

## THE HERMENEUTICS OF NONCESSATIONISM

Robert L. Thomas  
Professor of New Testament

*The Master's Seminary is noncessationist in regard to such gifts as teaching, helps, and administration, but is cessationist regarding revelatory and sign gifts. Recent changes in evangelical biblical hermeneutics that have accompanied comparable changes in evangelicalism as a whole have opened doors of opportunity for noncessationists to defend their position in a new way. The new hermeneutical subjectivism has given continuationists an opportunity that is nonexistent when following traditional grammatical-historical principles of interpretation. Four examples illustrate this use of revisionist hermeneutics. (1) Narrative-based interpretation takes its cue from evangelical redaction criticism and its theory that narrative literature can teach doctrine just as effectively as didactic type writings, a theory that has been successfully refuted. (2) Community-based interpretation sees a contemporary Christian community as playing an indispensable role in assigning meaning to a biblical text. This too contradicts traditional grammatical-historical principles. (3) Tradition-based interpretation allows for reading into a biblical passage an interpreter's own background and beliefs, but differences in defining how to limit that tradition reflects the extreme subjectivism to which such a principle leads. (4) Mediating-based interpretation theorizes the existence of a common ground between cessationists and noncessationists and alters traditional hermeneutical principles in a way to accommodate that preunderstanding. All four approaches illustrate the growing sophistication of noncessationist hermeneutics and their continuing violations of grammatical-historical hermeneutics.*

\* \* \* \* \*

To frame this discussion, the position of The Master's Seminary on cessationism is a good startingpoint. The institutional "Statement of Faith" on that issue reads as follows:

We teach that the Holy Spirit administers spiritual gifts to the church. The Holy Spirit

glorifies neither Himself nor His gifts by ostentatious displays, but He does glorify Christ by implementing His work of redeeming the lost and building up believers in the most holy faith (John 16:13, 14; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; 2 Cor. 3:18).

We teach, in this respect, that God the Holy Spirit is sovereign in the bestowing of all His gifts for the perfecting of the saints today and that speaking in tongues and the working of sign miracles in the beginning days of the church were for the purpose of pointing to and authenticating the apostles as revealers of divine truth, and were never intended to be characteristic of the lives of believers (1 Cor. 12:4-11; 13:8-10; 2 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:7-12; Heb. 2:1-4).

Those words indicate that as an institution TMS is noncessationist in regard to some of the gifts such as teaching, helps, and administration (1 Cor 12:28), but is cessationist in regard to other gifts such as miracles, healing, and tongues (1 Cor 12:28-30). The gift of apostleship (1 Cor 12:28, 29) lasted only as long as witnesses of Christ's incarnation and resurrection remained alive. Then it ceased along with other revelatory gifts and sign gifts, whose purpose it was to confirm revelation through the revelatory gifts. The remainder of the gifts continue and contribute immeasurably to growth in the body of Christ.

### **Hermeneutical Changes and Their Effect on Noncessationism**

In the last two or three decades, evangelicalism has undergone some dramatic changes that are not often noticed. David F. Wells has commented extensively on the changes in his "Foreword" to *The Eclipse of the Reformation in the Evangelical Church*,<sup>1</sup> as has Iain H. Murray in his work *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000*.<sup>2</sup> Along with the changes in evangelicalism have come changes in evangelical biblical hermeneutics, whether as a result of or as a cause for the changes in evangelicalism remains to be determined. Whatever the relationship between the two spheres of alteration, the two have gone hand in hand in revamping the evangelical landscape substantially.<sup>3</sup>

Noncessationism, of course, antedates the above-mentioned differences between the two stages of evangelicalism,<sup>4</sup> but the continuationist perspective has not

<sup>1</sup>David F. Wells, "Foreword" to *The Eclipse of the Reformation in the Evangelical Church*, eds. Gary L. W. Johnson and R. Fowler White (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001) xv-xvi, xvii, xix, xxviii.

<sup>2</sup>Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000) 51.

<sup>3</sup>For a further description of the changes, see Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 13-20.

<sup>4</sup>Menzies and Horton trace the beginning of noncessationist Pentecostalism as follows:

The current Pentecostal movement traces its origin to a revival at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas that began on January 1, 1901. Students, from their studies of the Bible concluded

been unaffected by the recent hermeneutical shift. In earlier days charismatics defended their alleged contemporary use of gifts like tongues and prophecy purely on the basis of experience,<sup>5</sup> but today their defense in many cases has shifted to claims of biblical interpretation as the basis for their exercise of such gifts. The shift has come through implementing new evangelical principles of interpretation.

What is the hermeneutical switch that has made this possible? First and foremost, it is the incorporation of a new first step in the interpretative process, a step called preunderstanding. In a very subtle way, beginning the exegetical practice with a conscious embracing of the interpreter's preunderstanding of what to expect from the passage under investigation has transformed evangelical hermeneutics from an objective exercise of letting a passage speak for itself into a subjective exercise of allowing an interpreter to read into a passage the meaning toward which he is inclined. Obviously, this transition moves away from letting the text speak for itself toward the practice of reader-response hermeneutics.

Noncessationists and other fringe evangelical subgroups who have been uneasy with trying to defend their systems from the Bible have taken advantage of the new hermeneutical subjectivism to present for the first time a biblical defense for what they believe. That is why so many new "isms" like noncessationism are cropping up among evangelicals. The new "isms" are difficult to deal with because evangelicals have as yet to isolate the root cause of the deviations: a change in principles of interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

The Master's Seminary advocates traditional grammatical-historical

---

that speaking in tongues (Acts 2:4) is the initial outward evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. One of the students, Agnes Ozman, said she felt "as though rivers of living water were proceeding from [her] innermost being."

The revival became a Pentecostal explosion when, in 1906, W. J. Seymour secured an old two-story frame building at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California. For about three years services ran almost continually, from ten in the morning to midnight. Many of those who received the Pentecostal baptism in the Holy Spirit there scattered to spread the message. Many Pentecostal churches sprang up. (William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton. *Biblical Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* [Springfield, Mo.: Logion, 1993] 10)

<sup>5</sup>Pentecostalist Gordon Fee has observed, "Pentecostals, in spite of some of their excesses, are frequently praised for recapturing for the church its joyful radiance, missionary enthusiasm, and life in the Spirit. But they are at the same time noted for bad hermeneutics. . . . [T]heir attitude toward Scripture regularly has included a general disregard for scientific exegesis and carefully thought-out hermeneutics. In fact, hermeneutics has simply not been a Pentecostal thing. . . . [I]t is probably fair—and important—to note that in general the Pentecostals' experience has preceded their hermeneutics" (Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991] 83, 85-86).

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed discussion of how new evangelical hermeneutics have given birth to Progressive Dispensationalism, Evangelical Feminism, Evangelical Missiology, Theonomy, and Open Theism, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 351-505. Currently, the Evangelical Theological Society is trying to cope with the presence of open theists in the Society, but is having difficulty doing so because the preunderstanding of the open theists has predetermined the results of their biblical interpretation (*ibid.*, 479-82).

hermeneutics as evidenced in its Statement of Faith:

We teach that, whereas there may be several applications of any given passage of Scripture, there is but one true interpretation. The meaning of Scripture is to be found as one diligently applies the literal, grammatical-historical method of interpretation under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (John 7:17; 16:12-15; 1 Cor. 2:7-15; 1 John 2:20). It is the responsibility of believers to ascertain carefully the true intent and meaning of Scripture, recognizing that proper application is binding on all generations. Yet the truth of Scripture stands in judgment of men; never do men stand in judgment of it.<sup>7</sup>

Four illustrations of noncessationism's use of the revisionist hermeneutics will help to specify the issues involved.

### A Narrative-Based Interpretation

#### **Pentecostal Awareness of a Hermeneutical Change**<sup>8</sup>

According to an Academic Dean at Western Pentecostal Bible College in Clayburn, British Columbia, Pentecostal hermeneutics in earlier days since the movement began has been characterized as a "Pragmatic" hermeneutic.<sup>9</sup> That charismatic dean admits that the governing principle in this approach is to interpret Scripture in light of contemporary charismatic experience, a principle established in 1901 when the father and fountainhead of Pentecostalism laid hands on one of his students and she began speaking in tongues.<sup>10</sup> That has been the method of studying Scripture for noncessationists ever since. They have simply asserted the method, taking it to be "self-evident and self-authenticating."<sup>11</sup> Experiences in the early church as recorded in Acts are taken to be normative for the present day.

In 1992, Menzies confessed that earlier Pentecostals viewed the Bible as "a homogeneous whole and built our [Pentecostal's] theology on texts arranged together with little regard for the author's original intent."<sup>12</sup> That approach has in recent times become an embarrassment to noncessationists who desire to become a part of mainstream evangelicalism. Recently, in the work coauthored by William and Robert Menzies, Robert Menzies observed,

---

<sup>7</sup>"Statement of Faith," Catalog for *The Master's Seminary 2002-2004*.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. David Diez, "An Inductive Study on the Spiritual Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament" (Th.M. thesis, The Master's Seminary, Sun Valley, Calif., 1998) 7-24. Pastor Diez's work was foundational to the study in preparation of the present article.

<sup>9</sup>Roger Stronstad, "Trends in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," *Paraclete* 22/3 (Summer 1988): 3.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 2-5.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup>Robert P. Menzies, ed., "The Essence of Pentecostalism: Forum Conducted at the Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Chapel," *Paraclete* 26/3 (Summer 1992): 1.

Pentecostal Scholars have seized the opportunity afforded by the new hermeneutical context and raised important questions concerning the nature of Luke's pneumatology (doctrine of the Holy Spirit) and its relationship to that of Paul. This in turn has stimulated discussions within the wider Evangelical world concerning the nature of fully-orbed biblical pneumatology and how this might impact contemporary church life.<sup>13</sup>

Cessationists can derive profit by looking first at how mainline Pentecostalism now claims a hermeneutical base in biblical interpretation, and then from a survey of how other charismatics, including third-wavers, have responded to this hermeneutical base.

### **Rationale for Using Narrative as a Basis for Doctrine**

Pentecostal hermeneutics has learned a redaction-critical approach to the book of Acts from evangelical redaction-critical studies of the Synoptic Gospels. Robert Menzies has emphasized the lesson learned in the following words: "The tools of redaction criticism, aided by more wide-ranging developments in literary analysis, were employed with considerable success."<sup>14</sup> For the most part, they credit I. Howard Marshall, a non-Pentecostal, for this discovery:

In 1970, I. Howard Marshall's influential book *Luke: Historian and Theologian* appeared on the scene. . . . Marshall suggested that Luke wrote history, accurate and careful history; but not bare, objective, detached history. Luke-Acts represents history with a purpose—history written with a theological agenda in view. Marshall's book signaled an important watershed in Evangelical thought. Although in 1970 many had not yet perceived the full implications of Marshall's position, the reappraisal of the theological character of biblical narrative, particularly the Gospels and Acts, was underway.<sup>15</sup>

On the basis of Marshall's work, he also writes, "A revolution is taking place in

---

<sup>13</sup>William W. and Robert P. Menzies. *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 43; William Menzies wrote chapter 1, the postscript of chapter 13, and the conclusion of this work; Robert Menzies wrote the rest (*ibid.*, 11 n. 1). In commenting on the Pentecostal shift in focus, Dempster has commented, "Hermeneutics has been a hot topic for Pentecostals in recent years. In the annual meetings of the Society for Pentecostal Studies over the last decade, no topic has been investigated with greater frequency or intensity than the topic of hermeneutics" (Murray W. Dempster, "Paradigm Shifts and Hermeneutics: Confronting Issues Old and New," *Pneuma: The Journal for Pentecostal Studies* 15/2 [Fall 1993]: 129).

<sup>14</sup>Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power* 41. William Menzies joins Robert Menzies in noting the utter dependence of Pentecostal theology on redaction criticism in Acts: "In fact, if one can demonstrate that Luke did not intend to convey a theological message by his narratives, he has at that point effectively undercut the possibility of a clear Pentecostal theology" (William W. Menzies, "The Methodology of Pentecostal Theology: An Essay on Hermeneutics," *Essays on Apostolic Themes*, ed. Paul Elbert [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1985] 7). Later he adds, "Marshall, although certainly not a Pentecostal, makes a good case for the contribution of redaction criticism to an understanding of Luke as a theologian" (*ibid.*, 8 n. 12).

<sup>15</sup>Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power* 40-41.

Evangelical hermeneutics. . . . I refer to the substantial change in Evangelical attitudes toward the theological significance of biblical narrative.”<sup>16</sup> He describes the effect of this revolution on the study of the Gospels in the following words:

[A] new generation of Evangelical scholars and seminary instructors, many of whom had studied under Marshall, began to reappropriate and utilize the tools of redaction criticism. These scholars—e.g., Grant Osborne, Robert Stein, Joel Green, Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg—began to judiciously use the positive insights of this method of analysis while at the same time discarding some of the more radical presuppositions. This resulted in an impressive array of scholarly studies that showed the value of the method and its compatibility—if employed properly—with a high view of Scripture. The impact upon Evangelical hermeneutics was inevitable, if not immediate. Here were Evangelical scholars highlighting the distinctive theological perspectives of the various Gospel writers.<sup>17</sup>

Menzies then transfers the redaction-critical method to the book of Acts and concludes that since Acts is narrative literature like the Gospels, one can derive doctrine from narrative literature just as well as he can from didactic literature such as the NT epistles:

These developments converged to produce what is today a clear consensus. There is now widespread recognition in the Evangelical world that biblical narratives, particularly those found in the Gospels and Acts, were shaped with theological concerns in mind and thus they convey a theological message. The crucial question is no longer whether Luke and the others were theologians; the central question now is what is the specific shape or content of their theology.<sup>18</sup>

He confirms such a conclusion by referring to two recent works on hermeneutics written by non-Pentecostals. One is by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard:

We have already stated that narrative often teaches more indirectly than didactic literature without becoming any less normative. Thus, we reject Fee and Stuart’s highlighted maxim that “unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 41-42. Archer is of the same opinion: “Pentecostal scholarship has aided in elevating Acts from a purely historical narrative to a historical-theological narrative thus giving it the same doctrinal clout as Paul and John” (Kenneth J. Archer, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 8 [April 1996]:73).

<sup>19</sup>Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power* 42; see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 349-50.

The other is by Grant Osborne:

Moreover, I also oppose the current tendency to deny the theological dimension on the grounds that narrative is indirect rather than direct. This ignores the results of redaction criticism, which has demonstrated that biblical narrative is indeed theological at the core and seeks to guide the reader to relive the truth encapsulated in the story. Narrative is not as direct as didactic material, but it does have a theological point and expects the reader to interact with that message. My argument is that biblical narrative is in some ways even better than the teaching applied to similar situations in the lives of the people.<sup>20</sup>

With this encouragement from non-Pentecostal scholars, Pentecostals have plunged ahead with using historical precedent in Acts as a scriptural basis for their alleged continuing exercise of such sign gifts as tongues and prophecy.<sup>21</sup> They justify this on the basis of the “quiet revolution” that has transpired in evangelical hermeneutics when writing,

Because Luke-Acts is so pivotal for Pentecostal theology and experience, the recent hermeneutical shift within the larger Evangelical world has had a special impact on Pentecostals. Pentecostals, often chided in the past for simplistic arguments from historical precedent, have entered into a new era of creative theological reflection.<sup>22</sup>

Robert Menzies cites Stronstad as an early voice that noted the distinction between Lukan and Pauline theologies, but acknowledges that Stronstad’s experience probably played a part in his discovery.<sup>23</sup> He writes, “Stronstad will undoubtedly be criticized by some for reading his own Pentecostal experience into Luke-Acts. . . . [M]ight it not be that Stronstad’s Pentecostal experience has actually enabled him to read Luke-Acts more accurately?”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power* 42; see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991) 172.

<sup>21</sup>Pinnock wholeheartedly endorses such a use of narrative portions of Scripture among Pentecostals: “Other believers also read the Bible as narrative, because it is in fact a narrative, but Pentecostals are particularly strong in this. Pentecostals read the Bible not primarily as a book of concepts, but as a very dynamic narrative [*sic*] of ongoing divine activity. They inhabit the story-world of the Bible and experience God according to that pattern” (Clark H. Pinnock, “Divine Relationality: A Pentecostal Contribution to the Doctrine of God,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 16 [April 2000]:9). In defending his position of open theism, Pinnock continues, “Pentecostals are in the happy position of being able to avoid categories that have long burdened classical theism, because they stick closer to biblical metaphors and biblical narrative” (*ibid.*, 10).

<sup>22</sup>Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power* 43.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 51-52.

**Evaluation of the Doctrine-Based-on-Narrative Rationale**

Three observations regarding the new Pentecostal hermeneutics are in order at this point.

(1) Even with the new sophistication that characterizes Pentecostalism's post-"revolution" hermeneutics,<sup>25</sup> the subjectivism of reading one's experience into the biblical text still prevails.<sup>26</sup> In other words, an experience-based preunderstanding of what meaning the text should yield is still the determining factor.<sup>27</sup> They are doing the same as they always have, but have gained a new respect from other evangelicals, because new evangelical hermeneutics have opened the door for them to come to the text with a preconceived interpretation.

(2) To credit I. Howard Marshall with launching this revolution raises questions about the legitimacy of the revolution's origin. Marshall's stand on the issue of biblical inerrancy is at best questionable. One whose redaction-critical studies acknowledge unhistorical elements in the text of the Gospels<sup>28</sup> can hardly furnish a suitable foundation for inerrantists to adopt new hermeneutical procedures. Neither do the disciples of Marshall listed by Robert Menzies supply suitable models of biblical inerrancy, because they all follow Marshall's example of finding

<sup>25</sup>Joseph Byrd, Senior Pastor of the Stewart Road Church of God in Monroe, Michigan, agrees with many others about the new trend among Pentecostals: "Recent publications demonstrate the transition of Pentecostalism from its oral theological origins to a new theological sophistication in the last two decades" ("Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory and Pentecostal Proclamation," *Pneuma: The Journal for Pentecostal Studies* 15/2 [Fall 1993]:203). Archer concurs: "Pentecostal scholarship has reached new levels of sophistication as the Fall 1993 issue of *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* demonstrates" (Kenneth J. Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect" 70).

<sup>26</sup>Noncessationists differ from one another regarding the exact role of experience with some holding that experience should not be the starting point for interpretation (Fee, *Gospel and Spirit* 85-86; Menzies, "Methodology" 12-13) and others that it is inevitably involved throughout the interpretive process (F. L. Arrington, "Hermeneutics, Historical Perspectives on Pentecostal and Charismatic," in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds Stanley M. Burgess, Gary B. McGee, and Patrick H. Alexander [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993] 384). Whatever position a noncessationist may take on this issue, the fact remains that contemporary experience plays a role in interpretation, as Ellington readily admits: "Beliefs are not derived from understanding, but arise from intense individual and corporate experiences of the presence and action of God in the lives of Christian believers. Doctrine is descriptive of and, as such, arises out of experience. . . . This is not to say that, for Pentecostals, doctrine is unimportant, but it is to recognize that the basic fodder of the doctrinal process within Pentecostalism is the experience of the community of faith" (Scott A. Ellington, "Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 9 [1996]:18).

<sup>27</sup>Noncessationist Arrington in essence admits this influence: "[T]he Pentecostal movement's own theological presuppositions also impact the movement's interpretative principles. . . . Interpretation, indeed, the very approach to the task of interpretation, is shaped by the theological presuppositions that the interpreter brings to the process" (Arrington, "Hermeneutics, Historical Perspectives" 378).

<sup>28</sup>I. Howard Marshall, "Historical Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 136.



unhistorical elements in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>29</sup> If evangelical redaction-critical procedures allow for editorial embellishments leading to historical inaccuracies in the Gospels, they very well may allow that Luke embellished and altered historical accounts in Acts with a view to enhancing his own theological preferences. Evangelical redaction criticism has had detrimental effects by dehistoricizing the Synoptic Gospels, and if used in Acts, will do the same there.

(3) Using narrative literature as a basis for doctrine is precarious for a variety of reasons. For one thing, that policy fails to allow for the transitional nature of Acts. As Loder observes,

Acts 2—when understood in light of the unique historical setting of the event described—does not support the view that the ‘vocational’ work of the Spirit can only be experienced as one enters into a whole new realm of the Christian life through a post-conversion crisis event.<sup>30</sup>

The delay between the Samaritans’ confession of faith and their reception of the Spirit is probably best understood within the context of the literary structure of Acts—which is apparently designed to reflect God’s programme of salvation-history.<sup>31</sup>

Many events in Acts are unrepeatable because they are unique in God’s ongoing plan from the time of His original creation to the time of His new creation. Acts describes a period of transitions such as those from the law to grace, from Israel’s history to the church’s history, from an emphasis on the kingdom of Israel to an emphasis on the body of Christ.

Furthermore, to attribute to Luke a double intent of writing history *and* theology is an unrealistic approach to narrative literature. The goal must be to determine a historian’s *primary* intent. As Fee expresses it,

it [i.e., discovering the author’s and the Holy Spirit’s intent] is of crucial importance to the hermeneutics of the historical narratives, for it is one thing for the historian to include an event because it serves the greater purpose of his work, and yet another thing for the interpreter to take that incident as having didactic value apart from the historian’s larger intent. . . . Whatever else one gleans from the story, whether it be the place of visions in Christian guidance (!) or the nature of Christian conversion, such gleanings are *incidental* to Luke’s intent.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 18-27, for examples of historical inaccuracies cited by various evangelical scholars.

<sup>30</sup>Allan Loder, “The Classical Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit-baptism: Some Exegetical Considerations,” *Διδασκαλία* 13/2 (Spring 2002): 80.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>32</sup>Fee, *Gospel and Spirit* 90-91.

By basing doctrine and Christian practice on incidental details, an interpreter commits grievous injustices against the narrative in particular and biblical doctrine in general. In so doing, he fails to allow for traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics in its recognition of history as unembellished history.

### **A Community-Based Interpretation**

#### **Rationale for Using the Community as a Basis for Interpretation**

Recently, Kenneth Archer, a professor at Church of God Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee, presented another approach to Pentecostal hermeneutics.<sup>33</sup> He proposed that the community is an indispensable partner in assigning meaning to a biblical text:

The Pentecostal hermeneutic being presented embraces a dialogical interdependent relationship between Scripture, Spirit and community as a necessary process in the making of meaning. . . . This hermeneutic emphasizes the important contributions that the Pentecostal community brings to the interpretive process. . . . The primary filter for interpretation will be the Pentecostal story.<sup>34</sup>

Archer continues, “The Bible, the Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal community are actively engaging each other in the conversation.”<sup>35</sup>

In reflecting the influence of modern linguistics upon his thinking, the Pentecostal scholar writes, “This tridactic conversational approach to ‘meaning’ is necessary because all forms of communication are underdeterminate; that is a listener or reader is needed to complete the communicative event, hence producing meaning.”<sup>36</sup> He dismisses the possibility that the individual hermeneut can arrive at a meaning through use of objective hermeneutical principles, and says that he needs the input of the community to assign meaning to a biblical text.<sup>37</sup> Archer later adds, “Pentecostals take very serious [sic] Goldingay’s warning that ‘those who pretend to be objective and critical and then find their own concerns in the texts they study

<sup>33</sup>Kenneth J. Archer, “A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community” (Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, November 22, 2002). The paper was a condensation of the sixth chapter of his dissertation scheduled for publication in the fall of 2003 under the title *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, forthcoming) (ibid., 1 n. 4).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 2; cf. Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 195-240, especially 226-27, for a comparison of modern linguistics with grammatical-historical interpretation. The field of linguistics downplays precision in biblical interpretation (ibid., 226-27).

<sup>37</sup>Archer, “A Pentecostal Hermeneutic” 2, also 2 n. 6.

need to take a dose of self-suspicion.”<sup>38</sup>

Archer continues,

The biblical passage is at the mercy of the community. However, a Pentecostal community will give the biblical passage the opportunity to interact with the readers in such a way that the passage fulfills its dialogical role in the communicative event. This is so because the Pentecostal community recognizes the Bible as the penultimate authoritative written testimony of Divine revelation—the inspired word of God. Furthermore, the community believes that the Scripture can speak clearly and creatively as word of God to the contemporary Pentecostal community’s situations and needs. Hence the Pentecostal community will read the Bible as sacred Scripture that speaks to the community’s current needs thus enabling the community to live faithfully before and with the living God.<sup>39</sup>

Further, he says,

Knowledge as meaningful understanding will be rooted in and related to human life because ‘the only sort of (theological and theoretical) knowledge that really counts is knowledge grounded in life.’ ‘Meaning, therefore, is no longer seen in terms of an original “cause” or ultimate “effect” but in terms of relationship.’ This meaning is arrived at through a dialectical process based upon an interdependent dialogical relationship between Scripture, Spirit and community.<sup>40</sup>

In clarification, he states, “Meaning is negotiated through the conversation between the text, community and Spirit with the world behind the text informing not controlling the conversation.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Evaluation of Using the Community as a Basis for Interpretation**

Several brief comments will compare Archer’s hermeneutic with the traditional grammatical-historical approach.

(1) Most conspicuous is this scholar’s concession to reader-response hermeneutics as relates to deconstructionism, postmodernism, and poststructural-

---

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 3-4; cf. also Kenneth J. Archer, “Early Pentecostal Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 8 (2001):41, where he writes, “The Modernist attempt to to [*sic*] be a neutral interpreter by setting aside one’s ‘experience’ and/or presuppositions is a false illusion.”

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 3. Note Archer’s reference to the Bible as “the *penultimate* authoritative written testimony of Divine revelation.” If the Bible is the next to the last authority, is the community the ultimate authority? Archer is unclear on this point.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 6.

ism.<sup>42</sup> He indicates that the text has no meaning in and of itself, but must be assigned a meaning by the Pentecostal community. In contrast, the goal of grammatical-historical hermeneutics is to exclude preunderstanding of any contemporary person or community and let the text speak for itself.<sup>43</sup>

(2) Reader-response hermeneutics leads inevitably to allowing a single passage of Scripture to have multiple meanings. If the Pentecostal community controls the meaning in its community, and so does the Reformed community in its community and the dispensational community in its community and so on, that means a given passage has as many meanings as there are communities. That characteristic of community-facilitated hermeneutics directly violates the grammatical-historical principle of a single meaning for each passage of Scripture.<sup>44</sup>

(3) Community-based interpretation stands against another grammatical-historical principle, that of keeping application separate from interpretation. When

<sup>42</sup>Robert Menzies tries to distance himself from “the extreme subjectivity of some reader-oriented methodologies (such as reader-response criticism and deconstructionism)” by calling them “disturbing” (Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power* 65-66). Commendably, he also insists, “[T]he distinction between the meaning of the text and the numerous applications (or significances) it may have for various situations and cultures is necessary if we are to restrain ourselves from distorting the text” (ibid., 66). Yet his wholehearted endorsement of redaction criticism and experience-based preunderstanding cited earlier in this article clearly evidences his deconstructive leanings and his willingness to let application have its part in determining textual meaning. Archer goes so far as to say that “Pentecostalism must have a postmodern accent” and that a promising Pentecostal hermeneutic “will speak with a liberating voice accented by postmodernity” (Archer, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect” 81). Cargal is strong in his insistence that Pentecostals must adopt multiple meanings of a single text along with endorsing postmodern methods for Pentecostal hermeneutics (Timothy B. Cargal, “Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15/2 (Fall 1993):177-78).

<sup>43</sup>Note Ramm’s words: “The true philological spirit, or critical spirit, or scholarly spirit, in Biblical interpretation has as its goal to discover the original meaning and intention of the text. Its goal is *exegesis*—to lead meaning out of the text and shuns *eisogesis*—bringing a meaning to the text . . .” (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook on Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970] 115). See also those of Terry: “The systematic expounder of Scripture doctrine . . . must not import into the text of Scripture the ideas of later times, or build upon any words or passages a dogma which they do not legitimately teach” (Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* [1885, reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947] 583). For further discussion of preunderstanding, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 41-62.

<sup>44</sup>Terry speaks of single meaning this way: “A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture” (Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 205). Ramm expresses it thus: “But here we must remember the old adage: ‘Interpretation is one, application is many.’ This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study” (Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 113). Summit II of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy concurred: “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application” (Article VII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” adopted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Chicago, November 10-13, 1982). For further discussion of this principle, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 141-64.

Archer speaks of the Bible speaking to “the community’s current needs,” that is not interpretation; it is application. In a traditional approach to hermeneutics, the two must be kept separate. Failure to do so will distort the meaning of the passage in its original setting.<sup>45</sup> To arrive at the one correct interpretation, application cannot be allowed to control interpretation.

## A Tradition-Based Interpretation

### Using Presuppositions as a Basis for Interpretation

Gordon D. Fee fits well into the philosophical zone created by Anthony Thiselton in his 1980 work. Thiselton endorsed Smart’s statement that “[the] claim of absolute scientific objectivity in interpreting scripture involved the interpreter in an illusion about himself that inhibits objectivity.”<sup>46</sup> Thiselton then concluded, “The biblical scholar therefore needs the help of someone who has made it his life’s work to wrestle with the problem of how these two sides [i.e., the ideal of a “pure” description of the text’s meaning and the inability of the interpreter to escape the confines of his finite or ‘historic’ existence] of the situation can be held together, without either being lost to view.”<sup>47</sup> By insisting on an interpreter’s inability to approach a text objectively, Thiselton represents an agnostic skepticism toward obtaining propositional truth from Scripture.

Fee follows in this train. He writes,

In a now famous essay, Rudolf Bultmann once asked whether it was possible to do presuppositionless exegesis, in answer to which he gave a resounding No. We bring too much of ourselves—our culture and our traditions—to make such exegesis possible. Although he was contending in particular against sterile historical positivism, his essay continues to be a byword in biblical studies.<sup>48</sup>

Fee acknowledges his own Pentecostal upbringing and his current differences with Pentecostals in accepting the baptism of the Spirit as separate from and subsequent to conversion,<sup>49</sup> but clings to the use of the gifts of faith, healings, miracles, wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues

---

<sup>45</sup>For more detailed information on this point, see Brian A. Shealy, “Redrawing the Line between Hermeneutics and Application,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 165-94.

<sup>46</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 27.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Fee, *Gospel and Spirit* 70.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 105-19.

in the contemporary church.<sup>50</sup> Because of the combination of his differences from traditional Pentecostalism and his Pentecostal lineage, it is difficult to know whether to classify him as a Pentecostal, a charismatic, or a Third-Wave noncessationist.

One of Fee's peculiarities lies in the area of definitions. The following reflects his unusual definition of hermeneutics:

*Exegesis* is in fact concerned with what the text meant in its historical context. *Hermeneutics* has to do with the science of interpretation in all its ramifications. But since the term has to do especially with what a text means (which includes what is meant), I will use the term to refer to what the biblical text means for us in terms of our understanding and obedience.<sup>51</sup>

Earlier he commented, "Because I am an exegete committed to the canon of Scripture as God's word, I can neither reject exegesis (what it meant then) nor neglect hermeneutics (what does it say today)."<sup>52</sup> In so defining hermeneutics, he is equating hermeneutics with a contemporary application of the text rather than using it in its traditional sense of the rules governing exegesis or interpretation.<sup>53</sup>

By this novel definition of hermeneutics, this author has put present-day application into the driver's seat in obtaining the meaning of a biblical text.<sup>54</sup> In essence, that puts the focus on the interpreter's subjective opinion of the meaning as viewed through the filter of his own personal circumstances. Such a step distances him from the meaning the original author intended for his immediate readers to comprehend.

That definition also goes hand-in-hand with the prominence that Fee gives

<sup>50</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996) 165, 168.

<sup>51</sup>Fee, *Gospel and Spirit* 4 n. 5.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>53</sup>For further discussion of the meanings of exegesis and hermeneutics, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 20-27. Some sources refer to application as significance and interpretation as meaning (cf. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1967] 8).

<sup>54</sup>Pinnock is in essential agreement with Fee in equating application with interpretation: "The Spirit is active in the life of the whole church to interpret the biblical message in languages of today. He actualizes the word of God by helping us to restate the message in contemporary terminology and apply it to fresh situations" (Clark H. Pinnock, "The Word of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2 [April 1993]:16). He justifies such applications in "fresh situations" by comparing use made of the promise given to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3 by Isa 51:1-3 and Ezek 33:23-29. "The original text was a dynamic one and capable of being used in new ways by subsequent interpreters in the Spirit," he writes (ibid., 13). Similarly, he notes, "Peter changes the direction of Amos 9.11-12 . . . in a speech recorded in Acts 15" (ibid.). Reasoning in this manner, he concludes, "God's revelation is not a closed conceptual system. It is a word of life which becomes ever new" (ibid., 19). Pinnock fails, however, to distinguish between writers of inspired Scripture and present-day interpreters. The former received direct inspiration from God; the latter have no such direct revelation (see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 252-53).

to presuppositions in his interpretation of the text. After citing several examples of interpretations with which he disagrees, Fee says,

Let me finally conclude this critique of others, with the candid admission that I do not with all of these illustrations suggest that I come to the text with a clean slate. . . . But I am also illustrating in part how much easier it is to see this problem in others than in oneself. And that is precisely the great hermeneutical danger—that the biases of others are so clear!<sup>55</sup>

But after soundly rebuffing others for allowing their presuppositions to rule, he adds,

Having set the reader up with all of this, let me now seem to reverse myself and say that coming to the text with our tradition(s) in hand is not in itself a bad thing. Indeed, it is impossible to do otherwise. But what I want to stress here is that in itself this is neither good nor bad, and that in fact, it may often serve to the good.<sup>56</sup>

He then describes how traditions can be beneficial. Citing 2 Pet 1:20—“no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation’ (NRSV)” —he concludes, “Exegesis and hermeneutics, even when worked on or worked out in the privacy of one’s own study, must finally be the product of the Christian community at large.”<sup>57</sup>

At this point, Fee appears to agree with Kenneth Archer regarding the involvement of the community in the interpretive process, but he guards himself against placing as much weight on the community by proposing several levels of tradition: (1) a level that has been a consensus of the church for centuries such as the Trinity and the person of Christ; (2) a level that has not been the focus of much theological reflection such as the traditional role of male leadership; (3) a level of interpretation dealing with single verses where no reflective consensus exists; (4) the level related to our personal traditions; and (5) the level related to the personal traditions of others.<sup>58</sup> He implies that level one can be a good thing, but that levels two through five are less beneficial.

If level one is the only helpful tradition—and sometimes there may be doubt about that—allowing tradition to govern interpretation cannot but harm rather than help interpret the Bible. By starting the interpretive process with one’s biases about what meaning a passage will yield, one violates the principles of single meaning and of not allowing application to control interpretation.

Fee criticizes Pentecostals for experience-based hermeneutics: “What I hope to show in the rest of this essay is that the Pentecostals are generally right on

---

<sup>55</sup>Fee, *Gospel and Spirit* 77-78.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 80-82.

target biblically as to their *experience* of the Spirit. Their difficulties arose from the attempt to defend it biblically at the wrong point.<sup>59</sup> Yet by his admission that preunderstanding has helped forge his own hermeneutics on the issue, he too is guilty of the very same error as they, that of not approaching the text “with a clean slate.”

One other feature of Fee’s hermeneutical approach is worth mentioning. His view of the gift of tongues is that it was not an actual earthly language.<sup>60</sup> Also, he is not sure whether “the speaking in tongues in contemporary Pentecostal and charismatic communities is the same in kind as that in the Pauline churches.”<sup>61</sup> He says the issue is “probably irrelevant.”<sup>62</sup> All that matters is that “[a]n *experienced* phenomenon, it is analogous to theirs” and that “for its practitioners [it] has the value similar to that described by Paul.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, it is dynamically or functionally equivalent, but not necessarily formally equivalent.

In a similar vein, Fee thinks that the supernatural *charismata* named in 1 Cor 12:8-10 defy rational explanation. To try to explain them rationally, he says, is to impose standards of today’s Western culture on activities of the Holy Spirit. In speaking against assigning the meaning “mature” to τὸ τέλειον (*to teleion*) in 1 Cor 13:10,<sup>64</sup> he writes,

It is perhaps an indictment of Western Christianity that we should consider ‘mature’ our rather totally cerebral and domesticated—but bland—brand of faith, with the concomitant absence of the Spirit in terms of his supernatural gifts! The Spirit, not Western rationalism, marks the turning of the ages, after all; and to deny the Spirit’s manifestations is to deny our present existence to be eschatological, as belonging to the beginning of the time of the End.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>60</sup>Fee, *Paul, the Spirit* 169.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>In this issue of *The Master's Seminary Journal*, see Professor McDougall’s presentation of the overwhelming exegetical evidence for assigning the meaning “mature” in 1 Cor 13:10; see also Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts: A Verse-by-Verse Study of 1 Corinthians 12–14*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 123-32.

<sup>65</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1987) 644-45 n. 23. Pinnock concurs with Fee in contrasting a rational explanation of Scripture with the Spirit’s illumination of the text: “[T]here is the strong influence of rationalism in Western culture which fosters a neglect of the Spirit. There is a mystery when it comes to the Spirit which rationalism does not favour. It does not feel comfortable talking about God’s invisible wind. It prefers to draw up rules for interpretation which will deliver the meaning of any text by human effort. It does not want to drag mysticism into hermeneutics. Therefore, the only thing we leave for the Spirit to do in interpretation is to rubber-stamp what our scholarly exegesis concludes. This is an obstruction to effective biblical interpretation which grieves the Spirit of God” (Clark H. Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics” 8). Archer makes the same point: “This concern [i.e., that focus upon what



The outlook thus represented may explain why Fee has no explanation for speaking in tongues and why contemporary tongues need not match the biblical pattern. Both were and are a mysterious emotional experience that have no rational explanation. According to Fee, our Western culture misleads us into thinking that such an explanation should exist, but that is not necessarily true.

Pinnock carries irrationality a bit further than Fee when speaking of the perfections of God.

The problem of classical theism lies in the fact that it posits an ideal of the divine infinite perfection, which is often (not always) at odds with what the Bible says about God. It adopts a standard of what God must be like derived from human reason and used [*sic*, uses] it to interpret the Bible. Thus, for example, if God must (by that standard) be immutable, he cannot have changed, whatever the Bible says. Or, if God (by that standard is all-powerful, he cannot be vulnerable or take risks, whatever the Bible says. Or, if God (by that standard is timeless, he cannot have acted in time, whatever the Bible says. Or, if God is (by that standard) impassible, he cannot suffer, whatever the Bible says. Or, if God is (by that standard) omniscient, he cannot be surprised, whatever the Bible says. In effect, non-Christian philosophy trumps what the Bible may say; and this, ironically, what we usually call liberal theology.<sup>66</sup>

Interestingly, Pinnock credits the Bible with speaking of “an ideal of the divine infinite perfection” sometimes, but not always. He blames non-Christian philosophy for attributing such to God throughout the pages of Scripture. Is that the fault of non-Christian philosophy or of rational thinking? According to Pinnock, the mystery is so great that no one can ever know who God is. Sometimes He is who rational thinking says He is, but at other times He fits into an irrational pattern. If that is true, what good is the Bible in helping people to know God?

### **Evaluation of Tradition-Based Interpretation**

Three observations regarding tradition-based interpretation are appropriate.

(1) Fee’s agreement with Bultmann regarding the impossibility of presuppositionless exegesis repeats the same error as many evangelicals of recent years have committed. That position focuses its attention on the inability of humans to receive communication and turns aside from emphasizing God’s ability to communicate successfully.<sup>67</sup> Human inability to attain absolute objectivity is no excuse for not striving to achieve the goal of objectivity. The Lord Jesus left as a

---

the original inspired author meant and/or intended first readers to understand is inadequate as a Pentecostal hermeneutic] has led some scholars to articulate a hermeneutic that is more representative of the early tradition and ethos of Pentecostalism. These scholars desire to move away from a hermeneutical system that is heavily slanted toward rationalism which tends to downplay experience and/or the role of the Holy Spirit” (Archer, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect” 75).

<sup>66</sup>Pinnock, “Divine Relationality” 18.

<sup>67</sup>Cf. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 49-57, for further discussion of this point.

goal that His followers love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Failure to attain that absolute standard is inescapable, but is no excuse for not trying. Similarly, the interpreter's goal should ever be objectivity in letting the biblical text speak for itself. Settling for his own biases as a starting point in studying Scripture has huge ramifications in distorting the meaning that God put there. Expecting the Bible to correct those biases is quite different from starting with a clean slate. If an interpreter approaches a text with noncessationist expectations, the chances are very great that he will arrive at noncessationist conclusions regarding the meaning.<sup>68</sup> Fee criticizes other Pentecostals for their experienced-based hermeneutics, yet admits that preunderstanding has helped forge his own position on the noncessationist issue.

(2) Fee's equation of hermeneutics with contemporary applications of the text reflects his inclination to allow current significances of a passage to have their part in interpretation. He cites 2 Pet 1:20 as support for allowing the Christian community at large to determine meaning—in itself a highly suspect interpretation of Peter's words—demonstrating his opinion that the text has no meaning all its own, but depends on contemporary interpreters to assign a meaning. He proposes that tradition of a certain type can be a good thing for interpretation and assigns five levels of tradition, one of which is good, others bad. He fails to answer the question of how one distinguishes where one level ends and another begins. He honors the church's longstanding tradition regarding the Trinity and the person of Christ by putting it at level one, but disparages the church's longstanding tradition regarding male leadership in the church by putting it at level two.<sup>69</sup> Subjectivism prevails in his placement of what belongs in each category.

(3) Fee's characterization of Western Christianity as a "cerebral and domesticated—but bland—brand of faith" reflects a basic inconsistency. Here is an authority in Western Christianity writing about and using hermeneutical principles based on logic and reasoning, but issuing a pronouncement that no rationality exists in the biblical text. Western culture in its rational approach to Scripture is dead wrong; the interpreter must throw reason out the window and proceed purely on the basis of emotion. That position flies in the face of God's rationality and His ability to communicate rational truth. It denies fallen man's opportunity to receive illumination by the Holy Spirit in receiving God's reasoned revelation.<sup>70</sup> The ability

---

<sup>68</sup>The only bias that is inevitable relates to biblical inspiration. An interpreter must approach the text with either a favorable or an unfavorable disposition toward biblical inerrancy. Neutrality on that issue is impossible

<sup>69</sup>Fee, *Gospel and Spirit* 81.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 50-53. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (*Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979] 75-76) observes the contemporary tendency to set in contrast the cognitive and preconceptual sides of man as a reaction against a secularized use of reason. Yet he concludes that as bad as the dehumanizing use of reason is, it does not warrant an overreaction against reason in biblical

to think logically in Western culture derives from the impact of Christianity and the Bible—a very rational book—upon that culture. In instances where logical reasoning does not prevail, the Bible has not yet had its full effect.

The position of Max Turner—another noncessationist—regarding rationality closely resembles that of Fee. Turner criticizes B. B. Warfield’s stand for cessationism as being based on Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, which he labels as a product of the Enlightenment because it shifted the focus of knowledge away from revealed truth to the knowing subject, the inquiring critical mind.<sup>71</sup> According to Turner, Scottish Common Sense Philosophy contended that “God had set in the intellectual constitution of humankind a set of self-evident principles and logical abilities that enabled objective knowledge and true understanding of the real world.”<sup>72</sup> Warfield reasoned that “[t]he divine origin and nature of the miracles of Christ and the apostles are transparent to ‘common sense’ by their great quantity and utter perfection” in contrast to occasional miracles that may have occurred at other times.<sup>73</sup>

In attributing Warfield’s position to Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Enlightenment, however, Turner forfeits his own position, because he admits that “the prototypical gifts gradually became marginalized” *in the subapostolic era*.<sup>74</sup> In essence, the early church fathers, who could not have been affected by Scottish Common Sense Realism and the Enlightenment, agreed with Warfield’s cessationist

---

interpretation. He acknowledges that characteristics of an infinite God are beyond human logic, but an allegedly deeper aspect of personality than the mind (with its language capacities) is not where man copes with them. He observes, “Man is more than his mind; he is not an intellectualistic machine. But this ‘more’ is not inevitably in tension with the mind, nor does language necessarily distort or obscure the wholeness of experience” (76). Gaffin’s answer to the proposal that the gift of tongues consisted of some type of ecstatic utterances rather than foreign languages closely parallels an effective response to the proposal that logical consistency should not be required in interpreting the Bible.

<sup>71</sup>Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts in the New Testament Church and Today*, rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998) 287.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid. Ellington joins Turner and Fee in objecting to a rationalistic approach to knowing God and explaining His Word: “The rationalist paradigm in which we have been so successfully indoctrinated has made it all but impossible for us to avoid ‘demythologizing’ and rejecting everything which does not fit the structure of reality in which we are immersed. We are robbed of our ability to imagine any reality outside the physical, verifiable, predictable, domesticable world which we have created for ourselves. . . . Because most formal doctrine is expressed through and bound up in a rationalist paradigm, the community of faith in a dynamic, experiential relationship with God, and not the academic community, is the proper setting for the discovery and exploration of a Pentecostal understanding of biblical authority” (Ellington, *Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture* 26, 29). It is true that we as finite beings cannot know everything about God and understand every facet of His Word from a rationalistic standpoint, but when His Word does fall within our skills for comprehension, it behooves us to apply the rational abilities He has given us. The nature and use of spiritual gifts as described in the NT are areas we can understand by using our reasoning capacities.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 288.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 301.

position.<sup>75</sup> Turner's proposal that cessationists read modern rationalism back into the NT is without merit.

### A Mediating-Based Interpretation

The principal theme of this article has been preunderstanding and how incorporating that in the first step of exegesis skews other grammatical-historical principles. Preunderstandings vary from interpreter to interpreter, ranging from narrative-based interpretation to community-based interpretation to tradition-based interpretation to any one of many other possible beginning points for studying a text. One preunderstanding that appears to characterize most if not all noncessationist writers is what may be called a mediating-based interpretation. Such an approach is searching for common ground acceptable to both cessationists and noncessationists.

Pentecostalist Turner furnishes an example of this when he writes,

[A]s a member of the Evangelical Alliance's Committee on Unity and Truth . . . , I would wish to support any attempt to find unity between the Pentecostal/Charismatic and the more traditional forms of Evangelicalism. In that respect, Part 2 of this work is intended to be bridge-building, not polemical; many of its assertions should be heard as tentative questions rather than as dogmatic statements.<sup>76</sup>

In the same vein, Pentecostalist Robert Menzies speaks:

My vision of the future . . . [sees] the assimilation of the modern Pentecostal movement into the broader Evangelical world as an exciting and positive event. . . . Twenty years ago, who would have thought that today we would find such openness concerning gifts of the Spirit? Looking forward, I see the potential for additional theological contributions to the larger body. . . . [T]he hermeneutical climate within Evangelicalism is more conducive now than ever before to our theological contributions.<sup>77</sup>

Wayne Grudem, who is not a lifelong Pentecostal, reflects the same preunderstanding as he has approached the biblical text. In discussing the NT gift of prophecy, after alluding to the charismatic and noncharismatic positions, he writes, "Can a fresh examination of the New Testament give us a resolution of these views? Does the text of Scripture itself indicate a 'middle ground' or a 'third position' which preserves what is really important to both sides and yet is faithful to the teaching of

---

<sup>75</sup>Regarding the alleged radical break between ancient Christianity and modern evangelicalism's insistence on a rational approach to biblical interpretation, cf. F. David Farnell, "The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins," in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 200-2.

<sup>76</sup>Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* x-xi.

<sup>77</sup>Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power* 67.

the New Testament? I think the answer to these questions is yes.”<sup>78</sup> At another point he adds, “I wonder if there may be room for more *joint* theological reflection on this area.”<sup>79</sup> Grudem sought to present a concept of prophecy that is not so restrictive (i.e., authoritative) as to exclude charismatically inclined people or so loose (i.e., nonrevelatory) as to repel the noncharismatic. His presupposition that a mediating position exists and the presupposition’s consequences for other hermeneutical principles warrant further investigation.

Grudem’s presupposition forces him into some strange hermeneutical problems. For example, to curry favor with noncharismatics and cessationists, he acknowledges that the gift of apostleship ceased at the end of the apostolic era, at about the end of the first century A.D.<sup>80</sup> But to curry favor with the charismatics and noncessationists, he must hypothesize two gifts of prophecy—an apostolic-prophetic gift and a local-church prophetic gift—with the local-church prophetic gift continuing until Christ’s second coming.<sup>81</sup> His case leans heavily on his questionable treatment of “the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (τῶ θεμελίῳ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν, ἰῆ *themeliō iōn apostolōn kai prophēiōn*) in Eph 2:20. One of his main arguments for distinguishing apostle-prophets from local-church prophets is a grammatical one in this passage, the single article governing two nouns connected by *kai* (“and”).<sup>82</sup> He commits two hermeneutical errors in interpreting Paul’s language here. One is a grammatical error. The construction article-noun-*kai*-noun does not combine the two nouns into a single entity unless both nouns are singular, which they are not in Eph 2:20.<sup>83</sup> To disregard a basic grammatical principle on an important point like this is a serious breach of grammatical-historical hermeneutics.

<sup>78</sup>Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988) 14.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 249 [emphasis added]. In an earlier work he expressed his goal differently: “But even though I do not agree fully with either group, I hope that in my somewhat new definition of the nature of Christian prophecy both pro-charismatics and anti-charismatics may be able to find a ‘middle ground’ with a considerable potential for reconciling their current differences” (*The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* [Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982] xv).

<sup>80</sup>Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament* 275-76; for other hermeneutical consequences, see Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts* 133-42.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 63-64, 160, 251-52, 331 n. 143.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 49-51.

<sup>83</sup>For a refutation of Grudem’s interpretation of Eph 2:20 from a grammatical perspective, see F. David Farnell’s excellent discussion in “Fallible New Testament Prophecy/Prophets?,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 2 (Fall 1991):162-69, and that in Thomas R. Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996) 76-79. As his dissertation supervisor on this subject, Grudem had the advantage of expert guidance by a widely recognized grammatical authority, C. F. D. Moule (referred to in *Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*, xvi), but apparently he chose to disregard Moule’s counsel on this grammatical point (cf. C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1960] 110).

A second area where Grudem has skewed traditional hermeneutical principles in deference to his preunderstanding of what he presumes Eph 2:20 should teach is his disregard for the double occurrence of a term in a given context. Evidence contradicting his treatment of the verse goes unnoticed when he fails to acknowledge the clear distinguishing of prophets from apostles in Eph 4:11. Grudem's later rebuttal of the evidence in Eph 4:11 acknowledges that prophets are separate from apostles, but he says these prophets were different from the ones in 2:20.<sup>84</sup> That conclusion is arbitrary and exegetically invalid, for nothing in the intervening verses reflects a shift in meaning to a second kind of prophets.<sup>85</sup> The revelatory foundation of the church was laid by two groups, not one—apostles *and* prophets, not apostle-prophets.<sup>86</sup> If the revelatory gift of apostleship ceased around A.D. 100, so did the revelatory gift of prophecy.

In regard to this second area of skewing, Grudem has violated another principle, that of *usus loquendi* or current usage of a word as employed by a particular writer. As Terry describes the principle, "It often happens . . . that a writer uses a common word in some special and peculiar sense, and then his own definitions must be taken, or the context and scope must be consulted, in order to determine the precise meaning intended."<sup>87</sup> Since Paul clearly distinguishes prophets from apostles in Eph 4:11, it is irresponsible for an interpreter to identify prophets with apostles in Eph 2:20.

That is Grudem's way of erecting a concept of prophecy that is not so restrictive (i.e., authoritative) as to exclude charismatically inclined people or so loose (i.e., nonrevelatory) as to repel the noncharismatic, but his hermeneutics in so doing clearly violate grammatical-historical standards. His violation is the product of a preunderstanding of what he thinks Scripture should teach, a preunderstanding that reads back into Scripture a contemporary application he wants to make. As noted above, allowing application to influence interpretation crosses over the line between interpretation and application.

Ephesians 2:20 has been the "thorn in the flesh" for all noncessationists. No one has successfully countered the verse's support for cessationism. Since the gift of prophecy is paired with the gift of apostleship as the foundation for the "holy temple"—the church—and since apostleship is a temporary gift, prophecy is obviously a temporary revelatory gift just like apostleship. Noncessationist Jon Ruthven acknowledges that "Pentecostal or charismatic scholars generally have

---

<sup>84</sup>*Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* 59.

<sup>85</sup>Cf. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy*, 2nd ed. (Memphis, Tenn.: Footstool, 1989) 30-31.

<sup>86</sup>John R. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979) 107; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "A Cessationist View," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 43-44; Robert L. Saucy, "Open But Cautious," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* 111-12.

<sup>87</sup>Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 181.

failed to treat this cessationist argument [i.e., the support for cessationism from Eph 2:20] to any significant or adequate degree.”<sup>88</sup> He agrees with cessationists that Grudem’s explanation is unconvincing,<sup>89</sup> and offers his own rebuttal to the verse’s proof of cessationism. He rejects the idea that apostles and prophets were repositories for Scriptural revelation<sup>90</sup> and contends that apostleship along with prophecy continues functioning until the second coming of Christ.<sup>91</sup> Ruthven’s case falters, however, in light of the clearly delineated NT teaching about apostolic authority in the NT and early church and how that authority played a part in delivering and preserving the body of truth that is contained in the NT books.<sup>92</sup>

### Practical Results of Noncessationism

Without question, noncessationism’s influence among evangelicals is spreading rapidly. Literature supporting the position is multiplying almost faster than can be imagined.<sup>93</sup> A noncessationist estimate places the number of Pentecostals and charismatics combined as second only to Roman Catholicism throughout the world.<sup>94</sup> That may be an exaggeration, but major Christian publishers’ attention to noncessationists and their scholars who have veered toward the new evangelical hermeneutics have strongly influenced the evangelical church, resulting in the probability that the majority of evangelicals are in the “Open But Cautious” category regarding the issue of cessationism.<sup>95</sup> This is the group that is unconvinced by the

<sup>88</sup>John Ruthven, “The ‘Foundational Gifts’ of Ephesians 2:30,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 10/2 (2002):30. Ruthven is Professor of Systematic and Practical Theology at Regent University School of Divinity, Virginia Beach, Va.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 31-33.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 41-43. Deere joins Ruthven in holding to the possibility that apostles continue to be appointed throughout the church age (Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 248), but he hedges a bit in offering another suggestion, i.e., that apostleship was not a spiritual gift (ibid., 242). Neither proposal fulfils the biblical criteria of apostleship.

<sup>92</sup>Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts* 58-59, 174-76.

<sup>93</sup>To illustrate, the “Introduction” to a recent work by Craig S. Keener (*Gift and Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001]) includes the following: “I have been miraculously healed, experienced supernatural gifts such as prophecy, followed by the Spirit’s leading in witnessing, and had deep experiences in the Spirit during prayer (including, regularly, prayer in tongues). I consider such experiences (and others mentioned later in the book) an advantage in writing a book on the Holy Spirit that includes controversial questions. . . . I could not deny that such works happen today any more than I could deny the existence of someone I know personally, because I have witnessed their reality firsthand.” Without examining Keener’s work further, it is not difficult to predict where that preunderstanding leads him in his handling Scripture, regardless of the hermeneutical distortions he must resort to.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 92.

<sup>95</sup>This is the opinion of Grudem (*Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* 12-13) and Keener (ibid., 91).

cessationist arguments, but are also cautious about the emphasis given to spiritual gifts by noncessationists.

I will not venture to estimate the size of the “Open But Cautious” category as have the noncessationist writers, but I do wish to issue a warning about the dangers of a “charismatic sympathy” position that remains open to the possibility of noncessationism. All it takes for a local church or a Christian college or seminary to become totally noncessationist is for the leadership to become “charismatic sympathizers.” Recent evangelical history has taught that. An institution does not have to be pro-noncessationist to move in that direction. All it has to do is to have “Open But Cautious” leaders, members, or students, and over time, noncessationism will leave its mark on that body.

### A Last Word

This article has been a study of the growing sophistication of noncessationist hermeneutics in recent years. The noncessationist movement has changed from a simplistic approach of basing doctrine on experience to an appropriation of new hermeneutical principles that now characterize evangelical hermeneutics in general, principles ruled by preunderstanding that, in the examples cited, leads to subjectivism, dehistoricizing tendencies, using narrative literature as a basis for theology, meanings assigned by readers, multiple meanings for a single passage, application that controls interpretation, and an intolerance for Spirit-led common sense. At the beginning of a new century cessationists face a different challenge, the challenge of responding to noncessationism’s principles of biblical interpretation.

Cessationists must meet the challenge by returning to traditional grammatical-historical rules and elaborating on those principles in areas where they have become obscured by advocates of a strong subjective element in understanding the Bible. Let the Bible speak for itself without forcing it into patterns molded by human opinions. Approach the text with a “clean slate,” a *tabula rasa*,<sup>96</sup> and do away with preunderstanding as a starting point in exegesis. That is the only way to counter the noncessationist error and deliver evangelicalism from its impending hermeneutical emergency.

---

<sup>96</sup>Cf. R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977) 105.



Hermeneutics, in its broadest sense, describes the interpretation of meanings – explication, analysis, commentary. Originally applied to the interpretation of the Bible, Hermeneutics comprised valid readings plus exegesis (commentary on how the meanings were to be applied). In the nineteenth century, hermeneutics came to be considered as a general theory of interpretation applied to texts of all description. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833- 1911), the German philosopher, developed Friedrich Schleiermacher’s idea of the “hermeneutic circle” – the paradox which emerges from the fact that the reader cannot hermeneutics of faith, the interpretive effort is to examine the various messages. inherent in an interview text, giving “voice” in various ways to the participant(s), while the researcher working from the vantage point of the hermeneutics of sus- picion problematizes the participants’ narrative and strives for explanation beyond. the text. Examples are offered of narrative research from each point of view and. the implications of working from each stance are explored. Each interpretive po- sition also effects both reï-,exivity and ethics, and these matters are also discussed.