

John McNicol: Word and Spirit – The Centre of Toronto Bible College’s Training

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Biographical Abstract of John McNicol (1869-1956)

John McNicol was born in Hanover, Grey County, Ontario, where his father was a teacher. The family moved to Ottawa, and from there John did classics at University College, University of Toronto (B.A.Hons., 1891). In Toronto he was very involved in the Student Volunteer Movement, the Elizabeth Street Mission and the YMCA. He graduated from Knox College, Toronto, with his B.D. in 1895 and went on to pastor in the Presbyterian Church in Canada in Alymer, Quebec, before going to Toronto Bible College in 1902 to teach English Bible. In 1906 he became principal and remained in that post until 1946 (he continued teaching until 1954). McNicol was a board member of many Christian endeavours, including Sudan Interior Mission, the China Inland Mission and the Upper Canada Tract Society. He attended the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference as one of the Canadian delegates. In 1935 he received the honorary D.D. degree from Knox College. He was a prolific author of articles, monographs and the popular four volume work, *Thinking Through the Bible*. Evidently his most popular article was “Fundamental But Not Dispensational”. His wife, Louisa Burpe McNicol, was known affectionately as “The Colledge Mother”, and this is to whom he dedicated his books, *Thinking Through the Bible*.



Introduction

After forty years as Principal, McNicol could remind his fellow Canadian evangelicals that the entire educational and training focus of TBC had been built upon two fundamental and transcendent facts that lie at the heart of the Christian faith: the Bible as the living Word of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the corporate life of God's people.¹ Word and Spirit was the regulating centre of the teaching and training emphasis of TBC. To appreciate the significance of his practical theological focus one needs to place it within the three historical realities in which TBC was immersed. These were the Bible school movement, the design of TBC, and the Controversy between Modernists and Fundamentalists.

¹ "Gala Occasion," "Dr John McNicol's Reply," *TBC Recorder*, 52. 4 (December 1946): 13-15.

The Bible School Movement

The Toronto Bible College and the Bible Training School of Vancouver were present in Chicago at a Conference on World Evangelism and Vital Christianity in February 1919 in which a day was devoted to the special task of the Bible Institutes. The consensus among these representatives was that for twenty-five years the Bible school movement had made an important contribution to the life and work of the churches in the USA and Canada. They believed that they were called to fill a much larger place and do a greater work. While up to then the Bible school movement had not felt called to enter the field of academic or theological training, these leaders were convinced that in view of the



*Toronto Bible College building, 1920
(from a postcard)*

pressing needs of the church and the world the Bible schools must lengthen their cords and strengthen their stakes. This implied the courses offered should be strengthened and that the academic standards must also be raised, and for some schools, provision should be made for a more thorough training for the ministry.² McNicol shared these same sentiments with fellow Canadians, “Bible Schools have contributed spiritual service to the Christian Church, which the Church has not fully appreciated. There is still a larger field for these institutions to enter in order to meet the needs of the present day.”³

McNicol firmly believed that the Bible school movement had been raised up by the Spirit of God to meet the situations that were current at that time.

The Spirit of God is moving to-day upon the hearts of young men and women throughout the whole church. He is turning them towards the Bible Schools which He has raised up during the past twenty-five years. It is God’s doing and He has a purpose in it. The Toronto Bible College is surely called to share in this purpose and in this movement.⁴

It was this sense of being a part of something greater that moved McNicol to remind his readers to recognize that TBC was both the product and the

² Editorial, “A Forward Movement,” *TBC Recorder*, 25.2 (March 1919): 1.

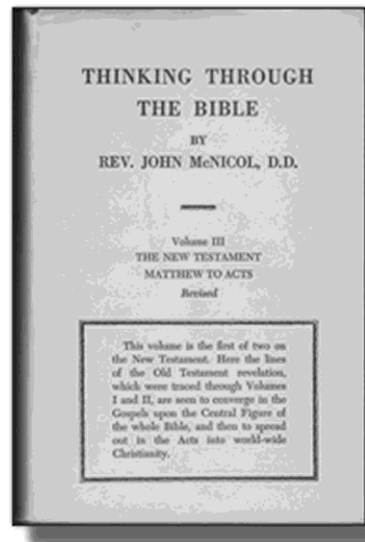
³ Editorial, “An Evening With The Officials,” *TBC Recorder*, 25.2 (March 1919): 2.

⁴ John McNicol, “The Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 27.3 (June 1921): 3.

manifestation of this free movement of the Spirit of God. The young men and women who came to the school did so with a sense of a divine urge upon them. It behoved the college to recognize this and to devote themselves to equip a body of consecrated young people so they would be fitted for the work of intensive personal evangelism at home and abroad. His conclusion was, "The Bible College, then, is not an isolated fact. It is part of that great movement of the purpose of God by which He is getting His work done in the world in this day and generation. This feature of the . . . College needs to be better and more widely known."⁵

It was, therefore, to catch the Spirit's breath in the sails of TBC that McNicol established his policies of the centrality of the Word of God in their curriculum and the leadership of the Spirit of God within their corporate fellowship. To fulfill these purposes for which the Spirit had raised up the school McNicol believed, "There is no greater need in church life and Christian education to-day than an intelligent, systematic study of the Bible."⁶ While McNicol did not define intelligent or systematic, it is safe to assume that his aim was to expose the students to a study of the Bible that was rigorous in its mental demands and yet systematic in its approach so the entire canonical Scriptures would be covered. McNicol developed his three-year course, "Thinking Through the Bible" in order to keep in step with the Spirit's activities in the Bible school movement. This was seen to be true in those days when the anti-supernaturalism of modernism was a blighting breath among the Canadian churches. In contrast, McNicol asserted that,

What is needed most of all these days is a new consciousness of the eternal realities. We seek above all things to bring the young men and women who come to us into a continuous living contact with these essential realities so that they may carry this consciousness with them out into their work in the world. Thus we would spread our sails for the winds of the Spirit of God and be



⁵ John McNicol, "The Principal's Annual Report," *TBC Recorder*, 33.3 (June 1927): 6. See also his Reports in *TBC Recorder*, 28.2 & 3 (June 1922): 7, and *TBC Recorder*, 30.3 (June 1924): 5.

⁶ John McNicol, "The Principal's Annual Report," *TBC Recorder*, 28.2 & 3 (June 1922): 7.

ready for that renewal which He alone can give and which we so greatly need.⁷

How would TBC introduce these students into a living contact with the essential realities of eternal things? The answer is found in McNicol's practical theology of Word and Spirit. For in the Bible, they encountered another world, a transcendent reality where God is, and out of which he speaks.⁸ This otherworld also pervaded McNicol's idea of the corporate presence of the Holy Spirit among His people. Their lives as God's people were ruled from heaven just as Christ's life while He lived on earth. Through Word and Spirit they were introduced into these realities of God and were enabled to consciously carry these essential realities into the work to which God had called them.

The Design of the Toronto Bible College

TBC's original aim embraced the experiential, the educational, and the practical aspects of Christianity. They aimed at the heart (a consecrated Christian life), the head (an adequate knowledge of the Word of God), and the hand (an effective use of the holy Scriptures in Christian service).⁹ There was an activist spirit at work among young people. The Christian Endeavour, the Baptist Young Peoples' Union, the St. Andrew's Brotherhood, and the Epworth League were producing young people for Christian service at home and abroad.¹⁰ Where were they to get training for such Christian work? They could not all go to the universities and theological colleges. It was in response to this influence that TBC came into existence.¹¹ Yet, what lay at the heart of what McNicol regarded as necessary for training these young people for effective Christian service?

⁷ John McNicol, "The Principal's Annual Report," *TBC Recorder*, 30.3 (June 1924): 5.

⁸ John McNicol, *The Bible's Philosophy of History* (Toronto, ON: Published by the Board of Governors, 1944), 5.

⁹ *Prospectus of the Toronto Bible Training School, 1894*, 987-019 File Box-Registrar's Office-Calendar-TBC-1 found in the Archives – OBC/OTS found in the Wm Horsey Library, Tyndale University College & Seminary in Toronto, ON. "It is designed that the full course of study will extend over two years. The instruction will be Biblical and practical, and will specially aim at these three great ends: - A consecrated Christian life, an adequate knowledge of the Word of God, and an effective use of the Holy Scripture in Christian service."

¹⁰ These young people's organizations were connected to the Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches respectively.

¹¹ A. E. Armstrong, "Gala Occasion," *TBC Recorder*, 52.4 (December 1946): 3-5 found in the Vertical File, McNicol, John 1869-1956 0233-1, Wm Horsey Library, Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON. Armstrong made these remarks as a former student of the college in 1896-97.

In preparation for their new building on 16 Spadina Road in 1929, the college reiterated its original purpose of 1894 but added this dimension. “It seeks to give them such a conviction and experience of the reality of Christianity as will enable them to be worthy servants of Christ in any part of the world.”¹² It is interesting to note that while the course of studies at the college was lengthened in 1923 from two to three years, and while it still “aimed at furnishing its students with a thorough and systematic knowledge of the English Bible and its practical use,”¹³ McNicol’s conviction was that his students could only be worthy servants of Christ in the world if their education was to include the conviction and experience of the reality of Christianity. His aim that TBC be a school that bears witness of the essential reality of Christianity was now at the heart of its design and purpose. Academics and practical training for Christian ministry were important but at the heart of all its courses was this experiential embodiment of the fundamental principles of Christianity. Christian spirituality was not merely a by-product of the school; it was at the very core of all that they did. How did McNicol seek to accomplish these theological, practical, and experiential aims of the school? He explained that their focus was chiefly upon Word and Spirit. Not Word without Spirit or Spirit without Word, but a unified practical theology of Word and Spirit.

The Bible College has never been conformed to any pattern or been made to follow any pre-conceived plan, but it has always kept in view two fundamental Christian verities and sought to give them visible expression. These are the supreme authority of the Word of God in Christian education and the corporate leadership of the Spirit of God in Christian fellowship. They are simple spiritual principles but have profound and far-reaching applications. We have sought to work them out through the years in the building up of our curriculum, in the composition and co-operation of our staff and in the discipline and fellowship of our student body.¹⁴

Controversy between Modernists and Fundamentalists

At McNicol’s retirement dinner, both the president of the board and McNicol alluded to the fact that in the history of the college a deliberate

¹² *Ibid.*, 5 and 7 - In the 1939-40 Calendar, under the “Purpose of the College” it reads, “The College does not provide for highly specialized forms of Christian work, but does aim to furnish its students with such a thorough and systematic knowledge of the Word of God and such a conviction of the reality of Christianity as will enable them to be worthy servants of Christ in any part of the world.” 7, 987-019 FB-RO-CA-TBC-1 Archives OBC/OTS found in the Wm Horsey Library at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴ John McNicol, “The Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 44.2 (June 1938): 4.

decision had been made to lead TBC in the path away from theological controversy.¹⁵ This was McNicol's first major decision as principal since the deaths of Elmore Harris and William Stewart, the original founders and leaders of the school. This decision was to establish the character and uniqueness of the college under his leadership.¹⁶ Why did McNicol choose this path of non-involvement in controversy? What precipitated his decision to function apart from this theological controversy in Canada? Were there practical-theological reasons, or was his decision just the result of an evangelical quietism?

In his reply to the honours he had received during his retirement dinner McNicol explained the college's stance regarding the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy. In turning away from this notable controversy McNicol was seeking to establish a system of Christian training at TBC that bore witness to the two fundamental and transcendent spiritual realities that lived at the heart of his conservative evangelical theology.¹⁷ What spurred him to steer TBC away from the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy was his practical theology of Word and Spirit. Yet it was not a mere path of non-involvement for flowing out from his theology of Word and Spirit was a very ambitious objective. They were "seeking rather to magnify the living verities of the Christian faith and to illustrate the essential reality of pure Christianity in such a way that the spirit of controversy dies away."¹⁸ In 1941 as he reflected on this decision of 1911, McNicol further explained the ultimate rationale behind it.

We declined to be drawn into the Fundamentalist Controversy or into any church controversy outside . . . We undertook to bear our Christian witness in another way. We sought to make the Bible College an illustration of what we believed to be the essential nature of New Testament Christianity. We sought the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit and tried to work out that principle in all our departments of the College life.¹⁹

McNicol's grand objective in building the educational and corporate life of TBC around these two fundamental and transcendent realities of Word and Spirit was a deeply spiritual reality that he described as "the essential nature of New Testament Christianity."

¹⁵ "A Gala Occasion," *TBC Recorder*, 52.4 (December 1946): 2 and 13-15.

¹⁶ John McNicol, "The Principal's Annual Report," *TBC Recorder*, 47.2 (June 1941): 6.

¹⁷ "A Gala Occasion," *TBC Recorder*, 52.4 (December 1946): 13-15.

¹⁸ John McNicol, "Principal's Annual Report," *TBC Recorder*, 36.3 (June 1930): 7.

¹⁹ John McNicol, "Principal's Annual Statement," *TBC Recorder*, 47.2 (June 1941): 7.

He did not elaborate on what the essential nature of NT Christianity was but it appears to be a spiritual reality that was experiential, emotional, personal, and relational within their corporate life at TBC. It was a life in which the presence and power of the Holy Spirit's leadership was manifested within all departments. In an earlier attempt to describe "The Essential Reality of Christianity,"²⁰ McNicol pointed to the origins of Christianity at the Spirit's descent at Pentecost. "By this event the Holy Spirit established living and abiding relations between the disciples on earth and their risen and ascended Lord in the heavens."²¹ Christianity introduced a new order of life whose source is found in the unseen spiritual reality of the heavenlies. This focus was seen in the experiences of the early Christians. During their times of fellowship, "There was a new atmosphere . . . the atmosphere of that other world into which their Master had gone."²²

McNicol wanted to see this new atmosphere, this new order of life (devotion and delight in Christ) reproduced at TBC in contrast to the destructive spiritual tendencies of modernism and fundamentalism. Under the tutelage of God's Word in their education and the presence of God's Spirit in their fellowship, this essential reality of Christianity as seen in the early church would become a reality. As the college's chief administrator McNicol's decision to avoid controversy was made according to the aims of his theology of Word and Spirit.²³

How did McNicol implement his practical theology with its orientation of the Word of God as the supreme authority in Christian education and the leadership of the Spirit of God in Christian fellowship?²⁴ It is here we must discuss the role of the Bible in TBC's curriculum and the corporate leadership of the Spirit within its fellowship.

The Role of the Bible at TBC

To oversee this discussion we turn to a man after McNicol's own heart, the man who was to succeed him as principal. J. B. Rhodes was an excellent interpreter of what McNicol meant when he claimed, "[TBC] gives the Bible its true place as the vitalizing centre in the scheme of Christian education."²⁵

²⁰ John McNicol, "The Essential Reality in Christianity" 491, *The Biblical Review*, 9.4 (October 1924): 491-510.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 494. "We seek to cultivate those qualities of Christianity that we find manifested in the early Church of the Book of Acts when the sense of Christ's presence was so real to the disciples." See: *Prospectus of the Toronto Bible College, 1947-48*, "Bible College Principles," 6, 987-019 FB-RO-CA-TBC-1 Archives OBC/OTS found at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON."

²² *Ibid.*, 495.

²³ See note 21 above.

²⁴ John McNicol, "The Principal's Annual Report," *TBC Recorder*, 44.2 (June 1938): 4.

²⁵ John McNicol, "Principal's Report," *TBC Recorder*, 25.3 (June 1919): 4-5 and reprinted in subsequent volumes of the *Recorder* 57.3 (September 1951), 59.3

Rhodes addressed the question, “What place does the Bible occupy in the Toronto Bible College?” His answer was, “The central and controlling place.”²⁶ What exactly did that imply about the educational philosophy of TBC and why did they give the English Bible such a central and controlling place? Rhodes drew out five implications of the college’s decision to place the Bible in a place of supremacy within its curriculum. These implications were an echo of McNicol’s own convictions and reflect his understanding of nature of the Bible as the *Word of God*.

The first implication was that TBC had a bibliocentric curriculum. The entire course of studies at TBC was built around the English Bible. The fundamental academic discipline at the school was the systematic study of the entire Bible for five hours per week. This course of studies lasted one hour each day through three years. As McNicol explained, “We kept enlarging the curriculum from time to time, adding one subject after another as we had the means to do so. But we always gave the supreme place to the Bible. We made it the guiding and regulating centre of the whole course . . .”²⁷ As the curriculum widened so that the entire field of theological studies was covered yet no one subject was to interfere with the college’s main task of enabling the students to master the English Bible.²⁸ Like a hub of a wheel, the Bible was the centre from which all the other subjects radiated like spokes. As a rim on a wheel, the Bible controlled, shaped, and held all the other subjects together as a unified whole. The Bible was clearly the queen of TBC’s curriculum. Why was mastering of the English Bible such an emphasis in TBC’s curriculum? How did this emphasis relate to McNicol’s theology of Word and Spirit with its spiritual aim that TBC become a centre in which the essential realities of Christianity were to be seen among all associated with the school?

Rhodes gives us the answer in his second implication. The study of the entire English Bible was regarded as a necessity if the students were to know “the whole counsel of God.” Under McNicol’s leadership, TBC did not follow the pattern of the theological colleges and place its emphasis on the minute study of the Bible in its original languages. Rather its emphasis was

(September 1953), 69.6 (September 1963):14-15, and “50 Years With Toronto Bible College,” *Evangelical Christian*, ed. J. H. Hunter, 2.

²⁶ J. B. Rhodes, “The Bible in the College,” *TBC Recorder*, 48.4 (December 1942): 2-3. This emphasis on the Bible-centred curriculum of TBC was a constant theme in McNicol’s explanation of the school’s uniqueness. “Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 40.2 (June 1934): 2-3. “The Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 44.2 (June 1938): 4. “The Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 47.2 (June 1941): 5-6.

²⁷ John McNicol, “Those Formative Years,” (Address by Dr John McNicol during Founders Day, November 8, 1949, during “Know Your College Week”) *TBC Recorder*, 55.4 (December 1949): 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

on the entire English Bible. Rhodes added, "It is our aim at the Toronto Bible College to take each student through the entire English Bible before graduation."²⁹

McNicol adopted this method of teaching the whole Bible in a consecutive canonical manner because of its twofold structure.

Its two parts, the Old and the New Testaments, are complementary to each other and stand together. They are two stages in the one progressive unfolding of the divine plan . . . The Old Testament is the necessary preparation for the New, and the New Testament is the necessary sequel and fulfilment of the Old . . . Both parts of the Bible together combine to form the Christian Scriptures. Both make up the Word of God, and both are needed for a true and full understanding of the historic revelation which God has given to man.³⁰

His method of teaching the entire English Bible was based upon his theology, not pragmatism. The Spirit who inspired holy men of old to write the Scriptures did so in this twofold structure. To keep in step with the Spirit's full progressive revelation of God to humankind McNicol believed the complete Bible must be taught and in the canonical format in which it was given to us. The Christian Scriptures consisted of both testaments together and he felt it was a necessity to teach both. If Spirit and Word are united in the work of divine revelation, then the Scriptures must be taught and understood according to its twofold format. McNicol's theology of Word and Spirit dictated his methodology of teaching the Christian Scriptures, and this method of teaching the whole English Bible was becoming a new emphasis in certain important theological schools in the USA.³¹

What was McNicol's goal in his emphasis on teaching the entire English Bible? It was to give the students not only a thorough knowledge of its contents but also to let the Bible make its own impact upon their life and thought. This was Rhode's third implication of giving the Bible the central and controlling place at TBC. McNicol testified of the two effects that their method of training had borne in the lives of their students. The first was the increasing awareness of the character of God upon the minds of the students. As the progressive revelation of God in the Scriptures was followed in their

²⁹ J. B. Rhodes, "The Bible in the College," *TBC Recorder*, 48.4 (December 1942): 3. This method of approach grew out of McNicol's own experience at Knox College. See: "17th Class of '36 Letter" during the Jubilee Celebrations (1944) found in the Archives-OBC/OTS File Box-Biography-McNicol at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON.

³⁰ John McNicol, *Thinking Through The Bible*, (Toronto, ON: The Upper Canada Tract and Book Society, 1944) Vol. 1, 3.

³¹ J. B. Rhodes, "The Bible in the College," *TBC Recorder*, 48.4 (December 1942): 3. He did not name these certain important American schools.

systematic way, the students came to realize “the profound significance of God’s redeeming purpose for the world.”³² The second effect was found within the personalities of the students. McNicol likened the effect to the opening of a flower to the sun. As each student responded to the revelation of God in His Word, “He is being truly educated . . . drawn out in the true exercise of his own God-given qualities and endowments.”³³ Within the lives of the students Word and Spirit were at work as an indivisible unit. For one to grow in his or her appreciation of God’s purpose of redemption (worship) and to develop in the exercise of their God-given qualities (ministry) is surely a true manifestation of the essential realities of NT Christianity. McNicol’s experiential theology of Word and Spirit shaped the goals of TBC’s educational practice.³⁴

However, to make this twofold impact upon the students “the Scriptures are studied not theoretically but practically, not critically but devotionally.”³⁵ McNicol was not ignorant of critical questions and he dealt with them only so far as was necessary to clear the ground so that the Bible was allowed to speak for itself.³⁶ Consistently, his aim in teaching the Bible for over forty years “has been to enter the inner shrine of the Scriptures and discover the spiritual world in the Bible, the world that makes it the Word of God.”³⁷ That is why his approach to teaching the Bible was exegetical and devotional. By devotional, McNicol, it appears, meant that the study of the Bible in the classroom was designed to move the student to a great devotion or love for the Lord in contrast to gaining merely a greater intellectual knowledge of the contents of the Bible. Such an approach implied that McNicol believed a critical approach was somewhat antagonistic to the Bible as divine revelation and therefore could not expose the students to the direct influence of the Bible. In the critical approach the impact left on the students would be that of the critics’ subjective opinions and not the direct influence of the Bible itself.

McNicol believed the Scriptures, as they were written, were recorded by men inspired of God. He also believed that, “In these Scriptures . . . His Spirit now speaks, and through them He makes known His mind and will to

³² John McNicol, “The Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 34.3 (June 1928): 5.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ John McNicol, The Principal’s Annual Report, *TBC Recorder*, 37.3 (June 1931): 7 made this comment about the testimonies students leave in evaluation of their studies at TBC. “In most cases the students have come to discover by their third year that the Bible College is attempting to set forth the pure Christianity of the New Testament in its essential reality, transcending all denominational distinctives and emphasizing no school of thought.”

³⁵ J. B. Rhodes, “The Bible in the College,” *TBC Recorder*, 48.4 (December 1942): 3.

³⁶ John McNicol, *Thinking Through The Bible*, (Toronto, ON: The Upper Canada Tract and Book Society, 1944) Vol. 1, v and 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, v.

us.”³⁸ The conviction the Bible was the living Word of God shaped his own attitude in studying the Bible. He explained what he required of himself and his students,

It becomes us . . . to read the Bible through with reverent and earnest attention, that we may know its contents and understand its spirit . . . A reverent and earnest approach means that we bring to bear upon it, all the active powers of our minds and all the light we have, and that we summon our hearts to respond in faith to the truth which it reveals to us.³⁹

McNicol’s choice of words such as “reverent, earnest, mind, heart” reveals a very experiential focus in his approach. He wanted his students to know and experience the power of the Scriptures in their own lives. He wanted them to enter the inner shrine of the Scriptures and discover the spiritual world in the Bible that makes it the Word of God,⁴⁰ for he knew that in so doing their lives would be transformed.

This was Paul Burns’ experience at TBC. He explained how his attitude towards the Bible changed under McNicol’s teaching.

It was then that I began to see in it a world of spiritual reality. I saw that there was more than chapters, verses, dates and facts. Here was a great spiritual world opening before me day by day into which I was called to enter, and in which I was challenged to live. The Bible, then, for the first time became a living message to me, revealing God’s will for my life and thus shaping my thinking, forming my character and guiding my conduct.⁴¹

There were four notable features about McNicol’s method of teaching the Bible. First, he regarded the Bible as the revelation of God to man. It was not a religious book created by humans but God’s revelation of Himself to His creatures. It was the Word of God in human language. McNicol embraced the Bible as the infallible and authoritative word from God. Second, he wanted his students to be exposed in a systematic way to the entire Scriptures as a unit allowing the Bible to interpret itself to the faithful student. The Old Testament would be interpreted in light of the New; and the New Testament would be understood in light of the Old. Therefore, the entire Bible was viewed as the Christian Scriptures. Third, he taught the Bible canonically. The progress of God’s revelation was unveiled through the reading and

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ John McNicol, *Thinking Through The Bible*, (Toronto, ON: The Upper Canada Tract and Book Society, 1944) Vol. 1, v and 1.

⁴¹ Paul Burns, “Graduation Testimonies, April 1946,” *TBC Recorder*, 52.2 (June 1946): 4.

exposition of each book as found within the Christian canon so that the voice of God was clearly heard.⁴² Fourth, the goal of all his teaching was deeply experiential and very spiritual. In the Bible, they encountered the living God speaking to them face to face. By this systematic exposure to the Bible as God's Word, the essential reality of Christianity blossomed within their soul through the work of the Spirit.⁴³ His method of teaching was rooted in his theology of Word and Spirit.

This does not imply that these spiritual effects within the lives of the students were automatic for as Rhodes demonstrated there was a fourth implication of the role that McNicol placed on the Bible. The rationale for giving the Bible the supreme place in its curriculum, said Rhodes, was McNicol's conviction that the Bible "becomes to us the living Word of the Eternal God as the Holy Spirit speaks to us in it and through it."⁴⁴ In McNicol's theology, the Bible is *THE Book* in that he believed in "the Divine Authority and Plenary Inspiration of the whole of the Old and New Testament Scriptures,"⁴⁵ yet he was not speaking simply of a Book. The Bible is the Word of God as the Spirit-breathed revelation of God, yet the Bible becomes the Word of God as the same Spirit speaks in and through it.⁴⁶ It was this understanding of the Bible that led McNicol to adopt the method of interpretation that he employed in handling the Scriptures. He explained,

We seek first to understand the plain and literal meaning of its language. Then, we discover that behind the literal sense of Scripture there is a spiritual and religious meaning. We find a new world in the Bible, the world from which God speaks. Thus the Scriptures establish their own authority for us. Through them we come to know the mind of God and learn to look upon our world as He would have us see it.⁴⁷

⁴² In this analysis, I am indebted to the observations that W. W. Bryden made at McNicol's retirement dinner, "Gala Occasion," *TBC Recorder* 52.4 (December 1946): 6-8.

⁴³ "Graduating Testimonies," *TBC Recorder*, 41.1 (March 1935): 2-3. See also McNicol's, "Principal's Report," *TBC Recorder*, 40.2 (June 1934): 3.

⁴⁴ J. B. Rhodes, "The Bible in the College," *TBC Recorder*, 48.4 (December 1942): 3.

⁴⁵ *Prospectus of the Toronto Bible College, 1947-48*, "Doctrinal Basis," 7, 987-019 FB-RO-CA-TBC-1 Archives OBC/OTS found at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON.

⁴⁶ J. B. Rhodes, "The Bible in the College," *TBC Recorder*, 48.4 (December 1942): 3. This was Rhodes' explanation of TBC's (and presumably McNicol's) view of the Bible.

⁴⁷ John McNicol, *Thinking Through The Bible*, Vol.1, 2.

McNicol's hermeneutic is interesting for it unites the literal and spiritual. He used the full sweep of historical, critical, literary, and grammatical exegesis to understand the plain and literal meaning of the text to its original readers. Yet he was not afraid to go beyond the obvious literal meaning of the passage to enquire as to what was its spiritual or religious meaning. He did this because he believed that the Bible differs from all other books in being pervaded by the sense of another world, a real spiritual world, the world that God inhabits and from which He speaks to us.⁴⁸ In an address to the leaders of the China Inland Mission Council, McNicol made this observation, "Throughout the written Word walks the living Word; and when we see Christ in this way in all the Scriptures, the Bible becomes to us in very truth the living voice of the living God."⁴⁹

It appears to this researcher that McNicol believed the Bible is always the Word of God written, and yet it appears that he also believed the Bible becomes the Word of God through the dynamic internal work of the Spirit.⁵⁰ In his theology of Word and Spirit the objective and the subjective, the doctrinal and the dynamic, the essential and the existential were indivisibly united. In this approach to the Bible, Rhodes claimed that McNicol was just following the Reformers' theology of Word and Spirit.⁵¹

If this Reformational theology of Word and Spirit shaped McNicol's method of approaching and interpreting the Scriptures, what were the implications for the student? Essentially each student must approach the study of the Bible with, "A devout attitude toward God, and a readiness to do His will as we come to know it, are the essential conditions to recognizing the voice of God in the Bible."⁵² This was the same principle, said McNicol, that Jesus laid down as a test of His own divine authority. "If any willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God, or whether I speak from myself" (Jn 7:17).⁵³ The objective testimony of the written Word of God is confirmed by the internal witness of the Spirit of God in the hearts

⁴⁸ John McNicol, *The Bible's Philosophy of History*, (Toronto, ON: Published by the Board of Governors, 1944). 5.

⁴⁹ John McNicol, "The Living Word in the Written Word," *China's Millions*, 30.11 (November 1922): 165. This article came from an address that McNicol gave at the China Inland Mission Conference at Atlantic City, in August 1922 and subsequently printed in their magazine.

⁵⁰ I draw this conclusion for two reasons. In TBC's doctrinal statement regarding the Bible it affirmed that the Bible **is** the Word of God (inspired by God) and yet McNicol seems to hold also to a dynamic understanding that the Bible **becomes** the Word of God in the experience of believers as God speaks to them from the spiritual world that the Bible reveals and to which it bears testimony.

⁵¹ J. B. Rhodes, "The Bible in the College," *TBC Recorder*, 48.4 (December 1942): 3.

⁵² John McNicol, *Thinking Through The Bible*, (Toronto, ON: The Upper Canada Tract and Book Society, 1944) Vol. 1, 2. See Rhodes' article, "The Bible in the College," 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

of those who study it with reverent and submissive hearts. Word and Spirit unite in the faithful teaching of the Bible and in its practice in one's daily life.

One other implication to the central and controlling role played by the Bible at TBC was hinted at by Rhodes. By acknowledging the supremacy of the Bible within the curriculum of the college, Rhodes affirmed "in this way He who inspired all Scripture is accorded His rightful leadership in our life and service."⁵⁴ It was right for him to make this allusion to Christ for in McNicol's theology of Word and Spirit, Jesus was its central theme. This Christocentric emphasis in his understanding of the Bible was the focus of a devotional booklet that he wrote entitled, *The Key to the Bible*,

Christ, therefore is the key to all the Bible. He is its central Figure. It all speaks of Him Who is at once our Prophet, our Priest, and our King. We can hear his voice in the Old Testament if we read it in the Light of the New. The New Testament has a richer meaning when we read it as the completion and fulfillment of the Old. It is when we see Christ in this way in all the Scriptures, that the Bible becomes to us the living voice of the living God.⁵⁵

By teaching his students that Christ is the key to a right understanding of the Bible, McNicol was training them in two truths that were vital for their experience of the essential realities of NT Christianity. First, he was training them in a key principle of interpretation, which is to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. In the experience of the Christian the Old Testament is given its continuing validity and authority by Christ. Second, they were to listen for the voice of Christ in the entire Bible, for it is correctly understood that He speaks to us in the Old and New Testaments. It is as we see and hear Christ in all the Scriptures that the Bible becomes to us the living voice of the living God. One's experience of Christ's lordship in daily life is predicated upon hearing and obeying the voice of Christ in all the Scriptures. Christ and the Scriptures are united in a dynamic spiritual manner. This union of Christ and Scriptures is reflective of McNicol's theology of Word and Spirit. Christ is central to both the witness of the Word of God and of the Spirit of God in the corporate life of the church of God. By holding to the unity of Word and Spirit McNicol was able to focus the hearts of his students upon Christ and encourage them to enjoy fellowship with Him as He is revealed in the Bible. By this, his aim to see produced in their lives a

⁵⁴ J. B. Rhodes, "The Bible in the College," *TBC Recorder*, 48.4 (December 1942): 3.

⁵⁵ John McNicol, *The Key to the Bible*, (Toronto, ON: The Scripture Union, n.d.):15-16 found in the File Box Biography-McNicol-1, Archives of OBC/OTS at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON. See also *Thinking Through The Bible*, Vol.1, IV, "The Unifying Theme of the Bible," 8-15.

corporate witness of the essential realities of Christianity would be realized. In this witness the life and the glory of Christ is central.

To silence the critics of the Bible college academic standards, McNicol pointed his critics to the major role of the Bible in TBC's curriculum.⁵⁶ Here the students were exposed in a daily manner to the Bible as God's Word. They were exposed to the Bible by biblically competent teachers who were academically well trained. The results of such exposure could be seen in their students who carried its message throughout the world.

The Corporate Leadership of the Holy Spirit at TBC

Two transcendent spiritual realities guided McNicol's leadership at TBC. These were God's Word in Christian education and God's Spirit in Christian fellowship. We now turn from the role the Bible played in their curriculum to the role the Spirit played within their fellowship. While these two transcendent realities can be studied separately, we need to reflect that in McNicol's theology and practice they were indivisible. While TBC's curriculum was Word-centred, it was not Word alone but rather Word and Spirit. Word and Spirit shaped the school's Christian educational focus.

On September 16, 1947, McNicol participated for the forty-fifth time in TBC's opening session. As principal-emeritus his job was to welcome a new class of students and outline the essential spiritual principles on which their methods of training operated. Though many changes had taken place at TBC over the years the tried and true methods of their training had not changed. They remained unchanged because their methods were, in McNicol's evaluation, the application of essential spiritual principles that were found in NT Christianity.⁵⁷ McNicol revealed to the new students that life at TBC was rooted in the Christian Scriptures and in Christian spirituality. Word and Spirit were at the heart of TBC's methods of training.

What were those spiritual principles that had been faithfully applied and practised over the years? That morning McNicol outlined three vital principles: 1) the Lordship of Jesus Christ, 2) the fellowship of the Spirit in the corporate life of the College, and 3) the personal freedom of each individual believer at the school.⁵⁸ In his theology these three principles were intertwined like a three-strand rope. They were united in the experience of the students who submitted to these spiritual disciplines. His comments revealed the intent of these principles of training; "We do not talk about them outside. We try to respond to them inside and carry the radiance outside.

⁵⁶ John McNicol, "Principal's Report," *TBC Recorder*, 26.2 & 3 (June 1920): 4-5. The criticisms were "(1) The Bible College course is weak. (2) The Bible College is too aggressive and (3) The Bible College is not aggressive enough."

⁵⁷ John McNicol, "The Principles of T.B.C. Training," *TBC Recorder*, 53.4 (December 1947): 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, 2, 5.

They are worked out during the life of the student.”⁵⁹ All three were embraced in order to make a spiritual impact in the life of each student. Shining out from the student body was this witness of the life of the risen and ascended Christ living in them. This was their witness to the presence of the Spirit’s life and leadership within the corporate life of the college.

The practice of the corporate leadership of the Spirit would only work if each student submitted to the lordship of Christ and was willing to practise self-discipline. This was underlined by Witmer’s research of Bible colleges in America. Writing four years after McNicol’s death, Witmer describes this distinctive spiritual principle at TBC.

A feature of Toronto’s program is the emphasis given to the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit demanding obedience to the lordship of Christ in the exercise of self-discipline. Reliance is placed on this principle rather than upon rules to regulate the life of the college.⁶⁰

Witmer correctly linked the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit with the demand for obedience to Christ’s lordship and to the exercise of self-discipline as the one regulative principle of the entire corporate life at TBC. Keeping in step with the Spirit was how the student life of TBC was regulated, not by a multiplicity of rules in a student handbook. This regulative principle was the practical outworking of McNicol’s theology of Word and Spirit. This is seen from what McNicol sought to accomplish by his policy of the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit.

As noted in our examination of the role of the Bible at TBC, McNicol’s aim was to see within his students the development of a reverent and devout faith that was shaped by the otherworldly reality that is found in the Christian Scriptures. We observe this same experiential and otherworldly focus flowing from his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit within the individual and corporate life of God’s people. His reasons for honouring the presence of the Spirit at TBC were both practical and theological.

First, it was instituted as the true principle of Christian unity in a school that was interdenominational by design. In 1919, McNicol reviewed the importance of the school to the cause of Christ in Canada after twenty-five years in existence. Besides giving “the Bible its true place as the vitalizing centre in the scheme of Christian education,” he also wrote, “It emphasizes the presence and leadership of the Holy Spirit as the true

⁵⁹ Bert Lane, “College Opening, September 17, 1947,” File Box Biography McNicol, Archives of OBC/OTS at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON.

⁶⁰ S. A. Witmer, *The Bible College Story: Education With Dimension* (Manhasset, N.Y.: Channel Press Inc., 1962), 88. See also McNicol’s “Principal’s Report,” *TBC Recorder* 38.2 (June 1938): 5.

principle of Christian unity.”⁶¹ McNicol faced the challenge of promoting Christian unity without disparaging the students’ loyalty to their own denomination. When controversy between modernism and fundamentalism erupted, “The College . . . was being criticized in some quarters because of its interdenominational character. It was charged that our classes were drawing young people away from their own churches.”⁶² McNicol initiated this policy of the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit in order to correct and clarify the students’ ideas about the church (ecclesiology), but he had a very spiritual and practical aim (the unity of the Spirit). By submitting to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, McNicol claimed their students came to “know that they can be truly loyal to their own particular denomination, and at the same time recognize and honour the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in all other parts of the Christian church, and in all other members of the body of Christ.”⁶³ At his retirement dinner McNicol underscored this rationale behind their policy at TBC.

We began to develop a system of training that would emphasize the one essential thing behind all our differences that is common to all the churches – the presence of the Holy Spirit in the corporate life of the Church. Wherever the Church of Christ is there is something given from above. That is the secret of the ecumenical or universal church.⁶⁴

In McNicol’s theology the one essential thing that makes churches of every denomination true churches of Jesus Christ was the presence of the Spirit.⁶⁵ Stackhouse underlines the significance of McNicol’s views.

These are not the words of the stereotypical fundamentalist who certainly would emphasize doctrinal rectitude above all in discerning the authenticity of a church. They are, to be sure, the words of a theologian who did indeed prize orthodoxy and resisted

⁶¹ John McNicol, “Principal’s Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 25.3 (June 1919): 4.

⁶² John McNicol, “Those Formative Years,” (Address by Dr. John McNicol during Founders’ Day, November 8, 1949 during “Know Your College Week”) *TBC Recorder*, 55.4 (December 1949): 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4. There were over 20 denominations represented within the student body at this time.

⁶⁴ “Gala Occasion,” *TBC Recorder*, 52.4 (December 1946): 13-15.

⁶⁵ John McNicol, “Those Formative Years,” *TBC Recorder*, 55.5 (December 1949): 3. He wrote, “No Church has a monopoly of Divine grace, and that every denomination bears witness to some special aspect of the whole truth of God. Therefore, each of us should be loyal to his own church, and should at the same time try to cultivate a sympathetic understanding of other churches. What makes any church a true church is not the form of its organization or method of its worship or even the creed it professes to believe, but something that is given to it from above, the presence of the Holy Spirit in its midst.”

what he called modernism, and of a man who did prefer Presbyterian polity, worship, and creed to the point that he would not join the United Church. But these are also the convictions of an evangelical whose warm heart testified to the irreducible criterion for discerning the true church, the presence of the Holy Spirit of God.⁶⁶

McNicol's aim in embracing the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit at TBC was to promote an ecumenical unity that was vitally connected to Christian spirituality. McNicol believed that as the students recognized the presence of the Holy Spirit in their corporate life and honoured his presence within their fellowship the unity of the Spirit among believers of all different denominations would become a reality.

In his desire for this corporate unity we witness McNicol's unified theology of Word and Spirit. As the students studied the Bible they were introduced to the unseen world in which the Spirit operates. To live under the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit is to live according to the values of this unseen world to which Word and Spirit bear witness. To practise the corporate leadership of the Spirit in the student body was to live under the rule and reign of Jesus, into whose kingdom they had been translated by the grace of God. Since the Word urges all believers to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, then as the Holy Spirit controlled the corporate life of TBC's students, unity in the Spirit would be experienced and manifested within their fellowship. It was unity of the Spirit, but not the Spirit without the Word. Spirit and Word were united in producing harmony among this multi-denominational student body.

A second practical purpose, which was closely related to this ecumenical unity, lay behind McNicol's policy of the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit. It was his desire to create among the students a radiant fellowship of love and harmony. The unity of the Spirit was not just a belief that TBC held to as an evangelical institution. It was a spiritual principle that worked itself out internally in the entire life and practices of the college. McNicol explained how it worked.

This New Testament principle of the unity of the Spirit in Christian fellowship carries with it the leadership of the Spirit in any corporate group in which His presence dwells. We put this principle into our system of training and in our methods of administration. Nothing is done among us by the vote of a majority. Everything we have to deal with and decide upon is considered in a common fellowship of thought and prayer until we arrive at unanimity about it. We believe that all the members of a Christian

⁶⁶John Stackhouse Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 61.

group seeking the mind of the Lord about the same matter will be led to one accord if each member of the group, suppressing all self-interest, desires the will of the Lord done. It is the same Spirit who dwells in each of them, and He can lead them all to have one mind if they truly wait upon His leading.⁶⁷

The secret of harmony among the students and the unanimity in the administration of the college was submission to the Spirit as a corporate body. The corporate leadership of the Spirit was an essential part of both their system of training (educational, experiential, and practical) and methods of administration (decision-making). McNicol described what was expected of each student and staff member at TBC.

We believed that if each of us made a personal surrender to the Lordship of Christ and was not moved by any selfish interest, then the same Holy Spirit who dwells in each of us would lead us finally to be of one mind. This is the real secret of spiritual unanimity . . . It is the recognition of this transcendent fact that has created the radiant atmosphere that characterizes TBC fellowship.⁶⁸

The radiant atmosphere at TBC was otherworldly in the sense that it was vitally connected to the transcendent reality of the Spirit's life and leadership within and among them. It was to this radiant atmosphere that Rhodes pointed when he detailed the unique character of their TBC heritage. He noted the convictions that TBC held in common with other schools but asked, "In what way is life at TBC unique, and what is it that gives to our testimony its distinctive witness?" He elaborated on TBC's uniqueness from an on-campus experience with a missionary leader.

There came to the College one morning a missionary of a well-known society, who was not one of our graduates . . . He explained why he had sought out this place. "While I was out on the field . . . I came into contact several times with TBC graduates. I noticed in them and in their fellowship something different. When I spoke to them about it they simply said; 'O, it's just the spirit of TBC.' There seemed to be something about those TBC folk that was distinctive. And I determined to find out the secret myself."⁶⁹

What was this 'spirit' that others noticed among TBC's students even after they had graduated and were serving on foreign fields? Rhodes noted

⁶⁷John McNicol, "The Principles of T.B.C. Training," *TBC Recorder*, 53.4 (December 1947): 4.

⁶⁸John McNicol, "Those Formative Years," *TBC Recorder*, 55.4 (December 1949): 3.

⁶⁹J. B. Rhodes, "Our TBC Heritage," (Address delivered at the Annual Alumni Conference at opening of current session) *TBC Recorder*, 53.1 (March 1947): 2-3.

that it was not a spirit that they created by their own enthusiasm or camaraderie. It was not developed by their similar interests and aims as young people. It was the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in their midst. Honouring and following the Spirit's leading at the school was the result of McNicol's resolve. He determined that as far as it lay within their power that they would provide the conditions for the college to recognise and honour the leadership of the Holy Spirit within all facets of the school's activities. That was how TBC's unique fellowship was created and it was characterized by a joyous sense of freedom and a willingness to serve others in the spirit of Christian love.⁷⁰

What others witnessed among its graduates was what McNicol had discerned from the early church in the Book of Acts. That was how one magazine described the College's witness.⁷¹ The author was both a graduate and a faculty member so his observations were from firsthand experience. Burns explained that McNicol not only held to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in individual believers but also to the reality that the Spirit reveals His will, and works through a corporate group. This was the method of the early church but it had been ignored or forgotten through the centuries and his article underlined the practical importance of this spiritual principle for the students at TBC.

It teaches young people to recognize the leadership of the Spirit during their years of their training in their group life, so that when they reach the foreign field, for example, and are placed in isolated stations, without colleagues for support, or when working co-operatively with other missionaries, they are able to recognize God's will for themselves and for the group.⁷²

It is interesting to note that the leadership of the Holy Spirit among a corporate group was a spiritual reality in which the students of TBC were trained. The purpose of their training was very practical. It equipped them to serve Christ effectively in isolated situations or with other believers. Here was spirituality that was rooted to the Word of God and lived out in step with the Spirit of God. McNicol's theology of Word and Spirit was aimed at producing this vital and practical Christian spirituality among its students.

The decision to follow the principle of the Spirit's leadership at the college was not only based on the experience of the early church but upon historic factors such as the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. McNicol

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Dixon A. Burns, "The Corporate Leadership of the Holy Spirit, Witness of the Toronto Bible College," *The Christian*, June 5, 1947, n.p., File Box History TBC Archives-OBC/OTS as found in the Library of Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON.

⁷² Ibid.

believed that by practising the corporate leadership of the Spirit the school would become an illustration of what was the essential nature of NT Christianity.⁷³ In this way they could overcome “the blighting breath of controversy” by equipping their students to enter into a conscious living contact with eternal realities so they could carry this consciousness into their work in the world.⁷⁴

At the heart of TBC’s methods of training was this passion that the college must not only bear witness of the essential realities of NT Christianity, but that their students should import this spiritual reality among the churches and mission fields to which they had been called to work. McNicol’s theology of the Holy Spirit within a corporate group was not only biblical but also experiential and practical in its impact among others. His decision not to engage in controversy was not due to fear or ignorance but to his passion for the spiritual health of God’s people. In 1930, McNicol wrote about the aims of the college and he reinforced this policy of freedom from any controversy in order to pursue a more positive and constructive course at TBC.

The purpose of the College as stated in the constitution is, “to train men and women for Christian work at home and abroad in the knowledge and practical use of the English Bible on an interdenominational basis.” This is a positive and constructive work. We refuse to turn aside from it to take part in any controversy or to share in any movement for emphasizing special aspects of Christian truth. We are seeking rather to magnify the living verities of the Christian faith and to illustrate the essential reality of pure Christianity in such a way that the spirit of controversy dies away and special emphases find no special place. We believe that we can best serve the cause of Christ in the world by going on with our own constructive work in this way.⁷⁵

Flowing from McNicol’s commitment to the corporate leadership of the Spirit was also the principle of self-government. He explained what it was, how it operated, and what the results were within the life of the college.

A system of student self-government was introduced and carefully fostered . . . and they, too, were trained to take no step without

⁷³ John McNicol, “The Principal’s Annual Statement,” *TBC Recorder*, 47.2 (June 1941): 7.

⁷⁴ John McNicol, “The Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 30.3 (June 1924): 5.

⁷⁵ John McNicol, “Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 36.3 (June 1930): 7. McNicol could boast in 1940, “It is gratifying to know that the impression which the students make by their corporate witness outside the College is that of genuine, vital Christianity.” The Principal’s Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 46.2 (June 1940): 6.

waiting upon the Lord to seek His mind and will. Under this system the students found themselves free for the development of their own personalities and for the expression of their own Christian experience. This was manifested in a number of different ways. One of the results was a new impetus given to the cultivation of vocal music and the interpretation of Christian song.

The students responded splendidly to this system of training and rose nobly to the responsibilities placed upon them . . . A spirit of Christian fellowship developed that was free from anything artificial. It was natural, spontaneous, and radiant, and the life of the College began to overflow with joy and gladness. It was the unrestrained expression of the Spirit of God in the corporate life of the Christian group, where each member was surrendered to the will of God.⁷⁶

Freedom to develop in their own personalities and experience reminds one of the early church. The Spirit was free not only to produce a spirit of unanimity among the student cabinet, a radiant fellowship among the students, but also to cultivate their gifts of singing and making melody unto the Lord. By honouring the presence of the Spirit, TBC was bearing a corporate witness of the essential realities of NT Christianity to a Canadian Christian community that was suffering destructive spiritual assaults from the modernism and fundamentalism controversy.⁷⁷

Closely aligned with the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit and student self-government was the spiritual principle of self-discipline. The students were trained to die to self so they might experience the victory that is in Christ. This was an attitude that TBC expected of each of its students for the corporate leadership of the Spirit could be grieved by those who asserted their own agenda at the college. The school could declare that, “As this system has been developed through the years it has produced the radiant joy that marks the witness of the Toronto Bible College student body, and pervades the peculiar impact which the College makes upon the Christian community.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ John McNicol, “The Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 30, 3, (June 1924): 5; “Principal’s Annual Report,” *TBC Recorder*, 36, 3, (June 1930): 7; “Founders Day Address October 28, 1947: A Synopsis of Dr McNicol’s Address on the Beginnings of the Bible College,” *TBC Recorder*, 54, 3, (September 1948): 2-3.

⁷⁸ *Calendar of the Toronto Bible College, 1947-48*, 6, 987-019 File Box-Registrar’s Office-Calendar-TBC-1 Archives – OBC/OTS at Tyndale University College & Seminary Toronto, ON. See also, “Three Outstanding Principles at TBC,” *TBC Recorder*, 55, 2 (June 1949): 8 and *Calendar -1951-52*, n.p.

As mentioned many times, the principle of the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit came from McNicol's study of the primitive church as seen in the NT, particularly the book of Acts. Yet, that was not the complete story. Indeed, did the study of the New Testament precipitate the introduction of this spiritual principle? Or did it initially come from another source? During the jubilee celebrations of 1944, the secretary of the class of 1936 recorded McNicol's historical review of the inner life of the college. He briefly shared that after the deaths of Harris and Stewart and his reappointment as principal, he "had a new direction of the inner working of the College and two more principles were added."⁷⁹ Those two new principles were the English Bible, which was made the basis and centre of the entire curriculum, and "the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit, or the leadership of the Holy Spirit in a corporate Christian group."⁸⁰ McNicol confessed how he was introduced to the idea of the corporate leadership of the Spirit. "I got that from my association with the China Inland Mission in my student days. There is a great deal of the CIM spirit in the College. This was the principle of the New Testament and this principle was accepted by the Board and the Staff."⁸¹

Whether his experience with CIM drove him to look at the corporate leadership of the Spirit in light of the New Testament (which I suspect), or whether his study of life in the early church was illustrated and confirmed by the spirit he found within CIM is a debatable point. However, it does demonstrate that other evangelicals in Canada were implementing the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit as a spiritual principle within their organizations. What makes McNicol's implementation of his policy unique was that he sought to apply it uniformly to every aspect of TBC's life as the consistent outworking of his practical theology of Word and Spirit. What were the results of the implementation of this spiritual principle within the inner life of TBC and its witness within Canada?

Vibrant Christian spirituality in the lives of his students was the fruit as seen by the attention given to the devotional life of the college and the spiritual training of its students.⁸² Such a focus made much of corporate prayer among the students and staff.

Such exuberance for prayer reflected the fullness of the Holy Spirit.⁸³ They sought His leadership regarding decisions of the cabinet. They called

⁷⁹ "From 17th Class of 36 Letter-Jubilee Celebrations," June 1944- File Box Biography McNicol, Archives-OBC/OTS at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON. See also, John McNicol, "Impressions of the China Inland Mission," *China Millions*, 46.9 (September 1938): 137.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² John McNicol, "Principal's Report," *TBC Recorder*, 37, 3, (June 1931): 6.

⁸³ "Revival in the College," *TBC Recorder* 38 (Dec.1932): 2-3; Douglas C. Percy, "God Did Something Different!" *TBC Recorder* 63 (March 1957): 6-7; Martin O. Wedge, "The Missionary Conference That Became a Revival," *TBC Recorder* 71 (March 1965): 3; *Toronto Bible College Calendar - 1950-51*, 32 - File Box

upon the Spirit to anoint their lives and ministries with His power. Corporate prayer was the divine means by which they secured the favour and help of God's Spirit on behalf of many serving in mission fields at home and abroad. Through prayer a felt unity and atmosphere of love pervaded their relationships. This was the fruit of their submission to the leadership of the Holy Spirit and a vital witness of the realities of Christianity as revealed in the early church.

A third consequence of McNicol's adherence to the principle of the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit at TBC was seen in his administration. All decisions of the board of governors, staff, faculty, and student cabinet were made only after reaching unanimity under the Spirit's leadership.⁸⁴

The principle of the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit introduces us to McNicol's reactions to Pentecostalism that was emerging within Canada. This is the connection that historian Ian Rennie makes:

In an era when, through not knowing how to handle the new phenomenon of Pentecostalism, some evangelicals were downplaying their emphasis upon the Spirit, McNicol proceeded quietly and consistently to emphasize the indispensable ministry of the Giver of Life. This was uniquely evident in his stress upon what has been called the Corporate Leadership of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁵

It is true, that McNicol embraced the reality of the Spirit's presence in the church of Christ, but did he appreciate the emphasis that came from Pentecostalism? The 1930 *Recorder's* lead article celebrated the 1900th anniversary of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost and expressed the hope that people would experience a deeper appreciation of the transcendent fact that the Spirit resides in the church. Attention was drawn to the spate of tracts and books that had been written about the Holy Spirit, especially the baptism of the Spirit. No negative word was mentioned regarding this emphasis, yet balance was sought by reminding the readers that the gift of the Spirit was a corporate as well as an individual gift. The writer expressed TBC's opinion

Registrar's Office, Calendars, TBC-Box 1, Archives at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON. John McNicol, "The Soul of the Toronto Bible College," *TBC Recorder* 49 (March 1943): 1-2. as cited by John Stackhouse Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, 58.

⁸⁴ Ian Rennie, "Our 90th Year," *Evangelical Recorder*, 90.1 (Spring 1984): 9 summed up this policy in these words, "Under this emphasis, all decisions among students, faculty, and Board, were arrived at by waiting upon God until unity in the Spirit was arrived at. This radical polity of consensus sought to develop both freedom and responsibility in the Spirit." *Minutes of the Board of Governors*, February 1, 1949 – File Box #1-Board of Governors-OBC/OTS Archives at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto, ON.

⁸⁵ Ian Rennie, "Our 90th Year," *Evangelical Recorder*, 90.1 (Spring 1984): 9.

“that one of the deepest needs of the Church today is to recover the leadership of the Holy Spirit and most of her problems would be resolved if congregations and Christian organizations were trained to recognize for themselves the unseen and silent Leader in their midst.”⁸⁶

Word and Spirit was the orienting principle of McNicol’s theology. However, it is crucial to note that his theology was both Christocentric in its focus and experiential in its aim. To enjoy fellowship with the ascended Jesus through the Spirit and the Spirit’s witness of Jesus as revealed in the Word is at the heart of essential NT Christianity.

At McNicol’s death, Dr J. Hunter, editor of the *Evangelical Christian* made these summary comments of McNicol’s life at TBC. “If there is one outstanding spiritual factor in his life it was his emphasis on and dependence upon the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁷ Within his own life, at the heart of his educational philosophy and practices at TBC was his theology of Word and Spirit; not Word alone or Spirit only, but Word and Spirit together.

The presence and power of the Holy Spirit was seen at TBC within the classrooms where His divine-human Word was held as the central and regulating centre of the entire curriculum. The best way to summarize McNicol’s spiritual policies of Word and Spirit is found in the “Class Valedictory” of 1939. This student reviewed his or her time at TBC in these words,

One of the greatest privileges afforded us in this place has been the opportunity of being instructed in every part of the Bible, with recognition that it is the written Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Who also interprets it in truth. How our hearts have rejoiced to find that the Scriptures which we search, testify of Christ, Who is the Living Word!

In our daily worship and intercession together we have been conscious of the reality that we are one in Christ because we have

⁸⁶ Editorial, “The Bible College Witness to the Presence of the Spirit,” *TBC Recorder*, 36.2 (March 1930): 1-2. While no writer was identified, the sentiments expressed were in agreement with McNicol’s views.

⁸⁷ J. H. Hunter, Editor, “The March of Events, As Seen by the Editors,” Dr John McNicol- Obituary Notice - October 1956, 459-460, File Box Biography-McNicol in the Archives of OBC/OTS at Tyndale University College and Seminary, Toronto, ON. OBC/OTS. In 1952 at McNicol’s 50th anniversary he wrote, “There is one factor of prime importance in connection with the work of the College that must be mentioned which has we believe contributed more than other to the success the institution has attained, and that is the place that Dr. McNicol has always given to the primacy of the Holy Spirit in all that pertained to the administration of the institution.”

been born from above, and that our unity is sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of us all.⁸⁸

Miedema favourably quotes an unnamed scholar who asserted that, “McNicol’s gift was not theology but spirituality.”⁸⁹ It is true that McNicol was passionately concerned about spirituality, nevertheless the argument of this thesis is that he was an excellent theologian and his passion for Christian spirituality grew out of his theology of Word and Spirit.

⁸⁸ Anonymous, “Class Valedictory,” *The Gateway*, 1939, 32, File Box History TBC-1-Archives of OBC/OTS at Tyndale University College and Seminary, Toronto, ON.

⁸⁹ G. R. Miedema, s.v, “McNicol, John,” *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, Timothy Larsen, David Bebbington, and Mark A. Noll, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 400.