

Book Review

Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics: Comparisons and Contemporary Impact

Bradley Truman Noel

(Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010) 216 pages

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As a classical Pentecostal teaching in a Pentecostal seminary, I found Bradley T. Noel's *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics* full of trenchant insight and provocative creative focus. His literary agenda is two-fold.

First, he seeks to persuade Pentecostals that Postmodernism possesses certain values and beliefs that dovetail with Pentecostal doctrine, practice, and interpretation of Scripture: rejection of the epistemological supremacy of reason, relationality over individuality—giving rise to the credence of narrative/story as a legitimate source of truth, and the role of community and experience in validating truth.¹

To defend his thesis Noel contends that early Pentecostals shared these values. He cites the early Pentecostal approach to Scripture as a rejection of “the hegemony of reason.” Here, dissent and qualification are needed. True, early Pentecostals were opposed to the “rationalism” of modernity with its epistemological reductionism, cessationism, and antisupernatural bias, but it is inaccurate to suggest that a rejection of “the hegemony of reason” (reason as the final arbiter of truth) somehow reflects Postmodernism’s rejection of objective and absolute truth. Early Pentecostals were certainly not *rationalists*, but neither were they *anti-reason*. In fact, any attempt to articulate a coherent biblical-theological

support for Pentecostal beliefs involves reason.² Their attempt to discover the Bible evidence for the Baptism in the Spirit necessitated inductive analysis and rational deduction.

Second, Noel argues that a new method of interpretation is needed if Pentecostals are to articulate their faith and practice to a world increasingly impacted by Postmodernism. The traditional grammatical-historical method of interpretation (erroneously called the “Historical-Critical method”)³ is judged not only deficient, but inimical to Pentecostal faith and practice as viewed from his historical survey of Pentecostal hermeneutics. In its place Noel offers a sweeping endorsement of the Pentecostal hermeneutic found in Kenneth J. Archer’s work, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*. This new approach is a “triadic negotiation” between the biblical text, the Holy Spirit, and the Pentecostal community. This definition sounds legitimate enough, until the author discloses Archer’s revisioning of the hermeneutical task. Textual meaning is not what the biblical author intended, but what the reader constructs in the *triadic negotiation* described above. In Archer’s words, “a Pentecostal hermeneutical strategy is needed which *rejects the quest for a past determinate meaning of the author* and embraces the reality that interpretation involves both the discovery of meaning and the *creation of meaning*.”

A couple of criticisms are in order.⁴ The author is unconvincing in his denial that the new method does not lead to “rampant subjectivism” in interpretation. Even if the “community” and the Holy Spirit are factored into the equation, history is replete with examples of allegedly Spirit-led individuals and communities that interpreted Scripture in mutually exclusive and sometimes heretical ways.

Perhaps most disturbing to me as a Pentecostal who shares his heritage within the Evangelical tradition is that the biblical author is eclipsed, if not entirely, then certainly marginalized. This Noel freely admits as he cites approvingly the words of Umberto Eco who believed that the intention of the author is “very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of a text.”⁵ Imagine that; the

intention of the Peter, Paul, James, John et al. are *irrelevant* to the interpretation of their New Testament writings!

A reader looking for guidance on how to interpret Scripture will not be helped. This is a book on hermeneutical theory, not practice. One searches in vain for an example of how this method serves exegesis or clarifies the meaning of a biblical text. What the reader will find is an informative discussion of the contributions of major Pentecostal scholars to the field of hermeneutics. Moreover, one is confronted with a provocative and carefully orchestrated apologetic for a distinctively “Pentecostal” hermeneutic—one that breaks rank with traditional evangelical interpretation and seeks justification for doing so.

¹As a foundation, the author lays a very helpful and well-written summary (ch. 2) that many will find a helpful primer in understanding Postmodernism and its major theorists.

²See Douglas Jacobsen’s *Think in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

³This error is compounded when Evangelicals and Pentecostals seeking to arrive exegetically at biblical truth expressive of the author’s intent (more said later) are typecast as Modernists in their use of the Historical-Critical method (HCM). This is unfortunate. As our author surely knows, the use of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation to discover the exegetical meaning of a text reflective of authorial intent, has little in common with the HCM practiced by theological liberals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Neither are the disciplines of “historical criticism” (source, form, redaction criticism et al.) to be equated with the HCM which R. Soulen describes as a “principle of historical reason,” that is, a philosophy of doing history. This method, articulated in 1922 by Ernst Troeltsch in his seminal article, “Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie,” contains not only questionable presuppositions, but ones fundamentally alien to a biblical worldview. His principles of *analogy* and *causation*, when applied to the Bible, render the historical authenticity of miracles impossible. Evangelicals, as traditionally defined, do not practice the discipline of historical criticism with these presuppositions in hand.

⁴Actually, many more criticisms could be leveled, but the prescribed length of the review allows for only these two. My original review is ten pages in length and available at jhernando@agseminary.edu.

⁵Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stephan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 30.