

SPIRIT, COMMUNITY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION - TREVOR REYNOLDS

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THE HELP OF THE SPIRIT

The complexity of the task of biblical interpretation is relieved by biblical promises of the Spirit's assistance. Jesus said, 'he *will* guide you [plural] into all truth' (Jn 16.13), and Paul affirms 'we have received ... the Spirit who is from God, that we might *understand* the things freely given us by God' (1 Cor 2.12). But how does the Spirit do this? Very often his assistance is conceived of purely in terms of a present, personal, illuminist comprehension: 'the Spirit helped me to see this'. But as well as being 'the Spirit of truth' the Spirit is also the Spirit of 'fellowship' – *koinonia*. This is emphasised in 2 Corinthians 13.14 as his distinctive characteristic within the Trinity. Augustine characterised the Spirit as the 'bond of love' (*vinculum caritatis*) between Father and Son. Some modern theologians emphasise the primacy of his *relational* role, as derived from the Spirit's dynamic function within the Godhead. Hence John Taylor's description of him as 'this current of communication, this invisible go-between'.¹ Consequently, we need to underscore the essentially communal/relational character of the Spirit's help, not least in the realm of scriptural understanding. This can be explored in at least four dimensions.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF KOINONIA

Firstly, 2 Corinthians 13.14 reminds us of the fundamentally *trinitarian* context of the Spirit's operations. The understanding of 'the *koinonia* of the Spirit' as primarily intimating an objective 'participation in the Spirit himself'² reminds of the 'upward' focus needed by biblical interpreters in a prayerful dependence that is rooted in Trinitarian fellowship (1 Jn 1.3). This hermeneutical partnership also needs to be worked out in conjunction with Christians 'who breathe the same trinitarian breath'. Kevin Vanhoozer claims that the Trinity alone can explain 'the experience of meaningful communication' with 'God as author, as message, and as power of salvation.' For him, 'non-Trinitarian' views of God result in fundamental interpretive errors.³

Secondly, the Spirit, as the one who also works in a 'downward' movement of conviction and challenge, can produce a *koinonia* of understanding through debate and even conflict. Such a *dialogical* process is illustrated by deliberations and narrations of the Council of Jerusalem around Scripture in Acts 15, epitomised in 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (v. 28). The Council's decision paved the way for wider mission to the world, as Spirit-assisted resolutions of interpretive difficulties should do.

Thirdly, the *historical* dimension is afforded by the Spirit of 'remembrance' (Jn 14.26). This 'backward' link reminds us that biblical interpretation needs to be pursued in conjunction with those who have gone before us and were taught by the same Spirit.

Fourthly, as the 'Spirit of promise' (Eph 1.13) and the 'firstfruits' (Rom 8.23), the *eschatological* Spirit has a forward orientation that highlights the 'now/not yet' tension inherent in New Testament kingdom teaching. This serves to warn us of the

provisionality of all understanding and the danger of over-realised interpretations. It also points to the great corporate and, indeed, cosmic renewal that is to come, a renewal intimated in believers by the Spirit (Rom 8. 19–25). This should shame all privatised and domesticated presentations of the gospel hope.

THE NEW TESTAMENT USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

These four dimensions of *koinonia* are not intended to be exclusive or exhaustive categories, but do illustrate the wider communal parameters afforded by the Spirit's help when interpreting Scripture, whether that interpretation is done by individuals or in a group. Illustrations can be found in the way that the New Testament characters and writers used Scripture with pneumatological assistance. Stephen's reading of Scripture, when speaking to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7.1–53) is one example. As one 'full of the Holy Spirit' (7.55), Stephen's speech not only contained *trinitarian* references, but was also pregnant with *dialogical* challenge to his hearers, *historical* references to Israel's past disobedience and *eschatological* motifs arising from his *peshet*/fulfilment use of Scripture.

More generally, we can detect commonalities in the New Testament writers' use of Scripture. CH Dodd highlighted the fact that 15 or so Old Testament texts (e.g. Deut 18.15,19; Ps 110.1; Isa 53.1; Jer 31.31–34) were regularly cited by the New Testament writers apparently independently of each other.⁴ Dodd argued this use stemmed from an oral collection of blocks of Old Testament material whose selection was originally inspired by Christ himself. Such 'Christocentric' inspiration and focus formed one of the common presuppositions that have been discerned as underlying the manner of New Testament exegesis of the Old Testament. A second presupposition singled out by Earle Ellis is 'charismatic exegesis' – namely, 'the perception of Scripture as hidden wisdom requiring a charismatic, revelatory exposition'.⁵ He cites examples from Jesus (Mt 11.25; cf. Lk 24.32), Qumran (1 QH 12.12f.), Paul (Rom 16.25–26; Eph 3.3–6; 1 Cor 2.6–16) and Peter (1 Pet 1.10–12) that emphasise the necessity of divine/Spirit-assisted interpretation. A third presupposition highlighted by Richard Longenecker is 'corporate solidarity', a notion central to Semitic thought with its emphasis upon group identity and corporate representation.⁶

This 'people' orientation, then, influenced the way the New Testament writers interpreted and applied Scripture. Tom Holland, for instance, has pointed out the corporate dimensions of Pauline soteriology, undergirded as it is by Paschal–New Exodus motifs.⁷ Hence Paul's addressees were more usually churches rather than individuals, as shown by his common use of plural terminology and expressions such as 'one another.' As Gordon Fee writes, '*Everything* is done [*allelon*] ... [for we] ... are members of one another' (Rom. 12.5; Eph. 4.25), who are to build up *one another* (1 Thess. 5.11)'.⁸ Not that this diminishes the importance of personal faith and individual accountability, but it highlights the importance of living the Christian life and reading Scripture in the context of our membership of the body of Christ, as a part of the 'pneumatic community' which is the Church (1 Cor 12). We should therefore seek to follow the example of the New Testament writers insofar as their reading strategy could broadly be described in terms of a 'Spirit-through-community' hermeneutic. (The extent to which the New Testament writers provide a model of exegesis that can be followed today is, of course, a matter of ongoing debate.)

REBUTTING INDIVIDUALISTIC INTERPRETATION

The recognition of such a hermeneutic would help us combat the individualism that

is endemic to fallen human nature and which has adversely affected the interpretive process. As Markus Bockmuehl writes, the first result of the serpent's entrance in Genesis 3 was 'to eliminate the ecclesial reception of the word of God and to place interpretation in the hands of the autonomous reasoning subject, isolated from the worshipping community: the serpent speaks to Eve, not to Eve and Adam, let alone to their fellowship with the Lord God himself'.⁹ Ever since, the temptation has been to read Scripture out of the context of the worshipping community, whether this takes the form of the individual eccentricities associated with the allegorical approach, the degeneration of *sola Scriptura* into autonomous forms of 'solo' *Scriptura*, the rationalisations of critical methodology or the subjectivisms of 'reader response' approaches. Western materialism, moreover, has meant that too often, 'disciples have become consumers, with a take-away attitude to church',¹⁰ including a 'pick and mix' attitude to its teachings. In evangelical ecclesiology, 'independence' can sometimes mask the more biblical concept of 'interdependence', whilst in evangelical spirituality, the private 'quiet time' can produce offbeat readings that just would not stand up if shared in a wider group.

Bibles were, of course, not widely available before the invention of the printing press. For most of Church history, the Bible had to be accessed in an oral, corporate context/setting that more readily facilitated an understanding of Scripture from within the *koinonia* of the Spirit. This has been a hallmark of the Anabaptist tradition with its distinctively congregationalist/ pneumatic emphasis – 'the Spirit is an interpreter of what a text is about only when Christians are gathered in readiness to hear it speak to their current needs and concerns.'¹¹

PROMOTING A KOINONIA APPROACH

Such an emphasis is not, of course, exclusive to Anabaptists. Strongly communal pneumatologies that carry with them ecclesiastical and hermeneutical implications can also be found in Orthodox, Catholic and Pentecostal pneumatologies. This suggests that all of us, whatever our church background, need to think through the implications of a 'Spirit-through- community' hermeneutic. Amongst the many, we single out four.

1. Educationally

The stimulus of a *communal* Bible study needs no elaboration from those who have benefited from the shared insights of a group gathered in Jesus' name. Pastors and Church leaders also need the input of fraternals, retreats, conferences, conventions and continuing education in order to promote spiritual freshness and scriptural learning. This is particularly relevant for those from more 'independent' church settings that lack the inputs of a wider fellowship or denominational linking.

Internet connections can now facilitate shared learning in a globalised *koinonia*. Electronic communications, however, are not a substitute for either living fellowship or books, with their hugely seminal influence. Here, the contemporary penchant for theological dictionaries and compilations also testifies to the benefits of shared insights, which are enriched if pursued cross-culturally. A visit to a living church in a developing country is always an enriching experience, but the cosmopolitan nature of the UK population also provides its own opportunities for learning from different cultural perspectives. Indeed, David Smith asserts that 'the most urgent challenge confronting the church worldwide, is that Christians in both North and South should listen to each other and, in fellowship together, hear what the Spirit is saying to them.'¹²

2. Ethically

That the Spirit is the *Holy Spirit* alerts us to the ethical element inherent in all Spirit-led interpretation. As William Brown states, 'the interpretation of Scripture and the moral formation of reading communities are inextricably bound.'¹³ The ongoing work of the fruit giving Spirit (Gal 5.22–23. Note also Rom 8.4–13) in the Church is vital for what Vanhoozer calls 'cultivating the interpretive virtues' ... 'relative to the sorts of life that bespeak sound biblical interpretation'.¹⁴

These include readiness to listen, discernment and charity. Augustine advocated interpreters whose prime goal was 'to engender the love of the Triune God and of the neighbour' along with 'a personal orientation towards holiness and the fear of God'.¹⁵ Honesty is also important. As Tom Wright rightly insists, 'integrity consists not of having no presuppositions but of being aware of what one's presuppositions are and of the obligation to listen to and interact with those who have different ones.'¹⁶

3. Homiletically

Spirit-anointed preaching should not be monological but rather vitally 'dialogical' in the sense of its creating a relationship of mutual challenge and response, under God, between preacher and congregation.

The preacher, for his part, should speak from a life that aims to keep in step with the Spirit, seeking the Spirit's unction upon all sermon preparation and delivery. The authority of the pulpit is derived from God and is not personal to the preacher, who should operate as a servant, not a master, of the Word (2 Tim 4.2). A 'come ... let us reason together' (Isa 1.18) style that draws the hearers in with questions, exhortations and space for reflection aids congregational participation. Expository preaching still needs to be declaratory and authoritative, but not arrogantly authoritarian. Good preachers will also have their sermons informed by the communal experiences of their pastoral work and seek to pay more attention to the corporate as well as the individual application of texts.

The congregation, for their part, should not just 'sit together under the Word' but also seek to actively engage with and apply it. Arturo Azurdia writes, 'the congregation must consciously refrain from any attitude or activity that might contribute to a withholding of the effects of the Holy Spirit', referring specifically to things that 'grieve' (Eph 4.29–30) or 'quench' (1 Thes. 5.19) 'the sensitive Spirit'.¹⁷ Further communal participation in the preaching process has been suggested in the involvement of consultative groups to work with the preacher in the preparation for and/or feedback from the sermon.

4. Pastorally

Pastoral work should generally be a shared responsibility whilst pastoral encounters invariably take place in a group context of two or more people, whether this is in the setting of a home visit, around a hospital bed, corporate prayer, the laying on of hands, a funeral or a wedding.

The dialectics of these occasions can sometimes spark off surprisingly fitting applications of the Bible. These may be reinforced by a *koinonia* that the Spirit can create through Scripture with the saints of old and their experiences, as recorded, for example, in the Psalms. As Menno Epp says, 'sharing the wisdom of the sages... keeps us linked to the community that passed this wisdom on. The treasure becomes part of the memory bank by which our lives are nurtured.'¹⁸ And the Spirit of remembrance who makes this possible is also the eschatological Spirit who gives a hope for the future, together 'with all the saints' (Eph 3.18).

In pastoral theology, the contemporary emphasis upon the *narrative* approach to Scripture¹⁹ reminds us that the grand storyline and myriad sub-stories of the Bible contain many examples with which its readers can identify, negatively or positively. Space needs to be created within the Church's life where this interchange of biblical and readers' stories can regularly take place. But there are also, of course, other pastoral uses of Scripture that the Spirit can activate, not least through its commands and injunctions. Here, the rigours of an authoritative text can be tempered by the ministry of an empathetic pastoral community that relies upon the Spirit's help to provide a compassionate application that does not, nevertheless, relativise the text.

CONCLUSION

Space does not permit further elaboration of the implications of this kind of hermeneutic. I hope that I have shown that whenever we do biblical interpretation, it is an activity that needs to be undertaken with the unction of the Spirit within 'the communion of saints'.

NOTES

1. JV Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London: SCM, 2004), p. 17.
2. GD Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendricksen, 1994), p. 872.
3. KJ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p. 456.
4. CH Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1952).
5. EE Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), p. 119.
6. RN Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 77. As Jonathan Sachs says, 'Judaism is an insistently communal faith ... [for] the covenant at Mount Sinai was made not with individuals but with an entire people.' See *Celebrating Life* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 136.
7. T Holland, *Contours of Pauline Theology: A Radical New Survey of the Influences on Paul's Biblical Writings* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus-Mentor, 2004)
8. Fee, *Empowering*, pp. 871–2.
9. M Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 93.
10. Chris Andre-Watson, reviewing Derek Tidball's *Discerning the Spirit of the Age* (London: Kingsway Communications, 2002) in Spurgeon's College's *The Record*, May 2003.
11. John Yoder, 'The Hermeneutics of Anabaptists', in WM Swartley (ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives* (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), p. 21.
12. DW Smith, *Against the Stream: Christianity and Mission in an Age of Globalization* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), p. 23.
13. WP Brown (ed.), *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. xi.
14. Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, p. 430 and AK Adam, SE Fowl, KJ Vanhoozer and F Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 11, respectively.
15. From Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, as cited by F Watson, 'Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics', in *Reading Scripture with the Church*, p. 120.
16. NT Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005), p. 11.
17. AG Azurdia III, *Spirit Empowered Preaching: The Vitality of Holy Spirit in Preaching* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1998), pp. 153 and 149, respectively
18. Menno Epp, 'Using Scripture in Pastoral Care', in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* (Institute of Mennonite Studies) 6.1 Spring 2005, p. 66.
19. See P Ballard and S Holmes (eds.), *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2005) for examples.

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