

## THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN HERMENEUTICS

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In theology a distinction is made between the Spirit *inspiring* and the Spirit *illuminating* Scripture. There is a differentiation made between original inspiration and a contemporary illumination of the Spirit in relation to the Bible. Beyond acknowledging his involvement in the process of forming Scripture, the church holds that the Spirit also guides the community as it walks with God in the light of its Scriptures toward the fulfillment of its mission and the consummation of the age. The risen Lord, active in the preparation of Scripture, is also ever present with the people of God. Oscar Cullmann writes, 'The Lord is present in scripture and the Spirit is present in the reader who has faith'.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem natural then to speak of an original and a contemporary inspiration by the Spirit, of his breathing in relation to the writing of Scripture (2 Tim. 3.16) and his breathing in relation to its readers (Eph. 1.17).<sup>2</sup> However, most theologians introduce a termino-

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1. O. Cullmann, *The Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1956), p. 99.

2. Prior to this essay, I dealt with this matter in *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), chs. 7-9.

logical distinction which obscures this. Aiming at preserving the unique product of the original inspiration, many theologians prefer to name the Spirit's contemporary breathing 'illumination', even though the two operations are breathings performed by the same Spirit.<sup>3</sup> They likely do so because of the nervousness which surrounds the defence of biblical inspiration in the modern setting. It is feared that, by using the same term (inspiration) to refer both to the breathing which created the Bible and to the breathing which enlightens its contemporary readers, scholars will obscure the normativity of the text over reader interests in the modern world. Anyone familiar with modern theology knows that this danger is real and not imagined.

Nevertheless, earlier Christian theologians, not caught up in our polemical situation and less nervous about the status of original inspiration, did not feel the need to differentiate the two kinds of inspiration so sharply. John Wesley could write in his notes on 2 Tim. 3.16, 'The Spirit of God not only once *inspired* those who wrote the Bible but continually *inspires* those who read it with earnest prayer'.<sup>4</sup> This language indicates his recognition of a double inspiration—an inspiration active in the formation of the Bible and an inspiration active when Scripture is read today. Evidently Wesley did not think that inspiration ceased with the completion of the Bible. Apparently he saw divine inspiration as a larger process encompassing both original inspiration and present day illumination, and was prepared to call the latter inspiration also. If Christians experience inspiration today, it follows that they should be closely attuned to the Spirit who is deeply involved in acts of their reading.

I certainly agree with Wesley in calling both operations of the Spirit, not just the original inspiration which produced the Bible but also the contemporary breathing of the Spirit in the hearts of readers, inspiration. Both are crucially important and both belong to that larger process of inspiration in which the Spirit first gave the Scriptures and then repeatedly gives them again and again to readers. God's breathing ought to be recognised both in the formation and in the appropriation of the text. The Bible should be viewed as part of a

3. Noted by F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 282.

4. Discussed by D.A.D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 129.

larger revelatory work of the Spirit who is always present in the community of faith helping people to interpret God's will for their lives. The work of the Spirit giving wisdom and revelation has not ceased and in our reading of the Bible the transforming process goes on aimed at conforming us to the image of Christ and leading us to fathom God's will for our lives.<sup>5</sup>

### *Why is Contemporary Inspiration Needed?*

Contemporary inspiration is needed because original inspiration has the goal of transforming readers and fails without it. What good is inspired Scripture if it remains a dead letter and fails to impact people? If the Bible is to become the word of God in our lives, the letter is going to have to come alive by means of the Spirit. Like the Gettysburg address in American political experience, we need to know both what the text meant and what the speech means for life today.<sup>6</sup>

Ordinary Christians know how important contemporary inspiration is. As disciples of Christ, they know how badly they need the Spirit to help them recognise the significance of Scripture. By an implied epistemology of faith, they know they are not sufficient in themselves adequately to interpret God's revelation or worldly reality. First, as regards God's revelation, believers recognise the partiality of their knowledge (1 Cor. 13.12). They know too that the Bible can be difficult to interpret and that they need the Spirit's help to grasp what is being disclosed. We need the Spirit to help us recognize God's voice and to discern between spirits (1 Thess. 5.19-22). And since to know God is to know a person, there is a subjective dimension in our interpretation which requires a living relationship with God and the operation of his Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

5. Paul J. Achtemeier is sensitive to the Bible's belonging to the process of our formation as God's people (*The Inspiration of Scripture* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980]).

6. Karl Barth emphasises how the Bible becomes a power in our lives by the grace of God. He exaggerates the point in reaction to any notion that we control God's Word and takes it in too much of an existentialist direction. But the basic point is valid and can be registered in a more balanced way: see K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), ch. 8.

7. J.D.G. Dunn expounds as well as any scholar on the nature of the Spirit's operations in the community (*Jesus and the Spirit* [London: SCM Press,

Secondly, interpreting worldly reality is not a simple matter either. Reality is complex and it is easy to miss the mark. In deference to Heidegger's warning, Christians should not be seeking the easy way out or making light of real difficulties. In terms of biblical interpretation, this means that bridging the gap from past text to present situation can be onerous. Fusing the horizons is not a simple operation.<sup>8</sup> What does God's word mean for us today? How do we apply it to pressing issues such as gender, pluralism, ecology and the like?<sup>9</sup> How do we transcend reader prejudices which silence the text in its power to transform? The only thing a person can do is cry out for understanding with the psalmist: 'Make me to know thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth and teach me' (Ps. 26.4-5).

According to the New Testament, God hears this cry for understanding by giving us his Spirit. Paul speaks of the Spirit comprehending the thoughts of God and assisting us to understand God's gifts (1 Cor. 2.10-12). In the writings of John, the Paraclete is called an anointing that teaches us (Jn 16.13; 1 Jn 2.20). He leads, guides, directs and illumines us. He makes the presentation of the word of God effective (1 Thess. 1.5-6). He makes us resonate with the experience of the psalmist: 'I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me' (Ps. 16.17).<sup>10</sup>

This implies that God did not speak in the Scriptures and then become silent. God did not stop breathing and illuminating the community after he had inspired the Bible. There is not a gap of thousands of years between us and the biblical witness for the simple reason that the Spirit is putting us in touch with the same subject matter even

1975], chs. 8-10).

8. A.C. Thiselton speaks of fusing the two horizons of text and reader (*The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* [Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980]).

9. W.M. Swartley offers four case studies where Christians have sought to relate the Scriptures to the topics in his title: *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983). The book illustrates how difficult fusing the two horizons can be.

10. H. Thieliicke places emphasis on the Spirit as the power of the effective presentation of God's Word (*The Evangelical Faith*, III [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], part 1).

today, helping us to understand what the ancients said, making God's saving truth present to us now.

### *Why the Deafening Silence?*

If our need of the illuminating work of the Spirit when we read the Bible is obvious, why is it impossible to locate detailed discussions of it? Why do so few theologians help us understand it? I challenge you to open the standard books on biblical interpretation and see whether you can find a serious discussion of the illuminating work of the Spirit in them. They all mention it in passing but seldom offer a proper discussion of it. I find I have to go back to Jonathan Edwards and John Owen to find one.<sup>11</sup>

The evangelical writers of today concentrate almost exclusively on teasing out the originally intended meanings of the biblical writers, as if that were all that was needed. Gordon D. Fee, a Pentecostal biblical scholar, can write a book entitled *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* and say nothing about the Spirit's role in interpretation. Richard A. Muller, who knows how much more is involved in interpretation than simply exegesis, does not address the issue either. What are we to conclude? It appears as if the evangelicals either do not think illumination matters much or think it needs no explanation. Presumably they are telling us that, if you wish to understand the Bible, sharpen your exegetical tools and go to work.<sup>12</sup>

Liberal scholars are a little better, at least in the sense that they can be counted on to take the contemporary horizon seriously. But they still discuss hermeneutics in terms of a creative human activity without mentioning the supernatural dimension of it. It sounds as though we are doing nothing more than reading any old English text all on

11. F.H. Klooster and A. Lindsley agree about the lacuna in their chapter addressing this problem in E.D. Radmacher and R.D. Preus (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), ch. 8.

12. G.D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) and R.A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991). I was surprised not even to find a serious discussion of the role of the Spirit in hermeneutics in G.R. Osborne's impressive new book *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

our own. Neither evangelicals nor liberals seem at all inclined to take the Bible, the present horizon *and* the Spirit (all three) seriously. Is this too much to ask? How can a theologically adequate hermeneutical theory fail to do this?<sup>13</sup>

Why is there this silence? Are modern theologians assuming that we know about illumination already, or does the problem lie deeper? It was not always so—premodern theologians paid heed to spiritual aspects of reading the Bible. I think the problem lies deep in the nature of modern theology. Firstly, there is the strong influence of rationalism in Western culture which fosters a neglect of the Spirit. There is a mystery when it comes to the Spirit which rationalism does not favour. It does not feel comfortable talking about God's invisible wind. It prefers to draw up rules for interpretation which will deliver the meaning of any text by human effort. It does not want to drag mysticism into hermeneutics. Therefore, the only thing we leave for the Spirit to do in interpretation is to rubber-stamp what our scholarly exegesis concludes. This is an obstruction to effective biblical interpretation which grieves the Spirit of God. It is in sharp contrast to African spirituality (for example) which sees the Spirit permeating everything.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, a rationalist orientation translates into a preference for static, propositional categories. It leads us to treat the Bible as a code book rather than a more flexible case book. When the Bible is approached as a code book, the Spirit cannot open it up. No room is left for that. Our cultural presuppositions tend to distort the true purpose of the Bible and the nature of its text. Powerless Christianity leads to a powerless biblical interpretation.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, evangelicals also neglect the illuminating work of the Spirit because of the polemical situation in which they find themselves over against liberal theology. Though supernaturalists are capable of

13. I was relieved to find quite a number of references to the Spirit and hermeneutics when I turned to the index of A.C. Thiselton's second magisterial book *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). Sadly even Thiselton does not address the issue directly, though he is the one we must long to have do so.

14. A. Anderson, *Moya: The Holy Spirit in an African Context* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1991).

15. The effect of rationalism on hermeneutics is one of C.H. Kraft's themes in *Christianity with Power: Your Worldview and Your Experience of the Supernatural* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1989).

acknowledging a contemporary breathing of the Spirit, they do not do so. They do not do so because of a fear of subjectivity. The fear prevents them from overcoming the cultural bias just mentioned. They see liberals cutting the Spirit off from the Word and making the meaning of the Bible whatever the reader chooses. This results in interpretive chaos and evangelicals are appalled. The nervousness this creates prevents them from saying much about any contemporary work of the Spirit. That would be to admit subjectivity through the back door. Their whole energy has to be directed toward securing the biblical foundations and toward that alone. They worry that, if they were to allow too much of a role for the Spirit in the context of hermeneutics, human predilections would overshadow the meaning of the Spirit in the original sense of the biblical text itself.

I understand this anxiety but we cannot allow it to push us into an unbalanced position. Abuse must not negate proper use, as the saying goes. The challenge before us is to keep the balance of past and present inspiration without falling into these subjectivist theologies.

### *Past and Present Inspiration*

Justice has to be done to divine inspiration both past and present. It is wrong to emphasise the one and ignore the other. When we stress past and ignore contemporary inspiration, we risk dead orthodoxy. When we stress contemporary and ignore past inspiration, we risk heresy. How then should the relationship between past and present inspiration be framed? I would say that the Holy Spirit, who inspired the apostolic testimony and binds himself to it, opens up the significance of the Scriptures for believers of all ages. Anchored in the Bible as canon, the Spirit opens up what is written there under the conditions of a controlled liberty. By controlled liberty I mean a freedom within parameters, a liberty which honours both the original meaning of Scripture and the fecundity of the text to be opened up. The Spirit helps us understand what was meant by the biblical authors with a view to our understanding what God wants to say to us today.<sup>16</sup>

In effect, this dialectical model combines the tendency of the school

16. Cullmann attempts to balance past and present inspiration in much this way: see T.M. Dorman, *The Hermeneutics of Oscar Cullmann* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1991), p. 156.

of Antioch to honor past inspiration and the tendency of the school of Alexandria to honor present inspiration in honoring both. It respects the primacy of the original meaning of texts and is also open to the mystery to which they bear testimony.<sup>17</sup> This approach avoids the liberal mistake of cutting the Spirit off from the Word and the conservative error of being closed to a surplus in the Bible's meaning. It would link a disciplined study of the text with possibilities of uplifting breakthroughs by way of creative, Spirit-breathed insight.

The model implies a combination of careful exegesis with prayerful attentiveness. It involves hearing what the text itself wants to say and appropriating it meditatively in our context. Study is supplemented by our asking the Spirit to bring our minds and hearts into a greater conformity with the subject matter. It means consenting to the text, while at the same time striving to discern its applications above the clamour of our own sinful resistance.

In a strong image which would be controversial today, Schleiermacher spoke of a masculine and a feminine reading of the Bible. By masculine reading he meant an analysis of the original meaning keeping at a critical distance, and by a feminine reading he meant creative intuition and immediacy with the text in our present. He wished to keep a historical reconstruction of textual meaning together with an immediacy of listening and understanding. I think he was right to want to respect the distinctiveness of the textual horizon in relation to our own reader horizon. Without the former, meaning could collapse into hopeless pluralism; without the latter, reading could become an academic exercise without transforming power. Paul Ricoeur would speak of a world behind the text and a world in front of the text and call us to negotiate both worlds. Thiselton puts the basic distinction in these terms: '(1) the capacity of the text, as a sub-system of signs operative within a life-world, to communicate a message and (2) the actualization of the text as a particular act of communication within the time-horizon of a reader or a reading community'.<sup>18</sup>

However, before probing the subjective aspects of biblical interpretation, I need to say something, however briefly, about the Spirit's

17. B.F. Meyer speaks of synthesising Antioch and Alexandria (*Critical Realism and the New Testament* [Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1989], pp. 44-49).

18. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, p. 64.

*controlled* liberty, because liberal theologians would balk at my restricting the Spirit's freedom in this way (liberty is important to liberal theology). Since the Spirit blows where it wills, why limit the Spirit to the Bible? In a day of reader-response theologies, which operate relatively free of the biblical witness, it would be irresponsible of me not to try to clarify this point.<sup>19</sup> Why do I say that the Spirit wants to subordinate himself to the written word of God?

### *The Apostolicity of the Church*

The principle of the Spirit's being tied to the Scriptures is laid down in effect by the Nicean Creed when it identifies the fourth mark of the church as apostolicity. Apostolicity here signals that the church is founded and established on the testimony of the original apostles to Jesus Christ, extant in the Bible. Their testimony is taken to be unique, valid for all time, not to be replaced or made void by later testimony. Subsequent generations of people come to know Jesus Christ through their word as the Spirit bears witness to it. This witness extant in the writings of the New Testament is held to be the norm against which the church of every generation should measure itself and obligate itself to be in accord. When the Spirit opens the truth up for us, therefore, we would expect it to be coherent with the apostolic Gospel. Later revelation should not contradict earlier revelation but should cohere with its central vision.<sup>20</sup> By this means, the early church protected itself against the Gnostic heresies. It subjected itself to a rule of faith consonant with the testimony of the original apostles embodied in the Scriptures. It thought that even the Spirit of God was bound to it.

Was this decision sound? It seems to be, based on the fact that Christian revelation takes the form of salvation history, not a series of mystical encounters. Because it is historical, revelation has to be captured and fixed in written documents so it can be passed on in a stable, permanent form. Thus, when the Spirit speaks to us today about the

19. G.D. Kaufman, for example, emphasizes the liberty of God from any such control ('Doing Theology from a Liberal Christian Point of View', in D. Woodbridge and T.E. McComiskey [eds.], *Doing Theology in Today's World* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], pp. 397-415).

20. For more on the apostolicity of the church, see H. Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), pp. 354-59.

will of God, we recognise it to be the Spirit of Jesus if it speaks in continuity with the normative scriptural revelation, the product of salvation history. This (I take it) was a landmark decision taken by the early church and it is difficult to imagine it ever being reversed. The ecumenical consensus has always been that the Spirit continues to speak but that the criterion for knowing that it is the Spirit of God speaking is the light of normative revelation, a product of salvation history and located in the writings of the apostles. In opposition to the liberal transformist theology of development where revelation is a dynamic experience lacking in specific content, I am siding with the historic Christian church in measuring progress in interpretation by the standard of God's written word. I believe the Spirit binds himself to the biblical canon.

### *The Openness of Scripture*

This does not mean, however, that there is no room for liberty on the part of God's Spirit in hermeneutics. The question has to be asked, what kind of text is the Bible as a canonical text? A normative text, if it took the form of a law code, would present a quite different interpretive challenge than would a normative text which came in the form of a narrative or a pluriformity of literary genres. Rudolf Bultmann would agree with me that the New Testament is foundational for the church but would understand its nature as a text and consequently its authority for us differently. He would not locate its authority in the cognitive dimension but rather in its power to occasion fresh experiences of revelation in hearers, when deployed in situations of proclamation with reference to human self-understanding. Bultmann takes the biblical witness to be proclamatory, a personal word of address from God, by which a new self-understanding could be evoked in the hearer. Therefore for him the authority of the Bible does not derive from its content but from its existential power to change individuals.<sup>21</sup>

Although this would do away with the cognitive aspects of authority in the Bible, it alerts us to the need to pay attention to the nature of the biblical text as canon. We are forced to ask: what kind of text is the Spirit seeking to open up?

21. See R. Bultmann, 'The Concept of Revelation', in S.M. Ogden (ed.), *Existence and Faith* (London: Meridian Books, 1960).

Enquiring into the nature of the biblical text is a fruitful question. Though some may think it obvious, there is more to textuality than meets the eye. The discovery of modern research into texts has been the insight that it is a property of texts themselves (especially classic texts like the Bible) that they are opened up in the presence of new reader horizons. Texts do not just sit passively by while readers plunder their meanings. They project a world into which we may enter, a world which may impact upon us. Interpretation is about more than retrieving information—it is also about the effects on readers that texts can set in motion.<sup>22</sup>

One can see the dynamic nature of texts within the Bible. In the Old Testament, to take a single example, the promise given to Abraham recorded in Gen. 12.1-3 is cited by both Isaiah and Ezekiel to make quite different points (Isa. 51.1-3; Ezek. 33.23-29). The original text was a dynamic one and capable of being used in new ways by subsequent interpreters in the Spirit. In the New Testament, it is obvious that texts cited from the Hebrew Bible are regularly given a christological twist. Peter changes the direction of Amos 9.11-12 (for example) in a speech recorded in Acts 15. The Old Testament is being read in light of the new situation created by the coming of Jesus Christ and the Spirit is indicating meanings that do not correspond to the grammatical-historical meaning of the text.<sup>23</sup>

We may have trouble accepting this, but the earlier theologians did not. They employed a spiritual reading which allowed them to move in the midst of a kaleidoscope of biblical imagery. They were much more conscious than we allow ourselves to be of the variety of interpretation. They knew that texts can cause dynamic things to happen as the Spirit actualizes their message in our consciousness. Though we are hindered from reflecting on it owing to our polemical situation, we also know experientially that texts do many things to us: they judge, exhort, challenge, comfort, heal and transform us. Let us resist allowing this truth to disappear from our reflections about hermeneutics due to fearfulness.

22. On shifting paradigms of textuality, see Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, ch. 2.

23. I admire the courage of Douglas Moo in admitting this in an ecclesial context suspicious of it (in D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge [eds.], *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], pp. 175-211).

The fact is that the Bible contains many literary genres and exercises numerous kinds of authority. Its authority is sometimes but certainly not always cognitive or informative in nature. Paul himself lists four different functions of Scripture: it is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3.16). Thus Scripture challenges us existentially as well as teaching us cognitively. It is more complex and richly authoritative than a box of retrievable bits of information could be. Bultmann may exaggerate the performative authority of the Bible but we do not need to allow ourselves to be pushed in an intellectualist direction. Bultmann's error does not lie in pointing to an existential dimension in biblical authority. He is right to do so. His mistake lies in eliminating the other ways (including the cognitive) in which the biblical text carries authority for the church. For our part, let us keep all the dimensions of authority alive and let no aspect, however important, be exaggerated out of proportion.

The Bible functions as an authority in a variety of ways because the truth itself is so richly various. The truth of the Bible into which the Spirit would lead us does not consist only of matters of fact and bits of information. It includes truth for thought, for life, for feeling. The Spirit is concerned as much with the truth of our walk as the truth of our talk. His interests encompass all these things and to this end he makes full use of the Scriptures' ability to be opened up.

The nature of the text of Scripture makes it flexible and openable by the Spirit. It is unlike the Koran, which presents Muslims with a set of rather inflexible rules. That such a Scripture is hard to open up is clear when one considers modern Islam struggling to relate to the modern world. The nature of the Bible as a rule of faith is that its text can be opened up. It does not even lay down rules for its own interpretation. The situation we face is not cut and dried even on the textual horizon. We devise rules for interpretation as we do in science in order to solve problems and deal with data. God has given us room in which to move and the Spirit to direct us toward meaning.

### *Exploring Present Inspiration*

When enquiring into the ministry of the Spirit as he opens up the word of God for us, we should not define the issue too narrowly. It is a broad question we are addressing: how does God lead his people in history to get a better grip on the significance of his word? How do

we arrive at a fuller understanding as the church moves down through history? Thus we are not merely asking how an individual can derive more from his or her quiet time with God. We are asking how God's revealed truth unfolds and becomes actualized. How does the Spirit cause the subject matter to become clearer? How does its richness unfold in continuity with what went before but also in dynamic ways?

Karl Rahner uses the analogy of persons in love because it is parallel to our covenant partnership with God. He considers how love unfolds over time.<sup>24</sup> A man falls head over heels in love with a woman. He is transformed by it but cannot grasp all it involves or all that is happening to him at once. Letters cannot begin to convey what he feels in his heart and mind. Over time, if he is clever, he may begin to understand and express it in words. Linguistic expressions can convey something of the love he has experienced. It is like that in our relationship with God. It cannot be put entirely into words. But, as we walk with God through history, the Spirit helps us grasp and articulate what is happening. Gradually we penetrate the Gospel in its content and in the dimensions that transcend content.

This model of the Spirit unfolding a love relationship is helpful because it takes us beyond two inadequate approaches: the dead continuity with the past exemplified in scholastic theology and the uncontrolled dynamism of the present expressed in liberal theology. This is a better way to see it. As God's word is pondered through the ages in countless settings, it is continually being related to a kaleidoscope of human needs and provides a living stream of transforming grace. The revelation itself came to us in history and its riches unfold in the consciousness of God's people over time. Nothing new is added to the Gospel but there is a progress in understanding the implications of the faith once delivered.<sup>25</sup>

Let me emphasize that taking into account the changing horizons of the readers does not mean that prior human understandings provide a standard for judging Scripture. On the contrary, prior understandings of our own stand beneath Scripture for its evaluation of them. I

24. K. Rahner, 'The Development of Doctrine', in *Theological Investigations*, I (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), pp. 39-77.

25. J. Walgrave represents the development of doctrine in this manner (*Unfolding Revelation: The Nature of Doctrinal Development* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), chs. 9-10.

repudiate the idea so prevalent today that the human standpoint acts as a sort of lens or grid on the basis of which we can understand the Bible. When this happens, one is not interpreting the Bible but judging and rewriting it. In that case reader interest subjects the Bible to an external norm and prevents the inspired writers from teaching and correcting us.

My position is that the Spirit unfolds what has already been given in salvation history and in the Bible. We should not expect to encounter something different from that. The Spirit takes what the inspired writers intended to say (the original meaning) and discloses its significance (its meaning for us) to the church. The original meaning is determinate—it is what it is and does not change. But God's Spirit, in his working out of salvation in history, uses this witness in new ways in ever new settings, creating significance for readers. The Spirit is active in the life of the whole church to interpret the biblical message in languages of today. He actualizes the word of God by helping us to restate the message in contemporary terminology and apply it to fresh situations. The result is that salvation history continues to take effect in us.

God has construed a narrative of salvation on the basis of his mighty acts in history and out of that has come through inspiration the salvific witness of Scripture to what has happened. God now continues to lead us forward in mission toward the future oriented to the biblical testimony. Let me attempt to spell this out more fully by means of a few proposals.

1. Firstly, the focus should be on corporate rather than individual experience. The Bible describes God as a shepherd who leads his *people* forth. God leads individuals but he leads them as members of the body of Christ in a corporate context. The milieu of our seeking God's leading is the community which is called the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3.15). Evangelicals are much too individualistic and modern. Like Descartes, we make the individual too much the centre of attention and impose on ourselves burdens too heavy to be borne. The truth does not depend on my grasping it or understanding it as a solitary person. I seek to understand in the context of the community. Individual judgments ought to be submitted to the larger judgments of the fellowship. No Scripture is of private interpretation (2 Pet. 1.21).

This should come as a relief. Life can be very stressful if we think

that all the issues depend on ourselves as individuals. What a dizzy experience freedom can be if our knowledge is not shared and communal. What a waste of time if a problem bothering us was solved already in the sixth century. Protestants neglect tradition as a vehicle of truth and as a context in which insight grows through the Spirit. As Scripture has been transmitted and interpreted, believers have come over time to discover its meaning and to restate in their own language what God has revealed. It is important that individual Christians exist in a network and community of committed others, because so often truth emerges not from the struggles of the individual but from the life of the whole community which participates in the Spirit (2 Cor. 13.14). By interacting with people who share our faith, we are more likely to rise above our own fragmentary perceptions and conceptions of the truth. The community of faith is the best context for understanding Scripture. We need one another. How else are we going to see our limitations and transcend them?

2. Secondly, we should recognize the dynamic nature and eschatological setting of this process. God is leading his people forward in history toward the consummation of the age on the basis of the witness of Scripture. It began with a far-from-simple process of inspiration which led to the formation of Scripture and opened out into a dynamic process of interpretation which takes us into the future. Hermeneutics is the process of understanding whereby the Spirit enables the church to penetrate the word of God and integrate it with its historical pilgrimage. The Spirit stimulates the church to reflect on the Gospel matters set forth in its foundational witness, the Bible.

The goal is to move us forward into the truth in anticipation of the coming kingdom. It is to grasp its meaning in every situation globally.<sup>26</sup> God's Spirit leads his people as a flock. The community engages his word in the Scriptures and feeds on this manna from heaven. It goes far beyond the realm of the intellectual. The goal is not to produce a perfect theology but to help the church comprehend its mission and infect the world with hope. We should not entertain false hopes. There will always be much we do not understand prior to the fulfillment when we will know even as we are known. In the meantime, our

26. W.A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

thinking will be characterized by tensions that only the future can resolve. What we know is partial, provisional and fragmentary. We will always have to walk by faith and will always be in need of the Spirit's direction.

3. Thirdly, we should realize that God's purpose in unfolding the truth of his word goes beyond the intellect. The goals are more holistic than simply the rational outworking of doctrine and concepts. The Spirit's goal is to make firm friends for God among humankind. His goal in using the Scripture then includes many aspects. He wants to assure us that we are God's children, to help us understand Jesus' passion as our death and resurrection, to bring us closer to the goal of transformation and fulfillment. Thus we pray, 'Come Holy Spirit!' May the life-giver fill our hearts with the love of God and all graces. May he expel the power of evil, cleanse what is unclean, give warmth to what is cold in us, and heal what is sick.

The truth into which the Spirit is leading us on the basis of Scripture is not of one kind only. He is not concerned only with intellectual concepts but with all sorts and variety of truths which enable us to grow up to maturity in Christ. He wants truth in thought, word and deed. God's will is that we should understand, experience, and live out the truth. The Bible presents us with words of love from God. When we read these words of love, the focus is not on acknowledging receipt of information; the focus is on commitment, bonding and growth in grace.

4. Fourthly, the purpose of the Spirit in unfolding the Scriptures should be viewed in the context of world mission. The first concern of the risen Lord was to speak of the coming of the Spirit in power to equip God's people for mission. Jesus did not speak about getting our theology right or organizing our congregations in a certain way, things we have given a lot of time to over the years. He spoke of going to all nations with good news in the power of the Spirit. An apostle (etymologically) is a 'sent one', a missionary. So when we speak of the church being apostolic, we mean more than its being grounded in apostolic doctrine, though this is essential. We also mean by apostolic a continuing of the apostolic function, a continuing of that task and commission.

In order to continue this task and to translate the Gospel into every language, our reading of Scripture must be dynamic. It must be able

to be translated into other languages.<sup>27</sup> It must be possible for it to relate to every culture, to be all things to all persons. Our hermeneutic must resemble the reading of those early Christians who were able to break free of Judaic restrictions, destigmatize pagan cultures and project a truly universal faith. Christianity could have taken the direction of Islam, which has not been able to transcend its Semitic character, but it did not. It did not happen because in the New Testament we have not a conservative movement unwilling to take chances, but one which is dynamic, adaptive, willing to risk new understandings, because of its confidence in the Spirit. For early Christians loyalty to the truth did not mean loyalty to traditional formulations but loyalty to a truth that transforms and impacts on every new situation. Charles H. Kraft writes, 'The dynamic of Christianity is not the sacredness of cultural forms [but] the venturesomeness of participating with God in the transformation of contemporary cultural forms to serve more adequately as vehicles for God's interaction with human beings'.<sup>28</sup>

We need the Spirit to help us with the work of translation for mission. The Spirit not only wants to ensure that God's people remember the good news, he also wants us to gain skills in adapting the word of Jesus to new situations. His task as teacher is to help us grasp the ongoing significance of the truth, to apply the truth in new contexts as we go forward in mission. Bound to the saving work of Christ, he is not giving new revelations of the kind which laid the foundations of the Gospel, but rather is causing what Jesus said and did to be revealed in a new light. God's revelation is not a closed conceptual system. It is a word of life which becomes ever new.

5. Fifthly, while recognizing that one cannot identify with absolute certainty where the Spirit is leading, let me try to name some areas where I think the Spirit has been helping us actualize the word of God. My remarks should not be taken to be denying the difficulty of knowing with certainty exactly what the Spirit is telling us. Analyzing the precise nature of the Spirit's breathing is no easier when it comes

27. L. Sanneh expounds upon the translatability of the Gospel into worldly cultures (*Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

28. C.H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 382.

to illumination than when it comes to past inspiration. One cannot demonstrate the Spirit's illumination but only point to where it seems to be happening.

The Spirit helps us to recognize the signs of the times and to discern what God is doing in today's world. One example of this would be in interpreting the phenomenal rise of Pentecostal Christianity in the 20th century. The historic churches have had to decide whether this new form of faith is from God or whether it represents an aberration. More and more the radical criticism has been diminishing, replaced by larger degrees of acceptance. On the ecumenical side, it has allowed Protestants in large numbers to acknowledge Catholicism in renewal to be a true form of the church. The Spirit has surely been leading his people in this regard. At this time we also seek the Spirit's direction around issues of gender, poverty, politics, religious pluralism, mission and so on. We do not expect it to come without considerable testing.

Another area of God's leading is the study of theology itself. Never a purely academic matter, theology is a task of church leaders arising out of the pastoral situation. Immersed in traditions of reading and interpreting, ongoing and never finished, the Spirit leads us on. Moving from ordinary to more precise language, through trial and error, progress is made. Correcting mistakes, dropping out temporary elements, we advance thanks to the provident hand of God moving in the church.

As further current examples of the Spirit's leading, I would point to the doctrine of the Trinity in which a new appreciation of the social analogy drawn from the Cappadocian fathers is being widely felt; to the growing realization of the openness of God implied by God's personhood; to the possibilities for Christology gained from doing theology in a global setting; to a new sense of the wideness of God's mercy in relation to God's work among all nations; and to a convergence of opinion on the issue of Christ as the transformer of culture.

6. As a Protestant, I would want to add that this leading does not in my opinion convey infallibility. It is possible to be mistaken about where the Spirit is actually leading us. The church can make mistakes in its tradition. There can be and have been corruptions and departures, exaggerations and excesses. Progress is not inevitable. As the exodus community we walk along the road toward truth but have not arrived at perfect clarity. We know that God is faithful but that

we are only human and capable of miscalculation and pride, short-sightedness and deceit. However, we do not lose heart because God has promised always to be with us. We believe that we will survive in spite of our mistakes by the grace of God. Strangers and pilgrims, we trek toward the city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God. We believe that God will fulfill his work in us.<sup>29</sup>

In the meantime, we have Scripture to stand in judgment on our errors and mistakes. It can call us to reform and renewal as it has before. It can be the liberating counter-authority in the church. Though far from perfect, the Reformation itself is proof that corruptions can be confronted and corrected and that we can attain a more solid grasp once again on the pure word of God even when we fail.<sup>30</sup>

7. Stressing the corporate milieu of interpretation only makes us long for the unity of the church to be restored. Interpretation within the confines of our sects, even though corporate to a degree, remains private and not church-wide interpretation. Our denominations hold proudly to paradigms which they ought to be criticizing and correcting, but cannot under the circumstances. Thus many of our opinions do not come under the judgment of the whole church, but only under our sectarian slice of it. Everyone knows that the Nicean Creed has a stature that the Thirty-Nine Articles do not have because of our disunity. And cannot much of the loss of hermeneutical certitude today be traced to this factor? We cannot convene church-wide councils. A magisterium does not exist with a fully catholic sweep, because of our denominational system.

I believe that God is saying to us: repent and stop justifying what is against my express will, against human good, and against common sense. How can you expect to hear my word when you refuse to listen for it together?<sup>31</sup> It is not uniformity that we need, not unity without diversity. It is oneness that harbours no hostility, co-existence which accepts the other forms of faith. The hermeneutical situation would be

29. H. Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), ch. 4.

30. H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 96.

31. J.M. Frame issued a strong call to repentance from our commitment to the denominational system (*Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991]). Ironically, he only really has in mind a small group of conservative Presbyterian sects.

at once improved if we could become a community of churches, united in acknowledging one Lord Jesus Christ, one in our sharing of baptism and eucharist, and one in seeking the mind of God in the interpretation of his word together.

8. Finally, against my own instincts and traditions as a Baptist, I have left God's leading of individuals last for the reasons I have given. But the Spirit does open up the Scriptures for us as individuals with a view to developing our friendship with God (Ps. 25.14; Jn 15.14). We experience it in the sacrament evangelicals call the 'quiet time', a time when we daily read the Bible prayerfully. In such moments, we often experience God speaking to us, when we allow the Bible to convict and convert, to build up and to tear down, to comfort and to challenge us. Usually we try to take the text in its intended sense and apply it. But sometimes we hear God saying something different, where a text will be given a meaning different from the one intended. At such times, a text written in one context functions as a word of God with a different force in a new one. It seems that a text may be the occasion of an insight without being the cause of it. The method is to allow a historical exegesis to interact with a prophetic openness to the Spirit.<sup>32</sup>

Almost any Christian can testify to the pedagogy of the Spirit using the Bible as we connect our own experience with the text. Christians can testify to wonderful discoveries that happen, how God brings texts to mind and helps them know what they signify. The Spirit helps us see the beauty and the light, the intelligibility and the wisdom of God's word. The text produces transforming effects in us. A most celebrated example of transformation was the effect Luther felt upon reading Rom. 1.17. His whole life was turned around by it.<sup>33</sup>

The effects may not always feel positive. Since we are capable of being obtuse, the Spirit may have to drag us back to the truth. He may have to overcome the Pharisee in us all. There are many obstacles to the truth in us to be overcome. There are so many hindrances to our hearing God's word: the closedness of our minds to God, our sin and folly, our unbelief and sloth.

A spirituality of openness must be fostered to facilitate transforming encounters with Scripture. A prayerful reading is essential, a prior willingness to hear, godly habits of the heart and a disposition of

32. J.D.G. Dunn, *The Living Word* (London: SCM Press, 1987), pp. 130-36.

33. Cited by Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, p. 35.

faith. Just as a judge needs a judicial temperament, the believer needs a godly temperament if she or he hopes to hear the voice of the shepherd. There needs to be reverence, humility, patience and obedience among other spiritual and moral qualities which foster the hearing of God's word.<sup>34</sup>

In our devotions, we do not approach Scripture as an object to be mastered but as a sacrament which can put us in touch with God. What was written by the Spirit's inspiration needs to be read with the help of the Spirit's graces. We read the Bible, not as worldly men and women but as men and women of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2.14-16).

A balance must be struck between the use of our minds studying the Scriptures and their submission to the Spirit in seeking the mind of Christ. It is important not only to be aware of the historical horizon of the text but to be in close touch with the redemptive realities which the text presents. Let us be open to hearing the voice of the shepherd and permit the Scripture to shape us. Let us ask God to use the word to bring our humanity into closer conformity to Jesus Christ.

The work of the Spirit in relation to biblical hermeneutics is much neglected. This essay is a beginning but mostly an invitation to others to give it more attention.<sup>35</sup> We need a reading of the Bible which is more than antiquarian, a reading which opens up to the present situation. I believe that those scholars who are open to the Pentecostal reality are particularly well suited experientially to do work in this area and I hope they will. It helps produce good theory when one knows the reality needing to be explained.

34. T.C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 355-59.

35. I have offered a further statement in 'The Role of the Spirit in Interpretation', *JETS* (forthcoming).