The reality of the Holy Spirit in the Church

In honour of F. P. Möller

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CHAPTER 2

Hermeneutical reflections on the interpretation of the New Testament with special reference to the Holy Spirit and faith

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Introduction

Current hermeneutical theory is characterised by a wide variety of theoretical models and approaches. In his recent comprehensive survey, New horizons in hermeneutics, Thiselton (1992) distinguishes between the hermeneutics of understanding, the hermeneutics of self-involvement, the hermeneutics of metacriticism and the foundations of knowledge, the hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval, the hermeneutics of socio-critical theory, the hermeneutics of liberation theologies and feminist theologies, the hermeneutics of reading in the context of literary theory and the hermeneutics of reading in reader-response theories of literary meaning.

If this article has to be classified within this vast field of hermeneutical theories, it may be classified under the heading, 'hermeneutics of metacriticism'. In this article certain metacritical questions concerning the basis of understanding the New Testament text, and our possible relation to its message, are to be addressed.

In current hermeneutical theory, Gadamer's work has been taken as a point of departure for a diversity of directions (cf. Thiselton 1992:1). In this article special attention is given to

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the way Paul Ricoeur and Werner Jeanrond developed (and criticised) important categories of Gadamer’s hermeneutical thinking – especially pertaining to text and interpretation.

The first section of this article deals with the Holy Spirit making the Christ-event a present reality. From the next section onwards important hermeneutical concepts are discussed, before a conclusion is drawn.

The Holy Spirit as the One who makes the Christ-event a present reality

‘Der Heilige Geist ist im neutestamentlichen Denken die Kategorie der Gegenwart ...’. ² With this statement Wendland (1952:458) summarised an important aspect of the New Testament message about the Holy Spirit. Within the Pentecostal tradition it is strongly emphasised that the risen Christ is a reality today in the church and in the life of the believer through the Holy Spirit who empowers the Christian community, enriches it with his fruit and bestows his gifts on them. The Spirit bridges the distance between the past and the present (cf. inter alia Veenhof 1987:115, Pinnock 1993). On the eve of his tribulations Jesus assured his disciples that when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide them into all truth (Jn 16:13).

Ratzinger’s (1968:275–76) commentary on the third article of the Apostles’ Creed (‘I believe in the Holy Spirit’) is in line with the New Testament message about the Holy Spirit. Ratzinger comments that the third article points to the expansion of the Christ-event through the gift of the Spirit into the present. This article of the Apostles’ Creed points to the ‘end times’ between the first and second comings of Christ. It was characteristic of early Christian thought that the history of salvation and Trinitarian perspectives were intertwined. The Holy Spirit is the power through which the exalted Lord is present in the history of the cosmos as principle of a new history and a new world.

The promise as well as the reality of a new dispensation is pri-

² ‘The Holy Spirit is in New Testament thought the category of the present’.
marily related to the Spirit, not only in the New but already in the Old Testament (cf. Lochman 1982:149–54). In Ezekiel 37 the implications of the recreative activity of Yahweh’s Spirit for Israel’s earthly existence is investigated. God is, through his Spirit, going to revive the dry bones. Isaiah 44.1–5 portrays how the Spirit of the Lord will bring the seemingly dead people to new life and vitality – as water in the desert miraculously brings forth new life. Joel 3.1–5 expounds the full meaning of the confession of the presence of Yahweh in the midst of his people. Viewed from a cosmic perspective the future is filled with new vitality and power through the outpouring of Yahweh’s Spirit. Just as Yahweh gave new life to the cosmos through the outpouring of the rain (Joel 2.24), he will give his people new vital power through the outpouring of his Spirit (cf. Vos 1984:99–100; Gräbe 1990:17–18).

The ‘new’ which the Holy Spirit brings, stands in the closest relationship to the activity of God the Father and Jesus Christ (cf. the first and second articles of the Apostles’ Creed). To illustrate this statement Lochman (1982:150) proposes two concepts, namely: ‘Vergegenwärtigung und Teilhabe’ (‘making present of’ and ‘gaining part in’). The Holy Spirit may be understood as the power through which God is made present in the Christ event. The Holy Spirit is God in his most intimate closeness. When baptised candidates confess the third article, it becomes clear to them that the faith in God the Father and in Jesus Christ does not merely relate to a history gone by; they do not have to comfort themselves by means of nostalgic memories, but they live in the relevant presence of God – their present situation being affected and changed.

The Holy Spirit not only makes God present, but also enables believers to partake in the Divine. Through the Spirit believers are united with God and God with them. In the confession about the Holy Spirit, what Christ has completed, is viewed from the perspective of ‘acceptance’ and ‘gaining part in’. People are not only the object of God’s activity, but are also addressed in their subjectiveness, in their being subjects who have to answer. The question of how the Crucified and Resurrected is present in our midst, can only be answered in the context of the New Testament message about the Spirit.
In the Gospels we find the story of Jesus of Nazareth, his crucifixion and resurrection. Acts recounts the presence (and powerful working) of the risen Jesus Christ among his followers through the activity of the Holy Spirit. From the angle of the risen Lord’s presence among his disciples through the Holy Spirit, Paul interprets the gospel in his letters ascentring on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus the New Testament rests on the conviction that the Jesus recorded there actually lived in Palestine and that there is an essential identity and continuity between the Jesus who was crucified and the Lord who was raised and who, through the Holy Spirit, remains with his disciples all the days to the end of the world.

**Interpretation as understanding the New Testament**

**Understanding and pre-understanding**

Under the influence of the Enlightenment ‘objective’ understanding was regarded as the highest form of understanding. Bias was considered reprehensible and it was believed that truth could be found by a rigorously methodical exercise of the human mind. Hermeneutic philosophy, on the other hand, showed that understanding is in fact based on our preconceptions (or prejudices). Without a modicum of prior understanding no understanding is possible. Anyone who has never experienced love will not know what is meant when others speak about it. The basic condition for understanding is the ‘prior understanding’ engendered by being engaged with the matter concerned (Gadamer 1965:278). People’s experiences and prejudices are all part of their ‘horizon’. The past influences a person’s present horizon. Understanding does not imply getting rid of one’s past and one’s prejudices, but taking them into account and placing them in the balance. Thus proper understanding is a fusion of horizons (see Gadamer 1965:289).

The process of understanding is therefore according to Gadamer the act of confronting the text with one’s own necessary pre-understandings (or as Jauss put it: one’s own ‘horizon of expectation’ [cf. Thiselton 1992:61]) in order to validate or correct one’s pre-understandings through the text. To achieve
understanding in this way a consciousness is necessary that knows itself as participating in the effective histories of the text (Jeanrond 1982:4).

**Understanding from a faith-perspective**

Gadamer (1979:295) cites Bultmann with approval that all understanding presumes a living relationship between the interpreter and the text. This hermeneutical requirement may also be termed ‘fore-understanding’ because it is not attained through the process of understanding, but is already presupposed. The history of hermeneutics shows how the examination of the New Testament is determined by a very precise fore-understanding. In this regard Gadamer emphasises the viewpoint of true faith. ‘The existential fore-understanding, which is Bultmann’s starting point, can only be a Christian one’ (Gadamer 1979:296, cf. also Ommen 1984). The New Testament came into being within the Christian community and it was written for the Christian community (cf. Kasper 1989:253).

In reaction to Bultmann’s demythologising programme, Gadamer (1976:45) poses the question as to whether our relationship to the New Testament can be understood adequately in terms of the individual’s self-understanding originating from his/her being-in-the-world or whether an entirely different factor is operative in it – a factor that goes beyond people’s self-understanding, beyond their individual being. From the theological point of view, Gadamer (1976:54) continues, faith’s self-understanding is determined by the fact that faith is not human-kind’s possibility, but a gracious act of God that happens to the one who has faith.

Faith can be described as a pneumatological reality (cf. Schütz 1985:3–4). From a Pentecostal point of view Ervin (1985:33) pointed out that a pneumatic epistemology posits an awareness that the Scriptures are the product of an experience with the Holy Spirit which the biblical writers describe in phenomenological language. When one encounters the Holy Spirit in a way similar to the description in the New Testament, it has an impact on the way one understands the apostolic witness. The experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s
life enables one to come to terms with the apostolic witness in a truly existential manner. Through the activity of the Holy Spirit a continuity with the faith community that gave birth to the Scriptures is constituted. Ervin (1985:33) draws two immediate consequences for Hermeneutics resulting from a Pentecostal encounter with the Holy Spirit: (1) There is a deepening respect for the witness of the Scriptures. (2) The Scriptures are now read within the pneumatic continuity of the faith community, and that community is much larger than the post-Reformation communities of the West.

**Understanding the New Testament as history and more than history**

The New Testament cannot be viewed as a merely historical writing. W. Pannenberg (1971:11) pointed out that the Bible speaks about God and claims to be his Word. This claim cannot be dismissed as purely ideological – that in itself would be a dogmatic prejudice. The biblical sources should rather be expounded according to their own self-understanding. This means that the Bible can definitely not be expounded along purely positivist historical lines. Whereas the Word of God was recorded in the Bible in a historical way, being God’s Word it continually transcends the specific historical situation. Because God is the all-transcending and all-embracing reality, the Bible has universal and therefore contemporary significance. This contemporary significance of the New Testament message cannot be separated from the activity of the Holy Spirit. Pinnock (1993) correctly observes that, from the perspective of faith, there does not merely exist a gap of thousands of years between us and the biblical witness, because the Spirit is putting us in touch with the same subject matter even today, helping us to understand what the ancients said, making God’s saving truth present to us now (Pinnock 1993:6–7).

Lessing emphasised the ‘garstige breite Grabe’ between the New Testament writings and the present day interpreter. The New Testament is a historical document. It is, however, not merely a historical document. It tells the story of a Jew who lived and died in Jerusalem almost two thousand years ago. It
interprets, however, this event in a specific way and tells about God’s activity in this Man and of the presence of a crucified and resurrected Christ in his church through the Holy Spirit. The theological dimension of the New Testament may not be separated from its historical basis. In history, however, more than history is to be found. ‘In Wirklichkeit geht es darum, die theologische Aussage im historischen Text zu finden’³ (Kasper 1989:515).

**Interpretation as methodological explanation**

In the preceding paragraphs it has been pointed out that faith and the reality of the Spirit in the life world of the interpreter have a profound effect on the way in which he/she understands the New Testament. Understanding is defined as the fusion of horizons conditioned by effective historical consciousness.

An important aspect for biblical scholars, however, still needs to be addressed, namely how do we validate our experience with the text. The problem of inadequate understanding (see Jeanrond 1988:27) can only be addressed through the methodological means of explanation. Ricoeur was much more concerned about text comprehension than Gadamer was. He pointed out that the relationship between text and interpretation has to be approached methodically and the method of approach must be critically accountable. Ricoeur describes the interpretive process as a dialectical process progressing from an initial naive understanding to an explanation of the text, which in turn leads to a deepened understanding. He therefore allows for a methodological validation of the results of our first or naive understanding (Jeanrond 1982:5; 1986:42).

**Interpretation as application, appropriation, assessment**

True understanding always includes the act of application. In his magisterial work ‘Truth and Method’, Gadamer clearly

³ ‘In the final analysis the issue is to find the theological dimension in the historical text’.
pointed to the weakness of a historical method which purports to understand history only in terms of itself as an objective enterprise. He correctly affirms that the text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim that it is uttering something true. The acknowledgement of the otherness of the other, which makes him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth (Gadamer 1979:270). Gadamer also points to the dilemma of theology practised from a perspective where the edifying application of Scripture in Christian proclamation and preaching seems to be quite a different thing from the historical and theological understanding of it. Understanding always involves the application of the text to be understood to the present situation of the interpreter (Gadamer 1979:274).

The concept 'understanding' has been used in this article to describe the relation between text and reader. The importance of 'explanation' as the methodological activity taking place between reader and text has also been highlighted. In the third place the attention has to be drawn to the tension between the meaning or purport of the text as it emerges in the previous two dimensions, and the readers who open themselves to that meaning. 'Assessment' as Jeanrond (1986:70, 125) calls this third dimension of the interpretive process is a matter of the readers' personal responsibility towards the meaning of the text that opens up before them. Assessment of New Testament texts consists in discovering and grasping the principal claim made by the text and then making a personal, considered response to it.

The 'world of the text'

'Assessment' can be described as the 'decision'-element of the act of appropriation (Jeanrond 1982:13). Ricoeur (1975:29) relates the problem of appropriation to his analysis of the 'world of the text'. The task of hermeneutics is to explicate the 'world of the text' (Ricoeur 1975:25). This notion corresponds at the level of the whole work, to that of reference at the level of an isolated sentence. Ricoeur distinguishes between the terms 'sense' and 'reference'. The sense of a sentence is its ideal object
and is immanent in the proposition. The reference is its truth value, its claim to reach reality. Although in poetry, for example, the first-order reference is suspended a second-order reference is effected. This second-order reference no longer touches the world at the level of manipulable objects, but at the deeper level which Husserl designated by the term ‘life-world’ (Lebenswelt) and Heidegger by that of ‘being-in-the-world’ (in der Welt-Sein). For every unique text there is such a ‘world of the text’. Distantiation by writing and objectification by structure are the preliminary conditions for the text saying something which is its ‘issue’. The ‘issue’ of the text, the ‘world’ of the text, the ‘new being’ of the text, is the object of hermeneutics.

When interpreting a written text the concept of appropriation has to be connected dialectically to that of distantiation. The appropriation is mediated by the structure of the text, which articulates its ‘sense’ as its inner-connectedness. The real vis-à-vis of appropriation is however not the structure of the work as such, but the world of the text. What I appropriate is the mode of being-in-the-world displayed by the text.

Conclusion

For Ricoeur (as is also the case with A. Schlatter, K. Barth, E. Fuchs and H.G. Gadamer) faith does not render scientific methodologically controlled interpretation of biblical texts impossible. Faith is the framework within which this whole enterprise is meaningful (Stuhlmacher 1979:204). What in theological language is called faith is constituted by the new being which is the ‘issue’ of the text. The recognition of the hermeneutical constitution of biblical faith leads to the resisting of all psychologising reductions of faith. Faith is, however, also an act which cannot be reduced to linguistic treatment. In this sense faith is the limit of all hermeneutics and the non-hermeneutical origin of all interpretation. The ceaseless movement of biblical interpretation, Ricoeur (1975:31) affirms, begins and ends in the risk of a response which is neither engendered nor exhausted by commentary, the risk namely of faith. In this sense faith could be called ‘ultimate concern’, which speaks of the laying hold of the necessary and unique from which basis I orientate myself
in all my choices. Faith can also be called a ‘feeling of absolute
dependence’, pointing to the fact that it responds to an initia-
tive which precedes me.

Hermeneutics, however, reminds us that biblical faith cannot
be separated from the movement of interpretation which ele-
vates it into language.

‘Ultimate concern’ would remain mute if it did not receive the
power of a word ceaselessly renewed by its interpretation in signs
and symbols which have, we might say, educated and formed this
concern over the centuries. The ‘feeling of absolute dependence’
would remain a weak and inarticulate sentiment if it were not the
response to the proposition of a new being which opens new possi-
bilities of existence for me (Ricoeur 1975:32).

Faith in the New Testament and specifically in Pauline theology
has a pneumatological basis. In 1 Thessalonians 1.5; 1 Corinth-
ians 2.4 and Romans 15.18–19 Paul clearly distantiates himself
from the assumption that the proclamation of the gospel is a
mere human endeavour. The confirmation in faith of the truth of
its message is neither the result of, nor demanded by logical pre-
mises, but is brought about by God himself through the power of
the Spirit (cf. Gräbe 1992:355). The event of proclamation which
gives rise to faith rests on the powerful working of the Spirit (cf.
1 Thess 1.5–6; 1 Cor. 12.9; Gal. 5.22) [Horn 1992:385].

The event which we refer to as Pentecost was the experience
of the Spirit of God transforming and empowering the lives of
the first Christians. This event is described in Acts as a dra-
matic episode. The result was the first Christian community in
Jerusalem, eager to bear witness to the power and love of God
which they had experienced, and radiating it out into the
world around them by the ardour of their faith and the vigour
of their fraternal charity (cf. Schnackenburg 1974:81–82). The
situation in which the New Testament books were written was
characterised from a theological point of view by a conscious-
ness of the very real presence and power of the Spirit.

In the Pentecostal and charismatic movements the Spirit has
again manifested himself. Throughout the world people have
found themselves together in prayer, full of longing and faith
that the Spirit will reveal and communicate himself to them.
Phenomena related to the early church and often somewhat skeptically referred to as primitive phenomena suitable for beginners have suddenly begun to happen again: glossolalia, prophecy, miracles of healing (cf. Schnackenburg 1974:82–83). Within this context the New Testament is also interpreted today. Theologians are endeavouring to understand themselves in the light of the text, i.e. the ‘what’ and the ‘about what’ of the text. They allow themselves to be exposed to the text, in order to receive from it a Self – in the sense of Ricoeur (1975:30) – a mode of subjectivity which responds and corresponds to the power of the New Testament to display its own world – a world which radiates the reality of a living, exalted Lord, present among his people, the community of faith, through the Holy Spirit.

Bibliography


