

# Classical Pentecostals' literalist reading of the Bible: Challenges and solutions

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The study's setting is South African classical Pentecostals' use of hermeneutics that became aligned with conservative Evangelicals' fundamentalist practices since the 1940s. It addresses the lack within Pentecostal scholarship to relate some Pentecostal excesses and related abuses, such as the prosperity message, to the movements' common literalist-biblicist hermeneutics Bible reading practices. It argues that an alternative hermeneutic to their hermeneutics true to the movement's original ethos can protect them from such excesses. The study utilises a comparative literature analysis without any empirical research methods. The article developed a scholarly founded Pentecostal hermeneutical model by emphasising three propria: that the Holy Spirit is central in reading the Bible, the influence of an eschatological perspective to establish interpretation practices, and the faith community as normative for interpretation reflects the unique Pentecostal ethos. To be sound as Pentecostal hermeneutics, its charismatic experiences become exemplary for interpretation practices regulated by the faith community.

**Contribution:** The research contributes to the current Pentecostal discussion about the diversity of hermeneutical practices within the movement and the challenges and dangers some of these practices hold for the reputation and prestige of the movement.

**Keywords:** classical Pentecostals; conservative Evangelicals; fundamentalism; Bible-reading practices; literalism; biblicism; inerrancy; inspired.

## Introduction

Several heresies and abuses connected to them mar the South African classical Pentecostal movement in current times; among them, the prosperity message exercises widespread influence in several prominent classical Pentecostal denominations. The article reflects on reasons for such a development by asking in what way their Bible reading practices open Pentecostals to such heresies. It argues that a contributing factor in accepting such heretical teachings can be found in their fundamentalist way of reading the Bible.

The current popularity of prosperity theology is used as an example of such heretical teachings that classical Pentecostals tend to accept in a wholesale manner. Prosperity theology teaches that faith, expressed through positive thoughts and declarations based on certain biblical passages and personalities, results in health, wealth and prosperity. Monetary donations to leaders are encouraged as a means to obtain divine happiness, negate anything and anyone who opposes believers, and cancel curses. Prosperity theologies utilise biblical passages that 'clearly' teach it. The conditions for prosperity are that believers should obey the Bible as God's words (Dt 38:1-2); faithfully pay their tithes (Mt 3:8-10; Lk 6:38); give generously (Ac 20:35); pray (Phlm 4:6-7); work hard (2 Th 3:10-12); and partner with God (1 Cor 3:9).

Prosperity preachers interpret texts by using the Bible reading practices of most classical Pentecostals who interpret the Bible literally, reading all texts on the same level and ignoring the context (Vorster 2004:595-598). And arguably, it is based, on their perspective of the essence of the Bible that guarantees its divine authority, as verbally inspired by God, using human authors to capture the divine voice. It implies that all texts, without exception, represent the divine views.

The article's scientific value is in the scarcity of material that relates such teachings to the literalist-biblicist hermeneutical practices among Pentecostals (Keener 2016:3). The presupposition is that hermeneutics influence both the theology and the practice of Pentecostals. The aim is to show how their fundamentalist Bible reading practices challenge Pentecostals, and to define hermeneutics true to their ethos that can confront the challenges effectively.

**Note:** Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

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The study has social value because of the negative impact of excesses and heresies because of invalid hermeneutical practices, not only among neo-Pentecostals but also among classical Pentecostals (Nel 2021:1).

## Research methods and design

### Setting

The study is limited to classical Pentecostals, the ancestors of the early 20th century revival that emphasised Spirit baptism in continuation with the early church, in distinction from other waves of Pentecostals such as charismatics, connected to the pentecostalisation of several main-line established churches since the 1980s and neo-Pentecostals, an independent movement of apostle-prophets (others distinguish more such waves).

### Research method

The study utilises a comparative literature analysis.

### Ethical considerations

Because this study is based on a comparative analysis of relevant literature and did not involve any empirical research, the research did not need to meet ethical review compliance with relevant standards of empirical research.

## Historical development of Pentecostal Bible reading practices

Early classical Pentecostals mostly came from a lower socio-economic status (Nel 2016:158–159). They read the Bible in a common-sense manner, relating it directly to their charismatic experiences in a largely ahistorical manner, ignoring, in most cases, the different contexts. They interpreted it literally and absolutized its principles morally and spiritually in a pragmatic and pastoral way. They read the Bible in view of their charismatic encounters, the result of their experience of Spirit baptism, and used biblical language to qualify their charismatic experiences. Their reading practices differed from fundamentalist Bible-reading practices in various respects (Oliverio 2012:51). It was charismatic while fundamentalism was didactic; Pentecostals represented the Wesleyan and/or Arminian tradition and fundamentalism the Calvinist tradition; Pentecostals emphasised the *charismata* that provide extra-biblical insights and revelations while for fundamentalists, inerrant Scripture provided all the assurance they needed; Pentecostalism was experience-centred, fundamentalism was theology-centred; in Pentecostalism, non-rational elements were accepted while fundamentalists emphasised the rational message (Kraus 1979:58–59). The vital difference was that Pentecostals valued revelation knowledge, found either by interpreting the Bible as a divine word for their day or of an extra-biblical nature such as prophecies, interpretation of tongues, a word of wisdom or knowledge, among others (Omenyo & Arthur 2013:52). They viewed revelation knowledge (sometimes referred to as *rhema* words) as superior to

knowledge attained through theological study or informed exegetical investigation of Scriptures, illustrating the difference from Evangelicals' cessationism which ensconced the supernatural in the past and bracketed from the present. Pentecostals' experience of Spirit baptism, essential to their spirituality, expected God to intervene also with miracles in the present-day church because they were hardwired to perceive and respond to the Spirit's influences (Albrecht & Howard 2014:240).

As a result, fundamentalists defined truth as the divine revelation in the Bible, implying that the Bible's canon was closed. At the same time, Pentecostals expected the continuing revelation of truth in the present moment on an ongoing basis. Fundamentalists' primary task was to defend the truth given once and for all in the Bible (Barr 2001:363). In contrast, Pentecostals accepted God's unchanging character but expected God's passionate involvement in their lives (Menzies 2013:13). For Pentecostals, the Bible was the fount of revealed truth and the road sign that explained how to meet God. For biblicalists, biblical witnesses testified to the truth. No new doctrines or new revelations could ever go beyond and add to biblical truth. For Pentecostals, the Spirit led the church forward in continuing revelatory ways (Pinnock 1993:23).

After the Second World War, socio-economically upwardly mobile classical Pentecostals vied for acceptability and respectability because of their historical status as a cult and sect (Anderson 1979:xi; Burger & Nel 2008:389). Their view shifted from considering the Spirit's anointing as all one needed to interpret the Bible to the view that theological training was needed to explain their ancient document in a foreign language to others.

The effect of this shift was widespread and long-lasting. For instance, in recent research into members' Bible reading practices of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, the majority preferred to read the Bible as the literal truth, representing word-for-word the Spirit's revelation to biblical authors (Nel 2017). At the same time, most Pentecostal pastors do not receive professional teaching in exegetical methods. Even more are not exposed at all to the biblical languages (Davies 2013:249–250). As a result, they employ pre-critical and literalist-fundamentalist hermeneutics (Cargal 1993:170).

Archer (2012a:111–115) agrees. In an early pre-critical period (1908 to the 1940s), Pentecostals read the Bible like their preceding holiness and healing movements, with inductive reasoning focussing on the text and deductive reasoning that compared all available biblical data on a particular topic in a pre-critical, canonical and text-centred way (Archer 2009:91–92). In the modern period (1940s to the 1980s), they formed an alliance with the broader conservative Evangelical tradition (Anderson 2013a:114). It led, in Ellington's terms (2013:151), to the 'evangelicalisation' of Pentecostals and, since the 1960s, the 'pentecostalisation' of Evangelicals. They abdicated their theological agenda to

evangelical hermeneutics (Menzie & Menzie 2000:495). Like Evangelicals, they emphasised the Bible as the inspired Word of God (Bebbington 2002:3), developing a hybrid hermeneutic (Oliverio 2016:3) to combine Evangelicals' cessationist stance with their continuationist stance. It changed their pacifist stance to the support of war and military training in a patriotic fashion, forbidding of women to lead and teach the church, and prohibiting the 'laity' from participating in worship services and ministry (Daniels 1999:235; Poloma 1989:119).

Like fundamentalist Evangelicals, they regarded the Bible as a reliable guide to life with systematic rules for living proven over '6000 years' of human history (literalism required a young earth theory). Everything in Scripture was viewed as divinely true (Ammerman 1998:61) because it was identified with God's inerrant own words, representing God's full and sufficient communication and will for humanity, applicable to the contemporary situation. Any intelligent person can read the Bible in their own language and correctly interpret its plain meaning like its first listeners. All one needs is common sense and the ability to read and interpret the text in its explicit, plain, most obvious and literal sense (Smith 2011:4–5). Fundamentalism was traditionally rooted in Scottish Common-Sense philosophy synthesised with the Baconian view that all propositions are accessible to any thinking, rational person (Hauerwas & Willimon 2014:22).

The contemporary period (the 1980s to the present) finds a growing element of Pentecostal scholars who embrace reader-response approaches and advocacy hermeneutics to unlock current readers' socio-economic and ethnic makeup in 'hearing' things in the text that others may miss (Ansberry & Hays 2013:221). Because this hermeneutic is limited mostly to Pentecostal scholars, most pastors and members still interpret the text literally. To favour the working of the Spirit, they are negative about any 'theological' endeavours to interpret the Bible (Cronjé 1979:46). They argue that the established church had driven the Spirit away by relying on their intellectual and rational abilities, and their speculative thinking had paralysed believers with scepticism (Vondey 2013:119).

To conclude, fundamentalism is defined as a religious attitude in conservative circles that views the Bible as the absolute source of authority (Falwell 1986:53), verbally inerrant and highly exclusivist and sectarian (Vorster 2004:597) since it argues that its theology contains the whole truth, a view that contrasts starkly with the ethos of Pentecostal spirituality and hermeneutics. However, it was argued that most South African classical Pentecostals accepted fundamentalist Bible reading practices without reflecting on the contradiction it implies in terms of their ethos.

## Facing the challenges of literalist Bible reading practices

As stated, many Pentecostal members and pastors read the Bible in a literalist way (Arrington 2012:18; see also Cox

2016:217). Therefore, they prefer to use literal translations such as the 1611 King James Version (Zylstra 2014:1) and the 1933/53 Ou Vertaling (Lederle 1988:162).

I submit that to define an alternative that reflects some of the values and distinctiveness of Pentecostals combined with the best of current exegetical practices to inform their Bible reading practices has become the next scholarly challenge for Pentecostals (Nel 2015). To address their current Bible reading practices, Pentecostals need to rediscover their ethos that traditionally emphasised the role of the Spirit and charismatic experiences, the eschatological as the angle of incidence and the faith community as normative.

### Emphasis on the Holy Spirit

Pentecostals' religious consciousness expects a charismatic experience or encounter with the Spirit when they worship and read the Bible, whether individually or collectively, and they interpret their experiences in the language of the book of Acts. The Spirit explicates and applies the biblical words to their lives, explaining Keener's (2016) suggestion that Pentecostals read the Bible 'in the light of Pentecost'. It presupposes that God does reveal the divine self in the Bible but only when readers (or listeners) encounter God while reading. Hence, they prefer narratives describing similar encounters and spiritual experiences to theirs in the Bible. For them, narratives have vital theological value (Keener 2017:274).

Several theoretical approaches function in the modern hermeneutical debate (Kaiser & Silva 1994:275–293), such as the hermeneutics of understanding, self-involvement, meta-criticism, suspicion and retrieval, socio-critical theory, liberation theologies and feminist theologies, reading in the context of literary theory and with reader-response theories of literary meaning (Gräbe 1997:14; Thiselton 1992). Pentecostal hermeneutics' approach can be described as a hermeneutics of meta-criticism, addressing the foundations of knowledge, the basis of understanding the text, and the modern reader's possible relation to the text's message (Keener 2017:276). Their faith that the Bible's message is true typifies it as a hermeneutics of trust (Keener 2017:276).

Pentecostal scholars accept that most of Scripture was repeatedly reinterpreted for later situations, implying the Bible can be read by later generations who find meaning in it, despite its textual heterogeneity. The responsible scribes designed it to be interpreted in this way (Bruns 1987:626–627). Hence, they supplement metaphors of the hermeneutic circle and spiral with the snowball to explain the interpretive relationship between the constituent parts because the Bible did not fall from the sky like a single snowflake. It rolled down the hill of salvation history and added layers as it went (Starling 2016:14), and each new layer presupposes what comes before and wraps itself around it and, in so doing, offers direction on how to read it (Hebner 2006:2–3). Reading in circular movements between pre-understanding, analysis, synthesis, and disclosure generates meaning because the text

came historically into existence and accumulated layers of self-interpretation. It implies a progressive revelation (*progressio revelationis*) because interpretation did not stop with the canon's closure and reception history did not end when the canon was declared closed (Williams 2006:7–8).

The Spirit's role in reading the Bible is the realisation of the Christ-event in the present, demonstrating the Christocentric focus of the gospel. The personal awareness and experience of the Spirit facilitate the encounter with Christ; the Spirit is Christ's Spirit (Rm 8:9; Phil 1:19; Williams 1972:1).

Consequently, Pentecostal theology is necessarily an experience-certified Bible-based 'experience-reality' (Erickson 1985:21.), serving the divine revelation and not *vice versa* (Pinnock 1990:182). It requires an emphasis on narratives because Bible reading is a life-transforming experience as a coherent reflection on divine revelation. It is effective when people get saved, healed, baptised in the Spirit, and encouraged through their Bible reading (Byrd 1993:203–204).

The Pentecostal God cannot be contained in philosophical categories (such as 'unmoved mover', 'cause of all being', 'pure being' or 'world soul'; McRoberts 2007:143) and their theology does not only reiterate what the Bible states but calls for the realisation of similar experiences (Tollefsen 2014:59).

To conclude, the Word is God's revelation while the Bible, the historical written witness about the divine word, serves as a road sign that indicates the way to God's revelation (Möller 1991:93). Scripture is the primal point of reference for divine encounters: to 'encounter the Scriptures is to encounter God' (Johns 1993:14).

## Eschatological lens

The revival of the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles with William Seymour as the leader, one of the birthplaces of Pentecostalism, experienced high eschatological fervour because it identified the outpouring of the Spirit in apocalyptic terms, as an event that marked the last days and a sign that the end was imminent (Vásquez 2016:325). The gift of the Spirit had restored the early church in the 'last days' and Spirit baptism prepared believers for the return of Christ. The Spirit was the eschatological Spirit, bridging past, present and future with God's presence. They justified their origins as being a restoration of the early church for the last days and an introduction to the *parousia*. The Azusa Street meetings' interraciality that washed away the colour line served as another sign of the last days, uniting believers before the end would dawn with the judgement of all nations and people before the white throne of Christ (Rv 20:11; Cox 1995:58).

Their apocalyptic eschatology read Scripture through the eschatologically determined 'latter rain' narrative grid instead of the more (biblically accurate) 'already/not yet' eschatology of the kingdom (Keener 2016:21). Their eschatological expectations formed their identity and they read the Bible through this

identification (Anderson 2013a:61–62). Their eschatology consisted of dispensational premillennialism (Althouse 2012:73–75), while the symbol of the latter rain validated and justified their charismatic experiences because it was supposed to prepare the world for the great harvest preceding Christ's return. In time, their eschatological-hermeneutical understanding changed and many held to a fundamentalist dispensational eschatology (see above).

Their eschatological identity led to their reading the New Testament in a non-cessationist or continuationist way, and biblical narrative explains God's work in believers' lives for all ages. Their worldview or approach to reality existed in expecting God to act like the Bible depicts the divine (Keener 2016:55).

Jesus's promise to pour out the Spirit serves to empower believers for mission (Lk 24:48–49; Ac 1:8), reminiscent of Elijah's giving a double portion of his spirit on Elisha, his successor (2 Ki 2:8–11; Ac 1:8–11). Living in the last days of the 'latter rain', Spirit-filled Pentecostals considered themselves the end-time church (Archer 2004:136–150; Oliverio 2012:114).

## Normative faith community

There is no simple or single set of rules or techniques to learn and follow to successfully interpret the Bible (Starling 2016:16–21, 205). As stated, Pentecostals accept the biblical text as the word of God applied as a benchmark for living to the glory of God. When they believe that the Spirit inspires the text and applies its message to contemporary believers' lives, the Bible becomes the most significant book in the world to them. However, they do not primarily treat the Bible as a book to learn from but engage with the text as a resource for divine encounters. In other words, they are not primarily interested in grasping what the Bible says but in meeting with the divine so that God may grasp them through it (Davies 2013:255). Their ethics are church-dependent, implying that it is based on Jesus' life and death (Hauerwas & Willimon 2014:32). Thus, the church is the bridge where Scripture and people meet (Hauerwas & Willimon 2014:128–129), making it essential to establish the original meaning for the first hearers of the message.

Pentecostals in the majority world, with their strong sense of community, mostly read and hear the Bible in the worship service when it addresses the community's challenges. Many of the members, mostly underprivileged workers, subsistence farmers and the unemployed, are illiterate and poor. They respond to their experiential interpretation of the Bible through prayers, songs, dances, prophecies, speaking in tongues and interpreting the tongues from the underside of society with their lives, struggles and experiences (Anderson 2013b:224). Their reading hybridises biblical texts, incorporating the pre-colonial past, to create interstices as sites for assimilation, questioning and resistance (Kinyua 2011:289).

As a result, their Christianity is communal, not individual. To them, being a Christian is to stand in relationships with others (Jacobsen 2015:62). *Ubuntu* implies that every human life is valuable and every life is interconnected. Hence, truthful confession, sorrowful repentance, gracious forgiveness and reconciliation should remain integral to the church's mission and agenda. Africans also believe those deceased who lived well, being morally upright and strengthening communities, became ancestors who guide and protect their descendants. As a result, they should be venerated. Their guidance through dreams and divination is appreciated and should be sought (Jacobsen 2015:63–72).

For communal Pentecostals to rightly understand the Bible, it is vital to understand what the church is (Keegan 1985:161). Its essence is to incarnate Christ; his primary task was to reveal God to humankind. Like Jesus, the church can only accomplish its task by living by the Spirit; its Spirit is Christ's Spirit. The Spirit alone can change the church into the implied readers of the Bible because it is only the Spirit who can reveal God to believers, and only the Spirit-anointed church can interpret the Bible correctly because it is the exclusive right of the Spirit who inspired Scriptures to interpret it correctly. The Bible has historical and literary value but to become divine revelation, the Spirit's intervention is a precondition. In this way, the Bible reading discipline with others determines believers' metanarrative, used to interpret and qualify their lives.

The challenge remains to interpret the Bible correctly, and the only safeguard is that the community of believers serves as the interpretive community (Starling 2016:206). Christians who participate in the flesh-and-blood community of the church are taught by God (1 Th 4:9) and the church has apostolic authority to protect the community (Pinnock 1993:24). However, the horizons of interpretation should also move beyond the parochialism of the own faith community and denomination to learn from others, including the wisdom of past leaders and teachers. While reading the Bible and listening to others' interpretation of it, it is vital to attend primarily to the Spirit's guidance because all reading practices are necessarily subjectivist interpretations. Therefore, the faith community should serve as normative in the hermeneutical process; believers should remain apprentices of the faith community.

The historical distance between the biblical and contemporary world of readers is a challenge that can only be addressed when the church is viewed as a continuation throughout history (Venema 2014:48) and biblical interpretation is undertaken as a communal task of the whole church. The church produced the Bible and its interpretation is qualitatively indistinguishable through all ages. As the norm God had chosen for church faith and *praxis*, the church should respect the Bible's value in forming its ethos (Venema 2014:50).

Therefore, when Pentecostals interpret the Bible, it should be done within the context of the *charismatic* faith community where the gospel is proclaimed. When the church gathers, they

receive God's word, meeting with God (Bartholomew 2015:33). God reveals the divine Word through the church's proclamation built on the valid exposition of the Bible (Barth 1947:1.1:52). Although some parts of the Bible may be difficult or even impossible to interpret, *claritas scripturae* implies that salvation history that explains the way to God is very clear. Anyone can understand how to be reconciled with their Creator.

The Bible's kerygmatic characters exist in stories, parables, sermons, letters, visionary forms, biographies, wisdom literature, and more. Although its kerygma instructs and provides information, the Bible imparts more and becomes the way God gives the divine self to humans, drawing them into participation with the divine. Pentecostal proclamation's goal is not merely to illumine listeners but to engage them in encountering the divine and life-transforming experiences (Bartholomew 2015:35). Barth (1947:1.1:59) explains that the concrete encounter with God and the human event of proclamation form counterparts. Although such encounters remain the divine initiative, Pentecostal hermeneutics requires pneumatic and prayerful Bible reading practices before it will succeed in bringing people to God and the divine word (Keener 2016:21–38). Hence, Pentecostal proclamation can never be a lecture or cerebral lesson that stimulates the human mind because its primary goal is to confront hearers with Jesus Christ as saviour, healer, sanctifier, baptiser and coming king (Lewis 2003:1–25; Nel 2007:526–527).

## Conclusion

It is submitted that although Pentecostal scholarship revisited the movement's hermeneutical angle, it has not yet attempted to design a hermeneutics that adequately reflects the Pentecostal *praxis* and ethos for the 21st century (Martin 2013:8). Its lack of a strong theological base contributes to the need to develop a Pentecostal hermeneutics, as the occurrence of heresy such as prosperity theologies illustrates (e.g. in Menzies & Menzies 2000:50). I argue that only theology, based on a careful reading of the Bible, can direct experience and *praxis* to the glory of God. Otherwise, it may dissipate or end in excesses and heresies because of the lack of a strong theological base, as many successful enthusiastic movements' history illustrates.

Most Pentecostal scholars agree that valid Pentecostal hermeneutics should include an emphasis on narrative, using the present existential situation and accompanying charismatic encounters as the hermeneutical lens to read the Bible and listen for and/or to its message. Their spiritual experiences form an important part of their interpretation, and they read the text expecting to encounter God rather than merely collect historical and dogmatic information. What is essential is that their pragmatic reading should result in readers' life transformation when they apply the text to their situation. While Pentecostal hermeneutics accepts that only the Spirit provides faithful interpretation and reads texts from the scopus of Jesus (Heb 1:3), it views the Bible as final and canonical, with authority over their lives and sufficient to explain the way of salvation to all people.

Such hermeneutics sees the decisive distinctive marks of Pentecostal hermeneutics firstly as the centrality of the Spirit in reading the Bible, implying that its epistemology is experience-based and rests on the interplay between knowledge gained from reading the Bible and lived charismatic experiences. Knowing about God and directly experiencing God perpetually inform and depend upon one another (Moore 2013:12). A second mark is their eschatology, qualifying their identity and informing their hermeneutics. A third mark is the normativity of the faith community for interpretation; finding truth is only possible by active participation in the localised faith community. The faith community's ethnic, linguistic, gender, national and economic diversity plays a definitive role in the interpretation process (Archer 2012b:173).

Amos Yong (2017:28) adds that in the pluralistic world, Pentecostal hermeneutics should adopt the day of Pentecost's apostolic charismatic experience as exemplary for their interpretation. Jesus is present where two or three are gathered in his name (Mt 18:20); Pentecostal faith was born, nurtured and sustained in such a gathering (Ac 2:1–4, 42–47). Whenever the faith community gathers, they realise the body of Christ, bound together in mutual interdependency and accountability, each believer contributing to faith formation (1 Cor 14:26), edifying and enlarging the body (1 Cor 12:14; Eph 4; Rm 12).

I conclude that the alternative to the prevailing common fundamentalist hermeneutics applied by most South African classical Pentecostals that addresses their tendency to accept heretical teachings in a wholesome manner is a hermeneutics true to the movement's original ethos with its charismatic emphasis.

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