


# The Bible as a human and fallible book? Contrasting Karl Barth and classical Pentecostal hermeneutical perspectives



**Author:**  
Marius Nel<sup>1</sup> 

**Affiliation:**  
<sup>1</sup>Unit for Reformed Theology,  
Faculty of Theology,  
North-West University,  
Potchefstroom, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**  
Marius Nel,  
marius.nel@nwu.ac.za

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Many Pentecostals share an affinity with Karl Barth's theology of the Word along with a high view of the Bible that Protestants share. Like some Reformed theologians, they interpret his theology as that the Bible *is* not in any objective sense the word of God but *becomes* the word when it means something to us through the work of the Spirit. The objective content of biblical words meant little for Barth; only the encounter with God in the text is essential. The purpose of this study was to consider the appropriateness of such affinity. The study limited the discussion to Barth's view about the Bible's humanness and fallibility and compared it to the Pentecostal perspective, that the Bible requires the Spirit's inner working in the reader to become God's revelation, implying that biblical authors point to the witness of the Spirit that entails the revelation; readers should strive to find that witness prayerfully. As a result, the related issues of the Bible's authority and the task of exegesis were also discussed. The research used a comparative literature study of some Barthian and Pentecostal resources. As a result, this article submits that some Pentecostals' perception of Barth's views is incorrect. However, some tangent planes exist between Barth's and Pentecostal hermeneutics. The article concludes that by recognising their significant influence, Pentecostals would establish room to further the nuances their hermeneutics represent. It contributes to considering one proponent of Reformed hermeneutics, Barth, and Pentecostal hermeneutics. It expounds one aspect of Pentecostal hermeneutics about the Bible's humanness and fallibility, that had received scant attention in the available literature.

**Contribution:** The article contributes to the discourse about Pentecostal hermeneutics by investigating links between Karl Barth's and classical Pentecostals' theology of the word. It concludes that although some tangent planes exist between Barth's and Pentecostal hermeneutics, Pentecostals regard the authority of the Bible as derived from the Spirit's preference to use the Bible to speak to people.

**Keywords:** Pentecostal hermeneutics; Karl Barth; Bible's humanness; Bible's fallibility; exegesis; Bible's authority.

## Introduction

To what extent is the Bible a book produced by human beings, although under the Spirit's inspiration? And do its human character and flavour imply that it is also a fallible book? In this study, Pentecostal hermeneutical perspectives are contrasted with Karl Barth's views. Many Pentecostals see a link between Barth's theology of the word of God and their own hermeneutical perspectives, especially in what they perceive as Barth's explanation, that the Bible *is* not the word of God but *becomes* the word, when the Spirit encounters readers in its pages, making it meaningful for the lives of the readers. They see this as Barth's apology for his assertion that the Bible's fallibility does not affect its usefulness for contemporary readers. The question is asked, to what extent does a link between Barthian and Pentecostal hermeneutics exist? And is the link unnuanced as these Pentecostals assume, amounting to Pentecostal theology being Barthian in its hermeneutics? The article uses a comparative literature analysis of Barth's relevant works and compares it to Pentecostal scholarly work on hermeneutics.

The contribution of the research is in the development of a more nuanced way of thinking about the Bible as revelation despite its humanness, its inspiration despite its fallibility, and the implications for the task of exegesis and thinking about the Bible's authority.

Any comparison with or dialogue between Barth and Pentecostal theology is 'fraught with difficulties', as Althouse (2017:254) explains. The theological, social, political and cultural distance

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between Barth and Pentecostalism is so vast that it is risky to attempt any comparison. At the same time, Pentecostalism represents a wide diversity of perspectives representing a myriad of local and regional forms of expression, that portray and illustrate the eclectic way in which it borrowed its theology from multiple traditions and pieced them together in a patchwork fashion. Given its populist nature that lacks theological sophistication, it is difficult to define its complicated theological perspectives. For example, it does not agree about even its most public feature, tongue-speaking (*glossolalia*), with some Pentecostals insisting that it serves as the initial sign of Spirit baptism. In contrast, others argue that Spirit baptism should be associated with faith initiation, while *glossolalia* and the other spiritual gifts (*charismata*) are different expressions of the faith.

Macchia (2001:5–6) is of the opinion that Barth might have been exposed to the Pentecostal movement by meeting with David du Plessis, a significant Pentecostal ecumenical South African leader (called Mr Pentecost, by Slosser 1977).<sup>1</sup> He allegedly told Du Plessis that he was uncomfortable with some Pentecostals of the mass evangelistic campaigns' glorification of success. However, Barth himself never wrote about the meeting or the movement as such.<sup>2</sup>

The Pentecostal movement can be categorised in three (or four waves): classical Pentecostals that occurred since the early 1900s, that resulted from the new emphasis on Spirit baptism with *glossolalia* as a sign (or one of the initial signs); the charismatic movement that resulted from the charismatisation of established churches since the 1960s; the neo-Pentecostal movement that occurred since the 1990s, with the establishment of independent churches; and network churches that since the 2000s charismatised their worship services along with various other elements (Ma & Ma 2020:280). The classical Pentecostal movement is also very diversified, without a leading theological figure like Augustine, Martin Luther or John Calvin. However, it is marked by a four- or fivefold full-gospel emphasis on Christ as saviour, healer, sanctifier, Spirit baptiser and coming King, and its focus on the ongoing revelation of the Spirit in contemporary times.<sup>3</sup>

Reference to Pentecostalism in this article is limited to the classical Pentecostal movement. Pentecostal hermeneutics

relates to the new hermeneutics developed by Pentecostal scholars, except if otherwise stated (see discussion below).

Next Pentecostal hermeneutical principles are discussed, before Barth's perspectives are portrayed, leading to a discussion of the humanness and fallibility of the Bible that Barth presupposed. The last two matters concern the Bible's authority and the role of exegesis in its interpretation, where a comparison is also made between Barth's and Pentecostals' perspective on the Bible as a human and fallible book.

## Pentecostal hermeneutical perspectives

Pentecostals use the hermeneutical angle of their experiences with the Spirit to interpret what they read in the Bible. Their Christocentric focus on Christ as the way God reveals the divine self to humanity, shaped the way they looked at the Bible (Althouse 2017:279). They find that their experiences are attuned to points of contact and continuity with the lives of biblical characters or people (Ellington 2020:63). Their experience of God's presence and activity reflects the ways of especially the early Christian church, attested to in Luke – Acts. In this process, the Bible becomes a new book, argues Ellington (2020:64), through a paradigmatic change in interpretive perspective. Being baptised in the Spirit and living a Spirit-filled life, change their perspective, so that certain narratives resonate with their own experiences of the presence and guidance of the Spirit. However, this is not how most Pentecostals think about the Bible.

Since the 1930s, some second-generation classical Pentecostals, tired of rejection by society and established churches for their sectarian tendencies and looking for acceptance, allied with Evangelicals. They attempted to shed their sectarian status, a feature of most movements' institutionalisation process. In the process, they imported many liturgical and hermeneutical elements of Evangelical worship practices, with the potential to undermine the Pentecostal ethos, which directly affected the way they live out their spirituality and read the Bible. Classical Evangelicalism was committed to modernist notions of objective truth that influenced Pentecostal hermeneutics radically. For these conservative Evangelicals, the Bible represents the end of the canon with its revelation of Christ, excluding any further revelatory acts of God. In the process, Pentecostals shifted their focus away from the immediate close encounter with the Spirit to study the Bible, employing the grammatical-historical exegetical method. It reshaped their movement. Previously they did not show much interest in developing a systematic theology; their emphasis on the priority of ongoing encounters with the Spirit birthed their anti-intellectualist urge. They believed that a formal theology would quench the spontaneous work of the Spirit. As part of the Evangelical movement, they now accepted that the objectification of the Bible limited biblical narratives into the realm of history. Revelation became historical, implying that Scripture was no longer a charismatic event, but remained embedded and petrified as text (Vondey 2010:63). Their new

1. It might be argued that Barth's first encounter with Pentecostalism might have been at the beginning of 1917 when he met a pietist evangelist, Jacob Vetter, who conducted an evangelistic campaign in Safenwil. Barth responded to the sermon by stating that he was not preaching the gospel but a bad form of religious mechanics (Smart 1964:40). However, Vetter as a pietist evangelist, was not Pentecostal.

2. Barth told about the encounter in a conversation in the summer of 1978 with Augustus Cerillo, published in *Agora*, but he did not disclose when he met Barth (referred to by Macchia 2001:5). Unfortunately, Du Plessis never referred to the exact date of their first meeting. He writes that Barth was not closed to the possibility of glossolalia because he realised the power of the Holy Spirit from own experience. He relates that Barth told him, 'Almost thou persuadest me to become an enthusiast, but I must have Scripture' (quoted in Macchia 2001:5). Barth referred, when what he thought of the Pentecostal movement, to Du Plessis, who had visited him and kept in contact. 'Der Mann hat mir nicht schlecht gefallen'. He followed by thanking God for a Pentecostal movement that draws attention to believers' need of the Holy Spirit (ed. Busch 1997:430–432).

3. Wesleyan Pentecostals argue for a fivefold gospel, to accommodate Wesley and the Holiness movement's emphasis on sanctification, as a fifth component of the full gospel. What is important, is the Christocentric way of thinking that determines Pentecostal proclamation, practice and theology. The church living on this side of Pentecost, encounters Christ through the Spirit, who mediates Christ's presence, kingdom and power.

hermeneutic undermined the original Pentecostal impetus and ethos. Although they accepted in theoretical terms the potential for continuing encounters with God, in theological terms, they supported the Protestant cessionary view of the ending of the canon, with the death of the last apostle at the end of the first century.

In a fundamentalist manner, Pentecostals accepted that the Bible was verbally (even mechanically) inspired, without any human elements or mistakes, like some of the early church fathers and a few of the Lutheran and Calvinistic theologians. Its infallible and inerrant character represents God's final, absolute and last revelation to human beings. The status accorded to the Bible implied that divine revelation was for practical purposes quarantined to a distant past, with unrepeatability of revelations. Now they believed like fundamentalists, that the authority of Scripture lies in its past inspiration and not, like early Pentecostals, that the experience of the Spirit speaking to the faith community, affirmed the belief in the Bible's inspiration (Archer 2014:35–40).

Eventually this changed when since the 1980s, Pentecostals developed a scholarship that redefined a Pentecostal hermeneutic in line with the way early Pentecostals viewed and interpreted the Bible.<sup>4</sup> The Cleveland School, consisting of the work of John Christopher Thomas, Ken Archer and Rickie D. Moore, initially represented the varying perspectives and nuances found among Pentecostals. Although there is yet no consensus on its final form, most scholars agree to its broad terms. Because of the new hermeneutical angle, reading the Scripture holds a sense of immediacy for Pentecostals. They accept the 'literal, plain meaning' of the text, because they identify closely with the experiences of the first Christians, illustrating their restorationist urge to continue the early church's emphasis on the continued work of the Spirit, including charismatic phenomena and miracles (Grey 2020:129). The Bible for them, was not a historical artefact but a living document with an application for their daily context. The narratives of Acts were incomplete, and they were continuing that story. Their reading approach was pre-critical, an adaption of the text-proof method; Archer (2014:65) asserts that it reflected how New Testament authors read the Old Testament. Like the Lukan narrative, they used a form of *peshar* interpretation, going beyond the text's plain meaning to include the revelation they perceived the Spirit showed them at the hand of the text (Purdy 2015:73). Their Bible reading method was characterised by a deductive process of combing the text for all references to a topic, and harmonising and synthesising the information (Martin 2013:3).

4. Oliverio (2017:143) explains the process of hermeneutical developments. He asserts that it is possible to distinguish between four basic types of classical Pentecostal theological hermeneutics. The first is an original classical Pentecostal hermeneutics of revelation and origination, marked by its restorationist ethos. The others are the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutics, that emphasise the relationship between the dynamics of revelation and textual-scriptural authority; the contextual Pentecostal hermeneutics in the work of Walter Hollenweger, James K.A. Smith and the Cleveland School, with the cultural-linguistic and philosophical underpinnings of spiritual-theological understanding; and the ecumenical Pentecostal hermeneutics represented by Craig Keener, Nimi Wariboko and Amos Yong, with the larger Christian tradition and the development of systematic theology. The last two waves of Oliverio represent what the article groups together, as the new Pentecostal hermeneutics.

In many cases, it led to a spiritualisation and contextualisation of the text. They also tended to interpret the biblical text in an a-historical manner, without necessarily recognising the cultural and historical distance and the gap between the biblical world and that of the reader. Macchia (2002:1122) calls this a kind of 'Biblicism', because they believed they could enter the world of the Bible through the Spirit working in them, and do not need to consciously engage hermeneutical challenges that the reading of an ancient manuscript pose to a contemporary reader. They find the world of the Bible much more accessible, because its truths resonate with their charismatic experiences.

They expected the Bible to become a living word that communicates God's will for their situation. The Spirit used the Bible for the self-disclosure of God (Macchia 2017:193). The Bible is God's word to the extent that the Spirit causes it to be the divine word, to the extent that it reveals the divine voice to the reader, representing the divine self-disclosure. Hearing from God in the text, did not require bridging the gap between the original authors and their sometimes-strange cultural world, but that the reader yielded to the Spirit. They read the Bible for devotional purposes, and not primarily to acquire knowledge about God, or to formulate propositions about God's work. In the process, they lacked interest in the author's intended meaning, to the extent that it is possible to render such an intention. For them, the hermeneutical gap was, in Macchia's words (2000:55), not historical or cultural but spiritual, because it requires the ongoing revelatory activity of the Spirit in their interpretive task, the same Spirit who inspired the biblical authors to write down the revelation of God. Their view of the Bible was more organic, implying that the Spirit acted upon the authors in harmony with the laws of their own being, as is the case when one interprets the Bible with the anointing of the Spirit. Contemporary readers, like biblical authors, were not passive but active, projecting all thoughts and ideas through the prism of their personality and cultural context.

The new Pentecostal hermeneutic also shows some affinities with postmodern reader-centred reading strategies, that value subjective experiences and the validation of story and testimony as a vital means of expressing meaning. It accommodates the tendency in Pentecostal Bible reading practices to focus on immediate content and 'plain meaning'. However, their dialogical understanding of the Bible, that leaves its interpretation open-ended, transcends reader-response approaches to the text (Ellington 2020:69). Pentecostals leave the room that experiences narrated in the Bible, and their reflections and reproductions in the current day are encounters with God, who remains the active agent that alone can place limits on the meaning of texts. The active agent's ability to expound final, absolute and universal truth, defines believers' lives and identity, representing Pentecostals' divergence from postmodernist assertions of the relativist nature of truth. Biblical truths form an unnegotiable authoritative and exclusionary metanarrative for Pentecostals, that postmodernists cannot accept (Johns 1995). In their



dialogical understanding of the Bible, Pentecostals preserve the necessary room for the inspiring Spirit, to actively participate in the author-reader conversation that transcends cultural, historical and linguistic barriers. The Spirit represents the unifying voice that bridges the gap between the ancient and present-day world. '... Scripture invites the Spirit's voice that both speaks the native tongue of every culture and that is free therefore to challenge, to call, and to transform that culture's readers' (Ellington 2020:69–70).

Pentecostals also expect the Spirit to be active in guiding them in their daily lives apart from the biblical text. Extra-biblical revelations can consist of charismatic words (such as words of wisdom and knowledge, prophecy and interpretation of *glossolalia*; 1 Cor 12–14) as well as perceived insights ascribed to the Spirit. Yet, the biblical text still holds a privileged position, being both the standard by which all experience is measured and interpreted, and a primary resource for further revelations (Davies 2013:256). They evaluate and correct their experiences by the Bible; the rule is that it may never contradict the Bible, because the Spirit cannot contradict the revealed word.

## Barth's hermeneutical perspective

Karl Barth emphasises that the Bible is literally God's word, because the chief subject matter is God's address to humankind, particularly as revealed in the incarnation of the Son of God (Macchia 2017:192): '... revelation does not differ from the person of Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in Him. To say revelation is to say "the Word made flesh"' (Barth 1933:119). It is more than a symbolic expression of human faith or experience. The Bible serves as a living witness to God's address to humanity, marked by grace and patience. However, while the Bible is literally God's word, it is a fallible witness. Therefore, it is not an object of our control or mastery; we cannot 'freeze' the relationship between the biblical text and the living God, because God can only reveal the divine self (Barth 1938:683).

When Barth does not accept the infallibility of the Bible, it is because it implies to him that humanity then would *have* the Word of God. The biblical words have objective contents; Barth does not contend with that statement. However, what mattered for Barth was not the contents of narratives or law found in the Bible, but the encounter with God that occurs as the text is proclaimed. 'The miracle of God takes place in this text formed of words' (Barth 1938:532). He reasons that God in divine grace and through the Spirit's work, must make the word of the Bible the divine word, before it touches human lives. The Bible is God's word 'only to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it' (Barth 1933:109). God's revelation is always revealing; it can never be a static *datum* but remains an event. It is the *dandum*, that which must be given again and again. God's revelation is always an ongoing event, comparable to Moses' staff that pointed the way, but only when moved by a living stretched-out hand (Barth 1933:111). Therefore, revelation

constitutes an always-new act, a constantly renewed miracle of grace (Barth 1938:529–30). Runia (1962:109) describes the syllogism representative of Barth's argument: God's revelation in the Bible must always be a miracle of grace. It becomes such a miracle only when God used fallible authors who remained fallible in their writing. Therefore, the Bible is a fallible document.

However, that does not imply for Barth that there is an ongoing revelation of God apart from, or beside the Bible, as some Pentecostals assert (Nel 2021). Apart from the Bible, Barth (1933:105) insists, God does not address the church. There is a unity between revelation and the Bible; the church can never appeal directly to God and never evade the Bible. The Bible exercises authority over all subsequent witnesses as a written text, primarily through the church's proclamation (Barth 1933:102). In revelation, believers are tied to the Bible (Barth 1938:492). When Barth refers to the 'objectivity of the inspiration of the Bible', he means that God speaks through the Bible and in ways informed by the text's verbal witness. God says what the text says (Barth 1938:532).

Barth unequivocally states that the Bible contains only human attempts to repeat and reproduce the word of God. Human expressions of the word of revelation that they perceived, can in no other way be presented than in human thoughts and terms (Barth 1933:127). The Bible is a fully human book, although believers see more in it as a document that somehow represents God's revelation. The Bible contains reports from Israel's religious past and its continuation in the Christian church's origins. It is not different from other documents of this kind (Barth 1938:495–496).

What in the Bible then comprises God's word if the human witnesses influenced the texts? Barth refers to the core of the Bible's content, as a witness to revelation; Pentecostals agree with him. They argue that the Bible, by its very nature, reveals God only indirectly, not because it provides symbols of the human experience of God, as many liberal theologians asserted, but by pointing the reader to God's address to humanity (Macchia 2017:195). In Barth's words, the Bible points to 'the life of God turned to us, the Word of God coming to us by the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ' (Barth 1938: 512–513). The Bible claims nothing for itself and everything for revelation, according to Barth (Macchia 2017:196).

The Bible is God's word in its function as the witness to God's word. In that sense, Barth holds a 'dynamic infallibilism' concerning the Bible (McCormack 2004:73). The biblical authors pointed beyond themselves to the revelation that is concerned with God. They are a part of that revelation but only to the extent that they spoke and wrote 'as ordered, about that Other' (Barth 1933:112). The Bible reveals God indirectly by pointing the reader to God and the divine address to humanity. In the Bible, we find the life of God turned to us and coming to us by the Spirit (Barth 1938:483). However, the voices of the witness struggled to bear witness, demonstrating the grace of God to allow human beings to

encounter God in Christ and the biblical words. The Bible mimics the kenotic Christ, but only analogously. In the event of revelation, the Bible is objectively the word of God in its essential unity with God's self-disclosure in Christ (McCormack 2004:58).

Macchia (2017:191) makes the significant assertion that many Evangelicals incorrectly interpret Barth's theology of the word; they argue that he thinks that the Bible *is* not in any objective sense the word of God. Instead, it only *becomes* the word when it means something to us. In this view, the objective content of biblical words meant little for Barth; only the encounter with God in the text is essential. Probably, the widespread affinity that Pentecostals share for Barth's theology of the word is based on this perception. However, such an assertion is not true since, for Barth, the text says precisely what God says, as discussed above.

## The Bible's humanness and fallibility

On the one hand, in his typical dialectical manner, Barth states that the Bible states what God says, while on the other hand, he emphasises the fallibility due to the author's contribution. Barth defends this last thesis by discussing various proofs that need to be summarised for the sake of brevity.

In Barth's opinion, biblical authors shared the cultural world view of their age and environment that was determined by sociological, cultural and pseudo-scientific perspectives of human life concerning the surrounding world. The general Reformed idea is that the Bible does not contain any worldview, found in, inter alia F.W. Grosheide and G.Ch. Aalders, who maintain that the cosmological theories found in the Bible only express poetical description. In contrast, Barth asserts that there existed a standard ancient world view that influenced biblical authors. In this view, the earth is flat and surrounded by an ocean on all sides. A primeval sea exists under the earth that is connected to the earth through wells. Under the sea is *sheol* (שאול), the realm of the dead, a term that occurs 65 times in the Hebrew Bible and is used interchangeably with 'grave'. The lowest centre of *sheol* is Gehenna. Above the earth, one finds a firmament or dome, and the area above it contains God's dwelling place. At the lowest part above the horizon are the treasures of the wind, rain, snow and hail (Berkouwer 1938:382, fn. 62).<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion is that the Bible uses views seen as antiquated and unacceptable by contemporary people with adequate knowledge of cosmology, that qualified to be called erroneous. However, that does not represent an insurmountable problem for believers, who find in the Bible a sourcebook for the nourishment of their spirituality. In the words of the Westminster Confession (I, 1), the Bible is not supposed to provide valid scientific and biological facts compared to contemporary (incomplete) views, but to reveal

the knowledge about God and the divine, necessary for humankind's salvation.

The contrast of the Israelite worldview with that of surrounding nations, is what is essential to the Bible. While the other nations' world is permeated by a world of gods and their struggles and human attempts to win the gods' favour, the Bible claims to contain the revelation of a monotheist God. The emphasis is on Israel's morally and ethically perfect God, who expects humanity to display divine holiness. Additionally, when one judges the Bible's pre-scientific worldview with present-day scientific views, one does not do justice to the human contribution that it implies. The Bible, written in human language with conceptions derived from human experience, does not violate the Bible's revelational character. After all, there is no other way to describe spiritual experiences than with human words and within a human frame of reference.

Humans can only use conceptions derived from their existential existence to describe what they perceived of God. That explains why their outdated scientific and biological theories do not enjoy divine sanction. After all, there is no other way for God to communicate comprehensibly with humanity, than through culturally determined language and figurative speech.

Barth found a second 'proof' of the Bible's humanity and fallibility in the biblical understanding of history, especially the use of sagas found in the Old Testament. He does not accept that the Bible contains any myths, qualified as principles or 'truth' clothed in human language, but unconcerned with history or historical reality. In contrast, according to Barth (1961:81), a saga is a 'poetically designed picture of a concrete once-for-all pre-historical historical reality (*Geschichtswirklichkeit*), subject to temporal-spatial limitations'. The implication is that it deals with an event's historical description, while this historical reality can often not easily be expressed in human words. Attempting to describe divine acts that are *geschichtlich* and belong to the succession of time-filling events, requires the necessity to explain what is outside all historical observation and record (Barth 1961:375). It implies that the Bible is forced to speak in the form of a saga, given its object and origin (Barth 1961:82).

Although most Pentecostals would agree with Barth that its character as an interplay between divine and human activities, that requires that the Bible uses language that attempts to describe the indescribable in literary form, they would probably disagree with Barth's unfortunate use of the loaded term, 'saga' (Runia 1962:94). Pentecostals would probably prefer a more descriptive, acceptable and biblical term that describes the same phenomenon. 'Prophecy' carries the connotation for Pentecostals of a situational revelation of God. The term acknowledges that God does reveal the divine self to human beings, although it is only the divine economy they can comprehend. Divine essence must necessarily remain incomprehensible, because of the widely divergent

5.F. Kuyper (1956) argues that the Bible provides a special kind of worldview, the biotic view that views the material world as object of the biotic world, and the earth as the base upon which life is founded and takes place. The heavenly dome constitutes the protective roof, at least for those enjoying divine beneficence (Kuyper 1956:193).

frame of reference in which divinity exists. Human thoughts can never fully contain divine revelation. In this regard, Barth (1938:508) quotes Augustine ('Homily on John 1:1:7'), who said that even though the apostle John experienced community with the Son of God, he could only speak as he was able: 'he spoke not the whole, but as a man could he spoke (*quod potuit homo dixit*)'. He could do nothing else than a human could with human concepts available, to describe unspeakable and indescribable charismatic mysteries.

Barth also argues that the Bible is fallible due to the religious and theological errors he supposes it contains, his third 'proof'. He refers to contradictions presumably existing between the *Torah* and the prophets about the essence of the Jewish religion, or Paul and James's differences about the interplay between faith and world. It is impossible to deny such contradictions, states Barth (1938:509–510) with confidence. Although Barth does not refer to it, the views of some biblical authors about Israel's superiority and supremacy as the predestined people of God's concerning other people groups; the extermination of Israel's enemies, the indigenous Canaanite people that preceded Israel (at least in the Old Testament); the depiction of God as a violent warmonger in parts of the Old Testament and the sexist and exclusive ideas characteristic to a paternalistic society, are other examples of religious, ethical and theological views that most contemporary people may find unacceptable and unpalatable.

Pentecostals accept that the Bible speaks the truth in the form of a divine dialectic, despite antinomies in its diverse narratives that cause tensions. It cannot be denied that there are differences in nuances and emphases. The Bible contains various traditions that use the same narratives, but with different theological and political motives, like the Deuteronomist historian in Deuteronomy to 2 Kings (except for Ruth), and the Chronist historian represented in Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah. It underlines the need to interpret the traditions in terms of the context of the situation in which it originated, and the purpose or intention of the author(s) as far as it is discernible.

The last proof presented by Barth is in the essence of the Bible as a product of the Jewish spirit, implying its fully human character (Barth 1938:510). It means the recognition that the Jewish people, characterised by their constant rejection of God's revelation, culminating in their rejection and crucifixion of God's Word, wrote the Bible.

Pentecostal hermeneutics agree that it is impossible to deny what Barth (1938:507, 509–510) calls 'lacunae, overlapping, inconsistencies, contradictions and overemphases' or acknowledge that 'we can make little or nothing of large tracts of the Bible'. The Bible contains documents of secular legislation, history and practical wisdom reflecting wisdom literature of surrounding nations like the Egyptians and Babylonians. It is submitted that to avoid taking offense at the Bible, Pentecostals should verbalise their perspective on the Bible as simultaneously God's word and a document written by humans, and displaying a human character that

might have been potentially erroneous in respect of religion and theology and not only cosmology and biology. In the words of Barth (1938:529), biblical authors were real, historical people, and therefore sinful in their actions and contemplations and guilty of error in their spoken and written words. The Spirit did not use them as amanuenses or mere channels through which the revelation flowed while they were mentally in repose, as if they did not contribute anything to the process. Their style remained their own, explaining why there are diverse styles found in the different books, and even within books, such as Isaiah, betraying the contribution of more than one author. Believers accept that the Bible is free from all error in what it reveals about God and the divine will for the salvation of humanity, and that demonstrates the Bible's significance for all people.

This does not imply that God cannot use the Bible to reveal the divine word to human beings. As far as the Spirit uses the Bible to reveal God, the Bible is also infallible. This viewpoint from the perspective of faith is vital in preserving the usefulness and advantage of the Bible, when prayerfully and contemplatively studied to hear from God. It does contain a divine message that provides sinners' only hope of restoration with their Creator. And through the ages, Christians have been experiencing its worth in ordering their priorities and preparing and equipping them for the challenges of daily life.

Barth (1938:510) refers to a denial of the humanness of the Bible as Docetism, a heresy that he argues threatens the Christian faith. His reason is that taking away or derogating the humanity of Scripture, destroys the divine miracle of revelation. Pentecostal hermeneutics agrees and finds the Bible's authority in the inspirer of the Bible, who interprets it to contemporary readers. The authority of the Spirit, they argue, comes before the authority of the Bible and surpasses human interpretation of biblical texts. Pentecostals read the Bible with the agenda to encounter the Spirit in the biblical words (Nel 2018:81). The revelation or word of God cannot be confined or restricted to the book; God cannot be made a prisoner of the book that divine providence uses to encourage believers in their faith. The Bible is not under believers' control. Pentecostals' assertion that one can speak freely about the revelation of God in the divine works among Israel and the incarnation of Jesus, supports the Bible's humanness. The implication is that it is preposterous to think that the book can encapsulate God's essence in human words and thoughts. Human thoughts can never contain the riches of the divine revelation and human language, and expression can never do justice to the glories of God. The divine existence in a frame of reference and dimension unknown to humanity disqualifies any sensible description of the essence of God. Even in saying that 'God is love', humans attempt to encapsulate God with a term that can only carry connotations derived from human beings' experience of the world.

The Bible shares in the *kenosis* that Jesus' incarnation implied. God's *kenosis* (first suggested in the self-emptying of Jesus to do the divine will completely, indicated in Phil 2:7) led to



God limiting the divine power intentionally for the sake of human beings. What the extent of these limitations are, falls outside human capability to know. Because God is almighty, God deliberately limited the divine self to stand in a relationship with human beings, characterised by human freedom.<sup>6</sup> The Bible's humanness illustrates God's need to restrict the divine self to what human beings in their limited abilities can grasp.

Pentecostal hermeneutics agrees with Barth that the Spirit's work is a prerequisite for the Bible to become the divine word. Still, their hermeneutics also apply their charismatic experiences to co-interpret the experiences recorded of biblical characters and events. Lastly, two significant implications of the Bible's fallibility are discussed, the Bible's authority and the task of exegesis.

## Authority and the Bible

Barth accepts that the Bible has authority for the church and believers. However, by distinguishing between the Bible and the word of God, Barth can state unequivocally that the church never has the word of God in its possession or control. Believers can only expect the miracle of revelation to happen, when they read the biblical words. Only in the divine act of revelation does the written word become the vehicle of the infallible God speaking to humankind (Barth 1938:577). God uses the fallible witness to reveal the divine self. God even uses a fallible witness's opaque and distorted words to state that women should not participate in the ministry to reveal the divine self, a discriminatory perspective that few Christians today accept. Several other examples abound.

As stated, Pentecostals read the Bible as people of the Spirit, using their charismatic experiences as *Vorverständnis* in the interpretive task. Their purpose in reading is not to theologise about what they learn about God, but primarily to find the word of God in the pages of the Bible. They assert that the word of God, located in the encounter with Jesus Christ, can only realise through the inner working of the Spirit in them while reading. The result is that, as Anderson (2013:122) correctly asserts, the Bible itself does not hold authority for them. At the same time, they agree that it is not possible to sever the testimony to inspiration recorded in the Bible from the inspiring Spirit, and still hear God's word. This is critical to defending interpretation from the morass of subjectivist risks (Ellington 2020:65).

The implication is that the locus of revelation in the Bible is open-ended (Mittelstadt 2010:164). It can never refer exclusively to a past event. The inspirer of the biblical words is speaking again when contemporary people encounter the Spirit in encountering the word of God. The inspirer did not stop talking to people when the last word of the New Testament was written down. The Spirit keeps on revealing Jesus Christ and speaking today, and according to Pentecostals, does not

only repeat the words of the biblical text. Archer (2009:199) emphasises that the Spirit as the communicator of God's word and revelation spoke to people in biblical times, as recorded by biblical authors, but also speaks in the faith community today, when they faithfully read and interpret the biblical word. Pentecostals see themselves as people of the book who uniquely read the Bible as people of the Spirit.

When the Spirit reveals a word from God to the faith community, they refer to it as 'prophecy'. Pentecostals must subordinate all prophetic words to the judgement of the Bible. Contemporary attempts to formulate divine ideas should always be plumb lined by the Spirit and placed on the square of the Bible, in Wacker's (2001:70) carpentry metaphors. Prophecy may also not become redundant, although the tendency exists when the church begins to institutionalise and formalise. The dynamic sense of continuation must be preserved between divine revelation in and beyond the Bible. The Spirit's ongoing presence and revelation should remain the final authority for the Pentecostal faith community, serving as the *proprium* for their origins and existence.

Due to Pentecostal exposure to a conservative Evangelical fundamentalist hermeneutic from the 1930s to the 1980s, many Pentecostals accepted their fundamentalist dispensational understanding of revelation (Oliverio 2012:113), as discussed. They also assumed that the textualisation of the revelation implied the end of God's revelation in Christ. As a result, the written canon has become the primary and exclusive way to access God's revelation for them. Vondey (2010:62) is for that reason adamant that to regain the early Pentecostal hermeneutic, it is critical to accept the biblical record, not as a record or performance of a completed act, but as an expression of revelation's continuing possibility, because of its potential to result in an encounter with Christ that calls for a response in the present. The Bible does not only report about the location of divine presence. Instead, it offers testimonies pointing and attesting to that presence, inviting readers to open themselves for the work of the Spirit in a similar manner. In response, Pentecostals love to testify about how God is working in the same way in their lives, uplifting others in need of encouragement and using biblical language and images. For them, the Spirit stands in authority over the revelation, whether in Scripture or the words of prophecy (Smith 1997:68).

The only protection against subjectivism and relativism, that represent actual risks for Pentecostals' understanding of revelation, is the continuing presence of Christ through the mediation of the Spirit and the requirement that any extrabiblical revelation be measured against the biblical revelation. The faith community's experience is that the primary way of encountering Christ is in reading and meditating on the biblical words; their experience of its effectivity of being used by the Spirit to reveal Christ affirms the authority of Scripture. The Spirit serves to facilitate the current conversation with the canonical witness, in Ellington's (2020:66) explanation, through its narratives that serve as a

<sup>6</sup>It might be possible that divine almightiness might also be limited, suggested as a solution to the challenge that theodicy poses to believers, as suggested in a book scheduled for publication early in 2022 by Wipf and Stock.

standard for the experiences that present-day believers may expect. The prophetic word is offered in this conversation with and alongside the Bible but may never eclipse it.

The Roman Catholic church qualified itself as the authority behind the Bible, the only one able and legitimised to interpret its content. In contrast, the Reformation qualified the Bible as believers' final and absolute authority with its divine authority as a guarantee for its necessity, perspicuity and sufficiency. Barth proposed a third way to qualify the authority of the Bible, by relating it to the work of the Spirit to reveal God through its words. Thus, the authority of the Bible is in the Spirit's appropriation as the instrument of divine revelation. Pentecostal hermeneutics agree with him.

Those Pentecostals who accepted a conservative Evangelical hermeneutic, also placed full and final authority in the biblical autographs. It redefined the way one encounters the word of God. Instead of yielding to the Spirit, it became an exercise in exegetical excavation, with the purpose to recover a revelatory moment in the distant past, defined by different cultural and religious circumstances. As a result, the Bible lost its potential to contain a new encounter with its revealer and inspirer in fresh experiences of divine encounters (Ellington 2020:67). As argued above, the recent development in their encounter with modernism holds the potential to nullify what is uniquely Pentecostal.

Eventually, the new Pentecostal hermeneutic developed in continuation with early Pentecostals' Bible reading practices, led to tension and even open conflict with conservative circles represented many Pentecostal members and leaders. The last group accepts the Bible's verbal inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy in line with fundamentalist thinking. At the same time, the new hermeneutic rejects a positivist view of history and opts for a narrative understanding of revelation, and the understanding of biblical narratives as kerygmatic historiography. They accept that biblical narratives point to the willingness of the Spirit to reveal divine intervention in the lives of contemporary people. They value the Bible for its potential for being used by the Spirit to reveal the word of God.<sup>7</sup>

Like Barth, Pentecostal hermeneutics accept that the Bible's authority is not locked in the book. Its authority is derived from the Spirit's preference to reveal God through his words. The Spirit's involvement in the Bible's interpretation, guarantees and establishes that the Bible holds authority for believers. Instead of needing the church to interpret the Bible, Pentecostals emphasise that it is the prerogative of the Spirit, because the Bible becomes God's word only when readers yield to the Spirit. Interpreting the Bible requires the divine initiative of revelation, as a condition. The Bible does not have the final and absolute authority; God holds that

authority as the divine domain. Its human fallibility to the extent that it does occur, illustrates God's mercy to empty the divine self to reach human beings in their sinful persistence and darkened minds.

In conclusion, the divine word in the Bible can only be unlocked through the ongoing revelatory activity of the inspirer of that word. For that reason, Anderson (2013:122) argues that for Pentecostals, the biblical text does not have authority in itself. Only when the inner working of the Spirit in believers interprets the biblical words, does it become authoritative. The condition that the biblical testimony becomes God's word is that the inspiring Spirit speaks God's word to the contemporary reader, employing an encounter with Jesus that the Spirit facilitates. The revelation as 'charismatic and prophetic event does not emerge from the written text itself, its letters, grammar, or syntax, but from what occurred and continues to occur in the community as God's presence seen, heard, spoken, and experienced' (Vondey 2010:74). The locus of revelation in the Bible is open-ended, because it does not only refer to a past event, but to a present encounter.

## Exegesis and the Bible

For Barth, exegesis has a critical place in biblical interpretation, but he qualifies it. It should remain in the service of and dependent on hearing God's word through the text. It implies that the exegete must seek to follow the text's pointing to its witness by God's grace, even if it requires that the author's faith or spirituality be ignored (Macchia 2017:197). As far as historical-critical investigation into a text's history or an author's influence is concerned, it is limited because it cannot reach the authors' pointing beyond themselves to the God who reveals the divine self in the text. When the criticism limits itself to finding the facts behind the text and ignores the message conveyed by the text, it does not serve the church's proclamation task at all (Runia 1962:62).

At the same time, Barth resolutely rejects the underpinnings of 19th century criticism, that viewed the Bible as a purely human book. Such a view completely dissolves the relationship between theme and text, as though the text's interpretation is dependent on the interest in antiquities. The result is that theology loses its own essential nature, because it is changed into a purely historical science.

However, that does not imply that Barth was entirely negative about higher criticism. He states that historical-critical methods can and should serve as preliminary prolegomena or intellectual preparation for the task of hearing what God is saying (Barth 1977:1). One should ask relevant, historical questions to the text. Ignoring the historical definiteness of the word would disqualify someone from hearing God's word. However, such attempts do not pierce to the text's spirit, which is the Spirit (Barth 1977:1). The text's spirit bears witness to the word, forming the essential matter (*Sache*) to which the text bears witness (Barth 1977:18). The true task of exegesis is to penetrate the message conveyed by the text (Barth 1977:1).

7. Another undermining element that influenced classical Pentecostals, is the Word of Faith doctrine that views the Bible, in pursuit of E.W. Kenyon. This is an expounding of propositional truths seen in legal terms that operates according to predetermined divine principles (see Nel 2020 for full discussion). The Bible contains covenants, promises, pledges and commitments between God and human beings, that should be realised by faith. The Bible has divine and supernatural status and serves as a symbol of power, explaining its popularity in the African context with its superstitions. It represents a functional deism (Nel 2020:230).



Barth criticised many biblical commentators' inability to penetrate theologically into the witness of the text to formulate the word of God, because in his judgement they concentrated solely on genre, history, archaeology and philological matters (Barth 1977:6). Hearing the Spirit through the text involves more, he suggests; it 'involves a reconsideration of what is set out in the epistle, until the actual meaning is disclosed' (Barth 1977:6-7).<sup>8</sup> What should be kept in mind is that the witness of the revelation ought to be exposed in the words of the biblical text, requiring that one struggles with the text that represents the voice of God in self-revelation (Barth 1977:7). It implies that one discerns spiritually what is spiritually intended in the text (Barth 1977:19).

The possibility always exists that exegesis and interpretation may captivate the text in the service of human ideology and for that reason, it is vital to remain open to all sides to guarantee the text's freedom. That the reader seeks for the Spirit's witness might imply another danger, of human subjectivity influencing the interpretation. Barth responds that the Spirit witnesses to our spirits (that is, to our subjectivity) through the words of the biblical text (Barth 1977:18). He assures that the same Spirit that encountered the biblical authors, sustains the text continually as the word of God. The Spirit remains the subject in both the objective speaking and corresponding subjective experiences of readers (Barth 1938:538). Christ as the subject matter of the Bible, is the hermeneutical key and source of authority to the Bible. Although the Bible says many things, it witnesses to one truth, the name of Jesus, firstly concealed under the name of Israel, and then under his own name (Barth 1938:720).

Pentecostals also do not disparage exegesis, but like Barth, they are clear that it should serve to reveal the word of God (Macchia 2017:199). The early Pentecostal movement was characterised by its anti-intellectualist stance that rejected most attempts to theologise. The motivation for its anti-intellectualism was its perceptions of the dangers that it might dethrone the Spirit as the primary interpreter of God's revelation in the Bible. It lost much standing by its viewpoints, but the contemporary movement can benefit by recognising the dangers of theology and exegesis functioning apart from the deliberate yielding to the Spirit in the context of faith and worship. The condition that exegesis will serve the church's task, is that interpreters read the text in a charismatic fashion, using all available information about contexts, genres and literary forms, but also waiting on the Spirit's revelation through the text.

Only when biblical words evoke life-transforming experiences of God, does exegesis realise its goals. Such experiences happen when the biblical text grasps its readers and becomes God incarnated in Christ. It is not humans' faith, but God's power that changes the biblical words in divine revelation. The Spirit is subject in both the objective speaking and corresponding subjective experience of hearers, working a correspondence of obedience between the text and the hearer (Barth 1938:543).

8. Barth is writing in the context of his commentary on Romans.

## Summary

Pentecostals share a high view of Scripture with Barth and other Protestants, although they also emphasise that the Bible presents an invitation to enter a kind of sacred space (Moore 2016:152). They understand that to retreat from their belief that the Bible becomes a place of encounter with Christ through the work of the Spirit, is to accord a status to the Bible as narratives that change it into an idol. This object then replaces the Spirit by standing between ourselves and the Spirit (Ellington 2020:70). When the Bible replaces the Spirit's revelation of Christ and becomes the epitome of divine authority, it places the Bible at human disposal and under human control, something Barth attributed to fundamentalist thinking and fought against in all his publications. Pentecostals regard the authority of the Bible as derived from the Spirit's preference to use the Bible to speak to people, although it is not the only means the Spirit employs. Moore (2016:159) argues that it is imperative not only to have a high view of the Bible, but also to hold a deep view for the Spirit to reveal our sins and secrets through the Bible. Pentecostals should leave the initiative in the interpreting task to the Spirit to speak and act, and not rely exclusively on their interpretive skills. It is important not to succumb to the temptation to control what the Bible says, but to read it with the expectation to encounter the holy God. To read the Bible is, to step midstream into a conversation between the Spirit and the church, that has yet to reach its conclusion and resolution. The conversation consists of many voices speaking through many ages and unified by the Spirit, and by grafting our lives into the biblical narratives; we become a part of the extension of that narrative, in Keener's (2016:167) words. Ellington (2020:71) concludes by stating that Pentecostals do not read the Bible to hear the story of another's life, but to discover their place in God's story. The Bible serves to provide the place where their own story finds its home with those by the faith communities that have gone before, and present-day believers verbalise it in testimony and prophecy.

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