

## **Principles and Criteria for Doing Contextual Theology in Melanesia: Part One – Donald Bloesch’s Theological Method and His Approach to Scripture**

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### **Abstract**

*The first part of this two part paper outlines Donald Bloesch’s theological method and his approach to scripture, while the second part will critically interact with his method with a view to determining principles and criteria for doing theology in context. In doing so, it proposes methodological principles and criteria for doing and assessing the effective implementation of contextual theology.*

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the first part of this paper is to outline Donald G. Bloesch’s approach to Scripture and his theological method. I believe, despite his weaknesses with respect to culture and the task of cross-cultural theologising, his theological method provides a suitable approach with which to interact in the process of developing criteria for doing theology in context.<sup>1</sup> This paper deals with one small part of the broader interdisciplinary discussion. It deals with issues of theological method within the evangelical-reformed tradition and the criteria for doing contextual theology. The particular context (in my case Melanesian) will be addressed in part two of the paper.

### **Outline of Bloesch’s Theological Method**

Bloesch works out his theological method amid the tension that exists between the theological right and left. Though he is an evangelical-reformed theologian, his work is permeated by a markedly progressive ecumenical and catholic spirit that is markedly progressive for an evangelical, and yet there is also a conservative aspect to his nature. Bloesch clarifies his position as a mediating theologian by asserting that:

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<sup>1</sup> I worked for twenty years with what was then RBMU International (now World Team) and the Evangelical Church of Indonesia among the Momina people of the southern lowland of West Papua, Indonesia in a church planting ministry. It is out of this context and the experience of working with a Melanesian people group that the broader discussion contained in this article is derived.

What is required is the recovery of a centralist position standing thoroughly in the tradition of orthodoxy but not averse to articulating the faith in new ways that relate to the contemporary situation...its goal is to drive beyond the theological polarity to a synthesis that negates the misconceptions of both sides but at the same time fulfills their legitimate hopes and concerns.<sup>2</sup>

### *Faith Seeking Understanding*

Following Augustine, Anselm, Calvin, Luther and Barth, Bloesch's theological method involves faith seeking understanding.<sup>3</sup> He describes faith as:

... an inward awakening to the infinite mercy of God revealed in Christ that gives rise to a commitment of the whole person to the claims of Christ. It is not mere opinion but an inward knowledge based on the illumination of the Spirit in conjunction with the hearing of the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

For Bloesch, faith involves a fundamental commitment to a relationship with a personal God, who is most fully 'revealed in Jesus Christ.'<sup>5</sup> Faith and commitment come before understanding; faith is nothing more than the recognition 'of the miracle of revelation in the chaos and darkness of human life.'<sup>6</sup> Faith is super-rational for it leads to 'a truth that transcends human imagination and perception.'<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Bloesch has decided on the partitioning of faith and reason, theology and philosophy, thus establishing his theology on biblical faith rather than on philosophical reasoning, which, I suggest, is the reverse of the more traditional approach.<sup>8</sup>

For Bloesch, the primary impediment to genuine understanding is not reason, but sin.<sup>9</sup> Hence, he asserts that, 'The certainty of faith lies in the inward confirmation of the Spirit concerning the objective validity of the biblical revelation. We are given a spiritual, not a rational certainty.'<sup>10</sup> However, he does acknowledge that faith involves intellectual investigation stating that, 'We do not believe without our reason, but we also do not believe on the basis of reason.'<sup>11</sup>

In line with his methodology, Bloesch exhibits a healthy fear of rationalism,<sup>12</sup> which he sees as the blight of much modern evangelicalism.<sup>13</sup> He declines to align himself with the

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<sup>2</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 58-59.

<sup>4</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 37. To all intents and purposes Bloesch sees faith as trust which grows out of the transformational encounter with Jesus Christ who is the object of faith.

<sup>5</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), 43.

<sup>6</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Bloesch, *The Ground of Certainty: Towards an Evangelical Theology of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 58, 38.

<sup>12</sup> See Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 34-61; also *The Ground of Certainty*, 176-203.

rationalistic approach conferred on evangelicalism by the Protestant scholastics. Evangelical rationalism associates revelation directly with the Bible<sup>14</sup> and understands theology to be essentially propositional in nature. It presupposes that human reason is capable of obtaining direct access to unmediated truth about God.<sup>15</sup> Rationalism, consequently, demotes faith to intellectual agreement, 'to verbal truth.'<sup>16</sup> It replaces the mystery of faith with unadulterated logic.<sup>17</sup>

Bloesch describes his method as, '... a *fideistic revelationalism* in which the decision of faith is as important as the fact of revelation in giving us certainty of the truth of faith.'<sup>18</sup> He elaborates saying, 'What I espouse is not fideism but faith that is deeper than fideism, for it is anchored in the supreme rationality that constitutes the content and object of faith.'<sup>19</sup> He suggests that it could also be described as 'dynamic revelationalism', and is careful to point out that, 'In the revelationalism I espouse, we begin neither with the will to believe nor with the probings of the understanding but with the living God personally addressing us in the moment of decision.'<sup>20</sup> Having focused on faith, we now need to explore Bloesch's understanding of revelation in detail.

### *The Necessity of Revelation*

Foundational to Bloesch's understanding of revelation is his deep sense of the fallenness and depravity of humankind. In holding this position, he sees himself as standing alongside Calvin and Luther in opposition to the rationalism of Protestant scholasticism. The rationalist assumes that humanity is volitionally capable of understanding truth about God by means of human reason. Bloesch sides with Barth rather than Brunner, and contends that there is no natural point of contact<sup>21</sup> for Christian truth because of the magnitude of human depravity.<sup>22</sup> Bloesch writes, 'Barth acknowledged with Calvin that God's glory and power are objectively disclosed in nature, but sin renders us incapable of perceiving that this glory and power originate in the true and living God.'<sup>23</sup> While he recognises that God 'has not left himself without a witness',<sup>24</sup> he contends that this witness is insufficient because it is 'suppressed by human sin.'<sup>25</sup> He goes on to say that, 'The general awareness of God is not a stepping stone to the gospel or a point of contact with the

<sup>13</sup> Bloesch, Donald G., *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978-1979), 1:75.

<sup>14</sup> See Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Grenz, "Fideistic Revelationalism": Donald Bloesch's Antirationalist Theological Method', in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*, ed. E.M.Colyer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), 36-39.

<sup>16</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 60, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 203.

<sup>20</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 276, fn. 17.

<sup>21</sup> See Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 75, 216.

<sup>22</sup> Grenz, 'Fideistic Revelationalism,' 38-40.

<sup>23</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 153.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 14:17.

<sup>25</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 174.

gospel, because it is invariably misunderstood. It falsifies rather than illumines the divine reality as well as the human situation.<sup>26</sup>

He contends that reason must be converted rather than cultivated; only then can reason illuminate 'the mysteries of faith', but even then it will by no means 'exhaust them.'<sup>27</sup> In holding to this position he follows Luther and Calvin who:

While acknowledging that all people are inescapably related to God and endowed with an innate sense of his infinite power and moral order, they were nonetheless insistent that because sin so utterly defaces the *imago Dei* we are rendered incapable of laying hold of God's redeeming revelation in Jesus Christ apart from a special illumination of the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup>

In agreement with Augustine, Bloesch recognises that the unconverted person may have an external understanding of the gospel, but insists that this is not a true understanding until the person's 'inward eyes are opened by the Spirit of God.' However, once converted, reason becomes an 'instrument of faith', enabling the new believer to comprehend his or her faith more completely.<sup>29</sup>

### *Nature of Revelation*

For Bloesch, revelation is not only necessary because of sin; it is also personal, dynamic and transformational in nature. It is an event involving God and the recipient.

The event of revelation has two poles: the historical and the experiential. Revelation is God speaking and human beings responding through the power of God's Spirit. God speaks not only in the Bible but also in the human heart. Revelation is the conjunction of the divine revealing action and human response.<sup>30</sup>

While Bloesch recognises the cognitive aspect of revelation, it is not for him primarily propositional or informational in character, but personal. It is an 'act of communication by which God confronts the whole person with his redeeming mercy and glorious presence. It therefore involves not only the mind but also the will and affections.'<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, Bloesch perceives revelation to be an event in which God and the recipient encounter one another, and therefore it is dynamic in character. He decries the static concept of revelation held by the rationalists who

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<sup>26</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 174.

<sup>27</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 36.

<sup>28</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 36, see also *Holy Scripture*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 50.

<sup>31</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 48.

equate revelation with the words of Scripture. He writes, 'Those who reduce the content of revelation to declarative statements in the Bible overlook the elements of mystery, transcendence and dynamism in revelation and in the Bible.'<sup>32</sup> Grenz goes so far as to state that the dynamic personal character of revelation is central to Bloesch's theological method.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently Bloesch understands revelation to be 'the redeeming, transforming encounter of the individual with the Living God' in which 'the Word of God comes to us as transforming power.'<sup>34</sup>

In this perspective, truth is not an abstract doctrine or an intuitive apprehension but the transformation reality of the incarnate Word making contact with us in a paradoxical encounter. It is God's self-communication to those who have been gripped by the passion of faith. It is the opening up of a new horizon for those who have been confronted by the living God.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of the relationship of theology to revelation, Bloesch sees theology as neither 'the verbalization of religious experience' (Schleiermacher) nor the 'common human experience' (David Tracy) but rather the enunciation of God's revelation, which breaks into our 'experience from beyond and transforms it.'<sup>36</sup>

### *General Revelation and Natural Theology*

Consistent with his understanding of the fallenness of humanity and the nature of revelation being personal, dynamic and transformational, Bloesch almost rejects any prospect of general revelation or natural theology. While he agrees with Scripture that everyone has some perception of 'God's universal working in nature and history,' he stresses the deceptive nature of such knowledge, because it is suppressed by fallen humanity; and is therefore undependable as a way to intimate relationship with God.<sup>37</sup>

The knowledge of God through nature and conscience apart from the revelation in Christ is not a true knowledge but a deceptive knowledge. It is not an understanding but a misunderstanding. It is not a saving knowledge but a condemning knowledge. It gives us not a capacity for revelation but an incapacity.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 1:75-76.

<sup>33</sup> Grenz, 'Fideistic Revelationalism,' 55.

<sup>34</sup> Grenz, 'Fideistic Revelationalism,' 39-40.

<sup>35</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 117-118.

<sup>37</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 160.

<sup>38</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 176.

For Bloesch, genuine revelation results in 'personal and concrete' knowledge of God rather than abstract or speculative knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, like Barth, he insists that natural theology cannot be validated on the foundation of general revelation. So with Hendrickus Berkhof, he recommends the abandonment of the term, 'general revelation.'<sup>40</sup> However, Bloesch is too good a student of Calvin to completely reject the idea of general revelation. Therefore he speaks about 'a general presence of God in nature and history,' adding that 'this general presence does not become a revelation of his grace and mercy until it is perceived in the light of Jesus Christ.'<sup>41</sup>

Rather than promoting general revelation or natural theology, Bloesch advocates a 'theology of creation', which analyses 'nature and conscience in the light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.'<sup>42</sup> Hence he recognises 'the world as created and loved by God, destined for redemption, and the theatre of God's glory.'<sup>43</sup>

### The Place of Theology in Bloesch's Methodology

In line with his theological method, Bloesch sees theology as a wisdom-orientated 'faith-responsive science'<sup>44</sup> involving the diligent study and systematic clarification of the Word of God to a specific age. Bloesch goes on to say that from an evangelical perspective it is:

... the faithful interpretation of the biblical message to the time in which we live. It must struggle to elucidate the relevance of the cross and resurrection victory of Jesus Christ for our time and place in history, not simply reaffirm past interpretations or repeat creedal formulas of another era.<sup>45</sup>

He elaborates upon the biblical, systematic, contextual, ecclesiological and Christological nature of theology by suggesting that it is:

...the systematic reflection within a particular culture on the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested to in Holy Scripture and witnessed to in the tradition of the catholic church...Its norm is Scripture, but its field or arena of action is the cultural context in which we find ourselves.<sup>46</sup>

He suggests that this is directed chiefly to the community of faith, with the purpose of helping 'that community to bring all of its thoughts and actions into conformity with the will of God

<sup>39</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 164.

<sup>40</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 164.

<sup>41</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 164.

<sup>42</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 173.

<sup>43</sup> Elmer M. Colyer, 'A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method', ([http://apu.edu/~CTRF/articles/1996\\_articles/colyer.html](http://apu.edu/~CTRF/articles/1996_articles/colyer.html), 1996), par. 28.

<sup>44</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 118.

<sup>45</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 115.

<sup>46</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 114.

as revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup> For Bloesch the task of theology is neither empirical knowledge nor rationalistic insight, but an understanding that results in obedience to Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> He recognises the need to consider the state of the world beyond the boundaries of the church, 'for its ultimate aim is to bring the whole world into submission to Jesus Christ.'<sup>49</sup> This theological and missiological task is to be accomplished by the equipping of 'the church to make a powerful and compelling witness [in both word and deed] to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ as we find in Holy Scripture' and so 'prepare the way for the kingdom of God.'<sup>50</sup>

### *Theology as a Faith-Responsive Science*

As stated above, Bloesch emphasises the practical nature of theology, which he sees as a 'faith-responsive science.'<sup>51</sup> Unlike natural science, its focus is upon hearing the Word of God in Scripture, under the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit. Hence it is an activity orientated towards the divine, which seeks wisdom, truth and certainty in order to enlighten the 'pilgrimage of faith' on its journey towards the eschaton.<sup>52</sup> Faith involves a real but partial knowledge of God, for 'God makes himself an object of our understanding', but only through the eyes of faith.<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere Bloesch declares that:

Even though we cannot claim a comprehensive knowledge of God as he is in himself, we must not suppose that God in himself is other than God as he relates to us in Jesus Christ. To know God in Christ is to know God in himself...though this is always a partial and broken knowledge waiting for completion on the day of redemption.<sup>54</sup>

Bloesch elaborates upon the eschatological nature of the church's theological understanding stating that, '... there will never be perfect agreement between church proclamation and the eschaton until the parousia, when Christ comes again.'<sup>55</sup>

### *Dogma and Doctrine Distinguished*

Bloesch distinguishes between dogma and doctrine. By dogma he is not referring to the historical, and therefore culturally relative, formulations of the church but rather 'the divinely given' and

<sup>47</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 39; see also, *Holy Scripture*, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 118.

<sup>52</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 115-116.

<sup>53</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 118-119.

<sup>54</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 116.

<sup>55</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 119; also 133.

unalterable 'content of the faith',<sup>56</sup> which commands our acquiescence in obedient faith.<sup>57</sup> This he associates with the self-understanding of God being God's 'inspired apostolic interpretation' of the story of redemption. It is the unchangeable and irrevocable declaration of God.<sup>58</sup> Thus he defines dogma as 'a propositional truth that is grounded in and inseparable from God's self-revelation in Christ and communicated to the interiority of our being by the spirit of God.'<sup>59</sup>

Doctrine is the historical, and therefore culturally conditioned, manifestation of dogma, which must be prized to the extent that it assists in the transmission of infallible truth.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, doctrine involves the systematic verification by church theologians of God's inspired interpretation. It is the condensation of dogma into 'propositional statement accessible to human understanding,' and, therefore, open to distortion because it no longer retains 'its absolute status.'<sup>61</sup> He asserts that doctrines are always open to revision and are trustworthy only when 'controlled by the dogmatic norm of the law and the gospel.'<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Scripture must be continually revisited, so that the 'content of truth or revelation' can be reformulated for new contexts.<sup>63</sup> Rejecting the rationalist's sense of optimism, Bloesch asserts that we have only a partial understanding of truth this side of the eschaton, which should result in greater humility.<sup>64</sup>

### *Authority, Norms and Sources of Theology*

Bloesch begins his discussion of the authority, norms and sources of theology by asking the question, 'Is authority to be placed in human wisdom or cultural experience, or is it to be located in an incommensurable divine revelation that intrudes into our world from beyond?'<sup>65</sup> His rejoinder is that the final authority,<sup>66</sup> and 'absolute, irreversible norm of faith'<sup>67</sup> and practice, resides in 'the living word of God, Jesus Christ' himself.<sup>68</sup> In so designating Christ, he means both the crucified, risen and 'indwelling Christ.'<sup>69</sup> However, Bloesch distinguishes between Christ as the absolute norm, and the relative norms, which he equates with a number of independent 'loci of authority.'<sup>70</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 120.

<sup>57</sup> Avery Dulles, 'Donald Bloesch on Revelation,' in *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, ed. Colyer, 65.

<sup>58</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 120.

<sup>59</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 19; see also 274, fn. 9.

<sup>60</sup> Dulles, 'Donald Bloesch on Revelation', 65.

<sup>61</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 120.

<sup>62</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 120.

<sup>63</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 121.

<sup>64</sup> Grenz, 'Fideistic Revelationalism,' 44.

<sup>65</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 184.

<sup>66</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 185.

<sup>67</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 196.

<sup>68</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 195.

<sup>69</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 196, see also 194.

<sup>70</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 186 and 195.



As Calvin suggests the absolute 'norm'<sup>71</sup> is only found in relative (dependent) norms: the Bible, the church and its traditions, and the experience of faith.<sup>72</sup>

### The Bible as the Primary Norm of Theology

Bloesch recognises the Bible as both 'the objective pole' and 'the mediated or historical source of revelation' and authority.<sup>73</sup> The Bible is the objective pole of revelation, because history not only provides the medium in which revelation occurred and 'the content of the Bible', but it also constitutes 'the original witness to the mighty acts of God.'<sup>74</sup> It is the source of revelation. 'It is not only the experiences of the biblical writers but the content of the Word addressed to them by the living God that constitutes the essence of revelation.'<sup>75</sup> Bloesch sees Christ as so intimately bound to the Bible that Scripture of necessity participates in Christ's authority.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, Christ, the living Word of God, draws closer to us by means of the 'biblical message' illuminated by the Holy Spirit.<sup>77</sup> So he agrees with the Reformers, who saw the Holy Spirit as the One who applies 'the gospel to the hearts of...men and women.'<sup>78</sup> Likewise, he recognises the sacramental nature of the Bible in that it is 'an instrument or channel of divine' revelation.<sup>79</sup> Bloesch sees the Bible as the primary authority and source (yet relative norm)<sup>80</sup> of theology stating that:

Biblical authority has a higher place than church authority because it is based on the primary witness to revelation, whereas church tradition is anchored in the secondary witnesses to revelation. We affirm the Bible over the church and over religious experience, but at the same time the Bible as exercising authority in the church and in religious experience.<sup>81</sup>

Likewise, Bloesch affirms the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* and suggests that by it [the Reformers] 'meant the Bible illuminated by the Spirit in the matrix of the church', adding that, '*Sola Scriptura* is not *nuda Scriptura* (the bare Scripture). It means that the Bible is our primary authority not our only authority.'<sup>82</sup>

<sup>71</sup> This language seems somewhat contradictory thus I prefer the term 'primary norm' rather than 'absolute norm.'

<sup>72</sup> Colyer, 'A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method', par.66; see also Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 195.

<sup>73</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 187.

<sup>74</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 187.

<sup>75</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 187-188.

<sup>76</sup> Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols, 1:63.

<sup>77</sup> Grenz, 'Fideistic Revelationalism,' 47.

<sup>78</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 194.

<sup>79</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 40.

<sup>80</sup> See Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 186.

<sup>81</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 194.

<sup>82</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 193.

### Church Tradition as a Norm of Theology

As already stated, church tradition is the matrix through which we comprehend and interpret revelation. 'We come to know the love of Jesus not only because 'the Bible tells us so' but also because of what we are told by our mother, the church.'<sup>83</sup> Consequently, the church's role involves clarification and interpretation of the Scriptural testimony, which itself bears witness to God's revelation of himself in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>84</sup> While adhering to *sola Scriptura*, Bloesch sees the church's creeds and confessions as 'road signs' pointing us towards Jesus Christ and the gospel, thus establishing and harmonising the church with the 'faith once delivered to the saints.'<sup>85</sup>

It is within the faith community, which has previously heard and reflected on both the Scriptures and church tradition, that the Bible comes afresh to each successive generation at its particular historical moment.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, Bloesch recognises the role of the Spirit in leading 'the church towards a deeper understanding of the mystery of the gospel declared in Scripture but never toward a new gospel.'<sup>87</sup> He agrees with Charles E. Curren that, 'God's revelation has been handed over and entrusted to the church, which faithfully hands this down from generation to generation through the assistance of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>88</sup> Tradition, says Bloesch, is not just the skill of forwarding the gospel; rather it is the gift of fidelity to the gospel in the face of opposition from 'the powers of sin, death and the devil.'<sup>89</sup>

Bloesch carefully preserves the reliance of tradition upon the regulating authority, the living Word of God, which for him does not directly correspond with the teaching of the church.<sup>90</sup> The church enjoys authority only to the extent that it yields to this 'higher authority.'<sup>91</sup>

The ultimate authority for faith is the living Word of God, the gospel of reconciliation and redemption, which is made known to the church but not delivered into the hands of the church. What the church passes on from one generation to another is teachings about the gospel, not the very gospel itself.<sup>92</sup>

For Bloesch, the church's proclamation can become a channel or instrument by which the living Word is communicated to the recipient because of the Word's sacramental function.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 189.

<sup>84</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 13.

<sup>85</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 160.

<sup>86</sup> Colyer, 'A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method', par. 68.

<sup>87</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 160.

<sup>88</sup> Charles E. Curren, 'In Dissent in the Church.' *Commonweal* 113/15 (1986):461.

<sup>89</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 160.

<sup>90</sup> Grenz, 'Fideistic Revelationalism,' 48.

<sup>91</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 190.

<sup>92</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 160.

<sup>93</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 40-45.

### Experience as a Norm of Theology

Bloesch recognises not only the biblical and ecclesial dimension of theological authority, but also the experiential or mystical dimension.<sup>94</sup> He accepts that experience fulfills an indispensable role in theology that must not be underplayed.<sup>95</sup> Yet, it does not possess an authority independent of the Word.<sup>96</sup> 'Scripture is the objective norm by which we can measure the validity of our experience. However, to be vital and fruitful, this norm must take root in our lives, which means that we must experience the reality of God presented in the Scriptures.'<sup>97</sup> He acknowledges that, while experience does not provide an adequate foundation for revelation, it does establish the credibility of revelation, making it more effectual.<sup>98</sup> He 'sees it as the field of revelation rather than its source or criterion.'<sup>99</sup>

If experience is taken to mean 'the total encounter with our environment in its web of interrelationships,' then all truth that affects human existence will be set in an experiential matrix, but this does not mean that it necessarily springs from this matrix. Truth descends into experience, but does not arise from experience.<sup>100</sup>

Bloesch expresses his concerns about both the mystical and experientialist views of experience as a norm of theology. He sees the mystical tradition as adhering to an understanding of God as essentially unknowable, incommunicable and remote. It refers to 'an ineffable encounter with a divinity that is beyond the grasp of human understanding.' Consequently, God can only be approached 'by negating statements.'<sup>101</sup> Bloesch also suggests that we must watch out for the kind of experientialism which asserts that experience is 'the ruling norm for truth and life.'<sup>102</sup> He is unhappy with the liberal experientialist who emphasises experience to such an extent that it becomes a substitute for revelation.<sup>103</sup>

### *The Word and Spirit as the Ground of Certainty*

Bloesch asserts that the ultimate ground of certainty for theological authority is neither the Bible, nor church tradition, but rather the experience of faith in the existential encounter of the Word and the Spirit. While the Bible is the regulative or objective norm, it is not the absolute norm.

<sup>94</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 189.

<sup>95</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 188.

<sup>96</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 25.

<sup>97</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 189.

<sup>98</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 210.

<sup>99</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 109.

<sup>100</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 109.

<sup>101</sup> Dulles, 'Donald Bloesch on Revelation', 66 and Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Carlisle, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1995), 60-61.

<sup>102</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 192.

<sup>103</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 23.

Therefore, if it is to impact on our lives in a vital way 'we must experience the reality of God presented in Scripture.'<sup>104</sup> It is through the action of the Holy Spirit that the Bible participates in and makes known the absolute norm, Jesus Christ – 'the apex and the foundation of faith and authority.'<sup>105</sup>

[By] Jesus Christ as the absolute, irreducible norm of faith, we mean not only Christ crucified and risen but also the indwelling Christ. It is not only the transcendent Christ who is the source of our authority and faith but also the incarnate Christ. It is Christ for us and in us.<sup>106</sup>

While the relative norms of Scripture and church are incapable of revealing Jesus Christ to us without the action and operation of the Spirit, we should also bear in mind that, 'We...do not have the absolute norm except in the form of the relative norms.'<sup>107</sup>

The relative norms for faith might be regarded as derivative authorities. Their authority is derived from the divine reality to which they point and attest. They have real authority but only when seen in their organic relatedness to the divine Spirit who speaks and acts in and through them. It is the Spirit who is the ultimate author of Scripture and the divine center of the church.<sup>108</sup>

Bloesch follows the Reformers in bringing together both Word and Spirit as the basis of authority. '[T]he Holy Spirit is not a second criterion alongside the Word but one aspect of the sole criterion - the Word enlightened by the Spirit or the Spirit illuminating the Word.'<sup>109</sup> He sees theological authority as a gift which offers its own supporting evidence, 'It claims our allegiance but at that same time imparts the capacity and willingness to adhere to this claim and act upon it.'<sup>110</sup> It is not demanding or arbitrary, but rather 'personal and spiritual.'<sup>111</sup> It results in freedom, liberty and obedience.<sup>112</sup>

### *A Theology of Word and Spirit*

In considering Bloesch's handling of issues of revelation, truth and authority we see that, at every point in his methodology, the theme of Word and Spirit comes through strongly. This is in line with the overarching intention of developing *A Theology of Word and Spirit*. He writes:

<sup>104</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 189 and 197.

<sup>105</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 191 and 197; see also Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 158-161.

<sup>106</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 196.

<sup>107</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 196.

<sup>108</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 197-198.

<sup>109</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 202.

<sup>110</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 205.

<sup>111</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 204.

<sup>112</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 205.

When I speak of Word and Spirit I am not thinking primarily of a book that receives its stamp of approval from the Spirit, though I affirm the decisive role of the Spirit in the inspiration and illumination of Scripture. I am thinking mainly of the living Word in its inseparable unity with Scripture and church proclamation as this is brought home to us by the Spirit in the awakening of faith. It is not the Bible as such but divine revelation that confronts us in the Bible that is the basis and source of spiritual authority...Scripture in this way is the Word of God to those with the eyes to see and ears to hear, as is also church proclamation that is based on Scripture.<sup>113</sup>

In reflecting upon Barth's threefold form of the Word of God, Bloesch asserts the interrelatedness and interdependence of the three-fold form writing:

There is something like perichoresis in these three forms of the Word of God in that the revealed Word [Jesus Christ] never comes to us apart from the written Word [Scripture] and the proclaimed Word [church], and the latter two are never the living Word unless they are united with the revealed Word.<sup>114</sup>

Bloesch goes on to affirm, 'The written Word and the proclaimed Word have no efficacy unless Christ makes his abode within us by his Spirit.'<sup>115</sup> He links all three forms of the Word of God intimately to the operation of the Holy Spirit.

### *Theology and Culture*

Bloesch's handling of the relationship between theology and culture exhibits an inherent tension that is not uncommon for theologians coming from a Reformed perspective. His understanding of the fallenness of humanity and his rejection of an intrinsic point of contact between human beings and God produces a thorough-going distrust of culture on his part.

He does not favour theologies of accommodation, which he identifies as 'Christ-of-culture' positions.<sup>116</sup> He suggests that they:

... accommodate to secularity and seek a point of identity between the highest values of the culture and the message of faith. The focus is on finding points of convergence between Christian tradition and modern philosophy. A call is made to revise the Christian message in order to bring it more into harmony with prevailing beliefs and attitudes.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 14.

<sup>114</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 190.

<sup>115</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 191.

<sup>116</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 257.

<sup>117</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 252.

He indicates that an accommodationalist element is present in Schleiermacher and evidenced throughout liberal theology.<sup>118</sup> This brand of theology negates the divine invasion into the history of humankind; instead it attempts to develop a fresh appreciation of God and the world in conversation with current philosophy.<sup>119</sup>

The theology of correlation, as a 'Christ-above-culture', position is also rejected by Bloesch.<sup>120</sup> He understands the approach as retaining the uniqueness of God's revelation in Christ, while bringing it into conversation with modernity. The aim is the purification of 'the cultural vision without negating it.'<sup>121</sup> It is a mediating approach, which introduces the innovative questions of culture to 'the answers of Christian revelation.'<sup>122</sup>

A further approach, with which Bloesch is dissatisfied is the theology of restoration. Here the aim is to undo the shackles of modernity and restore earlier traditions to the current context as feasible alternatives to those seeking for 'meaning and truth.' He suggests that this position is closely linked to Enlightenment rationalism<sup>123</sup> and to those who 'identify revelation with the propositional content of the Bible.'<sup>124</sup> Restorationists are less concerned with converting 'modern culture' than displacing it with 'another culture'<sup>125</sup> and they often appear to hold a 'Christ-against-culture' position.<sup>126</sup>

Bloesch rejects theologies of accommodation, correlation and restoration. Instead he advocates a theology of confrontation, by which he means a theology that aggressively confronts the cultural matrix with the Word of God. The aim is not correlation or synthesis but the 'conversion of cultural values and attitudes in the light of divine revelation. Cultural images and symbols are not annulled but instead are subordinated to the abiding revelatory symbols of Scripture and tradition.'<sup>127</sup> This process he describes as diastasis.<sup>128</sup> His theological approach is kerygmatic rather than apologetic. The desire is to articulate the demands of the gospel without aligning it with the predetermined wisdom of the cultural context. 'It is a theology of crisis rather

<sup>118</sup>Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 257.

<sup>119</sup> Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 258.

<sup>120</sup> Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 260.

<sup>121</sup> Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 252.

<sup>122</sup> Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 260.

<sup>123</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 253.

<sup>124</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 254.

<sup>125</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 254.

<sup>126</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 255.

<sup>127</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 253.

<sup>128</sup> By 'diastasis,' Bloesch is referring to the separation of cultural symbols from revelatory symbols without fracture or break. There is a distinction to be made between them, but they are still related to one another through subordination.

than process.<sup>129</sup> The focus is upon 'Christ-transforming-culture' through 'the power of the gospel' rather than the strength of human argument.<sup>130</sup>

Consequently, Bloesch rejects the idea of culture as a normative source of theology, refusing to categorise it along with Scripture and tradition as a genuine source of theology. He writes:

Against the harmonizers and syncretizers I maintain that culture is not a bone fide source of theology but the catalysing material that theology uses in the application of the Word of God. Our task is to make the faith intelligible but not credible or palatable, for only the Spirit does that.<sup>131</sup>

At times, Bloesch's response to culture appears to place him in the fundamentalist camp, but then he frees himself from their errors. He wants to treat culture sensitively and speak in the contemporary context, but there is a genuine reservation. However, in one of his definitions of theology, he concedes the place of culture in the theological process without granting it the status of a source of theology.

... theology is the systematic reflection within a particular culture on the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture and witnessed to in the tradition of the catholic church. Theology in this sense is both biblical and contextual. Its norm is Scripture, but its field or arena of action is the cultural context in which we find ourselves.<sup>132</sup>

### Holy Scripture

As we have seen, Bloesch, unlike many evangelicals, is unwilling to equate Scripture with revelation. Critical to his understanding of the relationship between the two is his articulation of the Word and Spirit motif. He sees the Bible as being the divine channel or medium of revelation prepared by God rather than revelation itself.<sup>133</sup> He recognises the Spirit's role in confirming the authenticity of 'the biblical revelation' to the inner person.<sup>134</sup> Thus 'the experience of faith' is constantly earthed in 'the objective side of the Word and Spirit polarity.'<sup>135</sup>

Acknowledging Bloesch's emphasis on the Word and Spirit with respect to his understanding of the Holy Scriptures, we now consider the way he deals with the issues of

<sup>129</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 262.

<sup>130</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 263.

<sup>131</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 229.

<sup>132</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 114.

<sup>133</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 18.

<sup>134</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 202.

<sup>135</sup> Colyer, 'A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method', par. 36.

inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility and interpretation, for each of these have bearing upon his methodological approach.

### *The Inspiration of Scripture*

Bloesch ascribes the existence and origin of the Bible to a dual authorship, stating that, 'The paradox is that Scripture is the Word of God as well as the words of mortals. It is both a human witness to God and God's witness to himself.'<sup>136</sup> Clark H. Pinnock suggests that Bloesch is closer to Calvin than he is to Barth in recognising the human component of Scripture as being subordinate to divine.<sup>137</sup> Bloesch proposes that, 'The Bible is divine in its ultimate origin and theological content but human in its mode of expression or literary form.'<sup>138</sup> So for him, Scripture is primarily supernaturally given, 'from above', yet he does not deny that it is also 'from below'. He goes on to declare his uneasiness, first, with respect to a Protestant orthodoxy that equates the words of Scripture directly with 'the words of God',<sup>139</sup> instead of 'the Word of God mediated through human words,' and secondly, with a liberalism that doubts 'divine unity of the Scriptures', preferring to focus upon a plurality of New Testament kerygmas.<sup>140</sup>

For Bloesch, the Scriptures are God-breathed, meaning that God chose the writers and guided them in the process of reflection and writing through the Holy Spirit. Consequently, he defines inspiration as:

... the divine election and guidance of the biblical prophets and the ensuring of their writings as a compelling witness to revelation, the opening of the eyes of the people of that time to the truth of these writings, and the providential preservation of these writings as the unique channel of revelation. By the biblical prophets I have in mind all preachers, writers and editors in biblical history who were made the unique instrument of God's self-revealing action.<sup>141</sup>

As we can see, his view of inspiration is broad, including the compilation, editing and preservation of the text.<sup>142</sup>

Bloesch rejects a dictation approach to the inspiration of Scripture - it is not the 'stenographic notes of God's audible voice.'<sup>143</sup> Rather, following G.C. Berkouwer,<sup>144</sup> he advocates

<sup>136</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 87. See also Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 88, 115 and *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols., 1:52.

<sup>137</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, 'The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Donald G. Bloesch' in *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, ed. Colyer, 122.

<sup>138</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 38.

<sup>139</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 118.

<sup>140</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 38.

<sup>141</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 119-120; see also 126-127.

<sup>142</sup> Colyer, 'A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method', par. 39.

<sup>143</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 58.

<sup>144</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 51-157.



'a theory of organic inspiration', involving the interpenetration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit.<sup>145</sup> He writes:

The Spirit enters into the history and culture of the writers and does not simply superimpose truth on them. The Bible is not a celestial tape recorder but a report of an event or series of events in history that changed the world. I affirm not a supernaturalism that elevates the Bible above the relativities of history but one in which the divine enters into these relativities.<sup>146</sup>

Accordingly, he refers to the co-authorship of the Scripture, recognising the freedom given to the human authors in writing the words of the Bible.<sup>147</sup> He acknowledges that it is an entirely human book, conditioned by the historical and cultural limitations of its human authors.<sup>148</sup> Yet it is different from other books in that 'its authors were inspired by God.'<sup>149</sup>

Bloesch proceeds to affirm the conceptual and verbal nature of inspiration, not in terms of perfect accuracy, but maintaining that it 'conveys the truth that the writers were guided in their selection of words and meanings so that their overall witness is reliable and trustworthy.'<sup>150</sup> He endeavours to hold on to the conceptual nature of revelation even as he subordinates it to God's personal self-communication. Such revelational knowledge is both conceptual and existential; it may 'be formulated but never possessed or mastered in propositions.'<sup>151</sup>

Bloesch understands plenary inspiration to mean that all Scripture is inspired. However, he does not take it to mean that every part of Scripture is of the same value. He aligns himself with Bernard Ramm,<sup>152</sup> opposing a 'flat view of Scripture' which makes no distinction between the essential and marginal, the foreground and background of Scripture.<sup>153</sup>

The purpose of inspiration, according to Bloesch, is to facilitate God's revelation of Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. It is the means by which the Bible becomes a vehicle or channel of the Holy Spirit. Inspiration entails God sending out the Spirit to make ready the pathway for the Word of God, while revelation involves God speaking 'his Word in conjunction with the testimony of his inspired prophets and apostles.'<sup>154</sup> Hence the purpose is the salvation and/or transformation of the recipient rather than the creation 'of an errorless book.'<sup>155</sup>

<sup>145</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 122.

<sup>146</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 122.

<sup>147</sup> Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols., 1:55.

<sup>148</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 108 and 115.

<sup>149</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 27.

<sup>150</sup> Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 55.

<sup>151</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 48.

<sup>152</sup> Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).

<sup>153</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 121.

<sup>154</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 120.

<sup>155</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 118.

*Inerrancy and Infallibility*

Bloesch recognises the loaded nature of the term, 'inerrancy' and prefers the expression, 'the truthfulness or veracity of Scripture' instead.<sup>156</sup> The Bible is completely true in ways it selects and determines to be true, but not in the way we may want it to be true. Bloesch says, 'The Bible contains the perfect Word of God in the imperfect words of human beings.'<sup>157</sup> Along with Barth, he maintains that all of Scripture is culturally conditioned, and with Calvin, he follows the 'principle of accommodation' granting the Spirit's accommodation to the writers' mistaken but common conceptions of their day.<sup>158</sup> However, he asserts that, while the Bible may be 'imperfect in its form', it is 'not mistaken in its intent.'<sup>159</sup> Thus Bloesch's approach to inerrancy is in contrast to the fundamentalists, who believe the Bible to be a 'perfect measuring rod in matters of history and science as well as faith and morals.'<sup>160</sup>

From a negative perspective, Bloesch states what he does not mean by inerrancy. '[It] does not mean verbal exactness or precise accuracy of wording. Inerrancy can be defended in such a way as to deny growth or development in the understanding of Scripture, as well as cultural conditioning of language and doctrinal formulations.'<sup>161</sup> He suggests that, from a biblical perspective, error means deviation from the truth or straying from the true pathway, instead of imperfect knowledge of the truth. Consequently, he is prepared to support the idea of inerrancy, if it is understood to mean the conformity of the Scripture to the influence and injunction of the Spirit regarding the purpose and will of God. However, he is not prepared to accept it if it means the conformity of everything in the Scriptures to historical and scientific facts.<sup>162</sup> He differs from several of his evangelical colleagues since he understands, '... the divine content of Scripture not as rationally comprehensible teachings but as the mystery of salvation declared in Jesus Christ... This mystery can be stated in propositional form, but it eludes rational comprehension.'<sup>163</sup> Therefore, the Bible, rather than seeking to give 'an absolutely accurate account of Israel's history', seeks to present 'a faithful rendition of God's action in the community of Israel', while presenting 'the divine content in [an] earthen vessel.'<sup>164</sup>

<sup>156</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 116.

<sup>157</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 115.

<sup>158</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 109.

<sup>159</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 115.

<sup>160</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 96.

<sup>161</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 107.

<sup>162</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 107.

<sup>163</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 114.

<sup>164</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 114.

Bloesch affirms the infallibility of Scripture in a manner that parallels his understanding of inerrancy. He deems the message of Scripture to be infallible without aligning it to the total accuracy of Scripture, stating that the Spirit interprets the message infallibly to God's people. Subsequently, the Scripture is infallible neither in letter nor text, but rather in the text united with the Holy Spirit. He opposes both that strand of neo-orthodoxy that links infallibility exclusively with the 'Spirit speaking to us as we read the Bible',<sup>165</sup> and a fundamentalism that insists that infallibility dwells totally in the text. Rather, it rests in paradox of the unity that exists between the Word and the Spirit, through which the meaning is elucidated.<sup>166</sup> Along with Barth he upholds 'the paradox of the divine infallibility of the Bible and its human fallibility'.<sup>167</sup> Thus for Bloesch, it is the 'soteriological message of Scripture' that is inerrant and infallible.<sup>168</sup>

### *Interpretation of Scripture*

Unlike the fundamentalist and rationalist theologians, who believe that the words of Scripture are indistinguishable from divine revelation, Bloesch believes that the meaning is not in 'the text itself' but in 'the Spirit who breathes on the text'.<sup>169</sup> He writes, 'The task of interpretation would be much easier if the words of the Bible were identical with divine revelation. But because these words relate to revelation as form to content, interpretation is far more difficult'.<sup>170</sup> He asserts that critical methods can be justifiably employed with regard 'to the form but not to the content of Scripture'.<sup>171</sup> Consequently, he distinguishes between two categories of meaning: the historical meaning and the revelational meaning of the text. The historical meaning consists of authorial intention and the reception of the text in the faith community, while the revelatory meaning takes in the pneumatic or spiritual meaning 'that the text assumes when the Spirit acts on it in bringing home its significance to people of faith in every age'.<sup>172</sup>

So Bloesch advocates historical-pneumatic hermeneutics, which exegetes the text in terms of its historical context, then proceeds 'to discern the subtle relationship of the text to the centre of the sacred history mirrored in the Scriptures - the cross of Jesus Christ'.<sup>173</sup> Therefore, the Bible must be read from a position of faith under the guidance of the Spirit, since its primary purpose is to bear witness to Christ, from whom it receives its authority. Clark H. Pinnock writes concerning Bloesch's understanding of 'pneumatic exegesis', 'One must be a believer to

<sup>165</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 116-117.

<sup>166</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 117.

<sup>167</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 103.

<sup>168</sup> Frank Hasel, *Scripture in the Theologies of W. Pannenberg and D. G. Bloesch* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), 188.

<sup>169</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 178.

<sup>170</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 173.

<sup>171</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 177.

<sup>172</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 190.

<sup>173</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 206-207.

understand the text, not because the text is gibberish otherwise, but because its central theme is Jesus Christ, who cannot be grasped by reason alone...one's eyes must be opened and one's heart strangely warmed.<sup>174</sup>

Like J. I. Packer, Bloesch recognises that the biblical text may contain a fuller meaning than that originally understood by the human author.<sup>175</sup> In order to get to the deeper or revelatory meaning of the text, he develops a fourfold hermeneutical methodology. First, the reader must approach the text with 'reverence and humility.' Secondly, it involves the use of the critical research tools in order to establish authorial intent.<sup>176</sup> Thirdly, it is essential that the text is free to criticise the reader, so that the presuppositions that are brought to the text are questioned. Finally, the hermeneutical task is the prayerful application of the text to the cultural context of one's own life and times.<sup>177</sup> He goes on to state that:

This four-step process must not be construed as a technique or method for procuring the Word of God. It has value only if it makes us aware of dimensions of the mystery of coming to the knowledge of the Word. The two things necessary are a believing heart and a searching mind. Both precritical devotional study of the Bible and purely academic study are inadequate...[W]e must...push beyond these if we would know the full implications of the text for personal life and practice.<sup>178</sup>

For Bloesch, only an authentic hearing of the word of God can result in genuine theology. Finally, he realises that the language that the Bible uses about God is largely symbolic or mythopoetic.<sup>179</sup> The source of such language is not experience but rather God's revelation that in-breaks both experience and culture from the outside. Its aptitude to communicate meaning is derived neither from history nor cultural experience but rather from the Holy Spirit, who transcends both while operating with them.<sup>180</sup> He maintains that the Word of God may be understood only in symbolic or mythopoetic language, for it mediates that which, for the time being, cannot be fully known.<sup>181</sup> Yet he rejects the idea 'that symbols lead to God'; rather he insists 'that God uses symbols to come to us.'<sup>182</sup>

He recognises that much of Scripture is written in various forms including figurative language that is frequently symbolic or mythopoetic, but he is 'not suggesting that the reality this

<sup>174</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, 'The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Donald G. Bloesch', 123-124.

<sup>175</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 176.

<sup>176</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 178.

<sup>177</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 179.

<sup>178</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 180.

<sup>179</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 70.

<sup>180</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 73.

<sup>181</sup> Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 74-75.

<sup>182</sup> Dulles, 'Donald Bloesch on Revelation', 74.

language describes is mythological and therefore fanciful.<sup>183</sup> He accepts that it is unnecessary to reject such language, however, it must be interpreted according to the revelation it enshrines. Thus for Bloesch, the truth enshrined within symbol and myth is revealed only when illuminated through the Spirit.<sup>184</sup> All this fits nicely into his theological method of Word and Spirit.

Part two of this paper critiques Bloesch's theological method and approach to Scripture, again with a view to determining principles and criteria for doing theology in context. In doing so, the scope and interrelationship of key elements of theological method, namely, tradition, culture, social change and experience are elaborated.

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<sup>183</sup> Bloesch in *Holy Scripture*, 267.

<sup>184</sup> Colyer, 'A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method', 41-42.