

Pentecostalism, Patristic Exegesis, and the Postmodern Era: Interpreting Scripture in Communion with the Church Fathers

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Abstract

Over the last several decades, Pentecostal hermeneutics have undergone an identity crisis of sorts. Recognizing that their movement's core commitments are incompatible with the approach to Scripture it has often borrowed from fundamentalism, Pentecostals have proposed engaging postmodern hermeneutics, historical critical methods, and other interpretive approaches in the development of a distinctly Pentecostal hermeneutic.

The interpretive strategies of the Church Fathers, however, have yet to receive much explicit attention from Pentecostals. This is unfortunate since the commitments of patristic exegetes have much in common with the core tenets of Pentecostal spirituality. This paper therefore suggests that if Pentecostals are to move beyond the fundamentalist assumptions that have often exerted too much influence over their hermeneutics, the Fathers could serve as prime dialogue partners, avoiding certain pitfalls of postmodern and historical-critical readings of Scripture while providing Pentecostal interpretation with a link to the Great Tradition of Christian exegesis.

Introduction

For a movement that so intently claims to seek continuity with the early church, Pentecostalism's approach to biblical interpretation can appear puzzling at times.¹ Despite its frequent claim to the apostolic label,² the movement's engagement with the Church Fathers—including their biblical exegesis—has, unfortunately, remained relatively limited. Scholars have, however, observed exegetical similarities between early Pentecostals and their

¹ This article is dedicated to the late Dr. Bradley Truman Noel, a trusted friend, mentor, and fellow Newfoundlander whose conversations with me concerning Pentecostal hermeneutics led me to undertake this project.

² One of the earliest Pentecostal periodicals was entitled *The Apostolic Faith*. See Douglas G. Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 67-68.

fundamentalist brethren.³ When probing early Pentecostal statements of faith, fundamentalism's influences on their doctrine of Scripture is clear.⁴

However, in recent years, numerous Pentecostal exegetes have argued that their movement displays rank incompatibility with the assumptions that drive fundamentalist hermeneutics.⁵ Some have described Pentecostalism as a postmodern movement,⁶ while others have lamented the influence of dispensational hermeneutics, a common feature of fundamentalism, upon Pentecostalism.⁷ One of the most blunt charges comes from Chris Green, who suggests that such approaches to the Bible represent "nothing less than failed attempts to solve once-for-all the epistemological problems raised by post-Reformation churchly controversies and post-Enlightenment critiques of Christian doctrine."⁸ Green's charge comes as some evangelicals have called for further embrace of historical criticism,⁹ something many theological conservatives—Pentecostals included—harbour deep reservations about, given the implications for Scripture's trustworthiness and authority.¹⁰ Thus, perhaps there is another path beyond fundamentalism and historical criticism that Pentecostals might take as they engage a postmodern culture increasingly unconcerned with the aims of historical criticism in any case. Given Kenneth Archer's claim that early Pentecostals eschewed a strictly literalist approach to Scripture in favour of a "threefold interpretive approach,"¹¹ the way forward may be in looking back to the exegesis of the Fathers.

Premodern Exegesis for a Postmodern Culture?

This paper does not seek to argue that no place remains for critical methods in the development of Pentecostal hermeneutics; evangelical scholars, Pentecostals included, have observed that the tools employed by historical-critical scholars are often useful in uncovering

³ Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture, and Community* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2009), 89-99.

⁴ Chris E. W. Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness, and Scripture*. 2nd Ed (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2020), 1-2.

⁵ William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton. *Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield: Logion Press, 2015), 17-18.

⁶ For instance, Bradley Truman Noel, *Pentecostalism, Secularism, and Post Christendom* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 69.

⁷ Gerald T. Sheppard, "Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship," *Pneuma* 6.2 (Fall 1984): 5-33.

⁸ Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation*, 2.

⁹ It is worth noting that various types of historical-critical interpretation exist, and not all historical-critical approaches are acceptable to evangelicals. For further reading, see Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds Of Scripture Scholarship," *Modern Theology* 14.2 (April 1998): 243-278.

¹⁰ Christopher Hayes, a proponent of this approach, grants that "What is tricky...is that one can hardly address the topic of historical criticism without at least reflecting on whether and how Scripture might be authoritative and true. See Christopher M. Hayes, "Toward a Faithful Criticism," in Christopher M. Hayes and Christopher Ansberry, eds. *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1.

¹¹ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 142.

textual meaning.¹² The proposal that Pentecostals should engage patristic exegesis, therefore, should not be taken as a call to dispense with critical methods altogether, but to avoid a singular reliance upon them and consult other approaches that grant more weight to the importance of interpreting Scripture within, and for, the church.

It has been proposed that Pentecostals engage postmodern hermeneutics on this front, given the task of communicating the gospel to a younger generation whose worldview is no longer dominated by rationalism. Bradley Noel, former provincial youth director of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland and Labrador, expresses “personal concern” that “at a time when increasing numbers of Western youth and young adults are beginning to view truth in Postmodern terms, Pentecostals have begun to approach Scripture with a growing dependence on the Modern way of thinking.”¹³ While suggesting that Pentecostals engage postmodern hermeneutics as an alternative to historical-critical exegesis, Noel notes that, despite sharing certain features, postmodernism is not a return to the premodern metaphysics¹⁴ that undergirded premodern exegesis. Unlike the postmodern approach, premodern exegesis has yet to be given substantial attention from Pentecostals, an unfortunate omission given the Church Fathers’ potential to offer a theologically robust alternative to historical-criticism. As R.R. Reno and John O’Keefe point out, “Exegesis, for the fathers, was not an academic exercise to be undertaken in order to prove already held beliefs. Exegesis was a spiritual discipline [they] did not hold Jesus Christ as inert truth; they believed that they could only dwell in him, and he in them.”¹⁵ Indeed, the potential for Pentecostals to engage the Fathers to enrich their own biblical exegesis has been highlighted in the past; Green praises “the best of ancient and medieval readings of Scripture,” identifying Origen as a potential dialogue partner since he holds “like Pentecostals do, that Scripture is a coherent whole and that the meanings of Scripture are inexhaustible.”¹⁶ Like Pentecostals, for whom an experience of God is vital to the Christian life, the Church Fathers perceived the task of interpretation and the calling to live a holy life as inseparable.¹⁷

Therefore, this paper will explore the potential of patristic exegesis to inform Pentecostal biblical interpretation, arguing that, since neither is inherently beholden to the assumptions of historical criticism, they are well positioned to serve as dialogue partners. It will suggest that several core values of Pentecostal spirituality—the centrality of Christ, the role of community in spiritual formation, and the power of Scripture to shape one’s life—are shared

¹² William and Robert Menzies, for instance, suggest that the postmodern critique of critical methods per se is “misguided,” explaining that “For the Evangelical, critical methods help uncover textual meaning. This is important and relevant because it is God’s word to us.” See William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies. *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 66.

¹³ See, for example, Bradley Truman Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics: Comparisons and Contemporary Impact* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 10.

¹⁴ Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, 17.

¹⁵ John J. O’Keefe and R.R. Reno. *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 43-44.

¹⁶ Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation*, xiv.

¹⁷ See “The Rule of Faith and the Holy Life,” Ch. 6 in *Sanctified Vision*, 114-139.

by patristic exegetes. The missiological and homiletical benefits this might present to Pentecostals will also be noted throughout. Since, as Archer notes, theological conservatives have always considered the Bible “the Church’s Book,”¹⁸ the theology drawn from it must ultimately serve the church and its mission. In a society increasingly driven by postmodern assumptions, especially among youth, an approach to Scripture grounded in the pivotal role of community, an experience of the living God, and the centrality of Jesus Christ would undoubtedly serve the church well.

1. “Built Up in Love:” How Scripture Forms the Christian

Perhaps the most striking differences between historical-critical analysis and patristic biblical engagement concerns the end goal of exegesis. The former approaches the Scriptures first and foremost as historical documents, and is concerned primarily with issues of original context, cultural setting, and historical circumstances—in other words, the world behind the text. The focus of such an approach is on human authorial intent, not theological significance. John J. Collins claims that it was the framework of Enlightenment thinking, “of Spinoza and the English Deists,”¹⁹ that popularized the historical-critical approach, pointing to Church Fathers like Philo of Alexandria as examples of those who rejected such an approach. This is because, for patristic exegetes, “there was no point in differentiating the time when the different books were written because they were all supposed to come from God.”²⁰ One could debate at length whether this assessment of the Fathers’ supposed negligence of historical context is fair. Yet, an even more vital issue that emerges from Collins’ discussion is the purpose of interpreting Scripture in the first place. For the historical-critical scholar, it seems that the primary purpose is for information; for the Fathers, however, the primary purpose of reading Scripture was transformation. Origen of Alexandria, quite arguably the most influential exegete of the patristic era, explicitly charged that those who misunderstood the true meaning of the Scriptures did so because they read them as ordinary human texts rather than recognizing their divine origin.

Through his immense influence and pioneering approach, Origen guided the early church in adopting a markedly different exegetical approach than that implemented by later critical scholars. In his signature work, *On First Principles*, Origen claims that “The reason for the false beliefs and impious or ignorant assertions about God appears to be nothing else than Scripture not being understood according to its spiritual sense, but taken as regarding the bare letter.”²¹ He therefore challenges those who interpret Scripture otherwise, according to a more strictly literal approach, “to demonstrate for those who believe the holy Scriptures to be composed not merely by human words, but written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit

¹⁸ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 49.

¹⁹ See John J. Collins, “Historical-Critical Methods,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, Stephen B. Chapman and Marvin A. Sweeney, eds. Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 129.

²⁰ Collins, “Historical-Critical Methods,” 129.

²¹ Origen, *On First Principles*, ed. John Behr. Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 489.

what appears to us to be the right way of understanding.”²² Origen did not overlook authorial intent or historical context, nor was the wider church ignorant of such concerns. However, Origen recognized that for the text to have theological significance one must look beyond its “bare letter” and consider what the Spirit may be doing through the text to nourish God’s people.²³ For him, though not all of Scripture bears theological significance if interpreted in a literal sense, it does if interpreted in a spiritual sense.²⁴ Because Origen conducted his exegesis assuming that the Scriptures belong to God’s people corporately, he maintained a high view of inspiration; the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, he was convinced, testified to the spiritual significance of its canonical texts, indicating them to be much more than historical records. While he did not deny that Scripture referenced historical times, places, or events, its ultimate purpose was to teach spiritual truths, not historical ones, such that readers would acquire a deeper grasp of God’s salvific purposes.²⁵

This becomes even more explicit when, after discussing interpretation in *On First Principles*, Origen mentions that the end goal of exegesis is that the Christian “be edified from the very soul of Scripture.”²⁶ The purpose is not just the exercise of the mind, but the well-being of the soul, a rare consideration in today’s context where historical-critical exegesis reigns supreme. Jason Byassee thus observes that Origen’s “acts of interpretation show that to be open to the words of scripture is to have one’s own soul laid bare, operated on, and returned to wholeness.”²⁷ The purpose of reading Scripture, for the Fathers, is not simply about information, but the soul’s transformation. For the Spirit of God to teach an individual through the sacred text required not only cognitive discipline, but moral commitment.²⁸ Green thus claims that “Pentecostals fully agree with Origen and the Patristic hermeneutical tradition: the reading of Scripture has a purpose, and that purpose is the making-present of the works of God as readers are led by the Spirit beyond the ‘letter’ of Scripture.”²⁹

An emphasis on transformation was not unique to Origen; Augustine, in his *On Christian Doctrine*, insisted that anyone who believes they have rightly understood Scripture, but has not increased their love for God and neighbour through their interpretation, has yet to understand the divine Word at all. Conversely, those who misinterpret the text but, through

²² Origen, *On First Principles*, 491.

²³ Andrew Hofer, “Scripture in the Christological Controversies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 458.

²⁴ Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 42.

²⁵ For further reading, see Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1980), 16-17, 20.

²⁶ Origen. *On First Principles*, 497.

²⁷ Jason Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again: Reading the Bible in Communion with the Saints* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 29.

²⁸ Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 42.

²⁹ Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation*, xiii-xiv.

their interpretation, increase their love, have “not made a fatal error,”³⁰ even if they require correction. Two things strike the reader of Augustine’s text. First, he flatly asserts that anyone who thinks they have the correct interpretation of Scripture but fails to love their neighbour has not grasped the text at all. Reno and O’Keefe observe that Augustine “says that proper interpretation must be guided not only by true faith but also by ‘good morals’... to even divide [them] would have been unthinkable.”³¹ Secondly, and just as significantly, Augustine claims that anyone who interprets the text in a way that deepens their love of neighbour, but does not fully capture the author’s original intent, has not committed a deadly mistake that renders their exegesis unprofitable. He did not assume one could not benefit from reading Scripture unless a literal interpretation was taken. However, this does not mean that he endorsed rank subjectivism, or that he encouraged believers to disregard authorial intent. Rather, Augustine explains that

Anyone with an interpretation of the scriptures that differs from that of the writer is misled, but not because the scriptures are lying. If, as I began by saying, he is misled by an idea of the kind that builds up love, which is the end of the commandment, he is misled in the same way as a walker who leaves his path by mistake but reaches the destination to which the path leads by going through a field. But he must be put right and shown how it is more useful not to leave the path, in case the habit of deviating should force him to go astray or even adrift.³²

Care should be taken to ensure that one does not miss the biblical author’s point. Yet, the most important consideration is not to understand what the author intended, but that one’s reading increases love. Consider Augustine’s charge that if one understands the text in a way different than the author, but their mistake is “an idea of the kind that builds up love,” they are like a traveller who reaches their destination without following the intended path; yet, the one who “understands” the text as the author intended, but fails to grow in love, “has not yet succeeded” in understanding. Unlike much of modern exegesis, which assumes that coming to a fixed set of conclusions about the text is the goal, Augustine holds that the process of interpretation, and the Christian love formed in us through it, is what matters most. Biblical interpretation is not, then, a mere intellectual endeavor but a journey toward Christlikeness, turning our desires back to him.³³

Having established the emphasis on personal transformation in the biblical interpretation of the Fathers, it now bears considering what significance their approach holds for Pentecostals.

³⁰ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana (Latin)*, ed. R. P. H Green (Oxford Early Christian Texts. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1.86.

³¹ O’Keefe and R.R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 128.

³² Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.88.

³³ Although a discussion of Augustine’s theology of learning is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that his emphasis on Christological exegesis and biblical interpretation as a spiritual discipline does not mean that he eschewed secular learning altogether. Indeed, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, he even endorses the value of the liberal arts for Christian theological education. For further reading, see Ryan N.S. Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine’s Early Theology of Education* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

First, the conviction that Christian faith is ultimately about personal transformation, not simply information, is one that resonates deeply with the Pentecostal ethos. It has been suggested that Pentecostalism's distinguishing mark, that which separates it from the rest of Protestantism, is its sense of immediate encounter with, and transformation by, the Spirit of God.³⁴ Patristic exegetes, as discussed, were heavily invested in such a vision; encountering God through Scripture was, for them, central to interpretation. They would affirm Green's challenge to Pentecostals that "we are called to read Scripture in its fullness just as we are being drawn along toward the fullness of God and our own fullness in God."³⁵ Transformation is the goal not only of interpretation, but preaching as well. As Byassee explains, discussing Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule*, "One always has to read the Bible and the people," when exegeting a text before a congregation, "since the real work of exegesis ... is to draw one's hearer's away from sin and into grace."³⁶ For patristic exegetes, an emphasis on transformation impacted their communication of the text.

On this point it bears noting that, by interpreting Scripture in a highly figurative sense, the Fathers were not deriding the importance of literal meaning, but simply emphasizing the need to go beyond it to unlock the fullness of the text.³⁷ For Augustine, "There are three things going on in interpreting a text—the author and what he wishes to communicate, the words on the page in all their difficulty and glory, and the *desire of the reader*."³⁸ He felt adamant that preachers must passionately draw their listeners into the text, calling them to view themselves within its great overarching story.³⁹ Though a trained rhetorician, Augustine hardly considered human wisdom the determinative factor in effective communication. He insisted that "The poorer [a preacher] sees himself to be in his own resources, the richer he must be in those of scripture A preacher who cannot give pleasure with his words may give pleasure with his texts."⁴⁰

The text itself, in other words, has the power to bring delight to one's listeners; for Augustine, preaching by its very nature ought to be beautiful, since the goal is to draw listeners toward the beauty of Christ himself.⁴¹ Given that Pentecostals have recently expressed concern that much contemporary preaching consists of little more than theological propositions or motivational homilies,⁴² patristic exegesis could provide homiletical insight to a movement grappling with the emergence of secularism as a dominant force in western society. A vision

³⁴ See, for example, Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution: A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (Pymble: HarperCollins, 2007), 424.

³⁵ Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation*, xv.

³⁶ Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 102.

³⁷ See Hofer, "Scripture in the Christological," 455.

³⁸ Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 67.

³⁹ Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 76.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4.21. See the relevant section in the text for Augustine's original Latin.

⁴¹ See Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 57, for a further explanation of how Augustine perceived this connection.

⁴² Bradley Noel and Michael Wilkinson, "The Decline of Religion," in *Pentecostal Preaching and Ministry in Multicultural and Post-Christian Canada*, ed. Steven Studebaker. McMaster Ministry Studies Series (V.4. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019, eBook), Ch. 2.

of exegesis—and the preaching that arises from it—that focuses on Spirit-driven transformation of the Christian rather than the mere transmission of information may prove a perfect example of how premodern wisdom can inform Pentecostal witness and communication in the postmodern era.

2. The Crucial Community

The earliest Pentecostal theology was far from academic; their “formal” statements were often found in newsletters⁴³ or tracts produced by churches and evangelists, and promoted Pentecostal distinctives such as healing, Spirit baptism, or the return of Jesus, interspersed with testimonies. The idea of biblical interpretation—or, from it, constructive theology—conducted outside the Christian community was unheard of, an impulse that remains among many Pentecostals today.⁴⁴

Perhaps the importance of community in exegesis and theological reflection provides further opportunity for dialogue between contemporary Pentecostals and the Fathers. Historical-critical exegetes frequently decry the supposed subjectivism that permeates patristic exegesis, bolstered, again, by an unyielding commitment to human authorial intent.⁴⁵ Origen’s allegorical reading in particular has been accused, by those who hold that the meaning of Scripture must be discerned strictly according to human authorial intention, of obscuring the text rather than explicating it.⁴⁶ However, one wonders if critical scholars too quickly dismiss the Fathers for their assumed lack of objectivity, failing to consider that they themselves are not wholly objective in their search for textual meaning.⁴⁷ The idea that any individual or culture can interpret the Scriptures—or, by extension, construct a coherent theology from them—free of presuppositions or biases is simply mistaken. It is impossible to interpret Scripture or construct theology in a vacuum, insulated from any historical or cultural conditioning.⁴⁸ Noel, acknowledging this, expresses concern that many Christians “continue to pursue the concept of truly objective knowledge” when approaching the text. “These

⁴³ See, for example, *Canadian Pentecostal Testimony* 1.1 (December 1920), the first publication of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada.

⁴⁴ As Amos Yong contends, for example, “Community cannot simply be subordinated to either the Spirit or Word,” but plays an integral role in the church’s understanding of God Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 275.

⁴⁵ Hofer reminds us, however, that the Fathers too were committed to authorial intent. Their understanding of it, however, differed significantly from that of modern readers. He explains, “because they took the text of Scripture to be ordered and arranged for us by divine agency, early Christian exegetes read ‘according to the letter’ by following closely the details of the text before them, following the twists and turns of the letter, rather than placing primary interpretative weight on a reconstruction of the history.” See Hofer, “Scripture in the Christological,” 463.

⁴⁶ R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture*. 2nd ed (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 367.

⁴⁷ Archer labels this aim to approach the text from a position of assumed neutrality the “German model” of scholarship, noting that it “encouraged the ‘rapid professionalization’ of biblical scholars that required them to become...accountable to their ‘academic peers’ instead of the Christian communities to which they once belonged.” See Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 49.

⁴⁸ For further reading, see Vince L. Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity*. Missiological Engagements (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 219.

individuals read into the text what they are attempting to interpret objectively, and they are often unaware of their own presuppositions formed by culture and experience."⁴⁹

The early Pentecostal emphasis on the role of community should not only make contemporary adherents wary of too much reliance upon historical-critical scholarship, but also look for other methods of interpretation that grant more weight to the importance of interpreting Scripture within the church. On this point also the Fathers have much to offer Pentecostals. Although the postmodern emphasis on the communal nature of interpreting a text is commendable, certain pitfalls of the underlying postmodern worldview—such as a tendency to deny absolute truth and “overarching metanarratives”—are clearly incompatible with a movement that holds to biblical authority.⁵⁰ As a restorationist movement, Pentecostalism would not exist but for its belief in an overarching metanarrative; early Pentecostals were firmly committed to the message of salvation through Christ and were convinced of his imminent return.⁵¹ This vision sounds much more in line with the Fathers than postmodern exegetes; the former affirmed that “Every aspect of scripture leans toward Christ,” forming an “overarching hypothesis that suddenly brings the whole array” of the text together,⁵² typifying the kind of metanarrative that postmodernists vehemently deny. Premodern exegesis could therefore help Pentecostals develop a hermeneutic that elevates the community’s role in the interpretive process without compromising biblical authority. The patristic approach, while boasting some of the same advantages postmodern hermeneutics holds over rigid literalism, does not suffer from the shortcomings—such as a denial of objective reality—of postmodernism, as it locates objective reality in the person of Jesus Christ.⁵³ Again drawing on Gregory the Great, and the connection between his exegesis and preaching, Byassee notes that:

The point is this: scripture can only be read in and for the gathered Christian community. Individual reading leads back to communal worship and learning, where a new *we* is created. In reading scripture, the line between “we” and “they” gets blurred, smudged, for in reading scripture we all become part of the body of Christ, where we, they, and I are all intermingled, both in space now and through time.⁵⁴

So, for Gregory, biblical interpretation is not only formative for the individual’s soul; it is also formative for the church body. Exegesis and preaching, community and individual, cannot be separated under the patristic model; Gregory, evidently, considered every part of Scripture useful for the Christian journey. Here we see how the role of community and Scripture’s transforming power go hand in hand under a patristic framework. “Unlike most modern

⁴⁹ Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, 36-37.

⁵⁰ Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, 38-39.

⁵¹ Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, 63.

⁵² O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 42.

⁵³ This feature of premodern exegesis is discussed, incidentally, at length by Noel’s Tyndale colleague, in Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2018. Although Carter writes from within the Reformed Baptist tradition, his proposals might well help Pentecostals in their own engagement with the Church Fathers.

⁵⁴ Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 102.

intellectuals,” Reno and O’Keefe explain, “the church fathers recognized that good interpretation is most likely to flow from a good person....Right reading was a fruit of righteousness.”⁵⁵ Therefore, they were committed to mutual accountability between members of the community of interpreters.⁵⁶

Separating biblical interpretation from the community and, indeed, the task of preaching would have been foreign to the Fathers. Ambrose of Milan, Augustine’s mentor, approached exegesis as a pastoral task, borne out by the fact his exegesis is contained exclusively within his sermons⁵⁷—a concept that may help Pentecostals reconsider how exegesis is performed and translated into theology within the church community. Augustine too, Manlio Simonetti notes, “had a strong rhetorical sensitivity, and developed his exegesis principally in the service of his pastoral activity.”⁵⁸ He expressed great concern that preachers teach the Scriptures in such a way that all members of the community, even those with minimal education, might understand them.⁵⁹ A fine example comes from his *On Christian Doctrine*, where he prescribes that:

The teacher, then, will avoid all words that do not communicate; if, in their place, he can use other words which are intelligible in their correct forms, he will choose to do that, but if he cannot—either because they do not exist or because they do not occur to him at the time—he will use words that are less correct, provided that the subject-matter itself communicated and learnt correctly.⁶⁰

Since Scripture is for the edification of all believers, those in authority must communicate in such a way that the whole community can understand the text’s meaning.⁶¹

Augustine’s advice on how pastors and teachers should address those in the community with little knowledge of Scripture could be helpful in a postmodern era where outsiders or newcomers to church may have less knowledge of the faith than the average Westerner in the past. Noel surely describes many youth in the western world when he recalls his time as youth director of his denomination; while most acknowledged the existence of God and even the possibility of modern miracles, very few demonstrated an adequate grasp of the Scriptures or the ability to defend their beliefs.⁶² He and Michael Wilkinson, while challenging modern Pentecostal churches to “refrain from quick judgement,” and become spaces “where doubts, questions, criticism, and fears are embraced,” simultaneously admonish them to maintain their core values as Christian communities.⁶³ This directive comes amidst an acknowledgement that, in our increasingly postmodern era, it has become popular for people

⁵⁵ O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 23.

⁵⁶ O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 23.

⁵⁷ Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 89.

⁵⁸ Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 104.

⁵⁹ Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 105.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4.66.

⁶¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4.66.

⁶² Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, xiii.

⁶³ Noel and Wilkinson, “The Decline of Religion,” Ch. 2.

to assume one can belong to a community before embracing its values, to “belong before they believe.”⁶⁴ Thus, Augustine may help Pentecostal pastors communicate in such a way that they simultaneously encourage the committed and challenge the apathetic. He claims that, “the interpreter and teacher of the divine scriptures, the defender of the true faith and vanquisher of error, must communicate what is good and eradicate what is bad, and in the same process of speaking must win over the antagonistic, rouse the apathetic, and make clear to those who are not conversant with the matter under discussion what they should expect.”⁶⁵ While the task that Augustine describes is a daunting one, it may become increasingly common in the postmodern era.

The Fathers may also help Pentecostals chart a third path between pure [assumed] objectivity or subjectivity in their exegesis. Many early Pentecostals accomplished this in practice, charting a middle path between the extremes of fundamentalist literalism and liberal rejection of divine inspiration.⁶⁶ Such an approach is sorely needed today, given the acknowledgement by patristics scholars that the modern labels of liberalism and conservatism both fail to capture the way much of the Great Tradition interpreted Scripture.⁶⁷ Sounding akin to the Fathers, with their emphasis on interpretation for the entire church, Archer argues that “The Pentecostal hermeneutic is rooted in the narrative tradition of the community [it] has a cohesive theological structure and is centered upon the dramatic story of God’s dynamic involvement in their community.”⁶⁸ A huge weakness of the postmodern approach as it pertains to biblical authority is that the community, in effect, must give meaning to a text, given the inability of human language to adequately communicate truth.⁶⁹ Patristic exegesis, in contrast, makes no such claim; while recognizing the insufficiency of bare literalism, it refuses to compromise the authority of the Spirit-inspired text itself. Though patristic exegesis did not hinge primarily on the historical accuracy of the text, the Fathers’ high view of Scripture is unmistakable. Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, considered the Scriptures to be “perfect.”⁷⁰ Origen likewise showed no interest in questioning the reliability of the Bible, but simply interpreting that which it affirmed, a reflection of his unflinching belief in its authority.⁷¹ A hallmark of Pentecostalism has always been insistence on the trustworthiness of Scripture; however, Archer expresses concern that by adopting the definition of inerrancy as articulated by the fundamentalists, “Pentecostals accepted the foundations of modernity and began immersing themselves in the language and concerns of modernistic thought.”⁷² He prefers the approach taken in the early days of the Pentecostal movement, when “Pentecostals said yes to both the authority of Scripture and the authority

⁶⁴ Noel and Wilkinson, “The Decline of Religion,” Ch. 2.

⁶⁵ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4.14.

⁶⁶ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 5.

⁶⁷ O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, preface.

⁶⁸ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 5.

⁶⁹ Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, 39.

⁷⁰ O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 129.

⁷¹ O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 129.

⁷² Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 87.

of experience, an approach that “put Scripture and lived experience into a creative dialectical tension.”⁷³ Is it possible that a shared embrace of experience, scriptural authority, and the importance of community means that Pentecostals would find the Fathers superb dialogue partners in the exegetical task? Since the latter embodies the positive aspects of postmodern hermeneutics while avoiding its fatal flaws, one may answer positively.

3. The Centrality of Christ

While the Fathers hardly disdained the literal sense of Scripture, their unwavering impulse to probe the text’s spiritual and figurative meanings occupied a more prominent place in their exegesis than much contemporary interpretation. It is unfortunate that much of Protestantism, particularly fundamentalism, has chosen a different path—and convinced many Pentecostals to do likewise. By adopting fundamentalist/dispensational hermeneutics,⁷⁴ not only do Pentecostals jeopardize the development of their ecclesiology,⁷⁵ but unwittingly risk repeating the mistake of Origen’s opponents by failing to look beyond the “bare letter” of the text. It is indeed ironic that many conservatives, bolstered by a firm belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and a desire to respect authorial intent, have arrived at similar conclusions to Enlightenment inspired critical scholars in dismissing approaches that find significant meaning beyond the literal sense. This seems even more inappropriate for Pentecostals who, of all people, should resonate with the patristic claim that the ultimate author of the text is not any human being, but the Holy Spirit himself. Reno and O’Keefe contend, discussing Gregory of Nyssa’s approach to Scripture, that the Church Father would be “very confident that his allegorical reading is justified because it seeks the original intention of the author, who is the spirit of God.”⁷⁶ For Pentecostals, as for patristic exegetes, it is the Spirit who inspires all of Scripture such that it points to one central figure: Jesus Christ.

One of the gravest dangers of tying Pentecostal hermeneutics to dispensationalism is the negative implications for understanding the centrality of Christ and his Kingdom. For classical dispensationalism, large swaths of the New Testament, not to mention the Old, lack substantial relevance for the Church Age.⁷⁷ This could hardly be further from the patristic vision of Old Testament exegesis; it was clear to the Fathers that the New Testament authors considered Old Testament events and promises to prefigure Christ and his church.⁷⁸ Only in light of Jesus, they asserted, could one properly understand the true meaning of Israel’s Scriptures. In contrast, modern scholarship is mostly grounded on “a referential theory of

⁷³ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 87.

⁷⁴ Over the past several decades, modified and progressive dispensational approaches have gradually eclipsed classical dispensational theology. See, for example, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993). Though Pentecostal conversation with these developments appears limited thus far, their exegetical methods may not prove as problematic as classical dispensationalism’s.

⁷⁵ Sheppard, “Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics,” 5-6.

⁷⁶ O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 108.

⁷⁷ Sheppard, “Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics,” 7.

⁷⁸ Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 11.

meaning, which assumes that our words and sentences are meaningful insofar as they successfully refer or point.⁷⁹ According to such an approach, the Scriptures are significant because they refer to a given point; the gospel narratives, for instance, have value in that they record certain details about the life and teaching of Jesus. The value in the text lies behind the narrative, and their significance is tied to what they can teach us about history, culture, and individuals. For modern scholarship, stories about Christ are significant because they refer to a certain point. For the Fathers, however, Christ himself *is* the point!

One might observe the unwaveringly Christological focus of patristic exegesis, for instance, in Augustine's sermons on John, where he continually refers back to the story of Israel. He claims that, in Jacob and his sons, "the people of the Christians was prefigured,"⁸⁰ points to Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea as foreshadowing of baptism into the body of Christ,⁸¹ and identifies the manna Israel received in the wilderness as a prefiguring of Jesus' body in the Eucharist.⁸² Elsewhere, in *On Christian Doctrine*, he defends his belief in the inadequacy of the literal sense alone, claiming that many statements the Old Testament makes about Solomon "transcend the limits of their subject and in fact really become clear only when related to Christ or the church."⁸³ Augustine is not alone in his approach; Origen's exegesis of the Psalms is thoroughly Christological, as is that of Irenaeus and Justin Martyr. The latter, in his *Dialogue With Trypho*, pointed to Psalm 45:7 as evidence that Jesus Christ "is to be worshipped as both God and Christ."⁸⁴ Likewise, Origen's own interpretation of the Song of Solomon centred on Christ and his church,⁸⁵ as did his sermons on Genesis and Exodus.⁸⁶

The coherence of Scripture, for the Fathers, was predicated on the conviction that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament; uncovering its true meaning, they were convinced, was impossible apart from him.⁸⁷ Byassee summarizes their Christological exegesis, asserting that "Israel's story is entirely true, faithfully rendered, *and* it is entirely reworked here around Jesus."⁸⁸ Their faith in Christ, after all, is how most of the Fathers were introduced to the Scriptures and, indeed, the God of Israel in the first place; were it not for their faith in Christ, neither would have been of any interest to them. Byassee's claim that "God Is Jewish, Catholic, and Pentecostal"⁸⁹—the latter because Christianity must be peculiar and

⁷⁹ O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 8.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 11-27. The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, 79, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 11.8.

⁸¹ Augustine, *Gospel of John*, 11.4.

⁸² Augustine, *Gospel of John*, 26.13.

⁸³ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.109.

⁸⁴ Craig A. Blasing and Carmen Hardin. *Psalms 1-50*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament, 7 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 348.

⁸⁵ Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 30-31.

⁸⁶ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans R.E. Heine. Fathers of the Church, 71 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982).

⁸⁷ O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 26.

⁸⁸ Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 10.

⁸⁹ Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 81.

unpredictable—makes the prospect of dialogue between Pentecostals and the Fathers regarding Christological reading even more enticing.

To suggest that Pentecostals become more open to allegorical and/or Christological readings of the Old Testament is not to suggest that the movement adopt an alien framework. It is, rather, a call for Pentecostalism to return to its hermeneutical roots. One can observe parallels between the Christological approach of the Fathers and the early Pentecostals; the latter's periodicals in the decade following Azusa Street reveal an approach reminiscent of Origen. Pentecostals cited the Psalms nearly 600 times to support their doctrine of healing, defend their Christology, and encourage their people to trust the Lord for protection.⁹⁰ Like the Church Fathers, they were virtually unanimous in their Christological exegesis of Isaiah; Jacqueline Grey points out that "there was little dispute among Pentecostal readers regarding the identity of the servant of Isa 53; almost all identified the servant exclusively as Jesus Christ."⁹¹ Although other passages, such as 6:1-8 or 9:1-7, were likewise interpreted in a Christological sense, the suffering servant motif was particularly vital because of its implications for divine healing. This exegetical approach was natural for early Pentecostals; the Christocentric focus of their newsletters was clear, with one paper proclaiming Jesus as "Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer, Baptizer, Glorious Lord and Coming King," concluding with the slogan, "Everything in Jesus, and Jesus Everything."⁹² As Archer explains:

The prime focus of Pentecostalism was on Jesus as the source of salvation, sanctification, healing and Spirit baptism. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, enabled one to live a holy and productive Christian life. This Jesus-ology influenced Pentecostalism's interpretation of Scripture. Their pietistic concern is echoed in the words of W.J. Seymour: 'We are not fighting men or churches, but seeking to displace dead forms and creeds and wild fanaticism with living, practical Christianity.'⁹³

For a missional people like Pentecostals, placing Christ at the centre of all things should appear elementary; it evidently was for first-generation adherents, who drew upon tradition of Christian allegory to help put their powerful encounters with God into words.⁹⁴ Contemporary Pentecostal exegesis, particularly of the Old Testament, would be enriched by returning to the Christological approach their forebearers shared with patristic exegetes. Their unrelenting focus on Christ as the centre of all things grounded their ecclesiology,

⁹⁰ See Lee Roy Martin, "The Use and Interpretation of the Psalms in Early Pentecostalism as Reflected in the Apostolic Faith from 1906 to 1915," *Old Testament Essays* 30.3 (2017), 725.

⁹¹ Jacqueline Grey, *Three's a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), eBook, Ch. 4.

⁹² Van Johnson, "The End of Pentecostal Preaching," in *Pentecostal Preaching and Ministry in Multicultural and Post-Christian Canada*, ed. Steven Studebaker (McMaster Ministry Studies Series, V.4. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019, eBook,) Ch. 6.

⁹³ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 100. Seymour's anti-creedal attitudes, expressed in this quote, might be the biggest barrier Pentecostals would need to overcome in order to substantially engage patristic exegesis. For further discussion of anti-creedalism within the Pentecostal movement, see Charity Darby, *Pentecostalism and The Premodern: How Tradition Could Aid Pentecostal Hermeneutics* (MA Thesis, Acadia Divinity College, 2022).

⁹⁴ Grey, *Three's a Crowd*, Ch. 5

eschatology, and preaching; so pivotal was this Jesus-centred vision to early Pentecostalism that some fear the movement effectively invented their own brand of Unitarianism, focusing on the Son at the expense of Father and Spirit.⁹⁵

It is true that the early Pentecostals did not possess the sophisticated metaphysical framework to underly their exegesis as did the Fathers; these first-generation primary sources are not akin to confessional statements, refined and edited over a multi-year process.⁹⁶ However, the early Pentecostal zeal to keep Christ at the centre of their faith, coupled with the fact that they did, in fact, read Scripture Christologically, indicates that several of the core assumptions of patristic exegesis were already present within early Pentecostalism, and might be retrieved by the movement today. It seems the Fathers could greatly enrich Pentecostal exegetes, first by reminding them that all of Scripture points to Christ, and secondly by helping them develop the Christological assumptions of the early movement. Consider the implications of recovering a Christocentric reading of Scripture and applying it to Pentecostal preaching and mission in the postmodern era; although many postmodern Westerners have little interest in “institutional Christianity,” interest in Jesus Christ himself remains strong.⁹⁷ The Pentecostal mission of engaging an increasingly postmodern western culture could be greatly furthered by learning from premodern exegetes; refocusing preaching on Christ, after all, would be a more attainable goal if the church learned to see him as the reference point to which all of Scripture looks toward.

This raises a second point about how reading all of Scripture in light of Christ might enrich Pentecostal preaching. Perhaps the most woeful inadequacy of the historical-critical method is that if a text only holds as much meaning as the author imagined, most of it is, in fact, irrelevant for the church—and therefore irrelevant for preaching and spiritual formation. David Steinmetz rightly points out, for example, that, “Unless Psalm 137 has more than one possible meaning, it cannot be used as a prayer by the church and must be rejected as a lament belonging exclusively to the piety of ancient Israel.”⁹⁸ This raises arguably the most crucial question for exegetes of any persuasion: what relevance, if any, does Scripture hold for the church today? What is its purpose if not for the life of the Christian community? Historical-criticism’s failure to adequately answer this vital question perhaps suggests that its proponents have yet to grasp the shortcomings of their own “theoretical foundations”⁹⁹—especially if the goal of exegesis is, as Augustine insisted, to foster love of God and neighbour. Therefore, if Pentecostals are to carry on the legacy of their forefathers and ground their preaching, mission, evangelism, and spiritual formation in Christ, it stands to reason that they

⁹⁵ Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2010), 96.

⁹⁶ Kim Alexander has made this observation of their doctrine of divine healing as well, a doctrine which was inextricably linked to their Christological interpretation of certain texts. See Kimberly Ervin Alexander, *Pentecostal Healing: Models in Theology and Practice*. *Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series*, V. 29 (Blandford Forum: Deo, 2006), 108-109.

⁹⁷ Noel and Wilkinson, “The Decline of Religion,” Ch. 2.

⁹⁸ David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis.” *Theology Today* 37.1 (1980), 28.

⁹⁹ Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical,” 37.

must learn to read Scripture under the assumption that it too is all about Christ. Here, once again, the example of the Fathers proves to be indispensable.

4. Conclusion

Particularly with the rise of secularism in Western culture, Pentecostals will need to consider how to remain anchored in the Great Tradition of the faith while effectively communicating the gospel to a changing society. Given that many of the Church Fathers lived in a premodern, pre-Christendom era, their exegesis could provide fresh insight to a missional movement with an emphasis on transformation through the Spirit's power in an increasingly postmodern era. Archer contends that "there exists within early Pentecostalism an...interpretation that is rooted in and guided by Pentecostal identity which can be retrieved and critically reappropriated within the current postmodern context,"¹⁰⁰ hinting at the need to interpret Scripture in a manner that speaks to a postmodern society. Patristic exegesis not only offers an enticing alternative to historical critical methodology but avoids many pitfalls of postmodern hermeneutics through its emphasis on community, the primacy it grants to the Spirit's testimony, and its insistence that all Scripture points to Christ as its centre. Moreover, it is grounded in a crucial assumption so often neglected by historical criticism: the conviction that the Bible is, first and foremost, the church's book.¹⁰¹

There remain areas for dialogue between contemporary Pentecostals and the Fathers beyond the scope of this piece; a study on the Spirit's role in biblical interpretation alone could merit an entire monograph, for example. Noel laments that "Apart from a few words in theological texts about illumination ... there remains no firm understanding in the wider Christian world of the Spirit's role in hermeneutics,"¹⁰² a deficiency that may be corrected by such a conversation. Pentecostalism could also potentially benefit from dialogue with ancient Syrian methods of interpretation that incorporated music and singing. Bantu notes that Ephrem "madrashe," for instance, "were set to music and performed in call-and-response communal setting."¹⁰³ Some Pentecostals, recognizing the importance of musical worship within the movement, have called for reimagining music as a sacrament within their tradition.¹⁰⁴ So, a study on Ephrem's *midrashe* could enrich both its sacramentality and exegesis. Finally, the allegorical reading of the Genesis creation narrative represented by Augustine and Origen could help Pentecostals reimagine a biblically faithful doctrine of creation.

Indeed, a conversation between the Pentecostal movement and the Fathers regarding their approach to Scripture may help the former develop not just a richer hermeneutic, but a more robust sacramental theology, appreciation for tradition, and an awareness that fundamentalist literalism or historical criticism are hardly the only viable hermeneutical

¹⁰⁰ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 49.

¹⁰¹ Archer too employs this label for Scripture in his work. See Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 49.

¹⁰² Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, 14.

¹⁰³ Bantu, *A Multitude of All*, 124.

¹⁰⁴ Richard L. Griggs, "Musical Worship as a Pentecostal Sacrament: Toward a Soteriological Liturgy," *Master's Thesis, Southeastern University*, 2017.

approaches. More importantly, it may give the movement indispensable tools to effectively communicate the content of Scripture to a generation that is increasingly sceptical of established institutions and feels little need to depend on modern ideas or conceptions of objective “proof” to sustain their beliefs about the supernatural. Here, the Great Tradition of patristic interpretation offers Pentecostalism a wealth of premodern wisdom for their mission in a postmodern age.

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