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# A DISTINCTIVE PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTIC: POSSIBLE AND/OR NECESSARY?

## ABSTRACT

Over the past twenty years, Pentecostal theologians have published extensively on hermeneutical issues, a subject that had not received much consideration before the mid-1990s. In their discussion of hermeneutical issues, Pentecostal theologians may create the impression that their hermeneutics is so unique that one can speak of a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutics. This article raises the question as to whether it is possible and/or necessary to speak of such a distinctive hermeneutics. The growing debate among Pentecostals about hermeneutical issues demonstrates that they disagree on several important issues. They should also discount the difference between an academic hermeneutics and what happens on their pulpits and in their pews. Although there are specific identifiable emphases in a Pentecostal hermeneutics, it does not qualify to be called distinctive, and an ecumenical approach demands that the movement should function within the context of the wider Christian church and its history of reading and interpreting the Bible.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the *Dialogue Between the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostals* (1977-1982) held in Rome, Venice and Collegeville, Minnesota (Gómez 2016:1), Howard M. Ervin (1981:22), a Baptist theologian who has been involved with Pentecostal issues and served as a representative of the Pentecostal team, suggested for the first

time that Pentecostal hermeneutics differs such a great deal from other traditions that it is possible to call Pentecostal interpretation distinctive from the hermeneutics of other traditions.<sup>1</sup> Ervin called it “pneumatic exegesis”.<sup>2</sup> Over the past twenty years, several Pentecostals devoted their attention to the issues posed by Pentecostal hermeneutics, and the majority of them seemingly support Ervin’s viewpoint of Pentecostal hermeneutics as distinctive from other theological traditions. This article poses the question: Is it appropriate and proper to speak of Pentecostal hermeneutics as distinctive?

## 2. A DISTINCTIVE PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTICS?

Epistemology is an issue fundamental to any question of hermeneutics. Modernism and fundamentalism (as a critique on modernism) share a key epistemological presupposition of objectivity brought into service of a historicist view of meaning (Cargal 1993:163-187; Bosch 1992:342-345). Western culture, Ervin argues, accepts as axiomatic two ways of knowing, through reason and sensory experience. This implies that theology is also limited to these two ways, resulting in the unresolved dichotomy between faith and reason. Theologians reacted to the dichotomy by way of either traditional hermeneutics, with its strong commitment to historical-critical exegetical methods, dogmatic intransigence or non-rational mysticism (Ervin 1981:100; 1987:100-104). By contrast, Ervin argues (1987:101), Pentecostals need an epistemology rooted firmly in the biblical faith, with a phenomenology that also meets the criteria of empirically verifiable sensory experience (such as miracles of healing, deliverance, and so on) and does not violate the coherence of rational categories. Pneumatic epistemology provides a solution, according to Ervin (1987:107), because it provides a resolution to the dichotomy between faith and reason, or

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- 1 Hermeneutics can be understood in two ways: it can refer to the method and techniques used to interpret written texts, or it can refer to the conditions that make understanding possible. Either way, it is intrinsically linked to epistemology. The etymology of the word “hermeneutic” is derived from the Greek *hermeneueien*, which is synonymous with *interpretare*, the Latin verb for interpreting. Theological hermeneutics, therefore, is the study of the interpretation of the Bible (Konig & Maimela 1998:451).
  - 2 “Pneumatic exegesis” can be defined, not on the basis of some imagined spiritual power that Scripture possesses, but as scriptural exegesis that introduces the Spirit in the sense that it articulates its witness to revelation in the Bible. It is called pneumatic in the sense and to the extent that it uses the freedom founded ultimately on Scripture themselves, listening to the Spirit’s testimony heard in them. See also Burnett (2004:57).

rather a destructive rationalism that often accompanies critical exegetical methods, and a rational accountability for the mysticism fostered by a piety grounded in the Protestant *sola fide*. Ervin's epistemology, based partly on charismatic phenomena, combines with a specific hermeneutical viewpoint to inform Pentecostal hermeneutics.

What would such a pneumatic epistemology consist of as a basis for a "pneumatic" Pentecostal hermeneutics? Ervin (1987:107) finds it in the Word, the transcendent word beyond all human words, for which there are no categories endemic to human understanding. For this word, there is no hermeneutic, unless the Spirit mediates understanding. The condition for this hermeneutics is then the divine *hermeneutes*, the Spirit of God (Ervin 1987:116).

This implies that the absolute precondition for understanding the Word of God is to be born again, to be born from the Spirit (John 3:5). In this way, human beings become partakers of the divine nature, although they do not partake in the divine. The boundary between Creator and creature is not erased, but the Spirit creates the conditions where human beings may hear and understand the Word that he makes present or reveals. As the Spirit of Christ, he reveals the Word, Christ, the revelation of God's character and will. Hearing and understanding the Word is a theological (*theos logos*) communication in its deepest ontological context (Ervin 1987:108), the incarnation making truth personal (a phrase Ervin borrows from Martin Buber). For this reason, one has not heard the Word when one understands it only in cognitive terms. Bible study *per se* cannot reveal the Word of God, apart from the revelation by the Spirit to the contemporary reader. The gospel should happen, the good news consisting in it being apprehended by Jesus Christ. The *kerygma* is not simply in letters and words printed or read, but in an encounter between a human being and God. This is the ground of pneumatic hermeneutics (Ervin 1987:109) that makes it distinctive from all other theological hermeneutics.

Pentecostal hermeneutical thinking was undoubtedly influenced by Ervin's observations, because his hermeneutics leaves room for an intuitive, non-verbal communication between God and humankind, which is always the character of the miracle of an encounter with God through his Spirit. One of the phenomena that accompanies this communication is glossolalia, an initial evidence (for most Classical Pentecostal) of being baptised with the Spirit (Mittelstadt 2010:70-71) and, for Pentecostals, part of the reality of a direct encounter between God and a human being that coincides in their view with what the Bible describes in terms of dreams, visions, theophanies, miracles of healing, and salvation (Ervin 1987:113). In this way, Biblical events are re-enacted. "To be Pentecostal is to have

experienced the power of God in Jesus” (Clark & Lederle 1989:43). Pentecostals emphasise that the working of the Spirit would be accompanied by power, including signs, wonders and the miraculous (Wimber 1985:33-38; Thomas 2010:302-304), which form the “standard operating procedure of a New Testament/indigenous church” (Rance 2009:7). In this way, the apostolic mandate is fulfilled in apostolic power when the events that the New Testament relates also happen in the present-day church. The same God who spoke and acted in salvation-history events, as described in both the Old and the New Testaments, and in the inspiration of Scriptures speaks and acts nowadays, and Pentecostals read the Bible in order to find the hermeneutical implications of God’s present activity in the faith community (McQueen 2009:3-4). For Pentecostals, hermeneutics is informed by their first-hand experiences of encounters with God against the background of their reading and interpreting of biblical narratives about such encounters. Without spirituality, their hermeneutics does not make sense. The element of a direct and unique encounter between God and a human being or a group of believers is essential for the hermeneutical process; otherwise, revealed knowledge consists merely of cognitive data, when the experiential dimension is neglected (Jacobsen 2003:110).<sup>3</sup> Pentecostals use 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 to demonstrate their intention in preaching, where the author emphasises that his message and preaching were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of Spirit and power in order that listeners’ faith might not rest on the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (*καὶ ὁ λόγος μου καὶ τὸ κήρυγμά μου οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖ σοφίας ἀλλ’ ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως, ἵνα ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν μὴ ᾖ ἐν σοφίᾳ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ’ ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ*). This implies that effective preaching of the gospel should always consist of a miraculous element. Remembering and commemorating the words and deeds of Jesus and the apostles is especially important for Pentecostals and indispensable to faith. The historical data, however, is not important in itself, but for its value in creating expectations for the contemporary believers, because they insist on the experiential immediacy of the Holy Spirit (Jacobsen 2003:136). They read the Bible, not primarily to gain historical or dogmatic information, but to inform their spirituality, and they interpret what they read in terms of what they experience. In this sense, the experiential is conditional for interpreting the text, which provides the language to describe their encounters with God and creates their expectation of such encounters.

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3 Luther used the same terms when he described revelation not as cognitive data, but rather a coming of Christ, present in the Word, through eyes and ears, to hearers enabled to understand by the Spirit (Kirjavainen 1987:237-240).

For this reason, however, Pentecostals concentrate specifically and primarily on the narratives found in the New Testament relating to encounters early Christians experienced with the Holy Spirit, leading to an emphasis on the synoptic Gospels (with a predilection for Luke – Mittelstadt 2010:2-3) and especially Acts of the Apostles (Hollenweger 1988:336; Mittelstadt 2004:2). Because the Pentecostal community understands itself to be a restorationist movement, it argues in many instances (sometimes in an arrogant way) that it is currently the best representation of Christianity in the world, because it is an authentic continuation of New Testament Christianity as well as a faithful representative of New Testament Christianity (Archer 2009:133).<sup>4</sup> Penney (in Anderson 2003:3) argues that especially the experience of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 becomes a “normative paradigm for every Christian to preach the gospel”, and that Luke’s

primary and pervasive interest is the working of the Holy Spirit in initiating, empowering and directing the church in its eschatological worldwide mission.

A pneumatic epistemology, according to Kärkkäinen (1998a:97), posits the awareness that Scripture is the product of an experience with the Holy Spirit, which biblical writers describe in phenomenological language. The interpretation of this phenomenological language is more than an exercise in semantics or descriptive linguistics. The condition for understanding the events described in the Bible is an encounter with the Holy Spirit in the same tradition as the apostolic experience, with the same charismatic phenomena accompanying it. Only then can one truly understand the apostolic witness in an existential manner. The contemporary fellowship of believers stands in direct continuity with the faith community that birthed the New Testament (Thomas 2016:96).

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4 The early Pentecostal revival at Azusa Street in Los Angeles called itself the Apostolic Faith Mission, to emphasise their perceived continuity with the preaching and experience of the earliest apostles and their emphasis on faith in Christ, and their desire to be a movement or mission rather than an institutionalised church (Dayton 1987:25-26). Its leader, William Seymour, emphasised that the goal of the revival is the full restoration of the New Testament church, so that it would once again be “just like the one [Christ] started when He left the earth and organized it on the day of Pentecost” (quoted in Jacobsen 2003:136). The first issue of *The Apostolic Faith* included a creed of sorts for the Azusa Mission. It states that the Apostolic Faith Movement focused first of all on “the restoration of the faith once delivered unto the saints – the old time religion, camp meetings, revivals, missions, street and prison word and Christian Unity everywhere” (quoted in Jacobsen 2003:174).

Because of the sense of awareness of continuity with the earliest community of believers, the present-day community has a deep respect for the witness of the Bible, because they experience that the Bible is made alive in a new and fresh way through the anointing of the Spirit on the reader (Macchia 2015:9). For them, the Bible becomes a new book filled with experiences re-enacted in their own lives. They now read the Bible from within, accepting and understanding its idioms and categories (Kärkkäinen 1998a:107). Their intention is not to know the data related to biblical events and laws, but to experience what the Israelites or early believers experienced.

A resulting risk and danger for Pentecostals is the subjectivising trend to hear in the Bible what suits the reader. One's hermeneutics may lead to demythologising the Bible, because its exegesis robs the Bible of its critical-contextual historicity and factuality (Menzies & Menzies 2000:78). Then hermeneutics becomes an exercise in a private and convenient reconstruction of the intentionality of the text that serves the interests of the contemporary reader, while it ignores the socio-historical context of the biblical text. For this reason, linguistic, literary and historical analyses are indispensable as a first step to an understanding of the Scripture. A sound grammatical-historical and critical-contextual exegesis should be pursued to save one from the risk of subjectivism; there can be no hermeneutical integrity apart from a critical and contextual exegesis (Cartledge 2014:235). But more is needed than good exegesis by the reader; human rationality must be joined in ontological union with the "mind of Christ" (*νοῦν χριστοῦ*; 1 Cor. 2:16) quickened by the Spirit revealing divine mystery (Green 2015:73).

Ervin is not a Classical Pentecostal in his ideal of a sound exegetical basis for interpreting the Bible. It can be argued that his view does not necessarily represent the practice in the average Pentecostal congregation. For this reason, Arrington (1988:376) finds it necessary to utilise Ervin's model as the basis of his perspective, which he then expands to provide an important additional perspective on Pentecostal hermeneutics when he explains that Pentecostal hermeneutics must arise out of the Pentecostal theology of the Spirit. Scripture can be interpreted and properly understood only through the agency of the Spirit, as the Paraclete sayings of John's Jesus demonstrate (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).<sup>5</sup> Pentecostals are convinced of the importance of the Spirit for the interpretative process and argue that an experience and life in the Spirit

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5 In essence, Arrington emphasises more the Spirit's unique contribution, although it is implied in Ervin's theological work. Arrington reflects Pentecostal practice to think pneumatocentrically.

is the precondition for understanding the Bible correctly. Only then can Pentecostal theology emerge, as the result of the anointing of the Spirit on the believer's engagement with Scripture (Arrington 1988:377). This implies that the Pentecostal method of interpretation stands on three pillars, as pneumatic, experiential, and historical narrative.<sup>6</sup>

This suggests that Pentecostals should not foresee any obstacle in using critical tools of grammatical-historical-contextual exegesis, while simultaneously appreciating the spiritual nature of the text and its Spirit-driven interpretation. What is necessary is that proper recognition be given to the divine and human elements in the interpretation of the Bible, as Arrington (1988:387) explains.

This hermeneutical model is open for questioning and criticism. Some of the questions that should be answered are: What comes first, the so-called Spirit-driven interpretation or the human endeavour to interpret the text in terms of its historical and grammatical context? What happens when a Spirit-driven interpretation and the human exegetical attempt provide conflicting interpretational data? What guarantee can be given that the interpretation determined by the immediacy of the text not be overwritten by the historicity of the mystery, which describes a personal entry of God into human history? How can the balance between spiritual/pneumatic and historically determined exegesis be maintained? Lee (1994:68-71) refers to the seemingly gnostic dualism that a pneumatic epistemology, in his opinion, witnesses to:

If Scripture is written in human language and is capable of communicating God's Word, his insistence on the total incapacity of the human hermeneutic of language to understand Scripture seems unreasonable.

Some Pentecostals describe Scripture as the "Word of God" expressed in human words, implying that the Bible is comprehensible apart from pneumatic illumination, and that allows for grammatical-historical exegesis to be effective in terms of the "words of humans". However, pneumatic illumination is necessary in understanding the "Word of God" quality of the Bible, the deeper significance that can only be perceived through the eyes of faith (Arrington 1988:382; Cargal 1993:174). The dualism found in Pentecostal hermeneutics accords well with postmodern hermeneutics when it emphasises the immediacy of the text and multiple dimensions of meaning (Cargal 1993:175). The dualism consists of a "correct reading" that leads to theological knowledge about God based on an investigation

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6 For a critical discussion, see Cargal (1993:163-165).

into the original intention of the biblical author by means of exegetical methods, and a “creative reading” of the Bible that leads to an explanation of how a given passage can be put into practice nowadays. Both are important in Pentecostal reading and in interpreting the Bible.

God wants to reveal himself, at first through the Incarnation of Christ and, since Pentecost, through the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit reveals Christ by way of the Bible. The inspiration of Scripture is a mystery consisting of an encounter between the divine and the human, and creates a kinship between the biblical writer and the contemporary reader (Arrington 1988:383). The Holy Spirit re-enacts the apostolic experience brought about by the Spirit, in the first instance, serving as the bridge between the writer and the reader. Stronstad (1995:14-23) calls the experiential nature integral to Pentecostal hermeneutics. The Spirit becomes the “common context” between historical experience, interpretation and contemporary experience (Arrington 1988:382). Lee appreciates Arrington’s historical continuity between the first faith community and modern-day faith communities, describing it as an important warrant against the risks of undue subjectivism (Lee 1994:69). He also appreciates Arrington’s going beyond a verbal dictation theory that characterised earlier fundamentalist hermeneutics within the Pentecostal community (Lewis 2016:4-7).

Since the contributions of Ervin and Arrington, hermeneutics has become an important topic for discussion among Pentecostals (Kärkkäinen 1998a:76).<sup>7</sup> It should, however, be borne in mind that Biblical interpretation in local congregations and pulpits is sometimes far removed from the academic discussion in Pentecostal theological circles confined mainly to seminaries (Lewis 2016:9). In local assemblies, many members of Pentecostal churches read the Bible from the supposition that it is the inspired and infallible Word of God, endowed with authority to determine doctrine and lifestyle, as totally reliable, without recognising any historical distance between contemporary believers and the text, and without giving the necessary attention to the context in which specific texts function (Pluess 1993:191). Texts are interpreted in terms of typology and allegory and their immediate and literal meaning is emphasised and applied to the contemporary context (Spittler 1985:75-77). The Bible is perceived and interpreted as literally as credibility could stand (Archer 1996:65) and at face value (Archer 1996:66). The *scopus* applied in interpreting the New Testament, in particular, is the pre-understanding of Jesus as Saviour, Baptiser, Sanctifier and soon coming King at the centre of charismatic life

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7 Pentecostal scholars now interact with writers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas, although they remain critical of their presuppositions.



(Menzies 1985:15; Tomberlin 2010:35-53; Lewis 2016:3). What is needed is that a more sophisticated hermeneutical approach developed by Pentecostal theologians be communicated with these members, in order to empower them to read the Bible from within a Pentecostal paradigm.

Moore and Henderson (2014:12-13) add two further elements to a Pentecostal hermeneutical approach that has important implications: the priesthood and prophethood of all believers where all contribute in a democratic manner to the interpretation of the Bible, and the community of faith under the support of the Spirit exercising a corrective influence to heretical teachings. The Spirit draws the attention of the community of believers to the relevance of biblical passages for the contemporary life context (Archer 1996:78-79; 2009:212-253). These three components have to be brought into dialogue with each other, as demonstrated by what happened at the meeting of church leaders in Acts 15. Its way of using the Old Testament serves as a parable to define the process of interpretation by a given community of faith, within the context of life of that respective community (Archer 2009:251). The hermeneutical process is solemnised when the Spirit draws the attention of the community of believers to the relevance of biblical passages for the life context of a specific church.

Postmodern circles emphasise another important aspect, namely the significant role of the modern-day Bible reader in determining meaning. Cargal (1993:186-187) concurs and acknowledges that there are different levels of meaning in a text and variously equally accepted possible interpretations for one passage. Readers interact with the text in different ways based on their personal experience.

In conclusion, Johns (1995:84-85) warns that Pentecostal hermeneutics may not happen within the frame of any other *Weltanschauung* than a Pentecostal one. For Pentecostals, truth consists of an encounter with the God who speaks in the Bible, and that leads to radical life transformation while reading the Bible. For Pentecostal theologians, Scripture forms a fixed reference point for the encounter with God, and an encounter with God forms the core of Pentecostal identity. The Pentecostal understanding of truth must be defended and protected at all costs and may never be made compatible with contemporary postmodern pluralism (Johns 1995:75).

### **3. DISTINCTIVE PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTICS: POSSIBILITY AND/OR NECESSITY?**

It is clear from the discussion so far that the Pentecostal debate does not allow for only one fixed nature of Pentecostal biblical interpretation. It

consists rather of different aspects and its combination determined by the specific text one is reading, such as historical-grammatical exegesis; the significance of the community of faith; the importance of the Holy Spirit with respect to inspiring, enlightening and illuminating authors as well as modern-day readers, and elements of new (postmodern) hermeneutical approaches, with their emphasis on the important role of the reader in the process of interpretation. The Bible is perceived as inspired and preserved by the Spirit and illuminated, taught and transformed in the lives of contemporary believers. The Bible becomes the Word because of the Spirit's ministry (Land 1993:100).

With the remark that Pentecostal hermeneutics stands in continuity with the earliest faith community and, by implication, with the faith communities that through the ages read the Bible, Pentecostals place themselves within a historical hermeneutical tradition that includes the Catholic church of the first eleven centuries, the post-Reformation communities of the West, as well as Eastern Orthodox hermeneutics. A careful historical comparison of the different traditions is necessary, including the respect that characterises a part of Protestant tradition for Scripture and its authoritativeness for life and teaching, as well as the space created for tradition as the life of the Spirit in the church in the Eastern Church (Ervin 1981:116).<sup>8</sup>

Pentecostals allow for the historical biblical events to be re-enacted in the contemporary church, creating the expectation for signs and wonders to be repeated in modern times. When they read the tale of Jonah, the expectation is that God can save a modern-day believer from drowning by sending another fish, as in Jonah's case. When they are ill, they expect that God would heal them, as he did in the days of Elijah, Jesus and Peter. Their worldview allows for supernatural intervention and miracles *contra* a scientific worldview that does not allow for any supernatural phenomena to occur outside the accepted system of indictable cause and effect (Lataster 2013:31) or the cessationist theology of some Reformed theological traditions (for example, Kuyper 1941:189; Warfield 1953:6; Calvin 1965:236). The question that needs to be asked is about the sustainability of such an anti-scientific worldview in times when some of Pentecostals' "miraculous healings" are scientifically tested and found wanting, apart from placebo cures from psychosomatic illnesses (see Morton 2012:110).<sup>9</sup>

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8 For one such dialogue between a Pentecostal theologian and the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views of revelation and Bible interpretation, see Kärkkäinen (1998b:337-359).

9 Pentecostals accept as a rule that miracles still happen, although they confess that it is God's sovereign decision whether a miracle happens (Keener 2011:761).

The typical Pentecostal epistemology can also be criticised as naïve, if it uncritically adopts the first-century worldview with all its corollaries, including a view about the (lack of) rights of women and slaves, and a mythical and superstitious image of the earth and its relation to the rest of creation (creationism). To speak of a transcendent word that goes beyond all human words may also imply a kind of docetic view of the Bible (Cargal 1993:173-174) that deems it necessary that a positivist-mechanistic view of the operation of mechanics and a rationalist-modernist philosophical paradigm be renounced to read the Bible from the viewpoint of this epistemology, a requirement that cannot be sustained over the long term. Cargal (1993:173) argues that what is needed is an epistemology that should rather be rooted in the criteria of empirically verifiable sensory experience (such as healings or other so-called miraculous events) and that does not violate the coherence of rational categories. Cargal underlines the impossibility of effectively living in a Western culture to readopt an epistemology and its corollary worldview from the first century or even earlier.

Cargal's remarks stem from the positivistic epistemology of the Enlightenment's modernism that uses, as a key epistemological presupposition, objectivity brought into service of a historicist view of meaning (Bosch 1992:342-345). Pentecostals counter these objective categories with a supernatural reality in which they believe and which, they confess, can and does impinge on their reality (Robeck 1988:635; Jacobsen 1999:90-107).

Western societies are experiencing a paradigm shift in the form of postmodernism as a critique of the hegemony of a modernist worldview associated with positivistic philosophy and a mechanistic outlook. Postmodernism does not critique reason and rationality *per se*, but the hegemony of rationalism, as the only way of interpreting the world and human life (Kärkkäinen 1998a:90).

The Pentecostal paradigm informs its hermeneutics, with an epistemology based on personal revelation and the human response thereto (Johns 1995:92). In Pentecostal theology, rationalism and/or empiricism can never be adequate as sources of knowledge; rather, a *yada* or direct revelation knowledge should be provided, for that does not negate reason or sensory experience, in the service of the Spirit. The Pentecostal view of truth is not propositional truth, but orthodoxy-orthopraxy-orthopathy serves as the function, purpose, structure and essence of truth (Johns 1995:92). The modernist Western notion of knowing, limited to objective facts divorced from experience, emotions and the supernatural, does not allow for the knowledge that forms the source of theology. This implies that an openness to transcendence forms the deliberately adopted methodological

presupposition for Pentecostal hermeneutics (Stuhlmacher 1977:84-85; 1979:125-132).<sup>10</sup> The role of the “experience” of the interpreter in the hermeneutical circle is also emphasised, following Ricoeur’s use of the dialectical movement between *Verstehen* and *Erklären*. The interpretations drawn from the Bible must impact on Pentecostal experience, and such personal and corporate experience informs the Pentecostal hermeneutical process (Cargal 1993:178). The place of the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit in the hermeneutical enterprise is in the ontological locus of the interpreter in the context of “the world”, according to Gadamer’s analysis. Pentecostal experience is part of the interpreter’s horizon that co-determines what one experiences as the text’s horizon. In this way, the horizon of the text and the divergence of the experience of God provide an understanding of the commonality (Israel, Albrecht & McNally 1993:145).

The implications of the Pentecostal emphasis on personal experience explains why the narrative texts of the Bible are important to Pentecostals (White 1973:121) and why they appreciate the role of affections in Bible reading and interpretation (Baker 1995:34-38), *contra* an affectionless and objective Western understanding of knowledge.

The latest developments in Pentecostal hermeneutics, informed in some measure by postmodern developments, allow Pentecostal theologians to participate in discussions with theologians from other traditions; to make use of critical methods of modern biblical scholarship while remaining critical of unacceptable presuppositions underlying some of these methods and operating in some scholarship, and to emphasise the role of experience and emotion as part of Pentecostal Bible interpretation.

#### 4. SYNTHESIS

Over the past twenty years, there have been several attempts at construing a Pentecostal hermeneutics, characterised by an openness to the Spirit that informs the model of Bible reading. Pentecostal theologians sometimes create the impression that this model contains unique characteristics and emphases that qualify it to be called a distinctive hermeneutics. However, it has been argued that this is neither possible nor desirable. By claiming a Pentecostal hermeneutics to be distinctive, Pentecostals may serve a Pentecostal ideology, while in reality they differ in several

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10 Wink (1973:34) argues from a non-Pentecostal perspective that the historicocritical methods, in fact, can do no other than practise a functional atheism, separating the text from the stream of existence and objectifying it, because it does not allow for an openness to transcendence. See McKay (1994:19).

hermeneutical aspects from each other. Such an attempt also contributes to the seemingly endless fragmentation within Protestantism and the larger church. Instead of attempting to develop a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutics, Pentecostals should rather contribute to a conciliar reading of the Bible that strengthens ecumenical commitment to the Bible and reveals its meaning for postmodern humankind. In engaging postmodern thinking, Pentecostal theologians should verbalise their hermeneutical model in an honest dialogue, without submitting to the alleged similarities between Pentecostalism and postmodernism, like the plural meaning of texts and the role of affections. These convergences exist only on the surface, but cannot determine Pentecostal hermeneutical thinking unduly, due to the fundamental differences in presuppositions between the two movements. Pentecostals accept the “big story” of a scopus and the existence of truth, connected to the person of Jesus, while postmodernism rejects it. Pentecostals should continue preserving their identity in terms of hermeneutical stances, while simultaneously relating to other Christians and the world around them.

Pentecostal theologians’ attempts to construct a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutics are challenged by the diverse ways they use to describe its essence. What is important is that its pneumatology informs its Bible interpretation. However, this is not unique to Pentecostal hermeneutics. Ecumenical discussions with the Roman Catholic Church and several Protestant groups show that Pentecostal hermeneutics drinks from many different streams. To talk of a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutics is not possible and not even necessary, given the contribution that it has made and still makes to the emergence of a pneumatic/spiritual dimension of biblical interpretation as the Pentecostal contribution to other traditions (Kärkkäinen 1998a:90).

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