

Review of Keener, Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost.

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Keener C 2016. *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

1. Introduction of Author and Book

Craig Keener is one of the most influential Biblical Scholars in contemporary conservative Christianity currently serving as FM and Ada Thompson Professor of the New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary. Keener is an extensively published author; at my last check, he has 'authored 24 books, five of which have won book awards in *Christianity Today*' (Keener 2018). The publications include major multivolume and sometimes voluminous academic commentaries on New Testament Backgrounds, the Gospels of Matthew, and of John, Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians. In addition to numerous journal articles, Keener has also used his writings to address important contemporary issues such as divorce and remarriage, miracles, and knowing the 'mind of the Spirit'. He is himself a Pentecostal minister, and thus eminently qualified to bring his wealth of expertise not only in Biblical scholarship, global intercultural theological education and

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practical ministry to bear on an aspect of one of the foremost subjects currently facing Christians and the academy.

That subject is Pentecostal Hermeneutics. It is an arena of keen interest and debate, not least because pentecostalism, as a spirituality, as well as a Christian tradition, is only recently receiving serious scholarly attention. A fundamental agenda in this new interest is what pentecostalism brings to the global theological discourse especially the tradition's hermeneutics. This is an arena of debate to which several authors have already made contributions (Archer and Oliverio Jr 2016; Martin 2013; Nel 2015:1–21) and Keener's latest publication may be said to belong to it. Even then, in reframing the standard discussion of the subject by labelling it as 'Spirit Hermeneutics', Keener has managed to catch the spirit of the proverbial current by significantly advancing that conversation, given the cross-traditional and global nature of pentecostalisation—the phenomenon whereby Pentecostal spirituality has interpenetrated and transformed other Christian traditions and the wider societies. This is quite correct in my view, for as I point out later, Keener's bridging of 'Pentecostal Hermeneutics' with mainstream Christian conservative hermeneutics is one of the most important achievements of the book.

The book itself was commissioned as part of what the publishers label as 'Pentecostal Manifestos'—a series of publications aimed at giving voice to established and emerging Pentecostal scholars to articulate the tradition's distinctive engagement with important theological themes of relevance to the wider Christian community. As his numerous devoted readers have come to expect, Keener delivers with an extensively- referenced and -sourced 522 page tome, of which 233 plus xxviii pages, that is, almost fifty per cent is made up of extremely useful front materials, appendices, endnotes and references. The main body of the book consists of an introduction and conclusion which enclose six parts, each with varying numbers of chapters. I now summarise these sections and follow with critical engagement of the contents.

2. Summary of Contents

In the introductory chapter, Keener sets about defining the field of his study, delineating the questions he aims to address, stating his main thesis and providing an outline of his argument. In sum, he argues that this book is 'primarily designed to function as biblical theological reflection supporting a dynamic, experiential reading of Scripture' (p. 1). He asserts that Scripture itself mandates that it

be read experientially and thus his aim is to articulate how such an enterprise, open to encountering the Spirit who continues to speak today through Scripture may be conducted. He clarifies that he is dead set against the kind of ‘unbridled subjectivism of popular charismatic excesses’ (p. 5) just as much as the purely cognitive models of biblical interpretation which diminish the continued experience of the Spirit as it was with the original audiences. This criticism of both extremes shapes significant aspects of the book’s discourse, with Keener urging that in his view ‘all Christians should be considered charismatic by definition’ (p. 8).

2.1 Summary of Part 1

The first part of the book lays a solid biblical theological foundation for Keener’s argument by examining the Pentecost narratives in Acts and some of the subsequent revivalist movements in Christianity to show that the Bible must be read experientially, eschatologically and missionally. Positing that ‘Scripture itself invites us to read it theologically with interest in praxis and mission’ (p. 19), he postulates that the spiritual contexts of the writers and first audiences are as important as their socio-historical and cultural contexts. In that light, today’s readers of Scripture who analogously share in the kind of experiences of the Spirit described in the text, experiences which were evidently familiar to the writers and their communities, those Christians are much better placed to capture the text’s full meaning than those who don’t share in that experience. In the same way, the eschatological ethos of Scripture mandates that it be read with a continualist hermeneutic which expects God to continue working out his eschatological missional purposes through today’s believers.

2.2 Summary of Part 2

The second part follows on with the eschatological missional theme by arguing that Scripture must be read in global perspective that is sensitive to what the Spirit is doing in different parts of the world. He again grounds this global reading in the biblical text and in the Pentecost narrative in particular, positing that speaking in other tongues signified the necessarily global dimension of the Spirit’s work and mandating the cross-cultural reading of Scripture. This inevitably leads to a discussion of the implications of contextualization in this project. Keener traces how contextualization and recontextualization occur in the Bible and encourages interpreters to be self-aware of both their own cultural preconditioning as well as their blind spots to current interpretations in other cultures when interpreting Scripture. This

leads Keener to employ a couple of case studies to examine the importance of contextualization for reading the Bible from a global cross-cultural perspective.

2.3 Summary of Part 3

The third part of the book underlines the need to read the text with its originally ‘designed sense’, by which he means pursuing ‘the sense projected by the ideal author or at least the ancient cultural sense’ (p. 99). This section is in particular aimed at rejecting approaches to reading Scripture prevalent in some sections of the Pentecostal movement as well as some postmodernist reader-response methods which diminish or even ignore the primacy of authorial intention and the pastoral purposes and contexts within which the texts were written. To prevent these dangers, Keener suggests a three-stage procedure involving studying the immediate context of the text, its original function and its meaning in the light of the cultural context. He appeals to relevance theory to assert that attempts to pit historical study against the theological interests of the texts are wrong-headed, though he admits that some readings are more helpful than others.

2.4 Summary of Part 4

The fourth part of *Spirit Hermeneutics* lays the foundation for the subsequent part by examining how the Spirit epistemologically directs Spirit Hermeneutics. Again Keener negotiates a middle ground between two extremes. On the one hand, he warns against a naively simplistic approach to Bible interpretation which ignores what the text itself is actually saying, or which imposes the interpreter’s preconceived ideas upon it. On the other hand, Keener rejects a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ which employs a secular and materialistic worldview with its hostile bias against the miraculous in Scripture and which is thus strangely acceptable to any interpreter, be they believers or nonbelievers and anti-believers. In this regard, he takes to task ‘hard cessationism which offers an intellectual approach to the text’ for mirroring unbelieving approaches to reading scripture as ‘it fails to embrace the continuing relevance of a major aspect of the biblical message’ (p. 199). The key to staying in the middle ground is an epistemological commitment to the hermeneutical relationship between the Word and the Spirit nurtured by faithful submission to God through Christ.

2.5 Summary of Part 5

Having defined the underlying premise of an epistemology of Spirit and the Word, Keener devotes the fifth part to examining the exact processes by which the Spirit-inspired writers of Scripture model Spirit Hermeneutics. This is one of the most important sections of the book, as it successfully provides important exemplars of what it means to interpret Scripture through Spirit-driven experience. Keener examines Jesus' hermeneutical use of Scripture to address the contextual issues of his day. Keener affirms that whereas to Jesus, the original sense of Scripture was fundamental to his exegesis, the application of the text to his context was nevertheless driven by the Spirit's work. Keener then uses specific passages to affirm how this approach is also employed by other inspired New Testament writers and speakers such as Paul, Stephen, and Matthew. These are extended to provide a number of guidelines for Spirit-enabled application and analogizing of Scripture.

2.6 Summary of Part 6

The final part is aimed at addressing the excesses of Pentecostal readings of Scripture. Keener ably traces some of the historical roots of problematic populist readings starting with the holiness Wesleyan movement, and employs examples to set out some of the features of 'the wrong kind of experiential reading' (p. 268). He suggests how the global Pentecostal community, whose clear-cut definition he admits is elusive, is nevertheless the arbiter constraining such excesses.

3. Critical Engagement

3.1 Strengths of the Book

This book has been hailed by many reviewers as a 'game changer' in the discipline of biblical hermeneutics and I am in total agreement with that glowing assessment. For evidence, one could point to many of its strengths which lead me to commend it to all conservative postgraduate seminary students, their teachers and certainly their libraries. I could write for example of its engaging nature, its lucidity, its commitment to the primacy and priority of the text as Spirit-inspired literature, its compelling argumentation by exemplification and its determination to underline the Bible as the Spirit's textbook designed to be interpreted through experience of the Spirit who continues to work through it. However, several other reviewers, including a whole edition of the journal *Pneuma* (Keener, 2017:198–240), have already examined its major contributions in some detail. Accordingly, I will limit myself here to

only a couple of strengths which to my mind have not been adequately highlighted.

In the first place, and as stated previously, a major achievement of this project is its attempt to bridge the gap between 'Pentecostal Hermeneutics' and 'mainstream' Christian hermeneutics. So from the start, Keener insists that he is not aiming 'to describe or prescribe an entire hermeneutic used by Pentecostal or charismatic exegetes; it is rather meant to highlight emphases that Pentecostals, charismatics and other people of the Spirit may add to hermeneutical wisdom already in place' (p. 7). In other words, what is on offer is enriching the hermeneutical praxis of the wider non-Pentecostal but pentecostalised Christian community, by introducing them to an approach to Bible interpretation which is evidently being instigated, directed and blessed by the Spirit today. This is an astute move as it demonstrates the coming-of-age of Pentecostal scholarship. But even more so, this bridging of the gap ensures that in an era of pentecostalisation of global Christianity whereby Pentecostal spirituality has permeated almost all Christian traditional denominational boundaries, its hermeneutical procedures and nuances become accessible to all Christians.

Keener's widened definition of what therefore constitutes a 'Charismatic Christian' is thus reasonably well argued, even though some may still need to be convinced whether such an extremely broad and boundary-blurring definition reflects the current state of Christian praxis on the ground. It is indeed gratifying that Keener provides an extensive list of scholars he knows of who may be reasonably classified as charismatic or Pentecostal in one of his appendices. Be that as it may, it seems to me that in abandoning the term 'Pentecostal hermeneutic' in favour of '*Spirit Hermeneutics*', Keener has accelerated the process of moving the hermeneutical beliefs and practices of pentecostalism from its secluded silo into the open-air of mainstream Christian interpretive praxis. This fits in perfectly well with the pentecostalisation of Christianity. I will shortly quibble with whether this new title is adequate enough, but I am very appreciative of Keener's concerted effort to respond to the mandates of the pentecostalisation of global Christianity.

Another achievement of Keener is how he situates his theory of Christian hermeneutics from the starting point of Scripture, rather than philosophical theories of human understanding. As the subtitle underlines, his primary assertion is that Scripture must be read 'in the light of Pentecost', rather than on the terms of an understanding of human anthropology. Keener returns to this

grounding of theory in Scripture by demonstrating how the kind of hermeneutics he advocates is modelled by Jesus and the inspired writers of Scripture and thus provides exemplars for our own contemporary interpretation. As I argue shortly, this biblically-grounded approach though brilliant, could have been augmented by an engagement with some of the philosophical and theological approaches to the hermeneutical enterprise, at least in order to strengthen the bridge which he erects with mainline approaches to the subject. Even so, his limited approach may well be deliberate, as it heightens his commitment to letting the Bible itself direct our theory of hermeneutics.

As Keener's numerous fans, of whom I count myself as one of the foremost, have come to expect of Keener, the copious endnotes of the book will certainly be of immense help to the research student. I am also impressed, but again unsurprised, by the several chapters of helpful appendices covering ancillary matters, the almost seventy pages of bibliographic references and the indices of authors and subject. Overall also, the book's unapologetically continualist outlook is another of its major features, and I am very appreciative of it.

3.2 Critical Quibbles

My first quibble is with regard to the title 'Spirit Hermeneutics'. Keener defends this terminological choice by arguing that the book's primary aim is not to comprehensively address the question of how one interprets or understands Scripture, but to focus on the narrower question of 'How do we hear the Spirit's voice in Scripture?' (p. 2). In that regard he rightly finds 'Pentecostal Hermeneutics' too narrow, so also, I must assume, would have been the alternative 'Charismatic Hermeneutics'.

Even so, the meaning of the term 'Spirit Hermeneutics' is not self-evident and perhaps discordant to the ear, especially given that the hermeneutical procedures that Keener lays out require co-operation between the exegete and the Spirit whom he or she experiences. Keener is of course absolutely right in urging us to move beyond restricting the work of the Spirit in hermeneutics to illumination alone, by taking serious account also of those experiential functions which lie beyond the cognitive faculties of the believing exegete. Yet, the term 'Spirit Hermeneutics' fails to capture this phenomenon and certainly may well give the impression, which Keener repeatedly condemns, that the hermeneutical procedure for which he argues is a totally passive reception of the meaning of the text from the Spirit. This is certainly far from what the book represents. In that case, would

'Spirit-directed Hermeneutics' or better still, *'Spirit-experiential Hermeneutics'* have been a better title, especially as the latter gives voice to the emphasis on experiencing the Spirit in Scripture?

A second area of query is on the section in which Keener argues for the pursuit of the 'designed sense' of the text. It is here that Keener mostly attempts to engage the excesses of both Pentecostal as well as non-Pentecostal, especially historical, readings of the text, a section which was extremely important for his central task of bridging the two. In this regard, his suggestion that the interpreter must focus on how the text functioned in its original context was extremely important. But Keener could have defined how the non-cognitive aspects of this 'designed sense' may be attained. He later underlines the importance of application and analogical mapping of the interpreter's experiences with that projected in the scriptures; but, what of the place of symbolical, typological or even limited allegorical interpretations of the Bible? There is no doubt that in some places the inspired writers and the first readers of the text could well have understood such Premodernist approaches as 'designed sense', and there are some conservative interpreters today who find this approach acceptable under certain controls. An attempt to address how this hermeneutical practice relates to the 'designed sense' would have been helpful.

I would also like to express a small quibble about the limited engagement with philosophical theories of hermeneutics. Though Keener engages elements of Hirsch's theory of interpretation, little is said about how *Spirit Hermeneutics*, and the pursuit of the 'designed sense' of scripture philosophically relates to other hermeneutical theoretical accounts proposed for example by Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Thiselton to name a few of the influential theorists. More crucially it appears to me that the type of experiential hermeneutics Keener proposes shares some important affinities with the phenomenological and existential hermeneutics of the nineteenth-century theologians (e.g. Kierkegaard and Buber). Some engagement with these might have solidified the theory undergirding his proposal.

Of course, Keener significantly differs from some of these theorists by his more positive commitment to the priority of the text as well as his grounding of the hermeneutical enterprise in the experience of the Spirit's voice in the text. Moreover, I am mindful of Keener's disclaimer that his intention was not to generate an exhaustive account of Christian hermeneutics. And in any case, he devotes Appendix A to briefly engage hermeneutical philosophers such as

Dilthey, Gadamer and Bultmann and so address some of the theoretical questions they raise with regard to his proposal. All that said, however, and given the impressive achievement of the book, more in-depth critical engagement with the key dialogical partners who provide the philosophical frameworks underpinning the hermeneutics which shape some of the approaches dominating contemporary mainline conservative biblical interpretation would have served to strengthen the alternative philosophical outlook set out in the book.

A final area to which Keener could have given more attention regards the natural question of how Spirit-driven experiential reading of the Bible relates in hierarchical terms to the 'designed sense' of the canon. In other words, if today's Christian may practise hermeneutical procedures modelled on those practised by the inspired writers of Scripture due to being in eschatological continuity with these Biblical believers in terms of experience of the Spirit's work, then at what point do the insights and experiences of the contemporary Christian differ in magnitude from those of the first canonical Christians? I am specifically asking, where does the finality and thus superiority of the biblical canon fit in the account of Spirit hermeneutics?

I am sure Keener would have answered such a question by indicating the degree to which the contemporary church is dissimilar to the Church of biblical times and therefore cannot wholly replicate the apostolic hermeneutics in its totality. And indeed he indirectly addresses this issue by urging that despite his non-cessationist outlook, the biblical witness of the canon is supreme above any revelation or interpretation that has followed it (p. 281). The canon, to Keener, remains the 'measuring stick' for all subsequent interpretations and thus cannot be superseded. That said, Keener does not give sustained attention to this vexed question, a question that I imagine will be raised by those of 'soft cessationist' persuasion. Even so, there is never an indication in the book that Keener would subscribe to the prioritization of contemporary readings of Scripture over and above those originally 'designed' by the inspired authors themselves, making this particular query to be a rather moot academic quibble.

4. Conclusion

This extended review has summarised and evaluated one of the most important contributions to shaping systematic approaches to interpreting Scripture following the inevitable implications of the

pentecostalisation of global Christianity. Keener has once again faithfully served his Lord in producing a book which in my view will in future be hailed as one of the most influential turning points in making Spirit-driven experiential readings of the Bible the standard hermeneutical norm in conservative Christianity. He certainly has provided the scaffolding for bridging the gap between Pentecostal hermeneutics and mainstream conservative approaches to the subject. Though much still needs to be now done in building and strengthening this bridge to its logical completion, I am confident that '*Spirit Hermeneutics*' will play a fundamental role in shaping this agenda.

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