

**Between Conviction and Critique:
A Hermeneutical Exploration of an Australian Pentecostal Community**

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Abstract

Pentecostals have conventionally been defined as a group that avoids critical reflection on the biblical text in favour of Spirit-led experience. This categorisation encourages a general anti-intellectual disposition often taken as representative or defining of the movement. While this description may well be a matter of stereotyping, it is a view that holds considerable force. This paper explores the nexus between the practice of a Pentecostal academy and Pentecostal ecclesial praxis within the Australian context and their role in influencing or maintaining this view. An initial intuition of incompatibility between Pentecostal academia and Pentecostal ecclesial praxis inspired the design and distribution of a survey in an attempt to understand and explain the perceived incongruence. Having conducted the survey and analysed the findings, I suggest that what has emerged is not an ontological division between two fixed and bounded groups but rather a hermeneutical issue: a seeming tension between two stances, two motivations and two idealised outcomes. It is precisely here that I suggest that the intended meaning of the title of this paper becomes evident – perhaps a *good* interpretation of the Bible lies somewhere between conviction and critique.

Keywords

Pentecostalism – Hermeneutics – Academy – biblical studies

Introduction

This paper will explore the nexus between the practice of a Pentecostal¹ academy and Pentecostal ecclesial praxis within the Australian context. It will consider the benefit of formal biblical studies and its impact on hermeneutical processes. This will be achieved by describing, analysing, and evaluating the reading practice of students at Alphacrucis University College (AC) who have engaged in formal biblical studies. Via a survey

¹ For the most part, I use the capitalised form *Pentecostal* to refer to the movement's classical expression. The un-capitalised form of *pentecostal* refers to the movement in general and includes its classical, charismatic, and neo-Pentecostal types. I use *Pentecostalism* to represent a movement rather than a church or denomination.

questionnaire, this paper will proceed from an initially descriptive to a more analytical focus and consider the attitudes of current and former students of AC towards critical skills acquired within biblical studies and through their engagement with selected Old Testament² literature. In particular, it will consider the impact of formal study on the preparation and presentation of sermons by graduates of the College.³ In the Australian context, Adam White observes that a “Sunday message in a Pentecostal church is less of an exercise in rigorous biblical exposition and much more of an oratory display aimed at motivating the church members to whatever course of action is being encouraged.”⁴ It is anticipated that this study may identify potential causes for this perceived disconnect between the two communities.

The first community is referred to here as the Pentecostal academy, specifically, the national college of the Australian Christian Churches⁵ (ACC), namely AC. The second community is Pentecostal ministry practitioners within the context of Pentecostal ecclesial practice. While both communities profess a shared history and faith, the basis of any separation becomes apparent when one probes the understanding of the biblical text (its nature, function, and role) that is operative within and defining of either. An appropriate place to begin the discussion is to consider the characteristic view of the academy that exists within the Pentecostal tradition. This view is best captured in a dedication made by Walter Hollenweger nearly half a century ago. In a significant study regarding Pentecostals, which Hollenweger simply called “The Pentecostals”, he begins with the following words, “To my friends and teachers in the Pentecostal Movement who taught me to love the Bible and to my teachers and friends in the Presbyterian Church who taught me to understand it.”⁶

Kenneth Archer describes Hollenweger’s words as a “chiding remark [which] undoubtedly reflects the simplistic and ‘uncritical’ work among early Pentecostals.”⁷ Although it is unclear whether Hollenweger’s intention at the time of penning his dedication was to disparage the Pentecostal academic tradition,⁸ according to Archer, the words do suggest “that the Reformed tradition has provided [Hollenweger]... with a better

² I acknowledge that the term ‘Hebrew Bible’ or ‘Israel’s Scriptures’ are more neutral descriptors of the Christian term ‘Old Testament’, the use of which implies, some would suggest in a derogatory way, that these books are ‘old’. I use the term ‘Old Testament’ as the Pentecostal community readily recognises it.

³ Joseph Byrd, “Pentecostal Homiletics: A Convergence of History, Theology, and Worship,” in *Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Preaching*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Cleveland, Tennessee: CPT Press, 2015), 287.

⁴ Adam G. White, “Not in Lofty Speech or Media: A Reflection on Pentecostal Preaching in Light of 1 Cor 2:1-5,” 24 (2015): 119.

⁵ Formed in 1937 and was formerly called the Assemblies of God (AOG) in Australia. The ACC incorporates approximately 75% of all Pentecostal churches in Australia. It comprises over 1,000 individual self-governing churches

⁶ Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals: The Charismatic Movement in the Churches* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1972), xvii.

⁷ Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit Scripture and Community* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 133

⁸ Andrew Davies, “What Does It Mean to Read the Bible as a Pentecostal?” *JPT* 18, no. 2 (2009): 217.

intellectual approach to understanding the Scriptures than has the Pentecostal tradition.”⁹ Whether a non-critical understanding of the biblical text is unique to early Pentecostals, most would agree that in broad terms, the words do ring true in a period where there were few formally educated Pentecostal readers of the biblical text.¹⁰

Although not unique to Pentecostals, they have long treasured the biblical text, and its importance for the tradition cannot be overstated.¹¹ This sentiment is reflected in Hollenweger’s original dedication to Pentecostals as those “who taught me to love the Bible”.¹² A ‘love’ that in some ways followed the Reformist’s cry, *Sola Scriptura*, and which fostered a defensive attitude towards biblical criticism. As the “‘people of the book’”,¹³ Pentecostals believed they were somehow protecting the ‘holiness’ of the Bible by resisting the work of critical biblical scholarship.¹⁴ However, the task of the ‘critical’ study of the biblical text is not to denigrate the Bible or to focus on errors. Instead, Brettler states, the term “biblical criticism” broadly means “the process of establishing the original, contextual meaning of biblical texts and assessing their historical accuracy...to make informed judgments about its current meaning and significance.”¹⁵ Brettler further remarks, “Such study is an indispensable step in biblical interpretation.”¹⁶

It is well established that the experience of the Holy Spirit is intricately woven into what it means to be a Pentecostal. As Rickie Moore observes, “Pentecostals bear distinctive witness to a reality and dimension of life in the Holy Spirit, out of which a uniquely Pentecostal approach to scripture emerges.”¹⁷ Although various scholars recognise this experiential orientation of the Pentecostal hermeneutic¹⁸, there is minimal emphasis on the role of biblical

⁹ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit Scripture and Community*, 133.

¹⁰ William Atkinson, “Worth a Second Look?: Pentecostal Hermeneutics,” *Evangel* 21, no. 2 (2003):50; Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit Scripture and Community*, 133.

¹¹ Wonsuk Ma, “Biblical Studies in the Pentecostal Tradition: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*, ed. Murray W. Dempster, Bryon D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Oxford, U.K.: Regnum Books International, 1999), 54; Yongnan Jeon Ahn, *Interpretation of Tongues and Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12-14 with a Pentecostal Hermeneutic* (Dorset, U.K.: Deo Publishing, 2013), 1.

¹² Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals*, xvii.

¹³ Ma, “Biblical Studies in the Pentecostal Tradition: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” 54.

¹⁴ Ma, 54.

¹⁵ Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, *Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3. Although some would argue that there is no such thing as ‘current meaning’ as the text means what it meant. There is only current application.

¹⁶ Brettler, Enns, and Harrington, 3.

¹⁷ Rickie D. Moore, “A Pentecostal Approach to Scripture,” in *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 11.

¹⁸ Peter D. Neumann, “Pentecostalism and the Experience of the Spirit,” in *Pentecostal Experience: An Ecumenical Encounter* (Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 100–104; Jacqueline Grey, *Three’s a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 15; Douglas Jacobsen, “Introduction: The History and Significance of Early Pentecostal Theology,” in *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4.

study or formal theological education and how this element affects what Grey describes as the “hermeneutical puzzle”¹⁹ in the overall reading process. Critical analysis or scholarly interpretation is not intended to be some *ersatz* for the work of the Holy Spirit, nor are the two necessarily opposed or mutually antagonistic.²⁰ Ergo, it is quite feasible that the work of the Holy Spirit extends to utilising critical skills learnt in the academic domain to aid in the interpretive process of reading the biblical text. Therefore, spirituality should not necessarily be considered inherently hostile to theological education and scholarly pursuit. It is with this in mind that the survey questionnaire has been designed. The paper will now proceed with an overview of the survey questionnaire before presenting the results and findings.

1. Survey Methodology

For the current study, a questionnaire was developed following best practices. The questionnaire primarily focuses on closed-ended questions, which provide quantitative data for analysis. Open-ended questions were used sparingly to avoid survey fatigue. Biased questions were also avoided to allow the respondents’ opinions to be solicited organically. Before distributing the questionnaire, it was tested to isolate any possible errors or design issues.

The questionnaire relates to four primary areas of inquiry: The first area elicits information relevant to the participants’ demographic status. The second area relates to study and church-based ministry. The third area of the survey concerns the preaching and teaching of the Old Testament. Much like Moore, I approach this study as “one who is consciously attempting to integrate...Pentecostal vocation and perspectives with critical Old Testament scholarship.”²¹ Thus, the fourth and final area focuses on engagement with the biblical text.

I selected biblical texts commonly related to creation care to measure engagement with OT literature. The primary rationale for choosing this theme is the connectedness with the eschatological concern of Pentecostals²², traditionally concentrating on missionary activity, leading to an apparent disregard vis-à-vis the broader social responsibility of the Church concerning environmental matters.²³ The texts selected were Genesis 1:28 and Isaiah 45:18. Although they reflect paradigmatic statements on creation

¹⁹ Grey, *Three’s a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament*, 4.

²⁰ Daniel E. Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 11. A point similarly made by Enyinnaya. Enyinnaya, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Preaching,” 150.

²¹ Rickie D. Moore, “Canon and Charisma in the Book of Deuteronomy,” in *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 16

²² As noted in the introduction.

²³ Robby Waddell, “Apocalyptic Sustainability: The Future of Pentecostal Ecology,” in *Perspectives in Pentecostal Eschatologies: World without End*, ed. Peter Althouse and Robby Waddell (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke and Company, 2012), 103.

theology, the theme and texts chosen for analysis provide an appropriate way of examining the apparent Pentecostal concern for literalism within the Pentecostal ecclesial practice.

Participation

Participants were current or former students of AC who had completed or were currently undertaking the following awards: BTh (Bachelor of Theology), BMin (Bachelor of Ministry), BBM (Bachelor of Business/Ministry), or BCM (Bachelor of Contemporary Ministry)²⁴. Participants were English-speaking students only.²⁵ The number of respondents for the survey analysis was 126²⁶ (a response rate of 32%). While the survey responses do not represent all students within the above awards, they offer insight into patterns and trends that may assist future engagement with and teaching the Bible within AC and the broader Pentecostal community in Australia.

Data Collection

Following ethics approval, the online survey platform SurveyMonkey was used to generate the questionnaire. Following a request, AC provided a list of participants' e-mail addresses in line with the research ethics protocols. A link to the questionnaire was issued via e-mail at the researcher's request. Finally, an invitation to participate was also posted on the AC learning platform. The data collected was non-identifiable. Although demographic data was collected, there was no access to or knowledge of the identity of any participant.

Limitations

An inherent limitation in survey research whereby data collection is via the last known e-mail address is 'notification reliability'. Multiple participants' e-mail addresses were not current, and it is impossible to know how many students received and read the notification of the survey. Notification reliability would have impacted the graduate cohort more than current students, as the request to participate was also posted on the opening page of AC's learning platform, to which only current students have access.

It must also be noted that some respondents did not respond to all survey questions, resulting in missing data. Further limitations are noted due to using the Likert scale for several questions. The limitations of subjectivity and what an individual's idea about what they believe to be strong or moderate agreement (or disagreement) indicate.

²⁴ The BMin degree replaced the BCM degree in 2013.

²⁵ AC has both an English-speaking and Korean-speaking Higher Education Program and Campus.

²⁶ A total of 143 students responded to the survey questionnaire. Respondents were excluded due to age parameters, if they did not identify with Pentecostals in terms of approaches to matters of faith, or if they still needed to complete BIB101 and BIB201. Therefore, the number of respondents utilised for survey analysis is 96.

The selected texts in the final section of the survey are *not* the entire text of any one book but one section of this corpus. Although there are limitations to this approach, the texts are used to draw attention to the reading practices of participants. They are not an exegesis or a critical study of the text itself—instead, the principles observed in the documented reading practice attempt to isolate the use of critical engagement.

2. Results

This section analyses the findings from the survey questionnaire for each of the four primary areas of inquiry.

Demographic Information

Based on the demographic responses to the first section of the survey questionnaire, the broad characteristics of the group under analysis can be seen in *Figures 1. – 4. below.*

Figure 1. Gender of Respondents

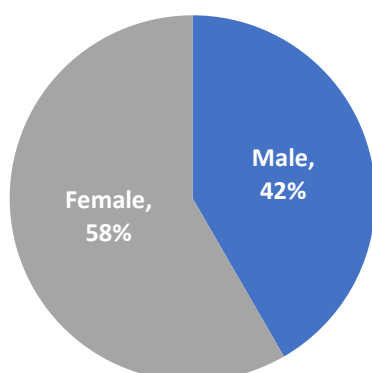


Figure 2. Age of Respondents

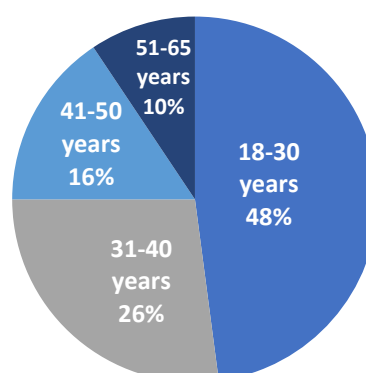


Figure 3. Ministry Credential

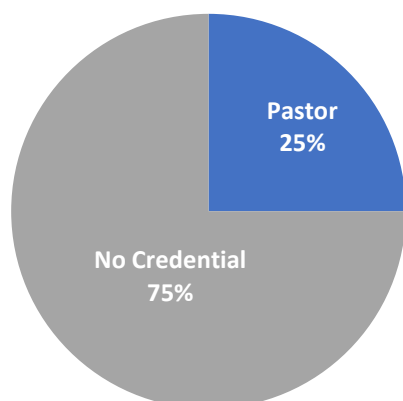
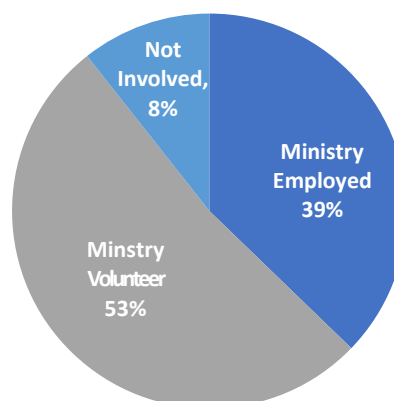


Figure 4. Ministry Involvement



To summarise the figures above, both males and females are well represented. The respondents comprised 40 males and 56 females (*Figure 1*). They ranged from 19 to 65 years old (*Figure 2*), with a mean of 34.0 years (SD =10.5). 91.7% (n=88) of respondents are directly involved in Church-based ministry, either in a paid role (full or part-time) or a volunteer capacity. 25% (n=24) of respondents are pastors (credentialed ministers).

Finally, the demographic section of the survey measured affiliation to a specific tradition. Participants were also asked to indicate how many years they had been a part of the selected tradition.²⁷ All respondents under analysis identified as either Pentecostal or Charismatic in approaches to matters of faith. The average time in the chosen tradition is approximately 19 years.²⁸

Academic Study and Church-Based Ministry

The respondents were divided into three groups founded on academic progression: *New*, *Existing*, and *Graduate*. These groups were selected to measure possible varying responses throughout the study period. Based on the equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL), *New* respondents are current students who have yet to complete the first year of full-time study.²⁹ *Existing* respondents have completed at least one year of full-time study but must complete their chosen award.³⁰ *Graduate* respondents are those who have completed their chosen award. Respondents comprise 37 *New*, 29 *Existing*, and 60 *Graduate*.

²⁷ Question 7 in the survey questionnaire.

²⁸ The mean result was 14.95 years, SD =10.5.

²⁹ A full academic year and full-time enrolment are equivalent to eight subjects at AC.

³⁰ BTh, BMin, BCM are 3-year full-time study programs. The BBM is the exception here and is a 4-year full-time study program.

The fundamental concern of this paper is the use of critical skills developed by students within biblical studies; as such, all participants have completed core subjects in biblical studies, namely *Introduction to the Bible* and *Biblical Hermeneutics*. *Introduction to the Bible* describes the Bible's overall content, storyline, and significance. It outlines how the Bible came into existence and attained its canonical structure. It provides an overview of the Bible's historical, cultural, and social context. Throughout the subject, a basic exegetical process is explained. Students must determine the genre of a specific passage and study the historical background to establish what is known about authorship and the original audience. Literary context, major themes, and cultural, social, and historical background must also be identified in the assessment process.

Biblical Hermeneutics explores the goal and history of interpretation. It discusses the various genres of the Bible and how to apply appropriate reading strategies to each. The subject examines the relevance of the Bible for the 21st century and attempts to discover the original application(s) intended by the author. It explores contextualisation, evaluates the specificity of applications to their original historical contexts, and considers if they are transferable.

By reflecting on the interpretation of the Bible, the study was explicitly concerned with application to practical ministry settings as opposed to personal devotion. As such, it is essential to consider participants' specific roles within their ministry context. In the demographic data section, we saw that 91.7% (n=88) of respondents are involved in ministry within their church context.³¹ Of this group, 88.6% (n=85)³² are involved in a role directly engaged with the Bible and subsequently applied in an ecclesial setting. This figure is relatively high and reveals the potential influence that *learning* within the academy can have within the ecclesial setting.

Question 20 related to the specific contexts within which formal academic study of the Bible should occur. Sarah Jane Lancaster, the traditional founder of Australian Pentecostalism, believed it was advantageous to understand the development of the Bible. However, she also believed it was *not* necessary to go to theological college to acquire that understanding. According to Lancaster, "[A] member of the true Church, which is Christ's body, should receive his training in that Church."³³ To assess the accuracy of this view, participants were asked to respond to the forced-choice question, "Do you think formal academic study of the biblical text should occur within the context of the local church or at an academic institute?" The results show that only 2.1 % (n=2) of respondents believe that formal academic study of the Bible should be undertaken exclusively in a local church context. 16.7% (n=16) of respondents believe it should be

³¹ See question 6.

³² Taken from question 17. The remaining 11.4% (n=11) comprise roles that involved administration and media (sound and lighting).

³³ *Good News* 12:8, September 1923, 12. *Good News* was the magazine of the earliest formal Pentecostal grouping in Australia.

conducted solely in an academic institute. 79.1% (n=76) believe it should be undertaken in the local church *and* an academic institute. As the traditional founder of Australian Pentecostalism, Lancaster's views have been highly influential. Indeed, such views may be held to contribute to the success of Bible colleges directly attached to large Churches, traditionally recognised as Pentecostal, for example, Hillsong College, C3, and Planet Shakers. However, the figures above also illustrate that any sharply carpentered division between an academic and ecclesial context may not necessarily exist more broadly.

The Old Testament, Preaching and Teaching

This section of the survey relates to engagement with the OT. It seeks to establish participants' concern for the original biblical languages and compares English translations and their use. Question 21 assessed using various Bible translations for personal devotion, academic study, and preaching. The data indicated that 13.3% (n=12) of respondents used a single Bible translation for personal devotion. This figure is surprisingly low as it would be expected that a more significant number would employ a single translation for personal use to maintain consistency in daily reading and as an aid in memorisation. The remaining 86.7% (n=78) used multiple Bible translations, typically three to four.³⁴

For academic study, 18.2% (n=16) of respondents used a single Bible translation. Fourteen of whom relied solely on the NIV Bible translation for scholarly work. While the above percentage is relatively high, indicating approximately one in five respondents, it is consistent among *New, Graduate, and Pastors*. However, it is closer to one in ten for the group *Existing*, indicating that students use multiple translations at higher levels of study, whilst those at the start of their studies or those who have completed their studies do not use multiple translations. This suggests that the lasting influence of formal academic study is limited in this area.

Students are encouraged to use a translation focusing on formal equivalence for academic studies, such as exegetical work. The choice of the NIV as the sole translation is unusual for academic work as it is a mixture of dynamic and formal equivalence. While the NIV translation is easy to read and balances "literal" translation focusing on meaning, it is more appropriate for reading in an ecclesial setting than an academic one.³⁵ Also, to get a sense of the complexities of a passage, it is recommended that students employ a range of translations, ideally two, a formal equivalence translation and a dynamic equivalence translation for comparison purposes.³⁶ This recommendation is more consistent with the remaining 81.8% (n=72) of respondents who used multiple

³⁴ The average number of Bible translations for this group is 3.6.

³⁵ "Which Is the Best Bible Translation?" *Bible Society* accessed 13th August 2021, <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/which-is-the-best-bible-translation/>.

³⁶ As there is no perfect English translation, students at AC are encouraged to use multiple Bible translations for comparison purposes, particularly in exegetical work where different nuances can be drawn out.

translations, typically between three and four. For preaching, 19.3% (n=17) of respondents used a single translation. The remaining 90.7% (n=71) used between two and five translations. These figures unexpectedly indicated that more respondents utilise multiple Bible translations for personal devotion than academic study and preaching.

As part of question 26, participants rated the following statement on a five-point scale, “When attempting to interpret an Old Testament passage, it is useful to refer to multiple modern translations” responses are summarised in *Figure 5*. below.

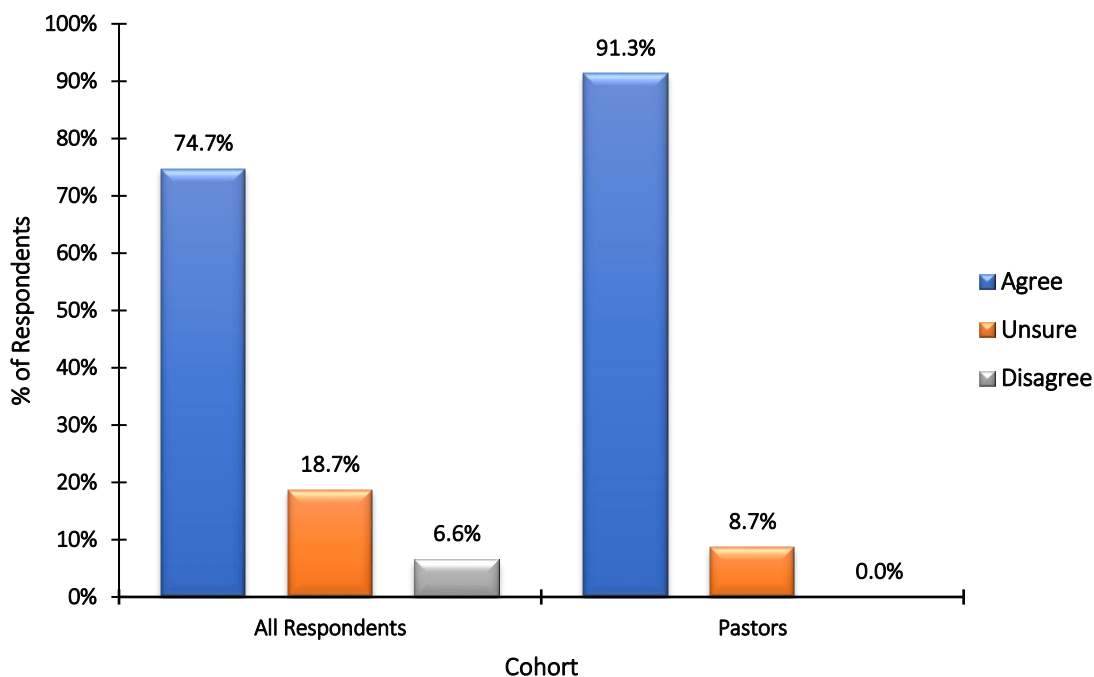


Figure 5. When attempting to interpret an Old Testament passage, it is useful to refer to multiple modern translations.

The data in *Figure 5*. is derived from question 26, indicating that 91.3% (n=21) of pastors agreed it was helpful to refer to multiple translations when attempting to interpret the OT. This agreement is significantly high compared to all respondents at 74.7% (n=68), which indicates that pastors within the overall group are more consistent with what is taught at AC in their general attitude towards multiple translations rather than their praxis.

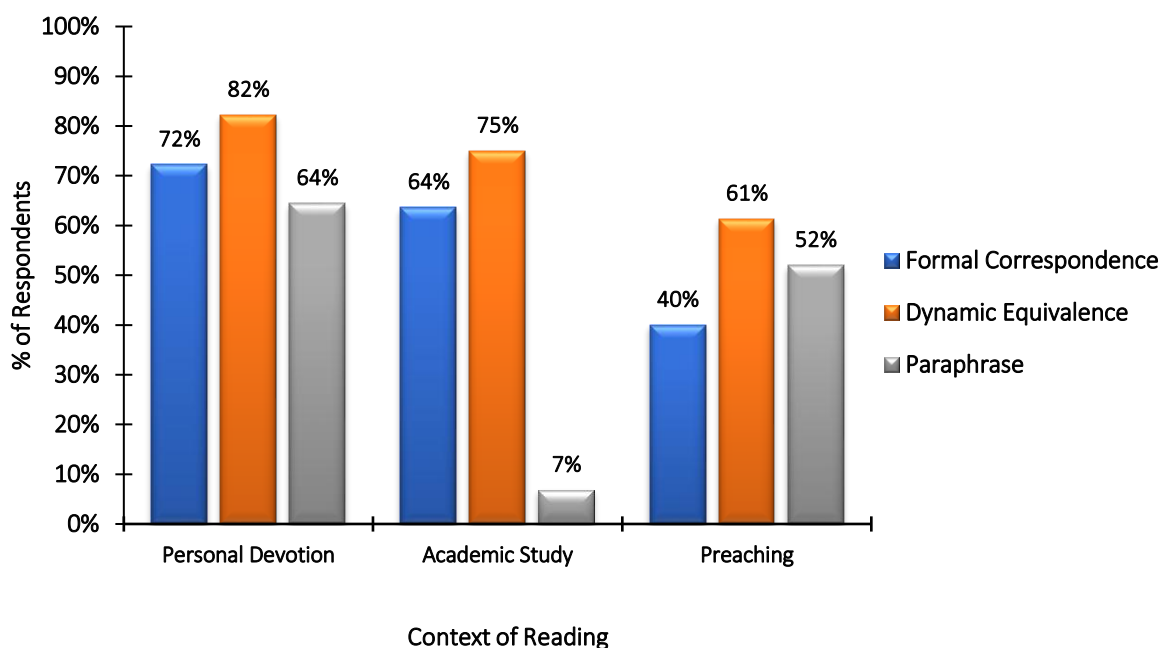


Figure 6. Bible Translations for Specific Context

Figure 6. above illustrates that the dynamic equivalence *type* translations are the most popular across each context. Of course, it must be recognised that there is value in the concept of “dynamic” or “meaning” equivalence translations, particularly in a congregational setting when a sermon is being preached. While the paraphrase translation is relatively well represented across the “personal devotional” and “preaching” contexts, 64.8% (n=57) and 52.3% (n=46) represent only 6.8% (n=6) in the academic context. From the academy’s perspective, it is encouraging to note that all respondents who utilised a paraphrase translation consulted at least two other translations, either dynamic equivalence or formal correspondence variety.

Question 22 considered how much of the OT respondents had read. The results of this question can be seen below in *Figure 7*.

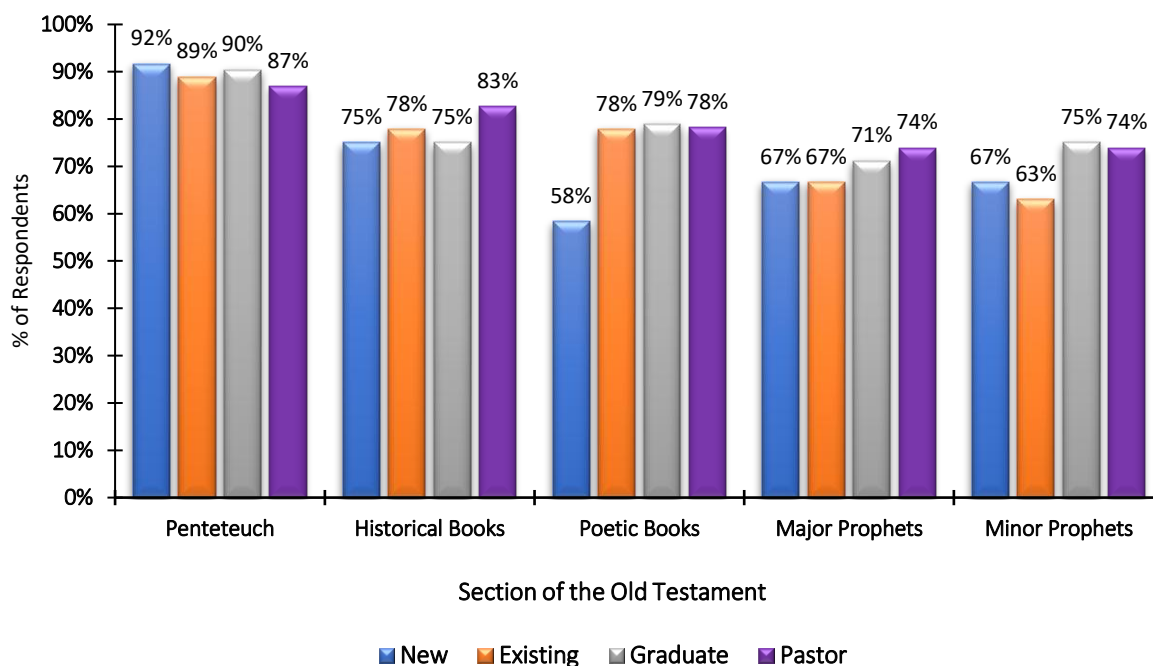


Figure 7. Reading the Old Testament

Considering the Bible is the medium with which Pentecostals associate the experience of the Holy Spirit,³⁷ and considering Pentecostals see themselves as *people of the Spirit* and *people of the Book*³⁸, only 58.2% (n=53) of respondents have read the OT in its entirety. This figure seems relatively low when considering the average time stated as part of the tradition is 19 years. One would assume more *people of the Book* would have read it. However, it is encouraging to see a slight increase from *New* students at 41.7% (n=5) to *Existing* students at 60.7% (n=17) and *Graduate* at 63.5% (n=33). This figure was slightly higher for pastors at 65.2% (n=15).

Five respondents had yet to read any of the sections of the OT in their entirety. Of concern is that three of these five respondents were pastors who had graduated and were employed in ministry positions. Data from the survey also shows that the Pentateuch is the most widely read section of the OT across all cohorts, with an average readership of 90.1% (n=82).

Further analysis of the reading of other sections of the OT, namely the Historical Books, Poetic Books, Major Prophets, and Minor Prophets, indicate an overall readership of 75.8% (n=69), 74.7% (n=68), 69.2% (n=63), and 70.3% (n=64), respectively. The figures

³⁷ Peter D. Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience: An Ecumenical Encounter* (Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 132.

³⁸ Scott A. Ellington, "Scripture: Finding One's Place in God's Story," in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 65. Ma, "Biblical Studies in the Pentecostal Tradition: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," 54; Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience: An Ecumenical Encounter*, 132.

for the readership of the Prophets are relatively low. One would expect Pentecostal readers to be drawn to the prophetic books based on the importance of a sense of “calling” akin to the OT prophets and the significance placed on the eschatological fulfilment in the book of Joel, which “enabled the Pentecostals to make a connection between the pouring out of the Spirit with the “early and Latter Rain’ motif.”³⁹. Furthermore, Pentecostal readers emphasise healing in the atonement from reading Isaiah 53.

The next question in the survey, number 26, was framed around a range of preaching-related statements. Respondents replied to each statement on the following scale: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Neutral/Unsure*, *Disagree*, and *Strongly Disagree*. The first statement was, “It is important to establish the original contextual meaning of a biblical passage before it can be applied.” Grey notes, “As Pentecostal readers bring...[a]presupposition of charismatic experience to their reading of biblical texts, there is also an expectation that the Spirit will be encountered in the reading process.”⁴⁰. To understand the range of responses to the survey question, one must appreciate that the Spirit can speak directly to a contemporary situation for Pentecostals and beyond the original contextual meaning.⁴¹ According to Grey,

The experience of the Spirit provides meaning, not just application; and since the experience of the Spirit differs according to the community and the individual members of the community, so also the meaning of the text differs according to the individual context in which it is read. This provides multiple interpretations according to the individual’s experience and potentially results in multiple meanings.⁴²

The responses to the first statement in question 26 indicated that 94.5% (n=86) of respondents considered it important to establish the original contextual meaning of a biblical passage before that meaning could be applied.⁴³ Only 2.2% (n=2) of respondents disagreed with the statement.⁴⁴ So, while it is acknowledged that, for Pentecostals, the Spirit *can speak* beyond the original context, the clear majority of respondents wished to engage with and understand the original contextual meaning before applying the text to the contemporary context. These figures are significant as they indicate that the original contextual meaning is not considered to be of secondary importance to Pentecostals. Instead, they suggest that for respondents, original contextual meaning, in so far as that

³⁹ Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit Scripture and Community* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 133.

⁴⁰ Grey, *Three’s a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament*, 17.

⁴¹ Grey, 17.

⁴² Grey, 17.

⁴³ 62.6% (n=57) of respondents strongly agreed, and 31.9% (n=29) of respondents agreed with the statement.

⁴⁴ Nobody strongly disagreed with the statement, and the remaining 3.3% (n=3) of respondents were unsure.

can be exegeted or understood, is somehow determinant of possible contemporary meaning.

Grey states, “The Old Testament text provides a pool of language and experience which Pentecostal readers draw from and identify with, regardless of the context or historical distance.”⁴⁵ While Grey recognises the importance of context within a specific cultural setting, she asserts that it limits the reader’s role and the multiple potential meanings consistent with postmodernism.⁴⁶ Grey further notes that Pentecostal readers tend to appropriate the text according to their contemporary culture rather than consider its significance in the ancient culture. Hence, Readers demonstrate a limited recognition of the cultural differences between the ancient and contemporary contexts.⁴⁷

The question of the importance of ancient culture and context relates to the subsequent statement from question 26, “It is not important to understand the culture of Ancient Israel when preaching/teaching from the Old Testament”. The overall responses to this statement are indicated in *Figure 8*. below.

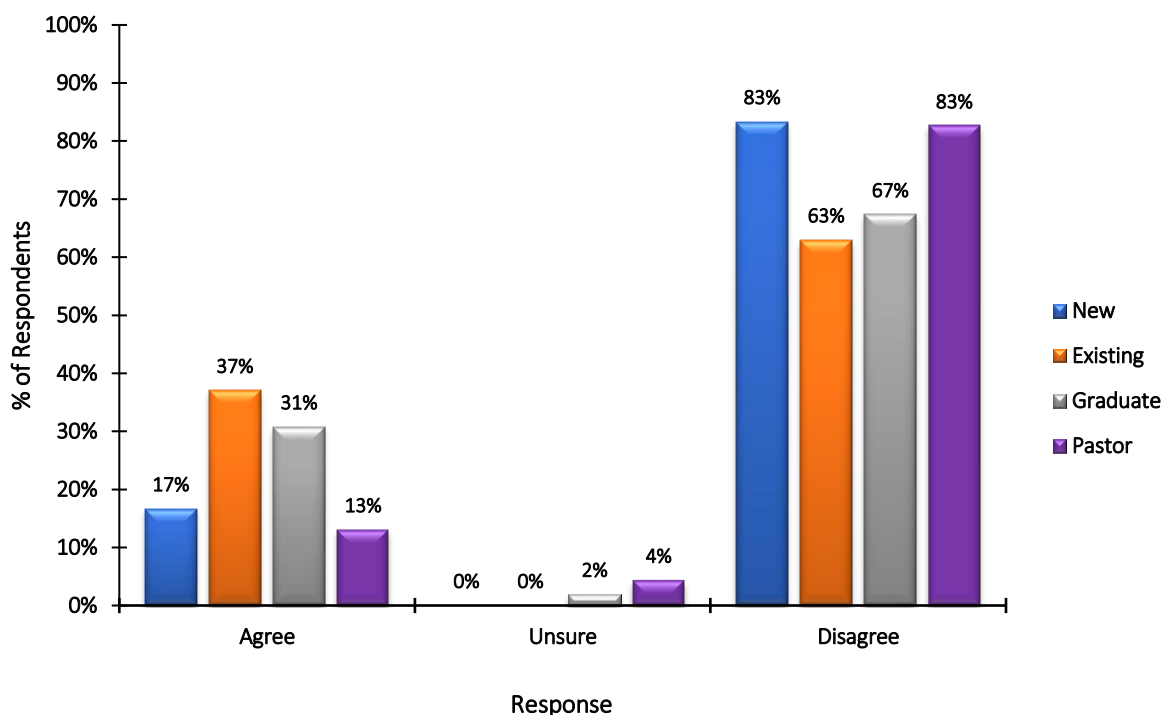


Figure 8. It is not important to understand the culture of Ancient Israel when preaching/teaching from the Old Testament

⁴⁵ Grey, *Three’s a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament*, 103.

⁴⁶ Grey, 103. Grey remarks, “Pentecostal readings share a presupposition with postmodernity that the text is autonomous and meanings are multivocal. However, unlike many postmodern readings, the Pentecostal community has not dismissed meta-narrative.” Grey, 104.

⁴⁷ Grey, *Three’s a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament*, 134.

The data from *Figure 8*. indicates that 68.1% (n=62) of all respondents considered it important to understand the culture of Ancient Israel for interpreting the OT. This figure is relatively low compared with the 94.5% (n=86) of respondents to the earlier question who considered establishing original contextual meaning important. The inconsistency with these figures may be due to the question's wording. While positive and negative questions can measure the same underlying attitude and have equal validity, according to N. Kamoen et al., "research shows that respondents are more inclined to disagree with negative questions than to agree with equivalent positive ones."⁴⁸ For analysis, if we consider the responses valid, there was very little uncertainty in the overall responses. Only one respondent selected the option "Neutral/Unsure", while a significant portion, 30.7% (n=12) of existing students and 30.8% (n=16) of graduates, agreed with the statement. Only 13.0% (n=3) of pastors agreed with the statement, which indicates that this group is more consistent with the academy in recognising the value of reading the Bible in light of the original cultural context. Grey suggests, "By using the text as a symbol independent of the historical and cultural context of the passage, Pentecostal readings can continue to invite the possibility of multiple readings of the text."⁴⁹ While this may be true, the data indicates that 68.1% (n=62) of all respondents and a significantly higher 82.6% (n=23) of pastors in the group consider understanding the culture of Ancient Israel a necessary pre-condition when utilising or interpreting the OT for preaching purposes.

Grey's recent work on the Australian Pentecostal community and their reading approaches to *Isaiah*⁵⁰, gives insight into the tendency of Pentecostal readings to be ahistorical with very little interest in the text's original language.⁵¹ She remarks,

The lack of awareness of textual issues perhaps reinforced the ahistorical nature of their readings as each participant tended to identify their particular translation as the "Word of God" rather than an English translation of an ancient text that evolved from a particular historical and social setting.⁵²

To assess the significance placed on original languages, the next part of question 26 was related to the statement, "It is important to have a basic understanding of ancient biblical languages to interpret the Old Testament well." The responses can be seen below in *Figure 9*.

⁴⁸ N Kamoen et al., "Why Are Negative Questions Difficult to Answer? : On the Processing of Linguistic Contrasts in Surveys," *Public opinion quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2017): 615, 629.

⁴⁹ Grey, *Three's a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament*, 104.

⁵⁰ See Grey, *Three's a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament*.

⁵¹ Grey, 104.

⁵² Grey, 142–43.

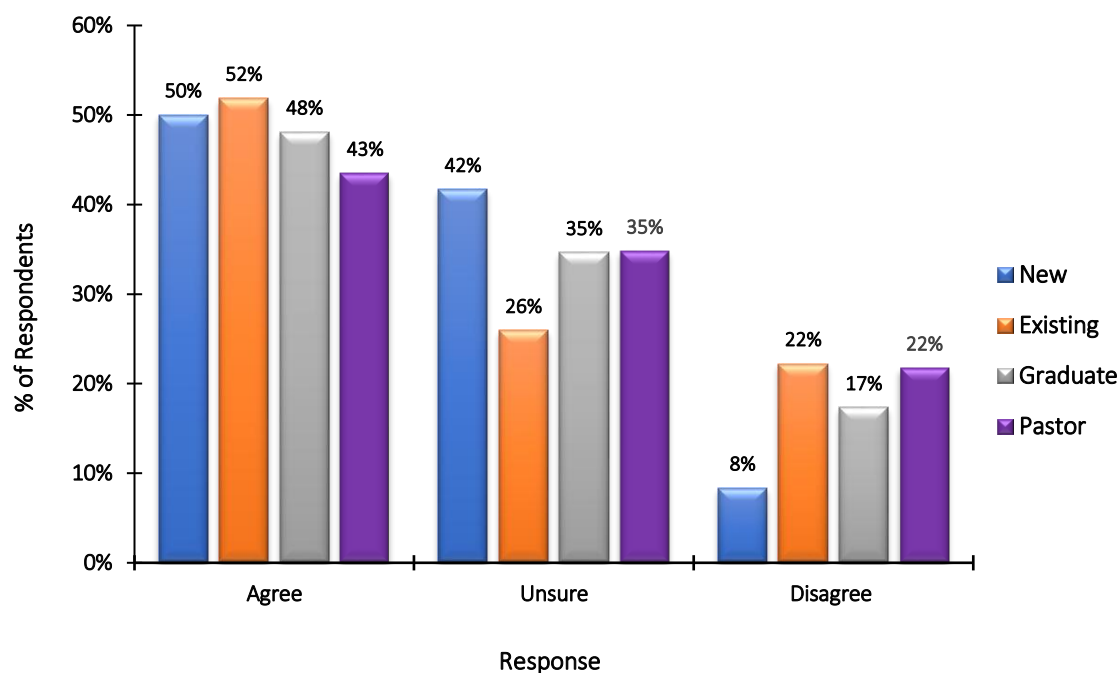


Figure 9. *It is important to have a basic understanding of ancient biblical languages to interpret the Old Testament well*⁵³

Figure 9. indicates that agreement with the statement is relatively consistent among approximately half of the respondents across all cohorts. The statement elicited a relatively high level of uncertainty, with a third of all respondents selecting “Neutral/Unsure” (n=30). Pastors’ uncertainty is consistent with the broader group, although marginally lower in agreement⁵⁴ and higher in disagreement with the statement. The mixed responses, primarily those around uncertainty, are possibly due to a degree of suspicion of new interpretations of texts based on a renewed understanding of the original language, particularly those that may challenge older interpretations. However, it should be noted that engaging with original languages can also provide new and substantial support for traditional interpretation.⁵⁵ According to Fee, while mastering biblical languages is essential at the highest level of exegesis, good exegetical work can be done even if one lacks these language skills.⁵⁶

⁵³ To compile Figure 9., The positive responses, *Strongly Agree* and *Agree*, and the negative responses, *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree*, have been combined to indicate a sense of general agreement and disagreement.

⁵⁴ It is worth noting that no pastors strongly agreed with the statement.

⁵⁵ Stanley E. Porter, “Linguistic Criticism,” ed. Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 199–201.

⁵⁶ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Fourth edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 29-30.

The subsequent statement from question 26 was, “Before preaching/teaching from a biblical passage; it is important to pray and ask God for guidance”. The overall responses are indicated below in *Figure 10*.

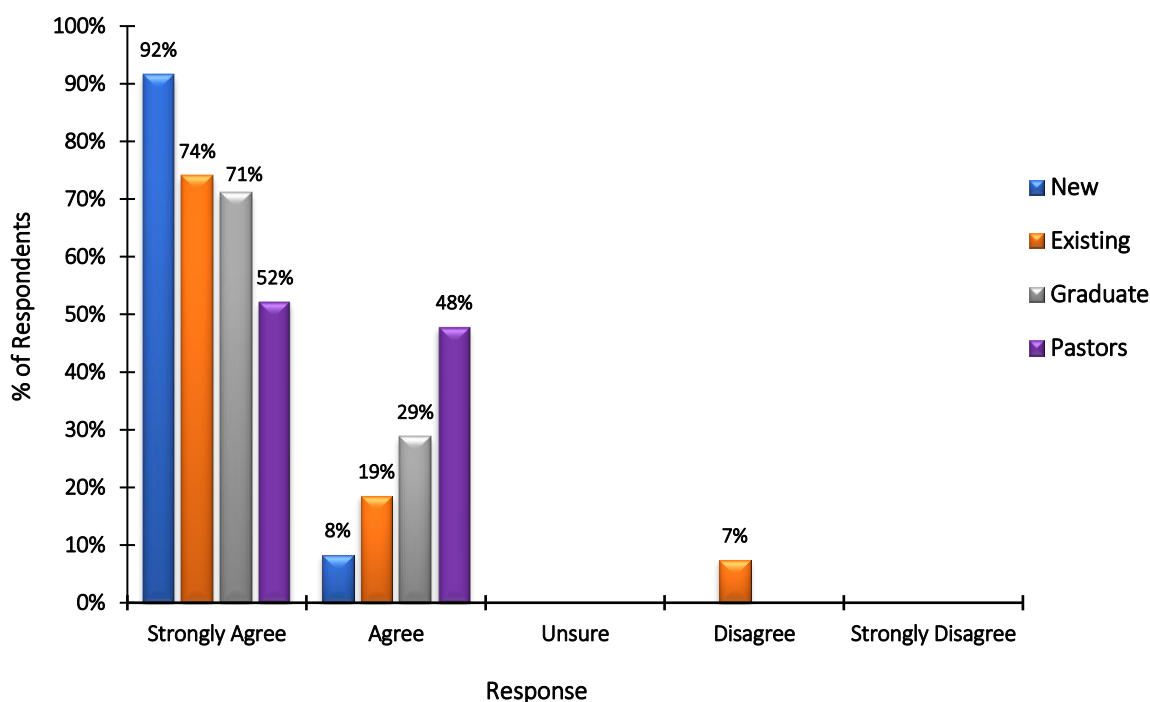


Figure 10. Before preaching/teaching from a biblical passage; it is important to pray and ask God for guidance

Responses to this statement evidence an overwhelming level of agreement with the statement, with 97.8% (n=89) of all respondents signalling either agreed or strongly agreed. For pastors, the response was 100% (n=23). Question 26 relates to a part of the overall process of preaching or teaching. The process may include praying during the preparation phase of deciding what to preach or teach or how to preach or teach. It may also include prayer during various stages of the writing process or prayer immediately before delivery. Whether one has a favourite passage or has been given a specific passage is not necessarily an indicator of seeking God’s guidance before preaching or teaching from a biblical passage or an indicator of the value placed on intercession on the part of the respondent.

Interestingly, 74.7% (n=68) of all respondents “strongly agreed” with the statement in question 26, relating to praying and seeking God’s guidance before preaching/teaching from a biblical passage. However, the data indicates that pastors were

less enthusiastic at 52.2 % (n=12).⁵⁷ Overall, the responses highlight the value placed on prayer by Pentecostals. Steven Land suggests that prayer is the most significant activity of Pentecostals.⁵⁸ He remarks, “individual prayers are shaped by the preaching and teaching of the Word.”⁵⁹ However, the data that indicates 97.8% (n=89) agreement with the statement in question 26 suggests the reverse is also true; the preaching and teaching of the word are also shaped by individual prayers.

The final statement contained within question 26 was, “The literal meaning of a biblical passage is the key to contemporary application”. See *Figure 11*.⁶⁰ below for overall responses.

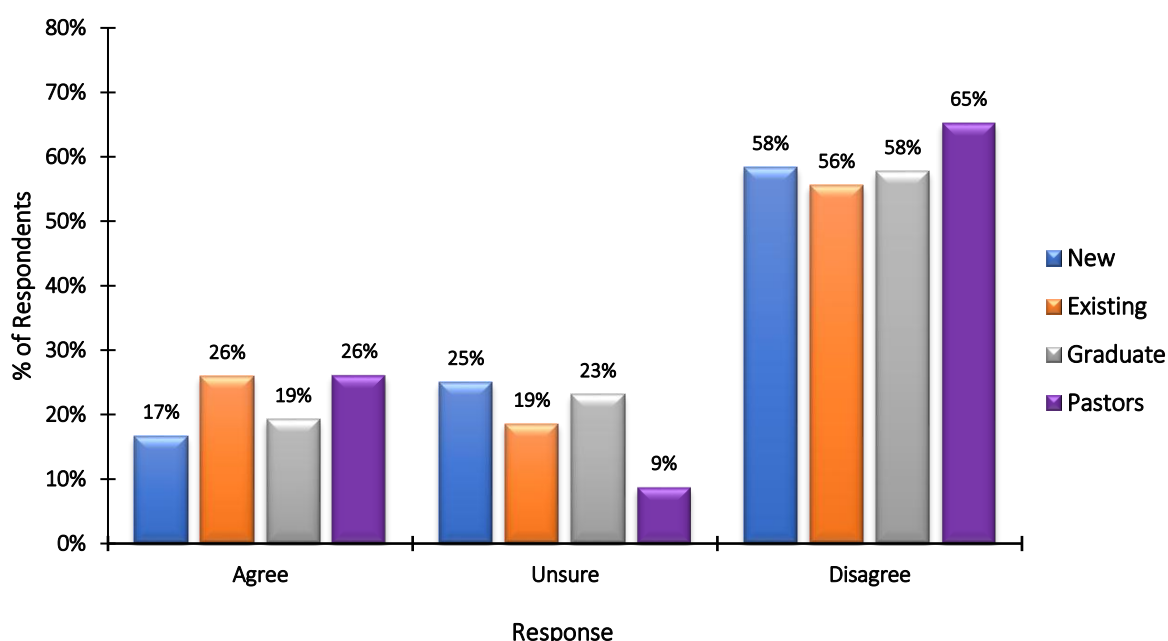


Figure 11. The literal meaning of a biblical passage is the key to contemporary application

Across all respondents, the data indicates that 20.9% (n=19) agreed⁶¹ with the statement, 22.0% (n=20) were unsure, and 57.1% (n=52) disagreed.⁶² The spread across the three student cohorts can be seen in *Figure 11*. No pastors “strongly agreed” with the statement, and the degree of uncertainty for pastors was significantly lower at 8.7% (n=2)

⁵⁷ The remaining pastors agreed rather than strongly agreed.

⁵⁸ Steven J Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Cleveland, Tennessee: CPT Press, 2010), 160.

⁵⁹ Land, 165.

⁶⁰ To compile *Figure 11.*, The positive responses, *Strongly agree* and *Agree*, and the negative responses, *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree*, have been combined to indicate a sense of general agreement and disagreement.

⁶¹ Includes responses for *Agrees* and *Strongly agrees*.

⁶² Includes responses for *Disagrees*, and *Strongly disagrees*

than the *New*, *Existing*, and *Graduate* cohorts. Interestingly, a relatively high number of pastors, 65.2% (n=15), disagreed with the statement. These figures seem to run counter to the traditional “literalistic hermeneutic” posited for the early Pentecostal interpretive method.⁶³

Following the line of enquiry of the previous question, the survey questionnaire continued with the theme of contemporary application. As part of question 27, participants rated, on a ten-point scale⁶⁴, the importance of contemporary application and the sharing of testimony when preaching or teaching from the OT. For contemporary applications, an overwhelming 92.1% (n=82)⁶⁵ of respondents indicated that the contemporary application was important to some degree.⁶⁶ This figure is consistent with what is considered essential for Pentecostal readers: application and contextualisation.⁶⁷

For the importance of sharing a testimony,⁶⁸ the data across all respondents indicated a mean of 6.56 (SD=2.0). The data was similar for pastors, with a mean of 6.65 (SD=2.1). While both these figures indicate importance, they are close to the neutral range. According to Land, for Pentecostals, the traditional purpose and function of sharing testimony was “to develop in the hearers the virtues, expectancy, attitudes, and experiences of those testifying.⁶⁹ Today, the significance of testimony is still an essential element in Pentecostal spirituality.⁷⁰ Ellington also highlights the sense of belonging to the community of believers as a feature of testimony.⁷¹ However, the data suggests that only 54.4% (n=49) of all respondents indicate a degree of importance in sharing a testimony.⁷² This figure is slightly lower for pastors at 52.2% (n=12). Also, it is worth noting that nearly a third, 32.2% (n=29), of all respondents gave a neutral response. For pastors, this figure is higher at 39.1% (n=9). These figures indicate that sharing a testimony is not necessarily considered an essential feature of spirituality.

⁶³ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture, and Community*, 89;

David Perry, *Spirit Baptism: The Pentecostal Experience in Theological Focus* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 9; Shane Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition: Analysing the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009), 55,77; Jacqueline Grey, “Biblical Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture with Spirit in Community,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (New York: Routledge, 2020), 130; Shane Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition: Analysing the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia*, 55,77.

⁶⁴ Based on the ten-point scale, the mean value across all respondents was 8.81 (SD=1.3), and the data for pastors was almost identical at 8.82 (SD=1.3).

⁶⁵ The lowest response on the scale was five from a single respondent. All other responses were between 6-10 on the scale.

⁶⁶ This is based on a rating between 7-10 on a ten-point scale.

⁶⁷ Grey, “Biblical Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture with Spirit in Community,” 136.

⁶⁸ The same scale is used here as with the first part of question 27. See footnote 82 above.

⁶⁹ Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 78.

⁷⁰ Kenneth J. Archer, “Pentecostal Theology as Story: Participating in God’s Mission,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 42.

⁷¹ Ellington, “Scripture: Finding One’s Place in God’s Story,” 65.

⁷² This is based on responses rated between 6 and 10 on the ten-point scale.

Engaging the Old Testament

Genesis 1:28 and Isaiah 45:18 were utilised to assess whether participants could identify the main themes of a biblical passage. In question 29, participants responded to the open-ended question: “For preaching, what would you consider to be the main themes of Genesis 1:28?” Two biblical studies faculty members independently coded the comments into categories of similar themes. After all the coding had been completed, differences in coding between the two faculty members were identified, and a moderator was used to help categorise discrepancies. The coding revealed six significant themes. See *Table 1*. below.

Theme	% of respondents ⁷³
Stewardship	47.2 (n=34)
Blessing⁷⁴	47.2 (n=34)
Multiplication	33.3 (n=24)
Dominion	31.9 (n=23)
Creation Care⁷⁵	26.4 (n=19)
Relationship	15.3 (n=11)

Table 1. Themes Identified from Genesis 1:28

To establish whether the themes noted by respondents were consistent with those of scholars, they were compared to a range of themes highlighted by modern commentators for Genesis 1:28 (see *Table 2*. below).⁷⁶

⁷³ Participants were permitted to select up to three themes.

⁷⁴ Blessing is understood here in terms of a benefit conveyed through a positive relationship between God and humanity. Kent Harold Richards, “Bless/Blessing,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 752.

⁷⁵ While the theme of *creation care* may be synonymous with the theme of stewardship, I have chosen to include it as a distinct theme as stewardship does not necessarily indicate responsible stewardship of creation.

⁷⁶ The rationale for the commentaries selected for this task is based on popular texts. All commentaries cited are listed in *Best Commentaries: Reviews and Ratings of Biblical, Theological, and Practical Christian Works*, which has a scoring algorithm for each work. Some of the criteria for the scoring algorithm are based on an average rating from users and journals, the number of reviews and an internal modifier that gives more weight to credible academic sources that may not have had many reviews. Although the ratings themselves are not an indicator of the value of individual work, the site helps note popular commentaries

Theme	Commentators selecting the same theme as the respondent
Stewardship	Arnold, Brueggemann, Cassuto, Hartley, McKeown, Waltke, Walton, Wenham
Blessing	Arnold, Brueggemann, Cassuto, Hamilton, Hartley, Kidner, McKeown, Sailhamer, Sarna, Waltke, Walton, Wenham
Multiplication	Arnold, Cassuto, Hamilton, Hartley, Kidner, Sailhamer, Sarna, Waltke, Walton, Wenham
Dominion	Arnold, Brueggemann, Cassuto, Hamilton, Hartley, McKeown, Sarna, Waltke, Walton, Wenham
Creation Care	Brueggemann, Cassuto, Hartley, McKeown
Relationship	Arnold, Brueggemann, Kidner, McKeown, Sarna

Table 2. Themes from Genesis 1:28 Identified by Respondent and Commentator

72.2% (n=52) of respondents for the central theme of Genesis 1:28 were consistent with the selected commentators on the book of Genesis. It is impossible to ascertain whether all the remaining responses directly correspond to the themes in *Table 1*. without further data, as many were brief or vague⁷⁷. So, while the figure could be higher based on the classification of responses, it indicates that most responses regarding dominant themes are consistent with scholarship. If we take the first response only, this figure is significantly higher at 88.9% (n=64).

Following the same procedure for Isaiah 45:18 as with Genesis 1:28, the results to question 38, "For preaching, what would you consider to be the main themes of Isaiah 45:18?" can be seen in *Table 3*. below.

and their general credibility. John Dyer, "Commentaries on Genesis," *Best Commentaries: Reviews and Ratings of Biblical, Theological, and Practical Christian Works*, last modified 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.bestcommentaries.com/genesis/>.

⁷⁷ Examples include "Creation" or "God's creation".

<i>Theme</i>	<i>% of respondents selecting the theme</i>
God the Creator	62.6 (n=42)
Purpose	25.4 (n=17)
Monotheism	22.4 (n=15)
Sovereignty of God	22.4 (n=15)

Table 3. Themes Identified from Isaiah 45:18

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Commentators selecting the same theme as the respondent</i>
God the Creator	<i>Blenkinsopp, Brueggemann, Motyer, Oswalt, Smith, Westermann</i>
Purpose	<i>Blenkinsopp, Brueggemann, Childs, Goldingay, Motyer, Oswalt, Payne, Smith</i>
Monotheism	<i>Blenkinsopp, Goldingay, Payne, Westermann</i>
Sovereignty of God	<i>Blenkinsopp, Brueggemann, Childs, Goldingay, Motyer, Payne</i>
Relationship	<i>Blenkinsopp, Brueggemann, Goldingay, Payne, Watts</i>
Earth is Created for Habitation	<i>Blenkinsopp, Brueggemann, Childs, Motyer, Watts</i>
Order	<i>Oswalt, Brueggemann, Watts</i>

Table 4. Themes from Isaiah 45:18 Identified by Respondent and Commentator

43.3% (n=99) of survey responses for the central themes of Isaiah 45:18 was consistent with selected commentators on the book of Isaiah. This figure is considerably lower than

Genesis 1:28. If we take the first response only, this figure is significantly higher at 71.6% (n=48). Both figures for Genesis 1:28 and Is 45:18 are relatively high when one considers the responses are not based on exegetical work but rather constitute an initial response to the survey question.⁷⁸

For question 30, participants indicated the resources they would utilise to preach a sermon from Genesis 1:28. The extent to which various resources are used can be seen in *Figure 12*. below. *Figure 12*. indicates the use of commentaries.

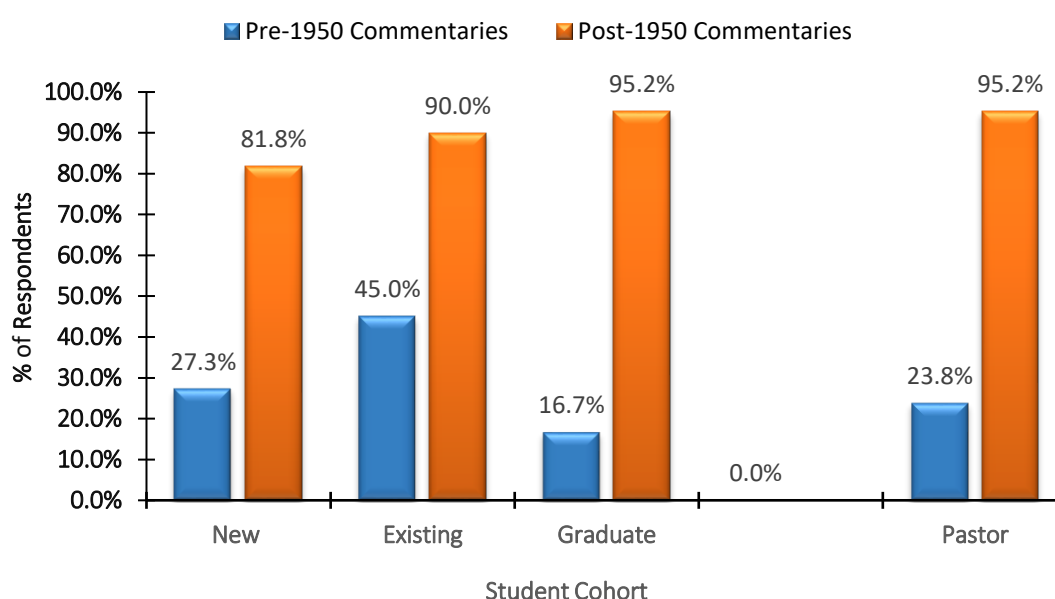


Figure 12. Resources Utilised: Commentaries

At AC, it is recommended that students have access to “good quality” commentaries.⁷⁹ Lectures and tutorials typically provide details of such commentaries and commentary series.⁸⁰ While as Fee notes, “There really is no completely satisfactory one-volume commentary,”⁸¹ most summarise the historical context and briefly give the meaning of the text in terms of literary context.⁸² Alongside the context questions, the purpose of referring to a commentary is to discover answers to content questions that

⁷⁸ It is possible that the responses reflected some aspect of prior learning.

⁷⁹ See Fee and Stuart for seven criteria in judging a “good quality” commentary. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 1993, 271-72.

⁸⁰ Many of those recommended are consistent with Fee and Stuart.

⁸¹ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 1993, 270.

⁸² Fee and Stuart, 270.

have become apparent as a part of the study.⁸³ Students are encouraged to consult post-1950 commentaries due to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the study of which has impacted “modern” Bible commentaries. This is due to variant readings in specific passages from the OT.⁸⁴

It is encouraging to note the data in *Figure 12*. All students scored relatively low in utilising pre-1950 commentaries compared with post-1950 commentaries. It is also reassuring to note a steady increase in the use of the later commentaries from *New* students 81.8% (n=9) to *Existing* students 90.0% (n=18) to *Graduate* 95.2% (n=40). Furthermore, 95.2% (n=20) of the pastors in this cohort would also employ more contemporary commentaries.

Generally, *Figures 12*. indicates that students typically utilise contemporary commentaries for sermon preparation, which helps engage the three essential elements provided by commentary: first, assistance in discovering the historical context; second, assistance with the various content questions; third, possible meaning based on substantiated arguments for texts that are difficult to interpret. Each element suggests something other than the anti-intellect roots of the movement.

3. Conclusion

An original perception regarding the lack of alignment between an ecclesial or faith-oriented reading of the biblical text and an academic one informed the survey design. Having conducted the survey and analysed the findings, I suggest that what has emerged is not an ontological division between two fixed and bounded groups but rather a hermeneutical issue: a seeming tension between two stances, two motivations and two idealised outcomes.

On the one hand, you have what we might call the Pentecostal tradition. This tradition assumes the first stance, which encompasses a conviction based on an informed appreciation of the Bible framed around its truth claims derived from its divine origins. However, those of this first stance approach the text in such a way as to gain another insight from what we might refer here to as another, or second stance, based on a critical approach to the same source material, the Bible. We might refer to this second stance as the academy. Here, there is an awareness of the logic or veracity of the additional insight that comes with approaching the biblical texts with academic rigour. For example, this is shown in the value of original context and appreciation of original languages.

⁸³ Fee and Stuart, 273.

⁸⁴ Not to mention the volume of literature found at the Qumran site. For examples of variant readings, see Timothy H Lim, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48–54. Also, see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Second Revised Edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

It is precisely here that I suggest that the intended meaning of the title of this thesis becomes evident. If we think of ecclesial practice as adopting the 'conviction' side of the coin and the academy as adopting the 'critique' side, neither, in and of itself, is a totalising and fulsome account of Pentecostal practice – perhaps a *good* interpretation of the Bible lies somewhere between conviction and critique.