

THE ROLE OF THE SPIRIT IN INTERPRETATION

CLARK H. PINNOCK*

The role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical interpretation is a topic that raises the issue of contextualizing the gospel in modern culture and understanding God's Word in new situations, for which we are in great need of the Spirit's help to lead us into truth and mission. We need the Spirit to enable us to bring Jesus' message into effective expression. We hear Christ say, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 3:22).¹

I. A GAP IN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Despite our need of them, discussions of the illumination of the Word by the Spirit are few. Fred H. Klooster comments: "The illumination of the Holy Spirit is regularly mentioned in theological literature; yet detailed discussion of this subject is rare." His respondent (Art Lindsley) agrees: "The Holy Spirit's work [of illumination] has not been given the prominence it deserves."² Pressed to find a worthy discussion, both men reach back to the Puritan pastor and theologian John Owen for something helpful, to a work written not less than three hundred years ago. This is astonishing. Why do we not find the topic discussed where we would expect it—in standard books on Biblical interpretation like those of Ramm, Osborne, Thiselton, Fee?³

There may be a slight excuse provided by the mention of John Owen's name. Could it be that the subject is not neglected so much as misplaced? In Owen one finds it in pastoral and devotional writing, not in hermeneutical theory. Perhaps we too place our discussions in such work. But this explanation contains a criticism of our thinking about interpretation. Is it not naive to think that one can master hermeneutics without paying attention to the Spirit and to the second horizon?

* Clark Pinnock is professor of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4K1, Canada.

¹ Consider the role of pneumatology in the Lukan and Johannine missionary paradigms: D. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) 113-115.

² Quotations are taken from *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible* (ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 451, 487.

³ B. Ramm could have placed it in *The Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) but is preoccupied (as Calvin was) with justification of faith, not Biblical hermeneutics. Catholics on the other hand can be found who discuss it; cf. e.g. A. Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991) chap. 12.

It is apparent that evangelical scholars are more interested in inspiration than illumination and in the first than in the second horizon. The shortfall of studies occurs not in regard to inspiration and methods of extracting meaning from the first horizon but in regard to illumination and the opening up of the text into significance. The tilt and onesidedness is easily explained. It has to do with the fact that liberal scholars are very interested in illumination and the second horizon. They gravitate toward reader-driven interpretations and celebrate unexpected insights coaxed from the text by the new literary approaches. As Grant Osborne says: "The scene today is controlled by the reader, rather than by text-oriented approaches."⁴ Evangelicals stay away from them because they sense danger in paying too much attention to illumination and the second horizon, the danger of unbridled subjectivism and reader-driven interpretation.

To avoid this danger, evangelicals emphasize historical exegesis and first-horizon concerns and disregard the role of readers in interpretation. Osborne observes how traditionalists often operate with a naive illusion about textual objectivity. They attempt to ignore the fact that readers bring interests and presuppositions to the text and settle comfortably into a positivist framework of interpretation, viewing the text as stationary object and the reader as detached examiner.⁵

It is time for evangelical scholars to turn to issues of illumination and the second horizon. Even Osborne only considers the second horizon in appendices and does not comment much on Spirit illumination. Thiselton would be the most diligent student of the second horizon (and an evangelical), but even he offers little help for understanding the Spirit's illumination in either of his large books. The Chicago statement on Biblical hermeneutics is naturally cautious with respect to illumination, not wanting to lose in hermeneutics what it gained from defending inerrancy, stressing that interpretations ought not contradict original meaning. At the same time the draft makes this brave assertion: "We deny that the writers of Scripture always understood the full implications of their own words" (Article XVIII). This admission opens up the possibility that one might understand the text in a fuller way with the help of the Spirit (evangelical *sensus plenior*). Such an openness may allow us at last to honor the interpretation of Alexandria as well as Antioch.⁶

Clearly there is room for evangelicals to work on their hermeneutical theory with respect to the illumination of the Word by the Spirit. Fear of liberalism must not prevent us from examining it. We should not, as the late F. F. Bruce pointed out, isolate the work of the Spirit in inspiration

⁴ G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 369.

⁵ In making his point Osborne (*Hermeneutical* 386) draws upon A. C. Thiselton (1982). It is a striking point because the other people who love the first horizon this much and celebrate objectivity are the earlier liberal scholars.

⁶ B. F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park: Pickwick, 1989) 45–49. Alexandria would represent the nonliteral approaches to interpretation that evangelicals tend to despise.

from his subsequent work in illumination or stress one and ignore the other. The goal of inspiration is that each generation should hear God speaking to them in their situation. For a right understanding we need the breathing of the Spirit in us as readers as much as we needed his breathing in their original production.⁷ In his *Notes upon the New Testament* John Wesley spoke of illumination as a form of inspiration: "The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it but continually inspires (supernaturally assists) those that read it with earnest prayer." Notice how Wesley uses the same word ("inspire") to refer to both horizons—a practice modern evangelicals seldom follow.⁸

II. A PARADIGM FOR ILLUMINATION

Let me offer a few ideas for advancing our thinking about the illumination of the Word by the Spirit.

1. *What is this illumination about?* To answer the question properly, we have to be clear about two things: the goal of the Spirit in our lives, and the nature of classic texts. The goal of the Spirit as he works within our lives shedding light on the Word is to deepen our friendship with God. He came to draw us toward transformation and to send us out into the ministry of reconciliation. The Spirit was given to advance the processes of sanctification and mission that are central to the gospel. The object of reading the Bible is that we should proceed from a discovery of what the text says to where we seize and are grasped by its truth and its consequences for life and ministry. We do not read the text out of mere historical interest but for purposes of transformation, in order that the Scriptures might become a revelatory text for us. The Spirit must be at work for this to happen.⁹

The image of second horizon as employed in interpretive theory relates to this goal. It refers to the fact that readers gain significance from classic texts and have their understanding and their persons enlarged by engaging them. From the first horizon a communication goes forth that needs to be actualized within the horizon of readers, and this meaning attains its goal of transforming readers when it is engaged and applied to their lives. The goal of reading the Bible (and any other classic text) is for a meaningful engagement between reader and text to take place, such that the reader's perspective is enlarged. Illumination is about this.

2. *Some of the anxiety surrounding illumination is due (I believe) to thinking wrongly about it.* It is not to be viewed intellectualistically, as if it meant conveying hidden information about the original meanings of

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 281–282.

⁸ D. A. D. Thorson, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 129.

⁹ Let it be said to Barth's credit that he grasped this point most clearly: K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) chap. 8.

Scripture to readers who are tuned in spiritually. This latter notion is what causes us to worry lest there be an appeal to the Spirit in defense of charismatic interpretation that circumvents historical exegesis. If illumination had to do with conveying esoteric information about the original meaning of the Bible, there would be cause for anxiety. But it does not. It has to do with drawing readers deeper into the world of the text, deeper into the kingdom of God, closer to God's heart. Illumination is what happens to readers who dialogue with the text, in which the Spirit is helping them know what to do with it in Christian existence.¹⁰

3. *Understanding illumination may be furthered by considering the nature of a classic like the Bible.* A classic text is a text that remains relevant over centuries and possesses universal appeal. Unlike lesser texts, the classic continues to speak in new circumstances and situations because it articulates something profound and true about human life and transcends its own historical origin. A classic has the power to impact and transform the lives of its readers. By means of historical exegesis we encounter the world of the text and behind the text. In the Spirit by faith we enter a world in front of the text where the goal is to get beyond mere reading and to undergo transformation. The classic text projects a world the reader is invited to enter, and in that world the reader is caught up and changed. Better than any novel or film but by analogy with them, the Bible creates a space for us to inhabit and invites readers into that world. It sets up an alternative reality, draws us into it, and then sends us back into everyday life significantly different people. This is the way our inspired classic also works as it issues the call to follow Jesus and walk in the Spirit.¹¹ The horizon of our reader horizon is fused with the horizon of the Bible as we surrender to it. The analogy would be surrendering to esthetic involvement. Illumination of the Word by the Spirit happens when, in dialogue with the text, we are drawn into its new world by the Spirit and changed. The dimension we are discussing using the language of second horizon has been talked about many times before in the history of interpretation in relation to a variety of nonliteral approaches to interpretation.

4. *There is of course the danger of unbridled reader interest transforming the text rather than being transformed by it.* The danger must be kept in check by holding to the primacy of the originally intended meaning of the Bible. Meaning is not an autonomous world of its own (Derrida and others). The fact is that humans are social beings who use language to communicate with one another. A text like Scripture (or a book by a deconstructionist, for that matter) encodes meaning in written form to be

¹⁰ F. Klooster speaks of organic illumination in this connection: Just as organic inspiration means that the human writer is not bypassed, so organic illumination means that the human reader is not bypassed either (*Hermeneutics* [ed. Radmacher and Preus] 460–461).

¹¹ A major contribution of Thiselton is the way he spells out this capacity of classic texts to transform readers; cf. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) chap. 2.

passed on. It is the first duty of interpretation to respect that meaning and to enquire into it.¹² Adherence to the primacy of the original meaning requires that the significance of any text be a possible interpretation of it and not something else altogether. We recognize that the significance of texts changes—but not their meaning.¹³ In illumination the Spirit directs us back to the original Word and helps us to grasp it in a new light.

In addition to original meaning providing a check on reader interest, there is the check of the interpretive tradition already sparked by the text. Classic texts like the Bible or the Declaration of Independence project an effective history of interpretation, in which intended meanings get enriched, sharpened and enlarged. The reader is not reading alone but participates in a community of readers over time. There is a community of readers, living and dead, who weigh what is said by present-day interpreters (1 Cor 14:29).¹⁴

5. *Being more specific about illumination, consider its working in the community.* Most often (I think) the significance of the Bible for today is actualized and becomes eventful in the community as it meets for prayer and waits upon God. While it is true that illumination happens to individuals all alone, the context is still the Church because, even when we read the Bible alone, what we think about is not in abstraction from the traditions of our community. Although Catholic and Orthodox most often mention it, (1) the Bible is the book of the people of God and (2) the Church is the normal locale of illumination even for Protestants. Scripture originally arose from the life of the community and was meant to be interpreted in the ongoing life of that community. The reader seldom approaches the text as an isolated individual cut off from the corporate life of the Church because the expectations of readers are shaped by the community to which they belong.¹⁵

The Spirit's goal in the illumination of the Word for the Church is to shed light on her pilgrim way. We have an example of this in the first apostolic letter of Acts 15: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (v. 28). Here the Spirit led the community to an important corporate decision, not insight into the faith so much as insight into the mission. The Spirit was guiding the Church to move beyond the confines of Judaism and learn to adapt to a mission among the Gentiles. All through Acts the ministry of the Spirit is to direct believers in what to think and where to go.

There are many pressing issues today on which we need illumination for faith and ministry—issues such as salvation beyond the Church, gender roles in church leadership, the ministry of the Spirit in cosmos and Church, the shape of public discipleship. Such problems will not be settled just by staring at the first horizon. There will have to be serious dialogue

¹² The value of the new literary theories would be that they warn us not to be too smug about ferreting out the originally intended meanings or too complacent about the influence of reader presuppositions.

¹³ Meyer, *Critical*, chap. 2.

¹⁴ On the role of tradition in hermeneutics cf. S. M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) chap. 3.

¹⁵ Thiselton, *New Horizons* 65.

and wrestling with the text on them. Part of this involves engaging post-Biblical interpretations, inasmuch as the meaning can be enlarged upon reflection. The meaning of the phrase "all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence, for example, has been enlarged since the eighteenth century from meaning mainly adult, white, property-owning males to a larger inclusion, and the process still goes on. Ironically, there are forces that want to apply it to homosexuals but not to the unborn. My point is that the text can come to be seen to allow a larger interpretation than was strictly intended. Meaning can be enlarged through dialogue with the text, because in dialogue deeper issues can surface than were first envisaged. A familiar example of enlargement in the case of the Bible would be slavery. The Bible tolerates slavery and does not call for its abolition, but Bible readers today do not consider slavery morally tolerable. How did they arrive at this fuller interpretation? The Spirit brought to completeness among Christians what the gospel was really about. Interpretation is not just blind submission to the text as a static object but an in-depth engagement of its subject matter within the contemporary faith context.

Evangelical theology has to be pilgrim theology. We never pass beyond the necessity of reconsidering our traditional interpretations until the return of Christ. We continually ask where the deep structures of Biblical revelation are pointing. A theology that is not restlessly probing and exploring is not serving the Church well. A theology that takes the path of discovery requires the Spirit's illumination most urgently.¹⁶

6. *Turning to illumination in relation to the individual believer, the emphasis should also fall on areas of growth and discipleship.* Not primarily intellectual, the goal of the Spirit is to make us grow in our relationship with God. God's heart aches over our distance and preoccupation. He longs for our presence.¹⁷ To this end the Spirit uses Scripture to deepen our walk with God, to strengthen our obedience, and to conform us more fully to Jesus Christ. The Spirit causes Scripture to come alive, helps us magnify God better, deepens our heart understanding, and challenges us to venture out in faith. The Spirit tailors Scripture to contemporary needs. The process is often painful because there are reader interests in us all that need to be rooted out.¹⁸

Normally in illumination the Scriptures are understood in their original meaning and actualized in new ways. Sometimes, though, the Spirit does not play by the exegetical rules. James Dunn gives the example of C. T.

¹⁶ On the method of the theological pilgrim see M. Bauman, *Pilgrim Theology: Taking the Path of Theological Discovery* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) chap. 1. On the other hand, the pilgrim must be prepared to be criticized by the settlers (theologians who have decided to build and defend a fortress and not travel on).

¹⁷ R. J. Foster is so eloquent in articulating God's warm and responsive heart toward his people; cf. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

¹⁸ One of several valuable things about W. Swartley's book is the way he identifies how reader interests can block the Word of God and need to be challenged: *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1983) 62, 183-185, 214, 220-222, 227, 230.

Studd, who took Ps 2:8 (a messianic passage) as referring to himself. I remember Edith Schaeffer citing Isa 2:2 (about the nations flowing to the Lord's mountain) in reference to L'Abri in 1964. In those cases, texts functioned as the word of God to individuals in a sense other than the intended one. In a similar way we all redirect texts from Hebrew contexts to Gentile contexts. But these are exceptional and cannot be used to establish new truth. The rule must remain an interaction between heeding the historical meaning and listening for fresh applications that the Spirit shows to those who are open.¹⁹

7. *To be adequate, a model of Biblical interpretation has to be dynamic.* Though we speak of two horizons in order to make a logical distinction between meaning and significance, we should not be fooled into thinking that these two horizons are cleanly differentiated in practice from one another. In the actual work of interpretation the two are hopelessly intertwined. We listen to the text (meaning) and live in front of the text (significance). We do historical exegesis (horizon one) and open ourselves to God (horizon two). But the two actions are interrelated in what Osborne terms a spiral movement. The reader begins interpreting with assumptions and enters an open-ended dialogue with the text, which involves conversion and progress toward truth and transformation. The reader enters into the new world of meaning projected by the text and experiences change. Illumination can be seen in the context of the dynamic and open-ended process in which the Spirit calls us higher up and deeper in.

8. *Theological hermeneutics goes beyond interpreting specific texts in relation to contexts and seeks to understand all reality as belonging to God.* Tillich speaks of it as a process of correlation, of bringing the answers of the gospel into contact with the questions of existence, based in the universal claim of revelation on all reality. Correlation may not be the right word for this, owing to the fact that it implies that the gospel and the worldly horizon normally align with each other. Engagement may be the better term, in that confrontation and correlation both regularly occur in the fusion of horizons.²⁰

The point is simply that in theology we allow God's revelatory light to fall on all reality and take categorical revelation to engage the present-day context. We do so not just in relation to questions of existence (as in Tillich) but in relation to everything. This is an awesome task for which we need the illumination of the Word by the Spirit.

¹⁹ J. D. G. Dunn, *The Living Word* (London: SCM, 1987) 131–136.

²⁰ D. G. Bloesch presses the point that confrontation, not correlation, is central to the engagement of theology with culture but may minimize the positive side of building bridges and finding points of contact; cf. *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).