to no one but God.<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard used the example of Abraham to say that faith trusts the Spirit to empower a response to the Spirit's promptings, even when there is no guarantee of security or validity—including, perhaps, the intellectual security of diligent scholarship.<sup>16</sup>

Calvin writes of the Spirit as “the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation enters our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears.”<sup>17</sup> Luther struggled alone to hear and to wrestle with great truths that were instrumental in the Reformation. Yet he also sought a sense of community interpretation by emphasising proclamation and discourse, an emphasis shared with other Reformers. “The Gospel is and should be nothing else than a discourse or story about Christ ... telling what he did, said, and suffered in his day.”<sup>18</sup>

Barth found it difficult to escape the isolation of the singular interpreting self. “Forget you are in church,” says the early Barth, militant in his demand for separation from community. “The church is a great, perhaps the greatest hindrance to repentance. If we wish to hear the call of Jesus, we must hear it despite the church.”<sup>19</sup>

A desire for unhindered solitary study does not of course gainsay the presence of the Spirit at work—on the contrary, as Catholic charismatic Andrew Minto says,

the collaboration between the Holy Spirit and believer-interpreter results in a living faith-knowledge of the very spiritual, paschal realities of which the text speaks. As such, this collaboration makes the act of divine revelation a completed act of communication. What God communicates through Christ in the Holy Spirit is now obtained as knowledge on the part of the believer.<sup>20</sup>

Amos Yong says that religious truth is not exclusively propositional and abstract, but is participatory, pragmatic, and personal. “The Spirit bearing witness to the truth of Jesus the Christ,” Yong says, “means that religious truth is supremely personal—both personally embodied and interpersonally encountered and engaged ... even the category of absolute truth, especially as a propositional claim, is unhelpful.”<sup>21</sup> This opens the clear possibility that

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15. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 83–98.

16. Mark I. Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2002), 80-2.

17. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, vol. 1*, edited by John T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 541.

18. “A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels,” in *Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35 of *Luther's Works*, eds. E. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 117.

19. Karl Barth and Edward Thorneycson, *Come Holy Spirit: Sermons by Karl Barth and Edward Thorneycson*, trans. George W. Richards, Elmer Homrighausen and Karl Ernst (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1933), 71.

20. Andrew L. Minto, “The Charismatic Renewal and the Spiritual Sense of Scripture,” *Pneuma* 27, no. 2 (2005): 262.

21. Amos Yong, “The Spirit Bears Witness: Pneumatology, Truth, and the Religions,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57, no. 1 (2004): 34.

the Spirit enables truth to be known directly to individuals through simple, even naïve, interpretation.

Yet the idea of the solitary interpreter does not go unchallenged. David Cunningham observes that today,

“we have often uncritically assumed that a solitary individual could, quite apart from communal formation, pick up the biblical text and suddenly be brought into a profound relationship with God. Such hermeneutical isolationism, though sometimes attributed to the Reformation, might be better understood as the product of Enlightenment individualism.”<sup>22</sup>

Russian religious philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev (1874-1948) said that God’s self-revelation occurs within the inner person, through divine-human spiritual cooperation and brings about a revolutionary transformation of the human consciousness. It occurs by the Holy Spirit, neither in the objective realm, nor within the subjectivity of the soul, but in the human spirit.<sup>23</sup> Berdyaev criticises the traditional understanding of revelation as communication from an externally objective God to a receiving, knowing, subject. God is subject and is revealed *to us within us*. As an “inward and spiritual event,”<sup>24</sup> revelation occurs within us through the action of God and its content is God’s very self—knowledge *of* God rather than knowledge about God.

Nevertheless Berdyaev emphasises that even when one hears God’s voice in the inner self, one hears it through one’s own humanity.<sup>25</sup> The presence of this natural, limited, element requires critique so that revelation may be “purified and emancipated”<sup>26</sup> from anything that is not of the truth or the Spirit.<sup>27</sup> Therefore Berdyaev upholds the value of scientific method in matters of objective study, including history and language.<sup>28</sup> He seeks a hermeneutic that leads to “the triumph of spirituality, to the liberation of spirit from naturalistic and materialist distortions.”<sup>29</sup> Such a critique would be a “critique by the spirit”<sup>30</sup> for which Christ himself is the resource and conclusion.<sup>31</sup> External authority cannot be the test of Truth. “The one and

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22. David S. Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 140.

23. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. O. F. Clarke (London: Bles, 1935), 90.

24. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, translated by R. M. French (London: Bles, 1954), 47.

25. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 7-8.

26. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 18.

27. Berdyaev uses the word ‘revelation’ in two ways—in the usual sense of the disclosure of God, and as that which we understand to be God’s self-disclosure. It is in the latter sense that ‘revelation’ may be criticised and subject to exegesis and hermeneutical method.

28. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography* (London: Bles, 1950), 286-287.

29. Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R. M. French (London: Bles, 1949), 14.

30. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 67.

31. Cf. R. T. Osborn. Subject and object in Barth and Berdyaev. *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly*, 9(4), 160-170, 1965, at pp.162-3.

only standard of truth is Truth itself.”<sup>32</sup> To assume any objective authority for religious truth will ultimately require a subjective belief in the authority.<sup>33</sup>

Truth, Berdyaev says, is communal and the role of the community in discerning revealed truth is crucial.<sup>34</sup> Such community life is a “brotherly communion in truth of human beings whose freedom is an accepted fact.”<sup>35</sup> Berdyaev and others in the Russian Orthodox tradition describe such a communal life as *sobornost*—a difficult to translate idea meaning roughly ‘alldtogetherness’ or ‘qualitative togetherness’.<sup>36</sup> Berdyaev writes that, through the experience of *sobornost*, “... I am not alone, for I am one with all my brethren in the spirit, in whatever place or time they may have lived.”<sup>37</sup> Here Berdyaev gives a hint of a possible hermeneutical path. “To community life”, he says, “truth can be revealed.”<sup>38</sup> Just as Truth is made known spiritually in the life of one human being, Berdyaev implies that a community united in the Spirit may spiritually discern Truth. *Sobornost* does not mean authority, “rather it is the communion in love of the church people with the Holy Spirit”<sup>39</sup>—a collective that can commune with God more effectively than separate and often competing individuals.

Berdyaev’s understanding of *sobornost*, draws on the ecclesiology of Aleksei Stepanovitch Khomyakov (1804-1860). According to Khomyakov, *sobornost* is the free unity of the members of the Church in a shared understanding of truth and salvation. Those who love truth and find it in Christ accept it freely, and this creates unity. God is freedom for the righteous and enforced conformity is a lie.<sup>40</sup>

This section of the essay has considered the potentially powerful relationship between the Holy Spirit and the individual interpreter. A difficulty with individual interpretations, whether or not they consciously draw on ‘the Spirit’, is that they can lead to misinterpretation

32. Nicolas A. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End: An Essay on Eschatological Metaphysics*, trans. R. M. French (London: Bles, 1952), 46-47.

33. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 39.

34. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 25.

35. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 25. Cf. Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the realm of Caesar*, translated by D. A. Lowrie (London: Gollancz, 1951), 123.

36. “... the Russian noun *sobornost* might be translated as qualitative togetherness. In this particular instance it can also be understood as *koinonia* – a fellowship of sharing and participation created by the power of the Holy Spirit. That the church is *soborny* means, according to Berdyaev, it is neither a lofty ideal nor a mere aggregation of individuals but rather a living community gathered around the Messiah.” M. A. Vallon. *An apostle of freedom: Life and teachings of Nicolas Berdyaev*. Philosophical Library, New York, 1960, 212.

“*Sobornost* is the Russian term for the “catholicity”, of the Church; the adjective form is *sobornyi* (catholic). *Sobornost* (derived from *sobirat*’, to gather, and related to *sobor*, council) is the unity of the church as a divinely inspired fellowship. It is community in love, communion in the spirit, the free union of the faithful in the pure heart of the Church.” Translator’s note in: Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, translated by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 286, n. 35.

37. Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 329.

38. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 25.

39. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, 122.

40. A. S. Khomyakov, *The Church is One* (London: SPCK, 1948). See also: K. Leśniewski, *The notion of Sobornost’ in Russian Orthodox theology*. <http://www.theo.kuleuven.ac.be/ap/pdmdocs/Sobornost - Leuven1.doc>

and excess, or simply the perpetuation of mistakes. Unfortunate histories abound (including in Australia<sup>41</sup>). Challenges to an understanding based on experience of the Spirit reflect a desire for testability, certainty and authority in discernment and interpretation. Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, strongly disputes any ability of personal experience to assure certainty: “The conditionality of all subjective certainty is part of the finitude of the human experience. To claim unconditional, independent certainty is forcibly to make oneself, the believing I, the locus of absolute truth.”<sup>42</sup> Pannenberg asserts that a claim of certainty based on experience is “irrational fanaticism”.<sup>43</sup>

Yet the Scriptures contain many narratives of prophets and teachers who took God’s Spirit as their instructor—supremely Jesus himself. If interpretation based on the Spirit’s undoubted guidance of the individual is to be accepted, it must be evaluated against the written text as a whole and in the community of faith, for “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety.” (Proverbs 11.14) The process of reception and the creation of a *sensus fidelum* come into play here, but are beyond the scope of this essay. These may be through prolonged debate and reflection but, as at the Pentecost event, they may equally be a spontaneous response to prophetic proclamation.

#### **INTERPRETATION BY THE SPIRIT IN COMMUNITY**

For the remainder of the essay, we will focus on interpretive work of the Holy Spirit in the church community. The following paragraphs note the views of some theologians who support the principle of interpretation in community. We will then briefly look at three differing church traditions concerning the interpretation of the Bible in the church: Orthodox, Catholic and Pentecostal. The Orthodox and Catholic churches see the Spirit as largely (though not entirely) in the ‘background’. The Pentecostal approach sees the Spirit as more overt.

New Testament scholar James Dunn suggests that a communal response to the promptings of the Spirit can be more than simply a collection of individual responses.

The model for spiritual renewal is often taken to be the individual ... Corporate renewal, renewal of the Church, is then seen simply as a multiplication of renewed individuals ... I wonder, however, if we do not need to give more attention to the corporate dimension of the work of the Spirit from the outset, to supplement (not exchange) the model of individual spirituality with a model of communal spirituality, where the corporate character of the

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41. For a contemporary Australian example see: Morag Zwartz, *Apostles of Fear: A Church Cult Exposed* (Boronia, Vic.: Parenisis Publishing, 2008).

42. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1., trans. G. W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998), 44.

43. *Ibid.*, 48.

experience is fundamental from the outset.<sup>44</sup>

Hans Frei suggests that a particular “model of human being”, born in the relationship between a singular interpreting self and the text, need not be normative:

As soon as one’s perspective, i.e. the process of understanding itself, schematically sets the terms on which the text is to be interpreted, the meaning of the text is bound to be similar to the structure of understanding or ‘linguisticity’ or some other special structure of human self-and-other apprehension.<sup>45</sup>

Gerhard Ebeling, a central figure in twentieth century Western hermeneutics, was particularly sensitive to the communal aspect of language and hence interpretation.

The fact, that man precisely in his linguisticity is not essentially self-sufficient, is illustrated by his dependence on his fellow man. No one can speak independently. And no one can be content to speak alone. Man speaks because he has received the gift of language as taught to him by others, and because he longs to hear in turn an echo, an answer to his own speaking.<sup>46</sup>

David Cunningham writes that, through most of its history, “Christianity has employed polyphonic and communally-normed hermeneutic—a practice which we very much need to retrieve.”<sup>47</sup> With Christ as the “hermeneutical centre” of the texts, “every reading of the biblical text is an *ecclesial* reading, in which the reader is never a solitary individual but is formed in particular virtues and animated by the life of the reading community.”<sup>48</sup>

Rowan Williams refers to R. L. Hart’s proposal that ‘revelation’ be taken to include both the event generating a hermeneutical enterprise and ‘the movement of the hermeneutical spiral itself’.<sup>49</sup> Following this, Williams suggests that God as Trinity permits us to see ‘revelation’ occurring in this way—through Son and Spirit together—and to see the structure of revelation itself as in a manner corresponding to God’s own being.<sup>50</sup> Consequently the revelatory process “both is and is not completed.”

[The] unending rediscovery of Christ or re-presentation of Christ, the revelatory aspect of the ‘hermeneutical spiral’, is, in Trinitarian perspective, what we mean by the illuminating or transforming operation of the Spirit. ‘He will take what is mine and give it to you’.<sup>51</sup>

The “you” here is communal. The early churches learned Jesus’ significance by coming to understand what community acknowledgment of him as Lord meant in their life together. The Spirit works in the community’s puzzlement at its own existence and character. William’s

44. James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and The Spirit: Collected essays, vol. 2: Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 243.

45. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 322-3.

46. Gerhard Ebeling, *God and Word*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 29.

47. Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 140.

48. Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 134.

49. Williams cites: R. L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination. Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York, 1968), 99.

50. Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (1986):205-6.

51. Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” 206.



argument is that such puzzlement “is the revelatory operation of God as ‘Spirit’.”<sup>52</sup>

#### SPIRIT AND TRADITION—ORTHODOX INTERPRETATION

For a brief appreciation of Orthodox pneumatological hermeneutics, we will draw on two Orthodox writers, Anton Ugolnik<sup>53</sup> and John Breck.<sup>54</sup> In the tension between focus on the individual and the community, Ugolnik maintains that Western hermeneutics falls on the side of the singular interpreting self. The Orthodox, on the other hand, see tradition and interdependence as a source of meaning in the Gospel.<sup>55</sup> Ugolnik proposes a dialogic “socially constituted” hermeneutic,<sup>56</sup> for the Orthodox hermeneutic is “not a private quest constituted in critical response, but a communal search for meaning, expressed anthropologically in socially organized prayer.” Consequently, “The text loses all autonomy. The self-sufficient ‘reader’ is no more. Our vision of the gospel centers it literally and figuratively amidst the people to whom the Word is addressed and among whom, in their common assent, the Word is reconstituted.”<sup>57</sup> Ugolnik says that the Orthodox come to an understanding of the Word in the *sobornost* ‘being-together’.

Our hermeneutic is a triumph over the fundamental solitude of each human being. Our Orthodoxy calls upon us to reject radical individualism and its implications. Together we reconstitute among ourselves in every age, in any cultural medium, the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>58</sup>

Because the Orthodox hermeneutic is generated in community, it stands over against individualism. Although private reading of the Bible is important devotionally, meaning is forged in the communal and liturgical environment.

The axioms are threefold: that our act of interpretation is not private but social in nature, that our response to the gospel is a collective act of assent, and that the environment for its dissemination is oral and public rather than private and written.<sup>59</sup>

Other writers confirm the Orthodox view of hermeneutics as communal *and* pneumatological. John Breck says that “the object of the biblical witness is actualized ... only by God himself, acting within the eucharistic community through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The hermeneutic bridge between the biblical event and its actualization in the Church, then, is neither the preached Word nor the ecclesial institution—it is *the person of the divine Spirit*.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore interpreters work, “not as a personal exercise undertaken on their

52. Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” 206-7.

53. Anton Ugolnik, “An Orthodox Hermeneutic in the West,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1983): 93-118.

54. John Breck, “Exegesis and Interpretation: Orthodox Reflections on the ‘Hermeneutic Problem,’” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1983): 75-95.

55. Ugolnik, “An Orthodox Hermeneutic,” 102-3.

56. Ugolnik, “An Orthodox Hermeneutic,” 107.

57. Ugolnik, “An Orthodox Hermeneutic,” 107.

58. Ugolnik, “An Orthodox Hermeneutic,” 117-118.

59. Ugolnik, “An Orthodox Hermeneutic,” 108-9.

60. Breck, “Exegesis and Interpretation,” 84. (Emphasis original.)

own authority, but under the continuing guidance of the Spirit within the ecclesial community.”<sup>61</sup> “To recover the proper doctrinal and doxological dimensions of scripture,” Breck says, “the exegete himself must participate in the process of divine revelation. ... Exegesis, as an integral part of the Church’s theological activity, is a theandric process, a divine-human enterprise based upon synergy or cooperation between the divine Spirit and the human interpreter.”<sup>62</sup> This can happen only within the liturgical, sacramental community of the Church.

The Orthodox hermeneutic also sees the Holy Spirit at work through the traditions, especially the liturgy; the Spirit constantly brings to life the memory implicit in tradition. Thus, Georges Florovsky wrote,

Tradition is the witness of the Spirit; the Spirit’s unceasing revelation and preaching of good things ... To accept and understand Tradition we must live within the Church, we must be conscious of the grace-giving presence of the Lord in it; we must feel the breath of the Holy [Spirit] in it ... Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words.<sup>63</sup>

Particularly in the West, tradition and the Spirit’s work in making God known are often seen to be opposites. David Brown shows that, “tradition, so far from being something secondary or reactionary, is the motor that sustains revelation both within Scripture and beyond.” “Christians,” he says, “must disabuse themselves of the habit of contrasting biblical revelation and later tradition, and instead see the hand of God in a continuing process that encompasses both.”<sup>64</sup>

#### SPIRIT AND AUTHORITY—CATHOLIC INTERPRETATION

Particularly since the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has strongly affirmed the role of the Spirit in guiding the individual believer and the Church in understanding of the Scriptures. Contemporary Catholic teaching on the Holy Spirit and interpretation of Scripture is founded on the Vatican II dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*<sup>65</sup> and the 1983 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,<sup>66</sup> which say that, as the Biblical text was both human work and the work of the Spirit, its interpretation requires human work that is, “attentive above all to what God wants to reveal through the sacred authors for our

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61. Breck, “Exegesis and Interpretation,” 90.

62. Breck, “Exegesis and Interpretation,” 91.

63. Georges Florovsky, “Sobornost: the Catholicity of the Church,” in *The Church of God: An Anglo-Russian Symposium by the Members of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius*, edited by E.L. Mascall, 51-74 (London: SPCK, 1934), 64-65.

64. David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1.

65. Vatican II Council. *Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*. (Hereafter *DV*) Promulgated 18 November 1965. See [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).

66. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Hereafter, *CCC*) (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM). See particularly Part 1, section 1, article 3, ‘Sacred Scripture’.

salvation.”<sup>67</sup> Further, “What comes from the Spirit is not fully ‘understood except by the Spirit’s action.’”<sup>68</sup> “Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written.”<sup>69</sup> The Spirit indwelling the letter of the sacred text provides a grace to the whole Church, not a select few.<sup>70</sup>

Catholic theologians have sought to recover the hermeneutic role of the Holy Spirit. Thus Henri Cazelles proposes a hermeneutic that centres upon the interpretive work of the Spirit within the liturgical-sacramental community of the Church. “Scripture presents itself less as a Word of God than as the witness to a new, lifegiving gift of God, a creative power. ... Catholic hermeneutics will perceive [in the Bible] a historical witness to human life ‘in the Spirit,’ what we call ‘grace.’”<sup>71</sup>

James Buckley writes of the “classic claim” that the biblical texts are themselves ‘the body of Christ’,<sup>[72]</sup> and therefore filled by the Spirit of Pentecost.

These texts are not the isolated Word of God but the Word spoken to and by a eucharistic community, empowered by the Spirit. Scripture and Eucharist and church, we might even say, are different aspects of the same thing in the sense that these texts are bound to eucharistic and ecclesial contexts.<sup>73</sup>

Anton Minto concludes an essay on Charismatic renewal and Catholic interpretation by saying that “... when all is said and done, the heart of exegesis belongs to the movement of God through Christ by the Holy Spirit in the lives of everyday people of faith.” A correct hermeneutic and many other things are necessary, but the renewal of biblical studies depends ultimately on “God’s own work.”<sup>74</sup>

The Pontifical Biblical Commission has strongly affirmed the interpretive role of the Spirit in the church, but insists that, “church authority, exercised as a service of the community, must see to it that this interpretation remains faithful to the great tradition which has produced the texts.”<sup>75</sup> This stricture effectively limits the role of the Spirit to an illumination of accepted teaching, to the individual or to congregations. This consciously recalls Augustine’s affirmation that right interpretation and application of the scripture occurs

67. CCC, §137.

68. CCC, §137, quoting DV, §1.

69. DV, §12.3 as cited in and clarified by CCC, Part 1, Sect. 1, Ch. 2, Art. 3.III, §109, 111.

70. DV, §8.

71. Henri Cazelles, *La nouvelle herméneutique biblique* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1969), 10f.

72. Buckley’s footnote: “On the patristic view of scripture as body of Christ, see the literature cited in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, vol. I: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 527-56. In medieval theology, see Henri du Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L’eucharistie et l’église au moyen-âge* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1949).”

73. James J. Buckley, “Beyond the Hermeneutical Deadlock,” in *Theology after Liberalism: a reader*, edited by John Webster and George P. Schnier (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 198-9.

74. Minto, “The Charismatic Renewal,” 270-1.

75. Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, edited by J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press, 1995), 28.

only within the church and his declaration, “I would not believe the gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not permit me.”<sup>76</sup>

Despite this assertion of authority, Catholic teaching submits itself to the Spirit as the supreme teacher and interpreter. Reason alone, the Commission says, “cannot fully comprehend” the biblical account. “Particular presuppositions, such as the faith lived in ecclesial community and the light of the Spirit, control its interpretation.”<sup>77</sup> Further, “The church, as the people of God, is aware that it is helped by the Holy Spirit in its understanding and interpretation of Scripture.<sup>78</sup> ... “The Spirit is, assuredly, also given to *individual Christians*, so that their hearts can “burn within them” (Lk. 24:32) as they pray and prayerfully study the Scripture within the context of their own personal lives.”<sup>79</sup> That said, the Commission is unable to resist an assertion of final authority.

“This kind of reading ... noted, is never completely private, for the believer always reads and interprets Scripture within the faith of the church and then brings back to the community the fruit of that reading for the enrichment of the common faith. ... [I]n the last resort it is the magisterium which has the responsibility of guaranteeing the authenticity of interpretation.”<sup>80</sup>

Seeking common ground for a Catholic/Evangelical consensus hermeneutics, Ted Doorman draws on a study of Oscar Cullmann<sup>81</sup> to affirm that the Spirit did not stop speaking to the Church after the death of the last apostle and that we must recognize the implications of the Spirit’s interpretive work. In Cullmann’s view, the content of Scripture, analysed by best scholarly methods, is normative, *contra*, for example, the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church or other purported ecclesial authority. The Holy Spirit was uniquely present in Jesus Christ; the apostolic witness is therefore an objective, normative, revelation accessible through exegetical analysis. Cullmann goes so far as to say that, “The Holy Spirit interprets Scripture, but is at the same time controlled by it.”<sup>82</sup> Doorman says that such a hermeneutic recognizes the ongoing hidden work of the Spirit in redemptive history, manifesting itself in various ways through the historical Christian tradition. The Spirit has given the church valuable (though not infallible) insights into the Scriptures—the formulation of the doctrines

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76. “Ego vero Evangelio non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas.” *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti liber unus*, 5:6.

77. Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible,” 54.

78. Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible,” 65.

79. Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible,” 70 (Emphasis original).

80. Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible,” 70, 72.

81. Ted M. Doorman, “Holy Spirit, History, Hermeneutics and Theology: Toward an Evangelical/Catholic Consensus,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 3 (1998): 427-438, relying on Ted M. Doorman, *The Hermeneutics of Oscar Cullmann* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University, 1991).

82. Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, edited by A. J. B. Higgins. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 20.

of the Trinity and the hypostatic union being particular examples in history.<sup>83</sup>

#### THE SPIRIT IN THE FOREGROUND—THE PENTECOSTAL EXAMPLE

There are significant hermeneutical differences within the Pentecostal tradition and no single ‘Pentecostal hermeneutic’.<sup>84</sup> Rather there is a conversation, as Pentecostal and charismatic thinkers seek to understand and describe their interpretive encounter with the free Spirit.

James Smith writes of Pentecostal practice that it has an implicit epistemology that “privileges an affective mode of knowing”, that is more “more literary than logical”, and “more like a dance than a deduction.”<sup>85</sup> Pastor and scholar Clayton Coombs writes as “a Pentecostal believer attempting to articulate a ‘hermeneutic of the Spirit’” and says that, “radical openness to God means that I must acknowledge the Spirit’s lordship over the text that he inspired and over the interpretive process.” Any methodology that limits the scope of the Spirit’s use of the text must be resisted.<sup>86</sup> Coombs says that, “understanding God’s word is more of an art than a science. A hermeneutic of the Spirit, then, is a hermeneutic of intimacy rather than one of mastery.” Sound exegetical practice *and* intuitive spiritual reading are required.

Pentecostal scholars have sought to show that dynamic, ecstatic, encounter with the Spirit complements, not compromises, the interpretation of Scripture. Thus John Levison sees a symbiosis between ecstasy and comprehension as integral to experiences of the Holy Spirit narrated in the Book of Acts.<sup>87</sup> The Pentecost narrative in Acts 2, for example, is a “combination of ecstasy and restraint”.<sup>88</sup> This is echoed in Michael Welker’s suggestion that the miracle of Pentecost “lies not in what is difficult to understand or incomprehensible, but in a totally unexpected comprehensibility and in an unbelievable, universal capacity to understand.”<sup>89</sup> “[T]his is what is truly shocking about the Pentecostal event . . . [It] connects intense experiences of individuality with a new experience of community.”<sup>90</sup>

Life in community is important to an outworking of Spirit-led Scriptural interpretation. John Thomas says that, “the emphasis upon our corporate life together and the appreciation

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83. Doorman, “Holy Spirit, History . . .,” 430.

84. The origins of Pentecostal hermeneutics are discussed by: L. William Oliviero, Jr., *Theological Hermeneutics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition: A Typological Account*. (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

85. James K. A. Smith, “Thinking in Tongues,” *First Things* 82 (April 2008): 27-31.

86. Clayton Coombs, “Reading in Tongues: The Case for a Pneumatological Hermeneutic in Conversation with James K. Smith,” *Pneuma* 32 (2010) 261-268.

87. John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), particularly chapter 3, “Filled with the Spirit and the Book of Acts,” 217-365.

88. John R. Levison, “Recommendations for the Future of Pneumatology,” *Pneuma* 33 (2011): 91.

89. Welker, *God the Spirit*, 230-1.

90. Welker, *God the Spirit*, 233.

for the spiritual and scriptural phenomenon of unity and diversity within the body rather naturally call for an extremely tight interplay to exist between the ethos of the tradition and the work of those called to be hermeneutes ...".<sup>91</sup> One way to "learn to hear in community", Thomas, says, is "through participation in pneumatic discernment in the formation of self and others," in which the sharing of personal testimony is particularly valuable. Through sharing personal testimonies, "one becomes more and more experienced at discerning the way in which the story offered in the testimony, the biblical text, and the Christian story intersect."<sup>92</sup> Thomas goes on to elaborate a fairly detailed and careful process by which to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church through the Scriptures, following which he asserts that, "the role of the Spirit in the interpretive process cannot be reduced to rather vague claims about illumination, for the Spirit's role is concrete and discernible throughout the entire process ... the Spirit is present at almost every turn."<sup>93</sup>

Paul Ricoeur's post critical method has been suggested as an attractive resource for Pentecostal hermeneutics.<sup>94</sup> Ricoeur has shown that objectivity and subjectivity need not be considered as opposites. He challenges readers to acknowledge that they project their own interests, desires, and selfhood into a text.<sup>95</sup> Ricoeur says that readers typically change over time from a naïve and intuitive approach to a more self-critical balance of the creative and the analytical. Ricoeur's approach combines historical analysis of the text with respect for differences in interpretation. It allows a diversity of meanings between differing communities and recognises the creative effect of symbols, metaphors and narratives on the religious imagination and thoughts. This allows a claim that the Holy Spirit reveals deeper, culturally and locally relevant meanings of the text.<sup>96</sup>

Anthony Thistleton finds that Pentecostal concerns about the readers' experience find parallels with secular reader-response theory. He argues that in a "careful and cautious form ... this can facilitate genuine engagement with the text."<sup>97</sup> Thistleton cites Wolfgang Iser, who says that biblical texts are *deliberately* ambivalent, inviting the readers to place

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91. John Christopher Thomas, "What is the Spirit Saying to the Church: The Testimony of a Pentecostal in New Testament Studies," in Spawn and Wright, *Spirit and Scripture*, 115-129 (116).

92. Thomas, "What is the Spirit Saying to the Church", 117-8.

93. Thomas, "What is the Spirit Saying to the Church", 128-9.

94. See: J. Byrd, "Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory and Pentecostal Proclamation," *Pneuma* 15, no. 2: (1993): 203-215.

95. See: Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 472.

96. T. B. Cargal, "Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age." *Pneuma* 15, no 2 (1993), 174.

97. Anthony C. Thistleton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 58-79, 516-57. Thistleton gives the work of Wolfgang Iser as an example.

themselves into different roles within the textual setting.<sup>98</sup> Thiselton is wary, however, of approaches in which “the rights of the text can become unduly compromised in favour of prior attitudes held by the reader.”<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Thiselton finds that some Pentecostals are insufficiently careful in their appeal to postmodern hermeneutics, which, leads to a “fragmentation and pluralism” that “undermines the very identity of Pentecostalism and the Renewal Movement.”<sup>100</sup>

Pentecostal writer Sam Hey counters that, “Pentecostalism claims to provide answers to the overconfidence of modernity and to the uncertainty of post modernity,” for it “claims that a truth can be found in an easily comprehended, single source of revelation in the Bible. It is open to guidance by a contemporary interpreter in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>101</sup> The emerging hermeneutics of Pentecostalism, Hey says, seek “to invite the same Holy Spirit who inspired both Scripture and scholarship to interpret the text anew into contemporary contexts and needs.”<sup>102</sup>

On the other hand again, Clark Kinnock<sup>103</sup> and Daniel P. Fuller<sup>104</sup> each rely on a distinction between “meaning” and “significance” articulated by E. D. Hirsch and others<sup>105</sup> to say that the role of the Spirit in Biblical interpretation is not to impart new information beyond the grammatical-historical data but simply to help the reader to accept the Scripture’s message. Although the Holy Spirit may interpret Scripture for the reader apart from historical-critical investigation, the resulting interpretations are still subject to the control of the historical-critical method.

Amid the considerable diversity of hermeneutic theories and methods, Pentecostal scholar Amos Yong proposes a ‘consensual’ hermeneutical and theological method. His work is helpful in the context of this essay as it exemplifies the possibility of a developed consensual hermeneutic that is pneumatological, ecclesial and Trinitarian.

Yong’s proposal is not readily summarised in a couple of paragraphs. In a 7,000 word

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98. Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 517, citing Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

99. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit*, 96-7.

100. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit*, 96-7.

101. Sam Hey, “Contemporary Developments in Pentecostal Hermeneutics,” *Pentecostal Charismatic Bible Colleges* 5, no. 2 (August 2001) (online) <http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/journals/PCBC/vol5-no2/contemporary-developments-in-pentecostal-hermeneut/>.

102. Sam Hey, “Contemporary Developments ...”.

103. Charles H. Pinnock, “The Role of the Spirit in Interpretation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 4 (1993): 491-497.

104. D. P. Fuller, “The Holy Spirit’s Role in Biblical Interpretation”, in *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation*, edited by W. W. Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 189–198.

105. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 121–122; E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976), 1–13.

article<sup>106</sup> he outlines ideas argued at length in a substantial book.<sup>107</sup> Yong's thesis is that to hear what the Spirit is saying, Christian theology occurs in a continuous hermeneutical trialectic of Spirit, Word and Community. Theological reflection starts with movement and experience of the Spirit. It is formed by the Word, the interpreted object in context, and adjudicated by the community in its interpretive situation.<sup>108</sup>

Yong's is a pneumatological theology that illuminates the hermeneutical process by showing how the Holy Spirit engages the human imagination to empower liberative praxis. In a full-length review essay, William Oliverio assesses Yong's work as "the most significant work on theological hermeneutics to date by a Pentecostal theologian," and "as helpfully urging Pentecostal theology toward a 'hermeneutical realism'."<sup>109</sup>

For Yong, the key to the hermeneutical role of the Spirit is that "Not only does the Spirit glorify and declare the Son, but the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and the Spirit of Christ. ... More than that, however, [is] the recognition that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is also the Spirit of God."<sup>110</sup> Rather than denying the role of pneumatology in hermeneutics, however, "the Spirit's identity as the Spirit of the Son and the Spirit of the Father means that an authentic pneumatology requires an equally vigorous Christology and patology—in short, a robustly and perichoretically Trinitarian theology."<sup>111</sup>

#### SUMMATION

This essay began by reviewing some of the Biblical evidence that the Holy Spirit is actively engaged in assisting followers of Jesus Christ to recall and understand Jesus' words and to interpret (and reinterpret) Biblical texts. We observed that some see the Holy Spirit as self-effacing, working through human thought and traditions and we have noted other perspectives that attribute more directly discernable interpretive activity to the Spirit.

Most theologians and church traditions alike agree that the fruits of interpretation can and usually should be moderated ecclesially (which does not exclude discussion within the academy!). There is considerable diversity, however, as to how this should and might occur. We took the Orthodox, Catholic and Pentecostal approaches as examples.

My conclusion is that none of the established approaches to pneumatological

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106. Amos Yong, "The Hermeneutical Trialectic: Notes Toward a Consensual Hermeneutic and Theological Method," *Heythrop Journal* 45, no. 1 (2004): 22-39.

107. Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Burlington, Ashgate Publishing, 2002).

108. Yong, "The Hermeneutical Trialectic ...," 34-5.

109. L. William Oliverio, Jr., "An Interpretive Review Essay on Amos Yong's *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective*," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18, no. 2 (2009): 301.

110. Yong, "The Hermeneutical Trialectic ...," 25-6.

111. Yong, "The Hermeneutical Trialectic ...," 26.



hermeneutics should necessarily dominate. Rather, I would opt for something of an ‘all of the above’, reflecting perhaps the Spirit’s own great diversity of action. To do otherwise would seem to attempt to constrain the Spirit of freedom, who cannot be constrained by human will. In some situations a frank exercise of interpretive authority may be wise. Traditional interpretations can be a rich voice testifying of the continuing guidance of Word and Spirit in community. The dynamic experience of Pentecostal interpretation and fellowship challenges us to trust in the work of the living, speaking, God.

Throughout Biblical history and since, the Spirit of God has called individuals to hear the Spirit’s voice and to interpret and proclaim the Truth afresh. The Spirit interprets God to us ‘spirit to spirit’. Yet we have seen in this essay that the interpretive work of the Holy Spirit—pneumatological hermeneutics—is above all the living experience of the community of faith.

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