


Comparison between the respective views of John Calvin and classical Pentecostals on the role of the Holy Spirit in reading the Bible

**Author:**Marius Nel¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Unit for Reformed Theology,
Faculty of Theology,
North-West University,
Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Marius Nel,
marinus.nel@nwu.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 04 Sept. 2020

Accepted: 22 Dec. 2020

Published: 10 Feb. 2021

How to cite this article:

Nel, M., 2021, 'Comparison between the respective views of John Calvin and classical Pentecostals on the role of the Holy Spirit in reading the Bible', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6327. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6327>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

The growth of the Pentecostal movement in the global south implies that its pneumatological emphases be noticed by other Christian traditions, including the hermeneutical processes followed to interpret the Bible, the Christians' source of revelation about God. The aim of this article is to reflect on the role of the Spirit in the hermeneutical process, and it is done based on two traditions, the Reformed and Pentecostal movements, both of which play an important role within South African Christianity. Whilst the Reformed tradition, for the better part, concentrates on scientific and rational hermeneutics, in part neglecting the subjective influence of the Spirit in the processes of interpretation, John Calvin uses it as a hermeneutical principle. An attempt is made to compare and contrast Calvin's and classical Pentecostals' views by way of a comparative literature study. It is concluded that a pneumatological basis should serve as a condition for representative biblical hermeneutics. It implies that the church can benefit from revisiting its hermeneutics ecumenically with a definite consideration of the role of the Spirit in the processes of interpreting the Bible for contemporary people.

Contribution: In reading and interpreting the Bible, what role does the Holy Spirit play? The article asserts that a pneumatological basis should serve as a condition for representative biblical hermeneutics by comparing John Calvin's and Pentecostals' view of the subjective influence of the Spirit, concluding that an ecumenical revisiting of hermeneutics is necessary.

Keywords: Hermeneutics; Holy Spirit; John Calvin; classical Pentecostals; reformed tradition; extra-biblical revelation; Sola Scripture; pneumatology.

Introduction

The Pentecostal movement shows considerable growth as compared to other Christian traditions. By the end of the twentieth century, there were already more Pentecostals worldwide as compared to mainline Protestants, accounting for around 80% of evangelical Protestantism's worldwide growth. (Berger 2000:425). The Atlas of Pentecostalism (viewed 20 August 2020, from <http://www.atlasofpentecostalism.net/>) asserts that one-quarter of the two billion Christians in the world are now members of a Pentecostal church, compared with 6% in 1980. It has become the largest Christian tradition after Roman Catholicism and is growing fast, especially in the global south, where 13 million new adherents are added every year. It charismatised African Christianity and fundamentally altered the character of African Christianity, shifting the centre of world Christianity to the global south, and the dominant theological perspectives have shifted with it as a consequence (Jenkins 2006). Neo-Pentecostal churches are expanding faster than Islam in Africa, at about twice the rate of the Roman Catholic Church, and at roughly three times the rate of other non-Catholic Christian groups. They embrace about 40% of the African black population (Johnson, Barrett & Crossing 2010:32–33; The Atlas of Pentecostalism [viewed 15 December 2020, from <http://www.atlasofpentecostalism.net/>]). Thirty per cent of the South African population consists of the almost entirely African 'Zionist' and 'Apostolic' churches with their charismatic spirituality, including Zion Christian Church, St. Engenas Zion Christian Church and St. John Apostolic Faith Mission (Anderson 2005:68). Pentecostalism has become an important voice in any theological discourse.

One of the dominant theological perspectives that Pentecostalism has put on the agenda is the role of the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutical process of interpreting the Bible. Not many references are found related to the role of the Holy Spirit in the reading and interpretation of the Bible by believers amongst Reformed theologians although Reformed and Pentecostal believers both accept the fact that the Holy Spirit is in some sense not only the author of the written word but also the only one who can explain its meaning effectively to readers (Vanhoozer 2005:344). An exception is John Calvin (1509–1564) who referred extensively to the Holy Spirit as *Magister veritatis* (Master of truth), the Seal of the Gospel that interprets the Bible for the preacher (Calvin 1950:243, in Sermon 16 on Pentecost).

Although Calvin did not leave an elaborate hermeneutic behind, it is possible to define clear hermeneutical principles in his different publications (Floor 1970:100). His angle is that Christ leads people through his Spirit to understand the Bible.

The issue of the Spirit's influence on hermeneutics is discussed in terms of a comparison between the views of John Calvin, one of the few Reformers who emphasised the Spirit's work in hermeneutics and classical Pentecostals with their emphasis on the cooperation of the Spirit with the reader of the Bible to unlock its meaning as a condition for hermeneutical engagement. The aim is to turn the attention to Pentecostals' pneumatological basis as a possible condition for representative and responsible biblical hermeneutics. No research could be found which contains such a comparison and its scientific value can be found in the need for an ongoing ecumenical discourse in South Africa as an important element in the country's need for reconciliation.

This study aims to investigate Calvin's and classical Pentecostals' respective views of the role the Spirit plays in the interpretation of the Bible, by delineating the most important aspects of the different hermeneutical angles.

John Calvin's views on the role of the Holy Spirit in reading the Bible

Most scholarly works about John Calvin's theology and hermeneutics hardly refer to his discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible, a subject that received attention in several of Calvin's sermons, biblical commentaries, letters, theological treatises and other works (see Potgieter 2008:69). Conservative Reformed theology acknowledges and accepts the existence of the Bible as the word of God, Jesus Christ as the revelation of the word and the unimpeachable validity and authority of the Bible that does not depend on the judgement of the church in the form of an agreement or consensus but the testimony of the Spirit. However, the subjective element suggested in the notion of the Holy Spirit's interpretation of the Bible for the reader seems to act as a deterrent to the idea that the guidance of the Spirit can serve as a hermeneutical principle, a religious premise that most theological traditions ascribe to. Whilst it is suggested that ecumenical endeavours with other theological traditions can enrich one's premises on these matters with further perspectives the article aims to inform such a discourse on the Spirit's role in hermeneutic considerations.

Floor (1982:190) in his discussion of Calvin's willingness to value the guidance of the Spirit in interpreting the Bible concludes that it has become necessary to re-orient exegesis towards the person and working of the Spirit. He argues that current preoccupation with language and its significance in the hermeneutical process and methods related to understanding the word necessitates a change of direction in following Calvin.

It might even be asserted that their emphasis on certain hermeneutical principles may lead a part of the Reformed fraternity to ignore the illuminative work of the Spirit in the

minds and spirits of believing people who read the Bible. For example, Mickelsen (1963:4) observed that many exegetes interpret the Bible in a mechanical and rationalistic way at the hand of several approaches without leaving any room for the intervention of the Spirit as the one who inspired the biblical authors and can inspire contemporary readers to understand aspects of the author's intention that might be hidden for these approaches. The internal witness of the Spirit does not suppose that the rationality of the reader is negated; to do justice to the Spirit's testimony does not require that the Bible's meaning is irrational in some sense. In contrast, 'the testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason' (*Inst.*, 1.7.4). For Calvin, it was important to emphasise that theology should limit itself to what the Bible teaches; Scripture remains the master and the exegete its servant (Bilkes 2008:15).

Bible as word of God

Calvin believed unconditionally that the Bible was God's own word, including everything written in the Bible (Opitz 2009:237).¹ God speaks to people through the Bible (*Inst.* 1.7.4). God uses the same Spirit to speak to contemporary readers that served as the author of the Bible. God's authorship of the Bible can only be perceived by those people whose minds are enlightened by the Spirit. For that reason, believers are required to show the Bible the same respect they reserve for God because the Bible had its origins in God without any human mixing (De Greef 2004:42).

Rossouw (1982:151) thinks that Calvin's basic presupposition in interpreting the Bible is that he was explicitly committed to obeying the Bible as the supreme norm for true Christian faith and religion. The Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* was determinative in all his theological endeavours. In this sense, Calvin was a biblicist because of his consistent appeal to the Bible as the grounds upon which the formulation of the doctrinal rests. His biblicism is a formal set of his theology and shaping his theology; this must be kept in mind when analysing his theological contribution (Opitz 2009:237).

Calvin's purpose in studying the Bible was to determine the real intention of the Bible and to pass it on to the readers and listeners of his sermons and writings. His first business was to let the biblical authors say what they said, in Berkhof's (1950:27) opinion, instead of attributing to the author what the contemporary interpreter thinks they ought to have said. Calvin warns against the danger that exegetes can present their own views, possibly unintentional, as though they occupy the same authority as the divine word (*Inst.* 1.6.1). The Bible must be interpreted according to its own intention to do justice to it as the word of God (Coetzee 1972:132). Barth (1922:389) remarked that a purely historical understanding of the Bible as a writing of its own time for Calvin implied that one does not understand the sense of the Bible. What serves as a condition for understanding the Bible is that the:

1. It should be remembered that the 'word of God' implies more than the Bible; Christ is called the word because he reveals God. God's revelation to humankind realises in words and these words lead to life transformations when it is accepted by faith.

[S]ame Spirit who spoke through the mouths of the prophet, must pervade our hearts, in order to convince us that the prophets faithfully passed on the message entrusted to them by God. (*Inst.* 1.7.4)

To do justice to the Bible as the word of God it is crucial that the text should be interpreted with careful consideration of the full context of the passage, including the historical determination, kerygmatic structure of focus, soteriological motive, eschatological focus, knowledge of revelation and theo-doxological finality (Coetzee 1972:124). Calvin made sure that he understood what the text says before he rephrased it in terms of the broader framework and the rest of the Bible.

Barth (1922:526) argued that it was in Calvin's focus on the text in his attempt to uncover the deepest meaning that one finds the distinctive character of his exegetical skill that amounts to his objectivity. He writes that one can learn from Calvin how to stick to the text, by concentrating on it with eager attention. Everything else in theology flows from this.

Another element of Calvin's hermeneutics is his consistent focus on the line of the scopus of Scripture, which consists of God's gracious actions in Christ, without forcing Christological applications on some texts in the Old Testament. He believed in the typical significance of the Old Testament without sharing Luther's opinion that Christ can (and should) be found everywhere in the Old Testament (Berkhof 1950:27). Calvin emphasised on the importance of each passage being interpreted in the light and as a product of the historical circumstances in which it was written down.

God's revelation in Christ was viewed as the culmination of a covenant that God already made with the first created people, continued in Israel and eventually running into the Christian church. His emphasis on the covenant kept his theology from a fundamentalist biblicism and legalism (Bijlsma 1960:191). Coetzee (1972:131) added that his focus on the scopus also kept Calvin from the error of will, dualism, historicism and similar dangers, even though Calvin emphasised the involvement of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation process.

Inability of human beings to understand the Bible

One's understanding of Calvin's hermeneutic is dependent on comprehending the role his anthropology plays in his theology (Floor 1982:186). He held to the absolute depravity of human beings (*corruptio hominis*) as a result of the Fall recorded in Genesis 3. All human beings are unable to believe in God and God's grace; faith is a special gift of God (Calvin [1538]1972:18). Their comprehension is corrupted by sin to such an extent that they also cannot comprehend God's wisdom that can only be revealed by God (*Inst.* 2.11; 2.3.1). The greatest hindrance for understanding Scriptures is not in the text or the language employed in the text but is according to Calvin to be found in human beings who are just as unsuitable for comprehending divine secrets as a donkey that is to participate in a concert (*Inst.* 2.2.18). The illumination

of the Spirit alone can enable them to understand those things that far exceed their capacity (*Inst.* 1.7.5). The same Spirit that gives faith to human beings also illuminates the interpretation of the Bible and permits human beings to accept the word as truth by faith. The Spirit alone can soften the hearts of human beings and open their eyes to understand the message of the Bible (Floor 1970:100).

Scripture can only be correctly interpreted and comprehended when the Spirit illumines its meaning. The illuminating work of the Spirit is not necessary because the word is dark but because the word shines like a flashing light amongst blind people, who require the Spirit's illumination to see. Without the Spirit interacting with the reader, it can happen that the interpretation of the Bible has disastrous results (Calvin [1538]1972:52). For instance, the human tendency to flatter those listeners who are listening to a sermon can result in the preacher's bypassing sharp edges found in the Bible, making the impact of the word softer than what it is. What is needed is that the Spirit illuminates the meaning of a text by explaining its range and import for new circumstances (Calvin [1538]1972:52). Human sinful depravity disables one to understand the Bible and only the Spirit can solve the challenge of human incomprehension of God's revelation. 'Carnality of life excludes (believers) from understanding, or progressing in, the deep things of God' (Chafer 1967:62).

Spirit and Bible

Jesus' words in John 14:26 influenced Calvin, that the Advocate (ὁ παράκλητος), the Holy Spirit, whom the father would send in his name, would teach disciples everything, and remind them of all that he said to them. He calls the Bible the school of the Spirit (*Inst.* 3.21.3). Calvin believed that when one attends to the Bible, one is listening to the voice of the Spirit. Even when the exegete can do justice to the context of a passage, the illumination of the Spirit is still a condition for its correct interpretation.

Regarding Ezekiel 2, Calvin ([1565]1948:109) emphasises that nothing happens when unbelievers listen to the word of God until the Spirit becomes involved in the act of reading or listening. God works efficiently through God's own words, but these words are not efficient in themselves. The Spirit's voice cannot be heard without the word whilst the word cannot fulfil its purpose without the Spirit (Vanhoozer 1998:428).

Calvin also emphasises that there is no revelation possible outside the Bible. He fought on two fronts, against the spiritualists who emphasised that the work of the Spirit as an *operatio Spiritus* in understanding the Bible did not precede the word and the Anabaptists who disregarded the Bible in his opinion when they accepted that the Spirit might use other means to speak to people in addition to the Bible (Floor 1970:101). Calvin emphasises that the Spirit exclusively uses the words of the Bible to reveal God (Berkouwer 1966:181). That does not mean that the Spirit in the Spirit's accompaniment of the word makes the word into an object but rather that Spirit and word point together at the same

object. The Spirit alone can know the things of God, as 1 Corinthians 2:11 states, and this is the primary point of departure in Calvin's hermeneutics (Kaiser & Silva 1994:23). The implication is that readers of the Bible are dependent upon the Spirit for a correct interpretation. They need the Spirit to discipline their thinking in order that their interpretation may honour God (Mickelsen 1963:378). Calvin did not explain in what way the Spirit works in the process of interpretation and how the reader will know that it is the Spirit that is working except to state that the Spirit influences the human spirit and takes away its blindness and makes the human heart willing to subject itself to the yoke of Christ (Calvin & Pringle 2010:375).

The Spirit's illumination works in two ways, Calvin ([1546]1963:57) concludes in his discussion of 2 Corinthians 4:6. One way is through the person of the Son of God in his incarnation, the other way is hidden and occurs in believers' hearts when the Spirit reveals the word of God through their reading of the Bible. In both ways, the condition is that God opens readers' comprehension through the Spirit. In discussing Psalm 143:10, Calvin ([1557]1949:450) remarks that the Spirit (*Magister veritatis*) is our teacher, not only through the dead letter but also the hidden work of the Spirit, in three ways: the Spirit teaches us through the word, illumines or enlightens our mind and engraves the instruction on our hearts, enabling us to be obedient to God and bringing us to an observance of the word with a true and cordial consent.

The internal testimony of the Spirit (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*) is unmistakably conditional for understanding Scripture. The interpretation of the Bible does not depend on human achievement but it is a gift of God who works through the Spirit in believers (Rossouw 1982:169). It is also the Spirit alone that can provide believers with certainty (*vera persuasio*) about the word of God and their salvation that erases all doubt (*Inst.* 3.1.1; 3.2.15).

Spirit and preaching

An interesting feature of Calvin's view of the role of the Spirit in interpreting the Bible is that he intentionally or unintentionally limited most of the discussion to the interpretation of the Bible by the preacher in the act of preaching. This might have to do with his emphasis on the principle that faith is not possible without hearing (*sine auditu*) of the proclamation of the word (Rossouw 1982:165). And without faith, the word conveys nothing to the listener, a view that should be qualified because the Spirit can also use the word to bring unbelievers to repentance (Rossouw 1982:167). In terms of Ezekiel 2:1–2, Calvin ([1565]1948:109) writes that nothing can happen until the Spirit becomes involved, emphasising the importance of the necessity of the illuminating work of the Spirit in preaching: 'All power of action, then, resides in the Spirit himself, and thus all praise ought to be entirely referred to God alone'. The effect of the words is not in its sound but the hidden working and inspiration of the Spirit. And

because God works in people's hearts consistently through the Spirit in the act of preaching, the word is never without fruit during the deliverance of the sermon. Preaching as a tool of the Spirit implies that it is the Spirit that makes a sermon effective (DeVries 2004:108). The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be comprehended in any other way than as the result of the testimony of the Spirit. Even more importantly, the gospel originates in the Spirit's testimony and the Spirit is the only true declarant that can unlock the meaning of the gospel (DeVries 2004:110).

The great responsibility of the preacher's ability to correctly understand Scripture is implied because it is the preacher's calling to bring believers to precise and pure comprehension of what God in the chosen passage of Scripture wants to say to the congregation and what that word implies in the lives of those who listen to the sermon (Veenhof 1965:57). The consensus of the congregation (*consensus ecclesiae*) is necessary for evaluating the correct interpretation of the word. However, their consensus can never be more than provisional because it may at any time be corrected by the self-interpreting Spirit (Rossouw 1982:180). Both the preaching of the Word and the inner testimony of the Spirit were important elements in Calvin's hermeneutics. Both elements were seen as conditional in the interpretation of the Bible (Rossouw 1982:171). In Gerard Ebeling's terms, both the *Wortgeschehen* [word act] and *Sprachereignis* [speech event] are important because the sermon represents itself as an act that is hermeneutical in nature (Floor 1970:95). In the speech event of the sermon as a word act, the congregation comes into being; the church exists where the Word is proclaimed.

The last remark is important. Calvin emphasised that the task of the Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture does not consist in changing the intention of the passage but rather to fill out its meaning and focus for new circumstances in which the word is proclaimed. It asserts the claim of warnings, promises, commands and assertions found in the Bible on listeners' minds and hearts because the Spirit will never alter the meaning but apply it to current readers' lives (Vanhoozer 1998:413).

Pentecostals' views of the role of the Holy Spirit in reading the Bible

Classical Pentecostals accept that respect for the authority of the Bible as the word of God requires meticulous attention to unlock the meaning that biblical passages held for original hearers and readers as a condition for understanding its meaning for contemporary readers (Zuck 1984:120). Because the Holy Spirit plays a prominent role in the inspiration of the original text and the illumination of the text to contemporary readers, Pentecostals emphasise the importance of leaving ample room for the work of the Spirit in biblical interpretation; the Spirit is the true expositor of the word of God.

Pentecostals emphasise Spirit baptism that leads to the anointing of the Spirit as an initiation into a life dedicated to

proclaiming the gospel of Jesus and resting on believers, enabling them to live a Spirit-filled life that results in holiness. They also confess the involvement of the Spirit as a condition for interpreting the Bible correctly (Vondey 2010:59). Parker's (1875:78) remark that the most important function assigned to the Spirit is to assure the church a profound and correct interpretation of the Bible is still valid, even though not explicitly stated in the New Testament.

An objection levelled at Pentecostals is that their emphasis on the charismatic element in interpreting the Bible leads to a subjectiveness that may result in a distorted reading and resultant misguided living and teaching (Keener 2016:106), underlining the necessity that all interpretation of the Bible should be subject to the faith community where the gift of distinction of spirits is to be found (1 Cor 12:10).

Pentecostals emphasise the clarity and self-interpreting capacity of the Bible with a 'populist hermeneutic', as Vondey (2010:58) designated it, that affirms the availability and perspicuity of the biblical writings for all who read Scripture with common sense. It implies that the Bible is clear in its meaning and can be interpreted by all Christians, not only scholars or mature Christians, although it does not deny that no one ultimately comprehends what is truly God's (τὰ τῶ θεοῦ) except the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:11).

For Pentecostals it is important to consider in what sense the Spirit gives insight into the Bible's meaning when it is read and reflected on in the context of prayer and worship (Keener 2016:237). Sometimes they find that illumination of the meaning of a specific passage comes in a moment with a flashing insight whilst at other times the Spirit works better understanding only after long reflection. In many instances, the application of the interpretation that the individual reader finds in the text is limited to the personal circumstances of the individual whilst at other times it becomes a word of encouragement or enlightenment that is directed at someone else. This necessitates a distinction between a word directed at an individual and a word for another person or the local congregation, and these two should not be confused in order to ensure that it is delivered and applied to the correct address because it might be that the word for the individual does not apply to the situation of other people (Taylor 1993:118). However, in all cases, it is important to note that the human interpretation is never authoritative on the same level as the Bible, even when the individual is certain that the revelation of such illumination was received by the Spirit. No interpretation of the Bible is infallible, not even when it is perceived that the Spirit gave the meaning, and all human endeavours are to be subjected to the evaluation by the faith community (Zuck 1984:121).

Some aspects of a pneumatological basis for hermeneutics from a classical Pentecostal perspective are discussed whilst it is acknowledged that other aspects can be added. Because of the constraints of space, attention is limited to the most important perspectives.

Charismatic extra-biblical revelation

Classical Pentecostals show respect for the authority (canon) of the Bible as the primary means through which the Holy Spirit reveals the word of God (Duffield & Van Cleave 1983:9). At the same time, however, they leave room for the possibility of extra-biblical revelation, as long as it is in conjunction with the spirit and ethos of the Bible (Hollenweger 2015:319). Normally, they refer to such revelation as prophecies. They accept that such extra-biblical revelation concerning the biblical text can never be accorded the same authority. At the same time, Pentecostals expect that the Spirit would reveal the meaning of biblical texts to them, especially in cases where it is difficult to discern the meaning. The implication is that the meaning would be directly related to the text because the Spirit works in and through the Bible. Their prophecies stand in contrast to the Reformed practice of utilising the term to refer to the application of the Bible in the current political, social and economic situation in such a way that God's will is revealed. It is submitted that it would be worthwhile for Pentecostals to apply the term to well-grounded biblical interpretation also. Besides, it is argued that there is not such a wide difference between Reformed and Pentecostal practice as Pentecostal prophecy is characterised by the use of the biblical language and images, serving as an analogy to biblical events and texts. Especially, the biblical narratives serve as a rich breeding ground for the prophetic practice, with believers prophesying during worship services, imitating the manner and speech of the Old Testament prophets. Prophecy and other revelations must be subjected to the judgement of the elders and other believers, and comparison with the revelation found in the Bible plays a primary role in its evaluation along with the gift of the discernment of spirits (2 Cor 12:10) that allow Spirit-filled people to discern whether the revelation is from God or other competing spirits (Hinn 2019:78).

Most Pentecostal leaders teach that believers who opined that they have a word from God for the congregation should not use the introductory formula that characterises most of Old Testament prophets' proclamation acts, 'Thus says the Lord' because their prophecies are not on the same level as the biblical text. In the biblical text, inspiration implies that the Spirit guarded, guided and superintended the authors to record what the Spirit wanted to be recorded (Zuck 1995:138). Whilst the contemporary reader may also experience the Spirit's moving in the interpretation task that does not make such interpretation infallible or inerrant. A clear distinction should be kept between inspiration as the past work of the Spirit as found in the Bible and interpretation as the work of the Spirit in present-day readers to unlock its meaning. Although Pentecostals, like the reformed tradition, allow the right of all believers to read and interpret the Bible, it does not mean that the results of such interpretation can be viewed on the same level as the intrinsic value of the biblical text. All interpretation is provisional, even by the most acknowledged scholars, and according to 1 Corinthians 13:12 believers can only know in part because we see as in a mirror, in part; a comprehensive understanding of the entire Bible is not possible (Zuck 1984:128).

Pentecostals emphasise the priesthood and prophethood of all believers, as demonstrated in their early practice where anyone was free to participate in the proclaiming act. The Reformers also emphasised the priesthood of all believers contrary to the Roman Catholic practices of the time of the Reformation that prohibited ordinary believers who were not a part of the priesthood or monastic orders to read the Bible. However, Calvin presumably concentrated on the work of the Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible only in terms of preaching, as indicated here. In contrast, all Pentecostal believers who read the Bible expect that the Spirit would speak God's words that are uniquely applicable to their situation.

Interpretation and infallibility

Whilst it is important for Pentecostals that their Bible reading practices should be enriched by the work of the Spirit because of the anointing resting on their lives, they may never claim infallibility for their interpretation of any biblical passage. Classical Pentecostals subscribe to this principle although its history shows that some influential leaders did not adhere to it and eventually led their followers on heretical ways. One example is found in prosperity theology that functions on the fringes of the classical Pentecostal movement and at the heart of neo-Pentecostalism (Nel 2020). Some of it represents a dangerous theology based on 'private revelation' to some individuals, leading to the exploitation and impoverishment of many of their disciples at the benefit of the leaders. Some leaders claim to be the sole receivers of divine revelation (Meyer 2007:13).²

The Holy Spirit will never give a new revelation that does not adhere to the biblical revelation (Anderson 1990:3). The Spirit's work is always in line and association with the Bible. It can never go beyond it or function in addition to it (Zuck 1984:122). The word of God is operative and effective (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐνεργῆς καὶ τομώτερος: 'living and active'; Heb 4:12); its effectiveness is because of the Spirit working in the reader or listener of the text. Pentecostals measure the evidence of the Spirit's work in the outcome of the reading and preaching of the Bible, in conversion and life-transformation of readers and listeners. They believe that the word of God cannot be heard if the Spirit does not work in the minds and hearts of the hearers that allows them to discern, receive, welcome and apply the truth (Zuck 1984:128). The Spirit's work is to create faith and make the word understandable and listeners' hearts receptive, as Calvin (Wallace 1957:128–129) also stated.

Spirit inspiration, anointing and non-scholarly readers of the Bible

All believers reading or listening to the Bible, not only trained theologians or scholars, can understand it because they use

2. For instance, Kenyon (1969:9, 12) teaches the doctrine of the spiritual death of Christ; Jesus had left his divine nature in heaven when he became a human being, implying that he was nothing more than an empowered man by the Holy Spirit. His death on the cross was not God's final work of atonement, but only served to demonstrate his defeat because he received the nature of Satan and it took a struggle for three days in hell before he eventually conquered the powers of evil and God declared him righteous. When he was resurrected from the dead, he became the first human being to be born again.

common sense. Using principles of common sense will keep readers from finding foreign meanings in a text (Zuck 1995:142). Pentecostal believers add that the enlightening of the Spirit unlocks the meaning of a passage with an eye on the present situation of the reader or listener. What is needed, they add, is the anointing of the Spirit, a result of being Spirit-filled. And Spirit-filledness is the result of Spirit-baptism, seen as a distinct experience apart from conversion because of repentance of sin, accompanied by *glossolalia* (Noll 1986:11–31).

What is important is that the literal meaning of biblical passages should be emphasised, except in clear cases where the authors used metaphorical or symbolic language. When an interpreter claims to have found some hidden truth under the surface of the biblical text that does not agree with the literal meaning, it is critical to be sceptical even if the reader claims the inspiration of the Spirit.

Spirit interpretation and spiritual preparedness

Pentecostals emphasise that being baptised in the Spirit does not guarantee that one lives a Spirit-filled life under the control of the Spirit. What is additionally needed is a life of continuous dedication, supported by prayer, worship and study of the Bible as a condition for spiritual preparedness to discern the guidance and voice of the Spirit manifesting in the believer's spirit, defined as the non-physical human capacity to respond to the divine spiritual reality (Grey 2011:111). The testimony is frequently heard amongst Pentecostals that the meaning of a difficult biblical passage was revealed after prayer and even fasting, which sharpens the spirit's capacity for perception of the Spirit's quickening. However, devotion, sensitivity and preparedness do not guarantee accurate interpretation but make correct interpretation more possible (Zuck 1995:139); all interpretation should always remain open for the gift of distinction that resides in the faith community.

Does this imply that unbelievers or the unregenerate do not qualify to interpret the Bible? According to John 8:47, Jesus states that those who are from God hear God's words; for that reason, Jesus' listeners did not hear what Jesus is saying.³ If that is the case, how would unbelievers become convinced of the truth of the gospel of Christ? Although at the moment they do not accept God's truth, they can comprehend the literal meaning of the Bible by way of common sense. When the conviction of the Spirit rests on them, even though they do not see or know the Spirit, the Spirit will prove them wrong concerning sin, righteousness and judgement (Jn 16:8; NET Bible).

The implication is that the Spirit's illumination of Christians when they interpret the Bible must be more than mental

3.1 Corinthians 2:14 also explains that the natural person (ψυχικός) cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God because these things are only spiritually discerned (πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται). They do not welcome the truth (δέχομαι should not be translated as 'receive', as New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and several other translations suppose). Does this imply that unsaved people are not able to understand spiritual truths? The implication is rather than the person cannot know by experience (γινῶναι from γινώσκω), as opposed to knowing intuitively or intrinsically (οἶδα) (Virkler 1981:30).

apprehension of the Bible if unbelievers are capable of it. It is difficult to describe this mysterious work of the Spirit consisting of intuitive flashes of insight into the meaning of a passage except in terms of its results when the believers experience an encounter with God whilst reading the Bible that consists of more than rational understanding. Keener (2016:32) described the experience of some Pentecostals, that the Spirit sparks one's conscience through something that reminds of a biblical principle, even if the reminder does not arise necessarily from a sound exegesis of the text, although that does not imply that the Bible is simply a 'mine for what we hope to find there anyway, whether theologically or experientially'. The mysteriousness of the Spirit's insights, however, does not imply that it is unexplainable, unpredictable or unverifiable (Lee 1984:195). Evidence that it is the Spirit speaking through the text can be found in a resultant life-transforming experience leading to a change in behaviour, relationships and attitudes as an integral part of sanctification, an important theme for historical reasons for Pentecostals. It consists of more than merely an intellectual grasp of the passage but requires the spiritual capacity to 'hear' the voice of God; yet believers may not neglect the interpretive helps available to Bible readers, such as commentaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias and concordances, helping them to span the wide gap between the text and the contemporary situation (Ramm 1970:13–14; Sandin 1983:240–241). The deeper readers delve into the Bible in prayerful obedience, the more likely it is that the Spirit will illustrate its application to their lives (Klooster 1982:16).

Spirit interpretation, common sense and logic

Pentecostals stand in the tradition of the Scottish Common Sense school of philosophy that in synthesis with the Baconian method asserted that propositions are accessible to any thinking, rational person, leading to the premise that all persons of common sense were capable of knowing that truth (Marsden 2006:12–13). The presupposition is that (for the most part) the Bible is clear in its meaning and that any reader can understand it if it is read in translation and with common sense using the principles of logic. 'In ninety-nine out of a hundred cases, the meaning that the plain man gets out of the Bible is the correct one' (eds. Torrey 1895:34). This does not necessarily adequately discount the diverse literary forms that the Bible contains, requiring different reading strategies, or that translations are, to a certain extent, already interpretations, transposed onto the text by the translator (Boone 1989:18; Cherok 2001:107).

For Pentecostals, the fixed reference point for encountering God is the Bible; this is the core of Pentecostal identity (Johns 1995:75). It has three basic characteristics: it is pneumatic, experiential and its focus is primarily on historical narratives (Arrington 1988:382–383). The relationship between experience and the interpretation of the Bible operates in a dialogical manner and not as the result of

linear progression. As Land (1993:71–81) suggested, Pentecostals are recovering and reentering the entire biblical story of redemption in their own lives. Biblical narratives are not seen as 'Scripture' or 'text' only, but as experienced reality and Pentecostals except that the biblical reality is to be taken at face value; it guides and interprets their own lives in the present (Vondey 2010:58–59). How they understand is based on their experience, and in interaction, their interpretation also informs their experience.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to compare Calvin's and classical Pentecostals' respective views of the role the Spirit plays in the interpretation of the Bible. Floor (1970:104) called pneumatology the Achilles heel of Reformed theology because it has been marginalised to a large extent, requiring *inter alia* that the Spirit should receive greater attention in theological hermeneutics. Calvin's emphasis on the human inability to understand God's revelation led to his emphasis on the significant role the Spirit plays in the interpretation process; that may be one reason why contemporary hermeneutics lost this emphasis because it utilises a much more positive anthropology. The growth of Pentecostalism placed its pneumatological basis for all hermeneutical labour on the agenda of theological discourse.

To call the Holy Spirit the great and decisive hermeneutical factor (Du Toit 1970:93–94) requires that instead of expelling the Spirit from the workplace of the exegete in an over-evaluation of the word, exegesis should occur in the context of worship and careful listening to the still voice of the Spirit. Pentecostals expect that the Spirit would reveal the truth in their hearts when they reflect on the words of Scripture. It implies that the reader should study the Bible prayerfully, confessing dependence on the Spirit for understanding the word of God. Exegetical work must be pneumatologically structured, with the ground pattern of exegesis based in the belief in the work of the Spirit in the human heart to unlock the meaning of a biblical pericope. The one who inspired the biblical authors is the only one who can inspire the contemporary reader to meet God in the pages of the Bible. This implies that the elements necessary for properly interpreting the Bible include that readers should be saved, grow spiritually, study the Bible diligently, apply common sense and logic and depend humbly on the Spirit for discernment.

Despite several significant similarities, Calvin's and Pentecostals' views of the role of the Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible differ in several respects. Pentecostals follow a two-pronged approach to the Spirit's illumining work, in terms of possible insights in the meaning of a passage and extra-biblical revelation of prophecies. Calvin in the Reformed tradition did not allow for any revelation outside the bounds of Scripture. Whilst both the Reformers and Pentecostals emphasise that all believers are priests only Pentecostals encourage all believers to participate in

the interpretation and proclamation task within the congregation. Whilst Calvin limited his discussion to the Spirit's involvement in the exegeting procedure of the preacher, Pentecostals expect that the Spirit would reveal flashing insights in the meaning of a passage that relates to the situation of the readers. And whilst Calvin did not substantiate the way the Spirit is involved in the interpretation process, Pentecostals discuss their diverse experiences of the Spirit's involvement in more detail.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that no competing interest exists.

Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Anderson, A.H., 2005, 'New African initiated Pentecostalism and charismatics in South Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35(1), 66–92. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570066052995843>
- Anderson, G.L., 1990, 'The changing nature of the moral crisis of American Christianity', Unpublished paper presented to the 38th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, November 11–13, 1990, pp. 1–21.
- Arrington, F.L., 1988, 'Hermeneutics, historical perspectives on pentecostal and charismatic', in S.M. Burgess & G.B. McGee (eds.), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and charismatic movements*, pp. 376–89, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Barth, K., 1922, *Die Theologie Calvins*, Theologischer Verlag, Zurich.
- Berger, P.L., 2000, 'Four faces of global culture', in P. O'Meara, H.D. Melinger & M. Krain (eds.), *Globalization and the challenges of a new century: A reader*, pp. 419–427, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Berkhof, L., 1950, *Principles of biblical interpretation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Berkouwer, G.C., 1966, *De heilige Schrift I*, Kok, Kampen.
- Bijlsma, R., 1960, *Schriftgesag en schriftgebruik*, Callenbach, Nijkerk.
- Bilkes, G.M., 2008, 'Calvin on the word of God', in J.R. Beeke (ed.), *Calvin for today*, pp. 15–32, Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Boone, K.C., 1989, *The Bible tells them so: The discourse of Protestant fundamentalism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.
- Calvin, J., [1536]1987, *The institutes of Christian religion (Inst.)*, T. Lane & H. Osborne (eds.), transl. H. Beveridge, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Calvin, J., [1538]1972, *Catechism*, transl. F.L. Battles, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA.
- Calvin, J., [1546]1963, *The second epistle of Paul to the Corinthians and the epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, transl. T.A. Smail, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh.
- Calvin, J., [1557]1949, *Commentary on the book of Psalms*, vol. V, transl. J. Anderson, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Calvin, J., [1565]1948, *Commentaries on the first twenty chapters of the book of the prophet Ezekiel*, transl. T. Myers, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Calvin, J., 1950, *The deity of Christ and other sermons*, transl. L. Nixon, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Calvin, J. & Pringle, W., 2010, *Commentary on a harmony of the evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3, Logos Bible Software, Bellingham, WA.
- Chafer, L.S., 1967, *He that is spiritual*, rev. edn., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Cherok, R.J., 2001, 'Common sense philosophy', in B.E. Brasher (ed.), *Encyclopedia of fundamentalism*, p. 107, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Coetzee, C.F.C., 1972, 'Die skopus van die Skrif by Calvyn', unpublished ThM dissertation, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education.
- De Greef, W., 2004, 'Calvin's writings', in D.K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin*, pp. 41–57, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- DeVries, D., 2004, 'Calvin's preaching', in D.K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin*, pp. 106–122, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Duffield, G.P. & Van Cleave, N.M., 1983, *Foundations of Pentecostal theology*, L.I.F.E. Bible College, Los Angeles, CA.
- Du Toit, A.B., 1970, 'Die eksegese van die sinoptiese Evangelies', in W.J. Jonker, J.H. Roberts & A.H. Van Zyl (eds.), *Hermeneutica: Erebundel aangebied aan prof. dr. E.P. Groenewald by geleentheid van sy 66e verjaarsdag, 2 Junie 1970*, pp. 65–101, NG Kerk-Boekhandel, Pretoria.
- Floor, L., 1970, 'Calvyn se hermeneutiek in vergelyking met Ebeling en Fuchs', *Neotestamentica* 4(14), 94–107. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v4i14.917>
- Floor, L., 1982, 'The hermeneutics of Calvin', in B.J. Van der Walt (ed.), *Calvinus Reformator: His contribution to theology, church and society*, Wetenskaplike bydraes van die PU vir CHO F3:17, pp. 181–191, PU for CHE, Potchefstroom.
- Grey, J., 2011, *Three's a crowd: Pentecostalism, hermeneutics, and the Old Testament*, Pickwick, Eugene, OR.
- Hinn, C.W., 2019, *God, greed, and the (prosperity) gospel: How truth overwhelms a life built on lies*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids: MI.
- Hollenweger, W.J., 2015, *Pentecostalism: Origins and developments worldwide*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Jenkins, P., 2006, *The new faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the global south*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Johns, J.D., 1995, 'Pentecostalism and the postmodern worldview', *Journal for Pentecostal Theology* 3(7), 73–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096673699500300706>
- Johnson, T.M., Barrett, D.B. & Crossing, P.F., 2010, 'Christianity 2010: A view from the New Atlas of Global Christianity', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34(1), 29–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693931003400109>
- Kaiser, C. & Silva, M., 1994, *An introduction to biblical hermeneutics*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Keener, C.S., 2016, *Spirit hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in light of Pentecost*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Kenyon, E.W., 1969, *What happened from the cross to the throne*, Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, Lynnwood, WA.
- Klooster, F.H., 1982, 'The role of the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutic process', Paper read at Chicago Summit Conference II, International Council for Biblical Inerrancy, Oakland, CA, November 11–13, 1990.
- Land, S.J., 1993, *Pentecostal spirituality: A passion for the kingdom*, Sheffield Academic, Sheffield.
- Lee, J.M., 1984, 'The authentic source of religious instruction', in N.H. Thompson (ed.), *Religious education and theology*, pp. 100–197, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL.
- Marsden, G.M., 2006, *Fundamentalism and American culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Meyer, B., 2007, 'Pentecostalism and neo-liberal capitalism: Faith, prosperity and vision in African Pentecostal charismatic churches', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 20(2), 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.4314/jsr.v20i2.47769>
- Mickelsen, A.B., 1963, *Interpreting the Bible*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Nel, M., 2020, *The Prosperity Gospel in Africa: An African Pentecostal Hermeneutical consideration*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR.
- Noll, M.A., 1986, *Between faith and criticism: Evangelicals, scholarship, and the Bible in America*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, CA.
- Opitz, P., 2009, 'Scripture', in H.J. Selderhuis (ed.), *The Calvin handbook*, pp. 235–244, transl. R.A. Giselbrecht, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Parker, J., 1875, *The paraclete*, Scribner, Armstrong & Co, New York, NY.
- Potgieter, P.C., 2008, 'Calvyn oor die leiding van die Heilige Gees in die verklaring van die Skrif', *Acta Theologica* 28(2), 69–85. <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v28i2.48884>
- Ramm, B., 1970, *Protestant Biblical interpretation*, 3rd edn., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Rossouw, H.W., 1982, 'Calvin's hermeneutics of Holy Scripture', in *Calvinus Reformator: His contribution to theology, church and society*, Wetenskaplike bydraes van die PU vir CHO F3:17, pp. 149–180, PU for CHE, Potchefstroom.

- Sandin, R.T., 1983, 'The clarity of scripture', in M. Inch & R. Youngblood (eds.), *The living and active word of God: Studies in honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, pp. 237–252, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN.
- Taylor, J.R., 1993, *The word of God with power: Experiencing the full meaning and blessing of the 'word of God'*, Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN.
- Torrey, R.A. & Dixon A.C. (eds.), 1895, *The fundamentals: Testimony to the truth*, Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA.
- Van der Haak, B. (ed.), 2020, *The Atlas of Pentecostalism*, Pulitzer Center, Washington, DC, viewed 20 August 2020, from <http://www.atlasofpentecostalism.net/>.
- Vanhoozer, K.J., 1998, *Is there a meaning in this text?* Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Vanhoozer, K.J., 2005, *The drama of doctrine: A canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KY.
- Veenhof, C., 1965, 'Calvijn en de prediking', in J. Van Genderen (ed.), *Zicht op Calvijn*, pp. 47–101, Buiten en Schipperheijn, Amsterdam.
- Virkler, H.A., 1981, *Hermeneutics: Principles and processes of biblical interpretation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Vondey, W., 2010, *Beyond Pentecostalism: The crisis of global Christianity and the renewal of the theological agenda*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Wallace, R.S., 1957, *Calvin's doctrine of the word and sacraments*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Zuck, R.B., 1984, 'The role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141, 120–130.
- Zuck, R.B., 1995, *The Holy Spirit in your teaching: The relationship that makes all the difference*, rev. edn., Scripture Pr Pubns, London.