

Amos Yong and Weaving a Hermeneutics of Love

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Introduction

It is a delight to reflect upon the theological contribution of Amos Yong on the 20th anniversary of his publication *Discerning the Spirit(s)*. Yong's work has greatly influenced me, particularly in my continuing work on pentecostal hermeneutics. This article is an exploration, inspired by the work of Amos Yong, on the intersections between love, the Holy Spirit, and biblical hermeneutics. It is essentially an interweaving of ideas inspired by the work of Amos Yong. While the corpus of Yong's work is too large to engage with, this exploration takes as a starting point Yong's *Spirit of Love*. It then weaves together some threads from other Pentecostal scholars who also explore desiring God and the affections. It then adds threads from biblical hermeneutics, looking at Lee Roy Martin's "affective approach" to reading the biblical text while interweaving those ideas with some of Yong's earlier work. It finally interlocks these ideas to weave a "hermeneutics of love," based on Yong's reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan, to demonstrate how a reading of biblical text can move us towards the *telos* of love for God and neighbor.

The thread of Spirit of Love

While recognizing the complexities in defining love, Yong suggests that love can be understood as "the affective disposition toward and intentional activity that benefits others."¹ According to this definition by Yong, love (and the *telos* of love) is to benefit others. To seek the welfare and wholeness of another is, of course, exemplified in the saving work of Jesus Christ who reaches out to others. On the other hand, love is yet to be, because it works towards the benefit of others yet fulfilled. Love works towards a goal, or *telos*. For various theologians, from Augustine to James K.A. Smith, love is connected to the quest or desire for the good life and human flourishing. Smith writes, "Our ultimate love is oriented by and to a picture of what we think it looks like for us to live well, and that picture then governs, shapes, and motivates our decisions and actions."² We are compelled by this vision of the *telos* that

¹ Amos Yong, *Spirit of Love: A Trinitarian Theology of Grace* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), xi.

² James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 53.

we desire. This *telos* of our desire—that is, our social vision of what we ultimately love—becomes and is that which we worship.

For Christian believers, hopefully the vision of human flourishing that we envision is grounded in the kingdom of God. While God is ultimately love, God is also the ultimate giver. In reaching out to creation, God intentionally and actively gave of himself in Jesus Christ to benefit others. This *telos* of the kingdom as self-giving love can perhaps be observed in the complex inter-relationship of the Son and Spirit; while Christ (through the power of the Spirit) inaugurated the kingdom of God and has achieved salvation through the cross for humanity for all time, the Spirit of Christ was given to the Church at Pentecost to benefit the church and world by working towards the actuation of Christ's salvation in the global Christian community and in the world. Like the kingdom of God, love both is and is to come. Love is disposed towards others, and in this sense, moves towards a *telos*. Or, to use language more familiar to Pentecostals, love is eschatological: It is now and not yet.

To understand how we pursue this *telos* of love, Yong (drawing on the heritage of Aquinas, among other theological traditions) suggests that central to this pursuit is human willing. This willing includes intentionality, desire, hope and yearnings that move beyond a simple appeal to our cognitive facilities.³ This has direct resonance with pentecostalism which is, at heart, a heart religion.⁴ Pentecostal scholars have long recognized the importance of the affections, particularly orthopathy (right affections). Steven Land, in his seminal work on pentecostal spirituality, emphasizes the role of affections.⁵ Yet, this emphasis on affections does not refer to a passing mood, nor to the sentimentality of an emotional feeling divorced from rationality. Land writes, "Affections are abiding dispositions which dispose the person toward God and the neighbour in ways appropriate to their source and goal in God."⁶ As Yong rightly discerns, pentecostals adopt more of an affectively-rational approach rather than a principled-rational approach—more narrative than propositional.⁷ These affections refer to "our passions, our emotions and our desires."⁸ For Land, the particular affections of gratitude, compassion, and courage are the integrating core of the affections of a pentecostal spirituality and a passion for the kingdom of God.⁹ These affections identified by Land are orientated towards the coming reign of God, the fulfilment of the kingdom.¹⁰ Yet, regardless of which of the affections we list, the point to be made is that the affections move us. They are the desires that turn, propel and direct our will, imagination, heart and actions. By these affections we are moved towards something, which for pentecostals is the desire for God mediated through the experience of the Spirit.

³ Yong, *Spirit of Love*, 10

⁴ *ibid*, 78.

⁵ Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010).

⁶ *ibid*, 136.

⁷ Yong, *Spirit of Love*, 77.

⁸ *ibid* 148.

⁹ Land, 139.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 56.

The affections move us and (re)orientate us towards the *telos*, the desire for God, who is the object of our longing. As Yong notes, central to the pentecostal *telos* is the experience of transformation that causes us to reach out to others. Yong writes,

...the Pentecostal encounter with the Spirit can be understood as an experience of the heart whereby God is perceived to break through into the very depths of the human domain and awaken people's affections. Thus Pentecostals meet God not merely as rational creatures but as embodied, feeling, and desiring ones. And when the Spirit shows up, what happens is not just or even that Pentecostals come into new knowledge of God, but that bodies are touched, their emotions healed and liberated, their affections reorientated, and their ways of life transformed. Baptism in the Spirit unpacked in this way shows how Pentecostal prayer and praise can be understood as an overflowing response to the experience of God's love, and how Pentecostal missional ministry then reflects a loving desire for others to experience, receive, and be transformed by the same.¹¹

However, the question this raises for me as a biblical scholar is: Can this experience of the Spirit awakening people's affections also be found in their reading of Scripture? That is, how can and does the biblical text reorient people's affections towards the *telos* of desiring God?

The Thread of Current Affective Readings of Scripture

The role of affections and emotions in the function of biblical texts has been of interest among scholars for some time,¹² and of renewed interest among historians reflecting on the use of affections in various theological traditions of the church.¹³ The role of affections has also been of particular interest to pentecostal biblical scholars in the last decade. The development of this method has been pioneered by Old Testament scholar, Lee Roy Martin who has developed what he calls an "affective reading."¹⁴ In describing this methodology, Martin asserts that the reader (or the "hearer" of Scripture) must be open and attentive to the emotional impact of the text: "The affective approach calls for the hearer to attend to the affective tones that are present in the text and to allow the affections of the hearer to be shaped by the text."¹⁵ While the level of affective content will vary according to the genre of

¹¹ Yong, *Spirit of Love*, 55.

¹² Of course, in this as well, Amos Yong has led the way in: Dale M. Coulter and Amos Yong (eds) *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016). Other recent and important studies in emotion within biblical studies include those by Spencer, F. Scott (ed.), *Mixed Feelings and Vexed Passions: Exploring Emotions in Biblical Literature* (RBS 90; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017); Bill T. Arnold, "The Love-Fear Antinomy in Deuteronomy 5-11," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol 61, 4 (2011): 551-569; Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (July 2003): 350-369; Mark S. Smith, "The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions: Notes from Anthropology and Psychobiology," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol 117, No. 3 (Autumn 1998): 427-36.

¹³ Martin itemizes some of these explorations by historians and theologians in *Longing for God*, 56-8.

¹⁴ L. R. Martin "'Oh give thanks to the Lord for he is good': Affective Hermeneutics, Psalm 107, and Pentecostal Spirituality," *Pneuma*, Vol 36 (2014): 355-378. See also L. R. Martin, "Longing for God: Psalm 63 and Pentecostal Spirituality," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, Vol 22 (2013): 54-76.

¹⁵ Martin, "Longing for God," 55.

the text, Martin argues that it can be found in every type of biblical writing.¹⁶ This is not to promote a non-critical, subjectivist interpretative method.¹⁷ This approach does not dismiss other methods of reading Scripture, in fact Martin welcomes a diversity of methods in the exegetical study of a text,¹⁸ however it seeks a holistic reading of the bible that counters the passionless objectivity deified in much of contemporary biblical scholarship. As Robert Baker writes, “By committing to read the text objectively from a critical distance, the professional reader subverts the text’s evocative power or is at least unable to express the feeling that the text evokes in him or her.”¹⁹

An affective reading, as developed by Martin, involves four key steps. The first step is almost confessional; the reader must acknowledge the affective dimensions of the text. In this step the reader must be willing to identify the emotive content in the text as well as the possible emotive impact for the reader. A close exegetical study of texts can help to draw out this recognition of the affective dimensions of texts. Secondly, the reader must also identify their own emotional presuppositions that they are bringing to the text. This is an important step. Often scholars will acknowledge their own theological or philosophical assumptions in the reading process, but not their affective presuppositions. This helps to filter the emotive response of the hearer to ensure that they can identify the passions and emotions expressed in the text as separate to their own. This then leads to the next step, which is to thirdly seek to enter the world of the text to identify its affective dimensions. This involves exegetical exploration of the text to unpack its use of emotive expressions, its mood, and emotive flow. Fourth, the reader then must allow themselves to be transformed by this affective engagement with the text that has evoked (and provoked) their passions. Martin acknowledges the difficulty of articulating the last two elements that are deeply personal, experiential and sometimes precognitive.²⁰ However each step requires discernment, which is arguably a social and relational activity that can only be performed in community as it is a gift of the Spirit given for the benefit of the church (1 Cor 12:8-10 cf. 1 Cor 14:29).

However just because an affective reading or experience cannot be adequately verbally expressed does not mean there is no content. When we speak of affective responses, this does not refer to just any feelings or any activity in our physical bodies that generates a sense of emotion of its own sake. It is not simply a sensory experience. Instead it refers to feelings that have some sort of intellectual content. So, for example, when Wesley recorded that “his heart was strangely warmed” he was not just documenting a change in his physiological condition. Instead, affective responses also have some level of thought content—even if it is simply an acknowledgement of the directedness of the emotions it generates, such as

¹⁶ Not surprisingly, Martin suggests the genre of poetry contains the highest concentration of affective language.

¹⁷ Martin, ““Oh give thanks to the Lord for he is good,”” 359.

¹⁸ Martin, “Longing for God,” 56.

¹⁹ Robert O. Baker, “Pentecostal Bible Reading: Toward a Model of Reading for the Formation of Christian Affections,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, Vol 7 (1995): 35.

²⁰ Martin, “Longing for God,” 57, 59-60.

towards desiring God.²¹ For pentecostals, to know God affectively is not just an intellectual belief but a deep, fellowship with God.²² This is captured in the Hebrew term *yada* (“to know”)²³ that emphasises a holistic knowledge of God that is both affective, experiential and cognitive.

Yet, what makes Martin’s affective approach different to other methods, such as rhetorical analysis, is that his approach also attempts to make evident the emotive message received by interpreter (or the real hearer) and not just the intended hearer. He writes, “The affections have a role in the interpretation of Scripture, and the affections of the interpreter should be formed/transformed by the encounter with the biblical text.”²⁴ The Bible informs us—not only in what to think, but what to hope for and desire.²⁵ This provides a more holistic approach to reading the biblical text. Arguably an affective reading also has a deeper resonance for the reader as it touches on their very sense of identity and their aspirations for life, that is, their *telos*. A text can stir the imagination of the reader (or hearer), it can appeal to their heart and emotions for the purpose of moving them towards something—whether that something be compassion, faith, hope, love, or desire for God. This is where perhaps, theories such as Speech-Act Theory can help us to understand how it is that a text *does* something, like move us towards desiring God. Again, this is a theory which Amos Yong has engaged in his monograph *Spirit-Word-Community*.

Speech Act Theory provides a vehicle through which to explore how words *do* things. While the history and development of the method has been adequately documented elsewhere, at its core is the idea that speech is performative.²⁶ That is, words or a text can be used to impart more than information. A text can persuade, promise, confront, inspire, or warn; it can bring about something through its words. One of the benefits of this approach is that it differentiates between what is done *in* saying, and what is done *by* saying.²⁷ Yong summarizes the distinct features of Speech Act Theory as ‘words simply uttered (locutionary acts), words doing something (illocutionary acts), and words bringing something about (perlocutionary acts).’²⁸ In utilizing an affective reading approach, we are looking at how a text uses affective language (locutionary act) to do something through that affective dimension in its

²¹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology-religion/#PheRelExp>

²² The anti-intellectual impulses of Pentecostalism are described by Wolfgang Vondey: “missionary zeal was fuelled by divine revelation rather than ‘deep tiresome thinking’ that wasted precious time by ‘searching’ and ‘counting’ and ‘special study’ instead of obtaining the ‘deeper, spiritual experiences’ made available through the Holy Spirit.” Instead, “Pentecostals seek the ‘deeper, spiritual experiences’ made available through the Holy Spirit.” (Vondey, Wolfgang. *Pentecostalism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T & T Clark, 2013), 136).

²³ C. Bridges-Johns, & J.D. Johns, “Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, Vol. 1 (1993): 112.

²⁴ Martin, “Longing for God,” 54.

²⁵ Martin, “Longing for God,” 59.

²⁶ See Jacqueline Grey “Acts of the Spirit: Ezekiel 37 in the Light of Contemporary Speech-Act Theory,” *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* Vol 1, (Fall 2009): 69-80.

²⁷ Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol & Story* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 81.

²⁸ Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 254.

communication (illocutionary act) to move the reader's will and desire towards God (perlocutionary force). To re-use some of Yong's thoughts in a slightly different way, listening to the affective dimensions of the biblical text includes my being open to being transformed by what is said.²⁹ This reinforces the fact that the study of the affective dimension is not just a nice exploration of pretty poetry and warm-fuzzy feelings, but that it makes demands of us, the reader. The biblical text is prophetic, alive and active (Heb 4:12).³⁰ There are a diversity of genres utilized in the biblical canon to achieve different affective purposes. Yong writes, "It is this word that calls us beyond ourselves, lays claims on our lives, demands our response, and, in the end, transforms us in our inabilities."³¹ Yet, it is important that it is not the text itself that is the object of the *telos*. Again, this is where perhaps Yong's earlier work can help us—the transforming power of the Word of God is seen in the person of Jesus Christ.³² So, the *telos* of the text is towards a person and not a document.³³ Scripture shapes us by moving us towards the *telos* of desiring the kingdom, of which Christ is King. This means that reading the bible is more about formation than information, about how life should be lived as a process of transformation and sanctification.

If reading Scripture *does* things in and through us, appealing to our will and transforming us into Christlikeness, it does this also by providing our imaginations a picture of what life can be. It is a picture that we then replicate or imitate in our life. The biblical texts give us glimpses into this glorious life of communion with God that we seek. For example, Martin notes that "The psalmist's longing for God, however, is not a longing for an experience for experience's sake, but it is a longing for God in relation, in covenant; and it is a longing that Pentecostals seek to imitate."³⁴ Smith also suggests that we learn right affections (or virtues) through imitation and practice. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 11:1).³⁵ By practice, Smith suggests that by regular rhythms and rituals of practicing orthopathy consistently it becomes second nature. He writes, "This means that our most fundamental orientation to the world—the longings and desires that orient us toward some version of the good life—is shaped and configured by imitation and practice."³⁶ This of course then impacts our formation, which for Pentecostals is primarily located in the process of sanctification.

This reminds us that there is a link between reading Scripture and sanctification. As Chris Green emphasises, "God works in and through our readings of Scripture to form us into

²⁹ *ibid*, 255.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 256.

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Ibid*, 257–258

³⁴ Martin, "Longing for God," 73.

³⁵ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 18.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 19.

Christlikeness.”³⁷ This work of sanctification through reading Scripture is not a quick process, nor one without struggle.³⁸ Sanctification requires not just one singular reading event, but a continuous engagement with the canonical text and engagement with the object of the text, the triune God. Sanctification leads to the acquisition and development of right affections—defined earlier by Yong and Land as abiding dispositions which orient the person toward love of God and love of neighbour. Love is not only an affection but also is a fruit of the Spirit, the first of a list of virtues highlighted in Galatians 5:22-23. In this sense, it is also a *telos* of the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the life of the believer; a virtue that all can and should cultivate regardless of gender, age, class or ethnicity. This leads to a life that is orientated in service to others. To be Christ-like is to bear the fruit of the Spirit of Christ, the foremost fruit being love. As Yong has reminded us in the *Spirit of Love*, love, and the *telos* of love, is to benefit others. If reading the canon of Scripture moves us to desire God, it also moves us towards love. Weaving together the *telos* of love, an affective reading of Scripture and its transforming power that shapes us into imitations of the object of our desire, leads us to a “hermeneutics of love.”

Weaving a Hermeneutics of love

Yong’s reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) exemplifies this idea of a hermeneutics of love. His reading of the text identifies key affections that emerge from and are emphasized by the text. Yong notes that the Samaritan was “moved in his heart” with compassion for the wounded stranger on the road. The compassion of the Samaritan and pity for the man prompted him to act with benevolent love—to care for the restoration of the health of stranger (the ethnic and religious “other”) at his own expense. It is an embodied love, both in experiencing the heart of God for an ‘other’ but also in expressing love in an embodied form to meet a physical need. Yong refers to it as an “empathetically orientated love.”³⁹ He writes of this compassion, that it “is simply the outflow of having been touched by God’s love so that human creatures are enabled both to love God in return, even with all that they are—heart, soul, strength and mind—and to love their neighbors as themselves (as did the Good Samaritan).”⁴⁰ This parable told by Jesus creates an imaginative world in which lovers of God love their neighbor. The parable moves the reader to not only desire God, but to act—to *do*—that which God loves, which is to love others. Were the disciples moved by this imaginative world of the parable in which they too could be like the Samaritan? Did it awaken their affection of compassion? Are we, the contemporary readers, moved by this story to a new way of knowing God and imitating God by serving others? We don’t know how

³⁷ Chris E.W. Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness, and Scripture* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2015), 22.

³⁸ Martin, “Longing for God,” 76.

³⁹ Yong, *Spirit of Love*, 149.

⁴⁰ Yong, *Spirit of Love*, 103.

the disciples responded to this claim of this individual parable. But we do know that Luke goes on to record the transformation of the disciples at Pentecost.

The Pentecost event is also an affective encounter. As Yong describes, “The spirit is, after all, poured out ‘upon all flesh’ (Acts 2:17) and can be heard, felt, and perceived ‘like the rush of a violent wind’ and as if ‘a tongue rested on’ bodies, certainly with bodies and tongues touched and catalyzed to feeling, action, and speech (2:2-4).”⁴¹ Following the pentecostal encounter with the Spirit, the disciples are seen to not only overflow with praise for God, but to also overflow in love and service for others. As Yong observes, this same compassion and intentional activity of the Samaritan that benefited an “other” is seen demonstrated by the community of believers newly baptized in the Spirit in Acts 2-4.⁴²

Conclusion

Hopefully what this inter-weaving of love, the Holy Spirit, and biblical hermeneutics demonstrates is not only the enormous contribution of Amos Yong to pentecostal theology, but also the importance of the contribution of Pentecostal theology to the broader Christian community. Of course, the ecumenical contribution of Yong is a whole other discussion, but the emphasis on love and the affections explored in this paper flows from the heart of pentecostal spirituality. Yet, certainly for biblical scholarship and biblical hermeneutics, this ability to feel and be moved in our affections by the text has been choked by the rationality of our discipline. The violent language of choking is deliberate because such vicious restriction of the air and breath of the spirit of love leads to a kind of death. Instead, we are open to God’s affectivity for human beings and to identifying this affectivity in God’s Word. We are then compelled by gratitude and love to share of the hermeneutical gifts we have experienced so that others may “experience, receive, and be transformed by the same.”⁴³ As Martin acknowledges, such approaches that embrace the affections are open to criticisms and stereotypes of emotionalism and excessiveness. Martin writes, “We would not be here today if the disciples on the day of Pentecost had withdrawn into the shadows when faced with the criticism, ‘these people are drunk’ (Acts 2:13). Because the early disciples did not shrink back from sharing their newly found life in the Spirit, the Christian Church was born.”⁴⁴ Instead, we cry “Come, holy wind! Breathe into us a new Pentecost!”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Amos Yong, *Mission After Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 274

⁴² Yong, *Spirit of Love*, 103.

⁴³ Yong, *Spirit of Love*, 55.

⁴⁴ Martin, “‘Oh give thanks to the Lord for he is good,’” 362.

⁴⁵ Yong, *Mission After Pentecost*, 283.