

## BIBLICAL TEXTS—PAST AND FUTURE MEANINGS

CLARK H. PINNOCK\*

### I. THE TEST OF CRUCIALITY

Millard Erickson has remarked: “I think that the issue of contemporizing the biblical message is possibly the single most important issue facing evangelical hermeneutics today.”<sup>1</sup> He is referring to what I would call the test of cruciality. That is, in order to follow Jesus in our generation, we need to have an ear *for* the word of God even as we listen *to* the word of God. We need to be able to speak a timely word in our modern situations and circumstances. This is not so easy for evangelicals who have a certain fear of new interpretations owing to the trauma of the experience with liberal theology, but God is calling us nonetheless to grow as hearers of the Word of God.<sup>2</sup>

Some readers seem content to be antiquarian with regard to Scripture. Once they have established (as they suppose) the past meaning, they think the job is finished, but it is not. We have also to be concerned about the Word coming alive in new contexts. Scripture ought not to remain a dead letter but constitute a living challenge to people of every present time. When I speak of “future” meanings of the Biblical text, I refer to the ways in which the Bible addresses us today. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once asked: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” To be sure, one could say that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Nevertheless, the proclamation comes to people in ever new ways through the Spirit. The present context always represents an opportunity for a fresh hearing of the gospel, and Bible reading that is mature requires the readiness to consider fresh interpretations and applications, even if they shake us up.

Cruciality, then, is a test of theological faithfulness. It means that we ask not only whether a given interpretation is true to the original meaning but also whether it is pertinent to the present situation or an evasion of what really matters now. Is this reading (we ought to ask) what God wills or not?

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

<sup>1</sup> Millard Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 56.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 211, 179. I sensed such a fear in the symposium entitled “The Future of Evangelical Theology” by Roger E. Olson in *Christianity Today* 42/2 (February 9, 1998) 40–50, when Timothy George expressed the conviction that a theologian who questions tradition and projects a new model is a self-seeker, not a servant of the Church. Evangelicals have difficulty with the call to be timely and crucial in the task of interpretation.

There is the original meaning of words, and there is the truth toward which they are pointing. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a sense of this when he wrote to fellow clergymen from a Birmingham jail and said it was the time for white churches to stop standing on the sidelines and take a stand against racism. In his discernment of the will of God, he named the truth toward which the Scriptures were pointing at that moment, and time has confirmed his conviction. He was alive to Jesus' distinction: "You tithe mint, dill, and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matt 23:23).<sup>3</sup>

Having listened to the text and having attempted to grasp what it is saying in its own context, we have to let it speak to us. The language of "applying" the text to a situation is too weak an expression to render what needs to happen. More than a rational exegetical decision, God must be allowed to challenge our very being and impact our world through the text, if we have ears to hear. Hermeneutics has the responsibility to reflect on the word of God in relation to contemporary experience and context. Not to do so is to invite Jesus' critical question: "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky—why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:56).<sup>4</sup>

## II. FUTURE MEANINGS

Witnesses to the gospel cannot be content with past meanings in an antiquarian way. In order to be timely in our testimony, we need to be able to access future meanings as well. That is, we need to cultivate an eye and an ear, not only for the meanings of human authors in their various historical settings, but also for the directions and trajectories that belong to the flow of God's historical redemptive project. While making use of literary and historical scholarship, we are not the prisoners of a textual past, but listen for the word of the Lord and watch for the fulfillment of God's promises that are still outstanding.

Historical study of Scripture can help us to hear God's word, because God has made himself known in the particularities of history—in specific persons, places, and events. Naturally we want to know as much about them as we can. So it is with Jesus Christ, the Word was made flesh. Because we respect his humanity, we want to know as much as we can about his historical career. In the same way, we respect the human reality of the Biblical witnesses

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). On cruciality as a test of theological faithfulness, see Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International, 1994) 65–66.

<sup>4</sup> Has not theology always been contextual and correlational and sought to be timely? In the Bible itself, themes are interpreted in different contexts and cultures creating the diversity with which we are all familiar. The early Church fathers also sought to make sense of the faith in terms of culture, and Thomas used the works of Aristotle as material for a synthesis of Christian doctrine. Evangelicals are often warned about the dangers of giving context a voice, but Harvie Conn warns against *not* doing our theology contextually: *WTJ* 52 (1990) 51–63. This is a theme of Stephen B. Evans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) chap. 1.

and pay close attention to how they express themselves. At the same time, we want to avoid being like the scribes of Jesus' day who studied the text carefully but were blind to the ways in which its message was being worked out in their own generation. They were Scriptural positivists, as it were, in relation to the past meanings of texts. They were not sensitive to the fact that the reason we engage the narratives of Scripture is not just to refresh our memories but also because the history of salvation of which they speak is not finished and we anticipate greater actualizations of the promises of God.

Tom Wright offers a nice analogy. Suppose we discovered a Shakespearian play (he suggests) whose fifth act has been lost. The four extant acts contain a wealth of characterizations and dynamics of plot, and so the work cries out to be performed. What would we do? Wright suggests that we would not try to write a fifth act in a detached scholarly way but rather commit the text to experienced Shakespearian actors who, having immersed themselves in the four acts, would work out what the fifth act might reasonably be like, had the Bard himself written it. Based, as it were, on the authority of the first four acts, the drama could be brought to completion in an appropriate manner. Living as we do after Acts 28, it is our responsibility to fill in details of our faith and practice out of a watching and waiting on God.<sup>5</sup>

The event of Jesus Christ, which is the centerpiece of Scripture, cannot fully be understood apart from the future that it has put into motion. It is not a story to be read with nostalgia for Bible times. To read it properly, we have to go beyond the historical descriptions and consider the extension of the story into the present and future. We need to read the Bible both historically and with prayerful sensitivity to the directions in which it is moving us. Daniel Migliore comments: "We must ask of Scripture, not only what past it calls us to remember, but what promises it wants us to claim and what future it wants us to pray and work for."<sup>6</sup>

The full significance of the Christian message was not actualized in the life of the early Church. The need for Christians, individually and corporately, to grow as hearers of the word of God remains, because interpretation is an unfinished task. Even if revelation were mainly a deposit of propositions essential to faith (which it is not), we would still be in the position of having more to learn about God and his kingdom than we presently know. Our best knowledge, as St. Paul says, is like seeing things in a mirror dimly. At the same time, our knowledge, limited though it is, anticipates a fuller understanding toward which God is leading us. Theology is a venture in hope and always capable of enrichment and reform.<sup>7</sup>

The meaning of the Bible is not static and locked up in the past but something living and active. There is untapped potentiality of meaning in these texts, a surplus that can be actualized by succeeding generations of disciples in their situations. The Bible is more than a collection of facts requiring

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 140–143.

<sup>6</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* 51.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) I:16, 55–58.

analysis—it has a potentiality of meaning that is waiting to break forth as it operates in relation to actual life situations by the Spirit.

### III. THE UNDERLYING RATIONALE

The existence of this potentiality of meaning waiting to be realized is due (I think) to a number of factors. Let me enumerate the ones that come to my mind. No doubt there are others. One is the nature of divine revelation as seen in the gracious self-disclosure of God in the history of Israel and in the life and ministry of Jesus. I believe that revelation refers, first of all, not to the Bible, but to God's activities in history where the purposes of God are disclosed for all to see. Revelation, while including the rational and propositional, goes beyond that, being a form of interpersonal communication that cannot be totally pinned down conceptually. Such revelation therefore is always open to deeper penetration. This may be glimpsed in the way in which OT texts are said to be fulfilled in the NT, being often surprising fulfillments that go beyond the terms of the original propositions. This phenomenon shows God moving forward and expanding the scope of his own promises as he responds to new situations in unprecedented ways and giving humankind even more than was actually promised. Was it not the Scriptural literalists in Jesus' day who, because they only had room for past meanings, could not bring themselves to recognize who he was? They refused to accept that God was free and sovereign to decide how his kingdom project should be worked out. They had their own view of God's freedom that ruled out God's doing new things that they had not specifically been told about.<sup>8</sup>

A second factor that fosters the retrieval of future meanings arises from the nature of Scripture as a grand or meta-narrative. Apart from the Bible, we would know very little of the good news of God's revelation in history through Jesus Christ. Were Scripture to be ignored, the availability of God's revelation would be diminished. Scripture gives us access to Jesus, the Word of God, and the light that shone on his face gets transmitted to us through the prism of the Biblical witnesses. The central authority of the Bible resides in its witness to God's world-transforming revelational activity culminating in him, and it is its character as story that opens the text to future meanings.

Often people think of the Bible in a Koran-like way, as a book of rules to obey and doctrines to believe. This intellectualistic approach can be a legacy of the Enlightenment and helps to explain why many Christians cannot get very far with future meanings. But if story is the comprehensive category that describes the Bible best and if it is the book that tells the story of God's care for the world, stretching from creation to new creation, then its basic authority is the authority of the narrative, and holding to its authority involves entering into and inhabiting the story. In that case, something more

<sup>8</sup> On the liberty taken in the fulfillment of OT promises, see Stephen Travis, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 135–143 and James DeYoung and Sarah Hurty, *Beyond the Obvious: Discover the Deeper Meaning of Scripture* (Gresham, OR: Vision House, 1995). Also Pinnock, *Flame of Love* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 223–227.

than intellectual assent is required—because like all great stories, it draws us into its own world, engages us imaginatively, and calls us to grow up into Christ from within it.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of interpretation, the story character of the Bible gives it a flexibility with regard to future meanings, which the Bible viewed as a collection of abstract truths would not. Consider the way in which the Koran binds people to ancient Arab culture and hinders the ability of Islam to contextualize itself in the modern world. The results have been cataclysmic for these nations. By way of contrast, the nature of the Bible as story makes it flexible when it comes to adapting its message to changing circumstances and yielding future meanings. It encourages us to believe, not so much believe in the Bible as in the living God rendered by the Bible's story. In a variety of ways, such Scriptures bring us into a relationship with God in Jesus Christ and thus with others and with the whole creation. The Bible witnesses to God's liberating activity in Jesus in whom God is identified and by which we are led into new life. Nicholas Wolterstorff uses speech-act theory to illuminate how God speaks to us through the Bible. Texts (he rightly says) not only *say* something but also *do* something. They do not just communicate content but through the Spirit propel readers into a confrontation with God. Through Word and Spirit, the revelatory activity of God is kept open. The process of ever fresh interpretation can go on.<sup>10</sup>

A third factor that (I think) keeps the meaning of the text open for the future is, paradoxically, its ambiguity and variety. Texts normally have several possible interpretations that require us to discern how to take them. For example, does Paul teach double predestination or not in Romans 9? John Piper says yes—John Zeisler says no. Both cannot be right. But the ambiguity takes us back to root metaphors, to systematic considerations, and to issues of discernment. It forces one to ask why we read texts the way we do and to become more self-conscious about issues of social location, etc. Often texts open up different paths that could be followed, and the resulting communal reflection can be rich and beneficial.

Diversity can have the same kind of effect on us.<sup>11</sup> Different answers are given in the Bible to similar sorts of issues because the text itself has been contextualized in different ways. This leaves room for us to decide about future meanings and applications. Sometimes there are even trajectories developing within the Bible as Richard N. Longenecker has shown. Using Gal 3:28, he reveals how gospel principles are applied to specific situations and how

<sup>9</sup> Alister McGrath calls attention to the centrality of story in the Bible and the evangelical neglect of it: *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 105–116. Along the same lines, see Richard Bauckham, "Scripture and Authority," *Transformation* 5/2 (April 1988) 5–11. Neglecting it results in a rationalistic type of hermeneutics.

<sup>10</sup> See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking of the kinds of diversity presented by John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) and by James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977).

texts can be viewed as signposts at the beginning of a trajectory, indicating paths to be followed by future disciples. God's project is an ongoing historical project and therefore texts may not only set a standard but indicate a direction in which we ought to be moving.<sup>12</sup>

A fourth and momentous factor that opens up future meanings is the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Having inspired the text and guided the people of God to a canon, the Spirit continues to open up its meaning to us. Jesus gave the Spirit, so that there might be a fuller understanding of his life and ministry by disciples in the future. We look to the Spirit for unfolding meaning because of the divine presence with and alongside the text, making it a truly living word. The Spirit, being at work in the contexts of our lives, helps us to grasp the divine intent of Scripture for our time. What is given is not (I think) the communication of new information but a deeper understanding of the truth that is there.<sup>13</sup> But it can be surprising, as illustrated in Acts 15 were what the Spirit was evidently doing in the world (pouring the Spirit out on the Gentiles) showed the leaders how to interpret the OT text in a new way. Because Scripture is spiritual, it has to be spiritually appraised (cf. 1 Cor 2:13b).<sup>14</sup>

Donald Bloesch writes: "It is commonly thought in lay circles more than in clerical that the surface meaning of the biblical text is sufficient and that this meaning is available to any searching person. But more often than not what first appears to be the sense of the text may not at all be the meaning that the Spirit of God is trying to impress on us through this text. It is not enough to know the words of the text: we must know the plentitude of meaning that these words carry for the community of faith at that time and for our time."<sup>15</sup>

There are valid concerns surrounding this idea of illumination, of course. We all fear uncontrolled subjectivity that might simply displace Biblical authority. (In the evangelical family, the scholastic tendency would be more alarmed about this than the pietistic because the latter make more room for experience.) However, there is another danger to be aware of—the danger of placing a fence around the Word and excluding the Spirit from the work of its interpretation. After all, God gives gifts of wisdom and knowledge to help the community with its interpretation, and we must respect them alongside the exegetes. The relative and oft-noted silence about illumination among evangelicals is suggestive of a certain rationalism. We have to learn to trust

<sup>12</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 14–15, 26–28.

<sup>13</sup> I am in agreement with Millard Erickson in relation to Walter Kaiser in *Evangelical Interpretation*, chap. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Roger Stronstad discusses Spirit-oriented Pentecostal hermeneutics: *Spirit, Scripture and Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Baguio City, Philippines: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 172. Unfortunately, the boldness of his views expressed here is not accompanied by specific examples. I do not see much evidence of him actually operating on the basis of such a view in his work.

the Spirit-empowered Word more and not be so afraid to do so.<sup>16</sup> Theology is more than rational discourse and includes the kind of truth that genres like parables, hymns, and stories convey, too.

Illumination, even when room is made for it in evangelical interpretation, is often narrowly conceived of in terms of issues of individual piety. In J. I. Packer, for example, illumination mainly serves to confirm truths of Scripture to the individual (elect) believer concerning his or her own salvation and is not particularly thought of as applying to the larger and urgent issues of mission in our day. The Second Vatican Council sets an example for us in “*Gaudium et Spes*” where it does address the challenges that confront the Church’s mission today.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV. GROWING AS HEARERS

The community needs to grow and mature as hearers of the Word of God, not approaching the Bible as a magical answer book, but as an inspired witness to the love of God and the kingdom of God breaking through. The authority of the Bible is important, but equally important is the decision about what kind of text it is and how to use it. It does not generally operate on a rationalistic plane but in the context of relationship and lived experience. Bloesch speaks of Scripture as a sacrament of our encounter with God in the present day. I would add that we need to listen to Scripture, too, not as isolated individuals, but in communities, allowing ourselves to be open to the readings of Scripture by other churches in contexts different from our own. Growing as hearers is essential, because the truth of profound matters is not easily grasped, and all implications are not immediately apparent. It is important to be on watch for the ways in which the Spirit is leading God’s people into deeper understanding and fuller obedience. A better comprehension is always possible of a revelation that is unsurpassable and inexhaustible.<sup>18</sup>

History presents us with examples of such future meanings that appear to have been successful. Let me mention only two, since current as yet unresolved cases are more interesting because they are contested. First, in the history of doctrine, classical Christians accept that the Spirit helped the Church in the early centuries to read the Biblical narrative in a trinitarian

<sup>16</sup> Erickson opposes the hermeneutical rationalism he sees in Kaiser and Fuller (chaps. 1–2). See also DeYoung and Hurty, *Beyond the Obvious*, chap. 6. Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) chap. 6. Clark H. Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2 (1993) 3–23; “The Role of the Spirit in Interpretation,” *JETS* 36 (1993) 491–497; and *The Scripture Principle*, chap. 9. On this subject, I expect the Pentecostal scholars to help us out.

<sup>17</sup> See Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation: A Study in the Writings of James I. Packer* (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1998). One of the few modern social challenges that Erickson comments on is the consumption of alcoholic beverages (*Evangelical Interpretation* 75–76). Ironically, he is forced to admit that he arrived at his position from extra-Biblical influences, not from Scripture.

<sup>18</sup> Postliberal theology and the Yale School is strong on the importance of a communal reading of the text and a corporate discernment of its meaning. See also Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 208–210.

way. The community was led to see that this was the direction in which the Biblical narrative was tending. It was a growing realization of what the gospel was indicating. They discerned that Father, Son, and Spirit constituted an identifying description of God and the key to an understanding of the Bible as a whole. This doctrine became the conceptual framework for interpreting the whole meta-narrative. The fondness for trinitarian doctrine today among classical theologians reflects the fact that, then as now, the model represents a revelation-based understanding of God uncorrupted by philosophical presuppositions.<sup>19</sup>

Second, on an ethical matter, most Christians would agree that in the case of slavery the full significance of the Christian message was not completely grasped by earlier generations but only subsequently in terms of the abolition of slavery. The direction of revelation was discerned and an implication recognized only after many centuries. Interestingly, it was those, like Hodge, who read the Bible like a rule book, who argued in favor of slavery, while those who read it as the story of human liberation saw the truth of the matter. The truth about slavery was inherent in the gospel from day one but only became plain later, thanks to the providence of God and the illumination of the Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

Harder to assess are issues in our own day that are still debated and where the need of further illumination is great. Being mortal and finite, we have difficulty understanding exactly how and where God is working on our world. Sometimes we think we know, but others tell us that it is not the way that they see it. Therefore there is no way to avoid risks of interpretation, and modesty is essential for everyone. Any examples that I name will inevitably reflect my own situated beliefs about how God is leading and would need to be discussed on a broader basis than the personal and individual. Certainly for a new item to enter tradition, it would have to be more than an intuition and passing fashion. A solid Scriptural basis would have to be indicated and a widespread consensus in the churches secured. These two criteria especially would be indicators that the mind of Christ is being revealed.

To provoke discussion, let me share a few items where I discern an opening up of the Word of God in timely ways. They are not necessarily the best or only examples of timely interpretations—I welcome both corrections and suggestions—but can represent what is possible by way of fresh and fruitful interpretations of our dynamic rule.

First, there is a strong tendency nowadays to rank the universal salvific will of God higher on the hierarchy of theological truths than was formerly the case. One sees it in Vatican Two, in mainline Protestantism, and among many evangelicals who seek a wider hope. Such thinking is on the rise and

<sup>19</sup> This is the theme of Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors Texte* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and McGrath in *Passion for Truth* 112–113.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today*, chap. 4, see Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983) chap. 1.

reflects less restrictive modes of Biblical interpretation. It has the makings of a fresh interpretation that is gaining in strength.<sup>21</sup>

Second, it has become clearer to more Christians than it was that the gospel relates to issues of social justice in the world as well as issues that affect individuals and the churches. A new theological emphasis (not unprecedented) pioneered by Latin American theologians has arisen that takes more account of the practical implications of theology. There is widespread agreement now that theology must address human struggles for justice and freedom. There is more attention given now to Christ's solidarity with the poor and to the social dimensions of sin. It feels like a better reading of the Bible and an enrichment (whatever mistakes have been made in pursuing it) of traditional theology. At the same time, the particular model of liberation developed by the Latin Americans is not a universal norm or even an impressive option. But the fundamental thrust and direction is not likely to go into recession.<sup>22</sup>

Third, the relevance of the Bible for ecological concerns is more widely recognized now than formerly. We are coming to see that the non-human creation is not just something to be used and exploited and that the gospel is concerned about nature as well as salvation. St. Francis of Assisi has formerly been the exception, not the rule, but this is beginning to change. We are now seeing that the natural world is more than a stage for the divine-human drama and that the value of non-human creatures is intrinsic to our own welfare and not merely instrumental. Modern pressure on the ecological web of life has challenged the anthropocentric interpretation of the Bible and alerted us to view creation from a more inclusive point of view.<sup>23</sup>

Fourth, from the experience of the Sunday school and the foreign missionary movements as well as in other ways, God seems to be leading us into a clearer recognition and stronger support for the gifts and callings of women.<sup>24</sup> Though debates remain over ordination, the conviction is surely growing that both men and women share in ministry as in baptism. More and more are asking why people are being excluded from certain ministries on the basis of gender when God calls all believers to ministries in the Church and gifts them. Though it will be a point of tension for some time to come, the impulse to include women and not exclude them from ministries

<sup>21</sup> See Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist, 1992) 199–204 and Richard H. Drummond, *Toward a New Age in Christian Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985). John Sanders documents the rise of wider hope thinking among evangelicals: *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Chan (for example) does not see the relevance of the Latin model for Asia: *Spiritual Theology* 32.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). Jürgen Moltmann, "Ecology of the Creative Spirit," *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997) 111–124.

<sup>24</sup> A point made by Roger Nicole in Alvera Mickelsen, ed., *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 47.

is likely to persist. The Spirit seems to be pointing us to those aspects of the Biblical traditions that point us in the direction of affirming and not quenching the Spirit's liberating activities.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, one must remember that feminism as such is a product of Western liberalism and is not a universal value. Any application of it in Asia (for example), says Chan, will have to take account of the nature of Asian society.<sup>26</sup>

Fifth, the rediscovery of Pentecost in the 20th century has led to a widespread correction of cessationist traditions of Biblical interpretation. Openness to the full range of spiritual gifts is now characteristic of the thinking of a large proportion of Christian people, even outside Pentecostal and charismatic circles. Again, the material was already there in the Bible, but it had been pushed to the side. Now the balance of interpretation has noticeably shifted to support the proposition that charismatic experience is not a fad but a move of God and a resurgence of the primordial power of Pentecost.<sup>27</sup>

Sixth, interpretation of the doctrine of God seems to be moving in a relational direction and away from the unrelational and/or deterministic motifs characteristic of Augustinianism, Thomism, and Calvinism. There is developing a more relational model of a God who sympathizes with and responds to what happens in the world. The pressure comes from many quarters—from Orthodoxy, from Wesleyan/Arminian traditions, from Berkhof's and Barth's neo-reformed thinking, and from the social trinitarians who ground the model in a trinitarian relational ontology. It is influenced also by the modern ethos that favors more dynamic metaphysical interpretations and moves both Thomists like Norris Clarke and Calvinists like Alvin Plantinga to back away from the non-relational thinking of those traditions.<sup>28</sup>

I have alluded to a few contemporary interpretations that may or may not illustrate directions in which God is leading us. One cannot always be certain what the timely word of the Lord is, but these are the sorts of issues on which it seems to me there is growth currently in our hearing of God's Word.

#### V. CONCLUSION

When involved in mission as it ought always to be, the community needs to be able to understand its message in fresh contexts—not in ways that go beyond Biblical revelation but in ways that penetrate that revelation more deeply. It is not so much new information that we look for as it is a fresh understanding of the Word in new circumstances. The Biblical text is quantitatively complete (that is, not requiring additions) but can always be more deeply pondered and grasped at a deeper level. The Spirit is always able to cause what has been written to be revealed in a new light. There are always

<sup>25</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today*, chap. 5; and Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, chap. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Chan, *Spiritual Theology* 31.

<sup>27</sup> Jon Ruthven lays out the exegetical issues forcefully: *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> John Sanders's doctoral thesis will help foster this discussion: *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

errors to overcome in interpretation and new directions to be attempted for the sake of mission. Though the faith is once delivered, the Church has not grasped its significance completely—nor will she until the end of time. We are on the interpretive road, not at the end of the journey, and we pray to the Lord for ever more fruitful meaning.

To use the language of theological hermeneutics, what I am saying is that it is fruitful in terms of fresh insight to correlate Holy Scripture with contextual factors so long as care is taken to avoid letting the context determine and not merely condition our theological reflection. Scripture should be brought into conversation with all aspects of the global situation but in such a way that the Bible is accorded priority over the contextual factors. The hermeneutical task is not a matter of reducing the meaning of Scripture to what readers want to hear but is an exercise in discerning what the Word of the Lord is for this time and place. Bloesch's distinction between correlation and confrontation is important here. He is very sensitive to the fact that the gospel often finds itself in conflict with culture and at variance with worldly wisdom. Thus, for example, it would not be possible to accept an inspirational Christology or a gay theology just because the pressures of pluralism and gender may call for it. I say this in closing to indicate that I am very conscious of the need for watchfulness and prayer in discerning the mind of Christ and the future meaning of texts.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) chap. 9.