

Bradley Truman Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics: Comparisons and Contemporary Impact* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

In *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, Bradley Truman Noel has given us a useful and important perspective on an ongoing difficulty in Pentecostal hermeneutics and praxis: How are we to address the rapidly shifting cultural environment in which Evangelical (read: Modernist/Rationalist) interpretations of scripture are increasingly suspect to an emerging generation that styles itself Postmodern? Noel's response to this question forms the thesis of his entire project: We need to recover certain impulses deep within the earliest expressions of the Pentecostal movement that are more resonant with the values of emerging Postmodernism.

Three in particular stand out: 1) Rejection of Rationalism as an exclusive arbiter of arriving at truth; 2) Emphasis on lived experience; and 3) Emphasis on the community as a locus of meaning. Unfortunately, writes Noel, these three early values have been continually eroded by Pentecostalism's ongoing engagement with Evangelicalism, especially by the tendency within Pentecostal scholarship to adopt Evangelical approaches to scripture, including historical-critical methods of biblical exegesis (which Noel contends are essentially Rationalist, and thus closely wedded to the failing Modernist agenda), emphasis on the scripture alone as the sole resource for theological reflection (which undercuts the importance of the ongoing lived experience of the Spirit), and the emphasis on

individual salvation (which erodes the importance of the community in shaping the faith experience of the individual).

To secure this thesis, Noel follows a logical, though necessarily meandering course. Chapter 1 sets up the problem, defines terms, and lays out the book's primary objective: to assess the significance of Postmodernity for Pentecostal hermeneutics (8). Of particular interest: his definition of *Postmodernism*—always a difficult subject. At its base, this movement emerges as a challenge to the Modernist faith in the “supremacy of reason as the final arbiter of truth. Other valid paths to knowledge include experience, emotions, and even intuitions” (5).

Chapter 2 surveys the historical background that brought us to this place (Pre-modern, Modern, Postmodern), engages the thought of four key philosophical voices that are widely recognized as significant contributors to Postmodern thought (Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty), surveys the range of positions within this debate, sets out key tenets that appear to be commonly held within the postmodern community, and then subjects the whole to an Evangelically-based critique.

Chapter 3 engages in a parallel evaluation of early Pentecostalism, describing the theological thought and practice of a widely array of early Pentecostal thinkers (Charles Parham, William Seymour, George F. Taylor, David W. Myland, Donald Gee, Myer Pearlman, Carl Brumback). The upshot of this survey is that Pentecostalism differed from the larger ecclesial milieu in its stress

on the importance of lived experience in the faith, on humility before the Word, on the vibrant present-day work of the Spirit, on the importance of the community of faith (note the role of *testimony*), and on the barrenness of Rationalism and intellectualism. (Earlier, Noel pointed out that Pentecostals were unusual in that they based their practice and much of their doctrine on *narrative* portions of scripture, especially Luke and Acts, rather than *didactic* portions [9]).

Chapter 4 examines the issues surrounding the work of Gordon Fee as a locus of theological controversy within Pentecostalism; the thesis here is that not only Fee, but also his detractors, launched their discussions from a hermeneutical framework that employed a more-or-less rationalist approach to exegesis. Chapter 5 parallels Chapter 4 by assessing the hermeneutical work of Rudolf Bultmann as an example of Modernism, “rationalism gone awry” (p. 12).

Chapter 6 finds a distinctively Pentecostal hermeneutic in the writings of Kenneth J. Archer. A quote from Archer epitomizes the thesis of the chapter: “Pentecostals require a hermeneutical strategy that involves an interdependent triadic dialogue between Scripture, the Spirit and community resulting in a creative negotiated meaning” (p. 140).

Chapter 7 teases a single thread from Archer’s triad: What, specifically, is the role of the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutical enterprise? This chapter, too, engages a variety of scholars, probing for practical expressions of

the ways in which the Spirit-led approaches might engage the text differently from approaches that are less open to the Spirit.

Chapter 8 summarizes the whole and presents once again the book's thesis: There are important impulses in Pentecostal history that allow for a larger and more appreciative engagement with emerging Postmodernism. To honor those impulses, Pentecostals should develop their own hermeneutic rather than adopting one ready-made in the Evangelical world. This book is a call for a return to Pentecostal distinctives, to develop a more fully orbed Pentecostal hermeneutic, and thus to remain true to the vital impulses of the movement's origins.

The author achieves this end although with two small caveats. First, one wonders about the selection of Bultmann (Chapter 5) as an example of "Rationalism gone awry." Since the larger category under discussion is Evangelical hermeneutics, the argument might be more compelling if the author had selected someone the Evangelicals themselves embrace. Second, one might hope for a somewhat more nuanced reading of the phrase, "historical-critical method;" biblical texts are in fact historically conditioned documents, and it seems that they require to be read first against their own cultural and ecclesial backgrounds. Perhaps Noel will address this issue in a subsequent project; I for one would welcome his insights.

Overall, the book demonstrates a sweeping grasp of the issues as well as a fine grasp of the background historical details against which the issues should be interpreted if our analysis is to make sense. This is a fine dis-

play of historical-critical scholarship and a timely reminder that the answers to future questions may indeed be found in the past.

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