

## THE PROBLEMATIC OF PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY

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It is a pleasure and an honor to be with you in this theological symposium. It is also fun to share this experience with Frank Macchia, who is emerging as one of the best Pentecostal theologians. I was able to help him plan his doctoral studies in Switzerland and remember very well visiting him in Basel, where I slept on his couch. We now live not far apart in Southern California, but it seems that we must come to Korea to get the chance to have a theological dialogue! This is surely a testimony to the emerging role of Korea in the articulation of Christian theology in our time—and of the role of Hansei University in the leadership of Pentecostal theology.

I, however, am not a Pentecostal. I am a product, in terms of both background and present commitments, of the “holiness movement” that was born largely in the United States, but has had great impact around the world, especially in Korea, not only in itself but also for having given birth in its more radical wing to the Pentecostal movement that has grown to become perhaps the most vital form of Christianity in our time. I am a sympathetic “fellow traveler” with and observer of Pentecostalism, one whose interest in Pentecostalism has been honored by the chance to serve as the only non-Pentecostal/non-charismatic president of the increasingly international Society for Pentecostal Studies, the most influential “theological society” of the Pentecostal movement—though significantly the word theology does not appear in the name.

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When I began, over thirty years ago now, the work that would become *The Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (now also available in Korean and Spanish), the title was viewed as “odd.” The expression “Pentecostal theology” was viewed as something of an “oxymoron”—a “contradiction in terms” that was unimaginable. This was, of course, a condescending prejudice, but it was also understandable. Many Christian renewal movements were born in the universities. One thinks of Martin Luther at Wittenberg and John Wesley at Oxford. Pentecostalism was born among the common people—in a small bible school in Topeka, Kansas, under the leadership of a idiosyncratic, itinerant.

Holiness evangelist, and in Los Angeles, California, under the leadership of a poorly educated Black man. I do not disparage these origins; I honor them. There are parallels to the origins of Christianity—and even the apostle Paul suggests that God works this way. Such origins may be a testimony to divine initiative—that the movement emerged not among the powerful and the educated leadership of the time. And the Pentecostal Movement has struggled to find theological legitimacy in the theological world of today just as Christianity itself, the religion of the apparent oxymoron of a crucified Messiah struggled in an age of “Greek wisdom.”

But “the times, they are a changing” and Pentecostalism is now about founding great universities around the world as men like Oral Roberts and Dr. Yong-Gi Cho, who both share the simple origins of Pentecostalism, lead this movement. But the prejudices against the idea of “Pentecostal universities” and “Pentecostal theology” remain both within and without the movement—and herein lie both the promise of a different future and the danger of pitfalls along the way. Such history and current tensions create the “problematic of Pentecostal theology.”

Pentecostalism was not noticed for its production of theology. It was noticed, when it was noticed, for its most distinctive practice—that of “speaking in tongues”—a practice that was often interpreted sociologically or psychologically. A colleague with whom I used to teach a course on “protestant evangelicalism,” a survey of possible historical antecedents, once remarked that he had noticed that he tended to interpret those movements he liked in theological terms and those he disliked in sociological terms. The practice of “speaking in tongues” has often led observers to dismiss the movement in terms of either

psychological or sociological deprivation—and overlook its theological claims. Pentecostalism was seen by those who were leery of it as merely a product of “psychological maladjustment” or a *Vision of the Disinherited* (to use the name of a book by Robert Anderson). In *Charismatic Renewal and the Churches*, Kilian McDonnell traces the decline of this interpretation as the movement became increasingly middle class and moved from “the other side of the tracks” into the mainstream of society. It is harder to dismiss the movement when the doctors and professors in one’s neighborhood become adherents, and social scientific research fails to find a discernible difference between Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals.

But the prejudice remains. In the late 1980s I was invited by Emilio Castro, head of the World Council of Churches, to spend a term in Geneva as a “consultant.” The idea was to have representatives of non-member churches live in Geneva so that staff could overcome their prejudices by coming to know living adherents of such movements as Pentecostalism. During this term I was expected to volunteer my services in an appropriate office of the WCC. As a graduate of Yale Divinity School and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, two of the finest theological centers in the world, I immediately identified the “Faith and Order” Commission, the center of theological reflection in the WCC, as the appropriate location of my volunteer work. To my astonishment this suggestion was rebuffed, and I was shunted over to the “Commission of World Mission and Evangelism.” It was apparently unthinkable to leaders of the theological wing of the WCC that I had a “theological” contribution to make; my only possible role was perhaps the motivation of mission and evangelism.<sup>1</sup>

Or, when the Society for Pentecostal Studies met in Toronto, Canada, there was a major address by an intellectual leader of Canadian “evangelicalism” who was happy to explain in a condescending manner that we need the “evangelical world” to do theology and help the “experiential” Pentecostals to fulfill their destiny. I protested mightily

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<sup>1</sup>Dayton writes, “And I, on the other hand, remain convinced that some of the problems of the ecumenical movement may be attributed to its refusal to take seriously on the level of *theology* some of the more modern movements in the church. But that is a topic for another paper!” (*Editor: The paragraph was part of the original body, not as a footnote*).

at the time that I found Pentecostals more interesting than evangelicals precisely on the level of *theology*.

But this is sometimes a difficult case to make, and the Pentecostals have often contributed to the problem. Much depends on what we mean by theology. For some theology is not theology unless it is philosophically articulated thought in the categories of the intellectual streams that dominate the universities of the time. In my book *The Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* I took theology to mean more the intellectual claims, implicit or explicit, of a religious movement attempting to articulate its identity over against other movements—and that it is possible to reflect on and to attempt to bring into coherence the ideas of even popular movements that have not characteristically expressed themselves in the terms of classical theology—or of the academy. This is the task of Pentecostal theology; but it is not an easy task, and it has many pitfalls.

This is not a new problem in the life of the church. In spite of its origins in Oxford, Methodism reveals similar dynamics. As the emerging movement moved “outside the gate” of London to establish itself in communities of the poor around the world it gained more the character of a popular movement that struggled with the problems that Pentecostalism now faces. I remember a story of Albert Outler, a Yale educated theologian of the Methodist tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America. He was on the advisory board of Oxford University Press and was in a brainstorming session in New York City about a new series of volumes on key figures and movements in the development of modern Protestant theology. When Outler suggested Wesley, the panel laughed out loud, and Outler was so humiliated that he devoted the rest of his life to defending the theological viability of Methodism and exploring the apparent “oxymoron” of John Wesley as a “theologian.” But Outler was vindicated; his volume was the only one of the series to go into a paperback edition and remain in print. And so it will be with Pentecostal theology in its own time.

But the road to “Pentecostal theology” is filled with “potholes” that may derail the movement. Foremost among these dangers is the fact that Pentecostals have too much internalized the critiques of their movement. Like Methodists before them, Pentecostals sometimes suffer from a massive “theological inferiority complex” that causes them to lose confidence in their own sources and the importance of their own movement as a carrier of significant theological resources

that need mediation to the whole church. Instead they allow others to “do theology” and append their own distinctives to another system of thought that gives them more theological prestige and saves them the pain of doing their own theological work.

This tendency was evident from the early years of Pentecostalism, when adherents of the new faith sometimes spoke of themselves as “fundamentalists plus”—plus the gifts of the Spirit, primarily tongues and healing. When the neo-evangelical movement emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Pentecostal leaders followed the clues they got from the “evangelicals.” When they founded the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (modeled after the National Association of Evangelicals) and the Society for Pentecostal Studies (a counterpart to the Evangelical Theological Society) they tended to adopt the articles of faith of the “evangelicals” by adding an additional article devoted to Pentecostal distinctives.

This move is problematic for several reasons. In the first place, it is striking that Pentecostals would wish to assimilate into the tradition that hurled against their founders such epithets as “the last vomit of hell.” But it is true that people often try to defend and justify themselves in the categories of their harshest critics. We sometimes speak of the “Stockholm syndrome” in which prisoners of war begin to accept the values of their captors (a la the daughter of a newspaper magnate Patty Hearst who joined the Simbionese Liberation Army that had taken her hostage). And liberation theologians have described the process by which oppressed classes adopt the values of the classes that oppress them and defend themselves in terms of their oppressors even to the point of denying their own class interests. This dynamic, grounded in various psychological and sociological forces, often leads a young movement to sell its inheritance for a “mess of pottage”—the cultural and theological acceptance of its critics.

I have seen this happen in such other movements as 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventism and my own holiness tradition. And last week in the theological symposium here I tried to show how this has happened to Pentecostalism in its relationship to evangelicalism, especially with regard to the doctrine of Scripture and issues of historiographical orientation, where the buying into evangelicalism has the unfortunate tendency of cutting off Pentecostalism from its continuity with its real sources (and thus the movements of renewal in the church) and suppresses important themes of the movement, especially those that are

arguably among its most important contributions to larger discussions.

In response to this “Babylonian captivity” of Pentecostalism in the land of “evangelicalism,” some have searched for more adequate theological frameworks in which to do their work. It is reported, for example, that South African David Du Plessis, after visiting Karl Barth, said that early Pentecostalism would have done better to have articulated its theology in a Barthian line than the line of the Fundamentalist/Evangelical movement. Some have taken up this suggestion. Charismatic Jesuit Philip Rosato worked from the comment of Barth to his American audience that he could just as well have started his theological reflection with Pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit) as with Christology. I have a lot of sympathy with this move toward the Barthian tradition of theology (some would suggest that both Frank Macchia and I share this agenda) but I am less sure than Rosato that it is possible to reorient the Pentecostal/charismatic tradition (or Barth, for that matter) for this agenda.

Other similar efforts have been made. One thinks of the work of another Jesuit, Donald Gelpi, who has attempted to articulate Pentecostal theology in the distinctly American lines of Process theology, American pragmatism, and so forth. And there is the work of Heribert Mühlen who has attempted to write a Pentecostal theology in the logic of the “Spiritual Exercises” of Ignatius of Loyola. Others have taken up the category of “Spiritual Theology” (Simon Chan?). Again, I have learned much from this work and appreciate these efforts. But my own appeal to Pentecostals would be move back toward their own sources in a way that would elaborate the distinctive themes of their own theology, both explicit and implicit.

I attempted to model this move in my book, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, but it was no easy task. In addition to the cultural prejudices against my agenda, I had to contend with the nature of Pentecostal sources in themselves. Is it a strength or a weakness that they often mix apparently “theological” talk about such topics as “baptism of the holy spirit” with advice on whether to join labor unions or participate in war? Or what are we to make of the anachronistic claims of the Azusa Street revival paper that such inherited practices of the holiness movement before it (camp meetings, street preaching, prison ministries, etc.) belong to the “Apostolic Faith”?

After much struggle and too many hours poring over early

Pentecostal sermons, periodicals, confessions of faith, etc., I decided that the best summary of distinctive Pentecostal claims is found in the summary of Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, in her articulation of the “foursquare” gospel: “Jesus saves us according to John 3:16. He baptizes us with the Holy Spirit according to Acts 2:4. He heals our bodies according to James 5:14-15. And Jesus is coming again to receive us unto Himself according to I Thessalonians 4:16-17.”

This pattern seems to lie behind all forms of classical Pentecostalism and I think also of the charismatic movement. Some add an additional theme (like sanctification in the “holiness” wing of Pentecostalism—likely the original articulation of Pentecostalism), and others play with the pattern (like Dr. Cho), but the “foursquare” pattern seems to be nearly universal—and is clearly found in the literature of the Assemblies of God. I took this “four-fold” as the basis of my theological exposition of Pentecostal theology in the first chapter of *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* and have been gratified by the acceptance it has received. This has been particularly true in South America where most of the *theological* analysis of Pentecostalism had been negative. My book has helped many Pentecostals understand themselves and also to identify near friends (and also enemies!) as they have entered wider and ecumenical theological dialogue. I would like to summarize how this works by reviewing the themes of the “foursquare” gospel, attempting to “place” Pentecostalism in a larger historical/theological context and indicating some issues that call out for theological reflection—and theological reflection grounded in the logic of the Pentecostal sources themselves.

If I had the book to do over again, I would add a first chapter on the Pentecostal understanding of “salvation”—in large part to correct a misunderstanding of themselves that many Pentecostals have. One often finds in Pentecostal literature the claim that “Martin Luther restored for us the doctrine of justification” as the first point of the “foursquare gospel.” There may be some truth in this claim, but there is also distortion. Pentecostalism does not teach in the line of Luther. Its doctrine of “salvation” owes more to post-Reformation developments that shaped the revivalist traditions than to Luther himself. Pentecostalism teaches a doctrine of “regeneration” (or being “born again”) that moves beyond justification to organize thinking about “salvation” in terms of “sanctification” and real change. This

position was developed in Pietism and perhaps in Puritanism as they were mediated to the Anglo-Saxon world through such figures as John Wesley where they shaped such currents as Methodism, revivalism, the holiness movement and other tributaries of Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism belongs to this family and a case may be made that it constitutes a “reversion” to Catholic patterns of “soteriology.” I once heard Frank Macchia (in his presidential address to the Society for Pentecostal Studies) that Pentecostal theology may be closer to the council of Trent than to Luther. Here are some suggestions for Pentecostal theological reflection that might open up dialogue with Roman Catholicism. Pentecostalism might become an ecumenical bridge tradition rather than losing itself in an amorphous lump of Protestantism.

The second theme of Pentecostalism, the “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” is adumbrated in Puritanism (and in Eastern Fathers of the Church) but owes its most immediate roots to a conflict in early Methodism between John Wesley and John Fletcher (sometimes called Methodism’s first theologian and “Wesley’s designated successor”) over whether to speak of “entire Sanctification” (Methodism’s “second blessing”) as a “baptism of the spirit.” Those later Pentecostals who understood Wesley’s concerns about this move tended to speak of three “works of grace” and became the “holiness” wing of the movement (hence Oral Roberts and Vinson Synan). Others followed Fletcher and those who washed out the sanctification themes in Fletcher became the progenitors of the Assemblies of God and others in that line, in part under the influence of William Durham, the articulator of this “finished work” line of Pentecostal theology. There are plenty of lingering issues here and much theological work needs to be done on the biblical and theological issues in these struggles.

The third theme is that of healing, one that Walter J. Hollenweger argues is more universally characteristic of Pentecostalism than the practice of speaking in tongues. This theme arose, as I suggested last week and describe in my book, in the converging of the “faith work” principle of August Hermann Francke and Halle Pietism as it was carried to England in the work of George Müller’s Bristol Orphanage with the reflection of the Blumhardts in southwest Germany on an experience of “exorcism” that occurred under the ministry of the father in the 1840s. These ideas were put together by Boston Physician Charles Cullis who then mediated the idea of “faith healing” to A. B.



Simpson of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (articulator of the “Four-fold Gospel” that adumbrated the “foursquare gospel” of Pentecostalism) and other early figures that moved into the Pentecostal movement. I often think that this area is one of the most productive areas for Pentecostal theological work. There needs to be more probing of the doctrine of “healing in the Atonement”—and the extent to which the soteriological vision of Pentecostalism includes a protest against the language of the “saving of the soul.” There are profound theological issues at stake here, and I think that Pentecostalism has a major contribution to make to wider Christian thinking as it explores these themes.

The final theme, that of eschatology, is the most difficult. I remember sitting in Jürgen Moltmann’s class when he commented that his “theology of hope” was merely an elaboration to the social order of the inner logic of the Pietist doctrine of the “new birth.” Similar developments took place in Puritanism, and every revival movement has seen itself linked to eschatology from Jonathan Edwards to Billy Graham—and so with Pentecostalism. Each has seen itself as the later rain (the language appears in 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventism and the Holiness Movement). And thus too with Pentecostalism, which has always been eschatological to the core. It is very significant that Pentecostalism was a populist protest against the modern tendency to “de-eschatologize” the gospel a generation before the scholarly world recovered this dimension of the New Testament in such figures as Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss who generated currents that have taught us that “apocalyptic” is the “mother of New Testament theology.” Pentecostalism has usually been interpreted in the line of “dispensational” eschatology. I am convinced that this is a mistake. It was natural enough in the context of the American Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy (much shaped by conflicts over “dispensationalism”), but the farther that one gets away from that context one sees more diversity in Pentecostal eschatology. Pentecostal theology is almost always eschatological but not necessarily dispensational. In Latin America, for example, Pentecostal theology is often more world-transforming than world-denying. There is much area for Pentecostal theologizing in this area—another illustration of the captivity” of Pentecostalism by fundamentalism and the history of the rise of dispensationalism.

These are only hints of issues in Pentecostal theology that cry out for exploration—issues that get one to the heart of the Pentecostal experience. I am convinced that Pentecostalism has much to contribute to the rest of the Christian world, but only if it regains a sense of confidence in its own heritage and its theological significance. The last thing we need is Pentecostalism appending a few themes to some other theological articulation and thus becoming a second rate imitation of something that at its core cannot carry the Pentecostal message. We need a Pentecostalism secure in its own vision and willing to do the hard work to articulate that vision in theologically responsible terms. The dangers and perils are real, but boldness and the power of the Spirit may enable the Pentecostal movement to overcome the “problematic of Pentecostal theology.”