

PENTECOSTAL STUDIES:
REFLECTIONS ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Various aspects of global Pentecostalism have provided a growing number of studies in the past decades, and this trend is clearly continuing. It is especially evident in the study of non-western Pentecostalism, including the Asian Pentecostal movement. There are a number of obvious reasons why this dynamic spiritual movement in the non-western world has attracted serious inquiry. It is significant that what is happening in the non-western world has been quite different from the patterns found in western Pentecostalism. Various reasons can be suggested, but the primary reasons are the radically different socio-cultural and religious contexts of the non-western world. In addition, this is where explosive growth is taking place. Once robust Pentecostal denominations in the West are disclosing diminishing rates of growth, and some are even beginning to report a decline in church membership. Nonetheless, the “global statistics” of those denominations in the West which seem to have reached a plateau in domestic growth still show impressive numbers, primarily because of the growth in membership in their churches in the non-western world.

One reason for the non-western patterns of Pentecostal growth may be attributable to the creativity of the Spirit. This seems to be evident in the rich diversity in “Pentecostal” beliefs and practices accommodated by the non-western Pentecostal world. The variety of papers presented at the recent International Conference on Asian Pentecostalism (Sept, 2001) organized by the University of Birmingham is a good example. Consider as well, the American Society of Church History’s plan to hold a meeting (Chicago, 2003) on “Pentecostal Currents and Healing/Revival Movements in Asia.” The growth and birth of several Pentecostal journals in Asia in the past decade may also symbolize the growing interest in Asian and other non-western Pentecostalism.

New graduate programs featuring the study of Pentecostalism are burgeoning. Initially, through the creative and courageous work of Walter Hollenweger, the University of Birmingham instituted the first serious doctoral-level academic program in global Pentecostal studies. Until recently, this program stood virtually alone.

Following the leadership of the University of Birmingham, the University of Wales recently began its Center for Pentecostal/Charismatic Studies with the Th.M. program in Pentecostal Studies in association with its affiliate, Mattersey Hall, a British Pentecostal Bible college. The Free University of Amsterdam has just created a chair for Pentecostal Studies and is launching a web-based Pentecostal journal. Hollenweger's decision to donate his life-long collection on Pentecostalism to the Free University has reinforced this plan. It is also through the university's affiliated Pentecostal college that necessary faculty and other resources are provided. This trend is also evident in North America. In addition to various scholarly meetings on various Pentecostal subjects, Regent University (Virginia Beach) has announced its Ph.D. program in Pentecostal Studies.

This breath of scholarly wind blowing through the Pentecostal world is being noted carefully by Christian publishing houses. Major publishers are adding more and more Pentecostal-Charismatic titles. Some of them are Blackwell, Paternoster (also through its Regnum division), Ashgate, Zondervan, Eerdmans, and Baker, just to mention a few. Publishers that have traditionally produced Pentecostal titles continue to strengthen their offerings in this field. Some of them are Sheffield Academic Press (recently merged with Continuum), Peter Lang, Hendrickson, and several university presses. This list is certainly not exhaustive, but it is representative of significant recent developments. There is no doubt that this trend will continue. If the last century was the "Century of the Spirit," titled as a witness to the dramatic impact of the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the church world, the current century, certainly in its early years, is likely to be known for the dramatic increase in scholarly reflection on the globalization of the Pentecostal movement.

An additional observation may be noted. This growing interest in Pentecostalism was in large part popularized by "outsiders" from beyond the Pentecostal movement. Popular sociological reflections on Latin American Pentecostalism are one good example.¹ Harvey Cox's popular book is another.² These friends of the movement have done something that "insiders" were not capable of doing for a variety of reasons. The diverse post-graduate programs in a variety of universities also fall largely in the category of contributions from "outsiders." With all their earnest desire to

¹ E.g., David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: the Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

² *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

speak for Pentecostals, however, it is evident that frequently the representations of “outsiders” miss values and perspectives that may be better articulated by those from within the movement itself. A quick fix is for Pentecostal writers to produce credible works to balance the representations of outsiders.

Such writings and reflections by friends from outside the movement have disclosed a penchant for descriptive studies, observing the phenomena of behavioral, psychological, sociological, or even religious disciplines. Seldom do their inquiries begin with questions like: “What is the theological foundation for Pentecostal belief?” Thus, the fascination with a description of a dynamic movement is not matched by theological substance. This certainly has something to do with the limitations with which some universities are required to operate. One’s belief is not a good academically convincing reason to explain a phenomenon, at least in their dialogue with the agencies that provide funding. A good example is the situation of many British institutions.

There may, indeed, be a need for an additional major study center for international Pentecostal studies, perhaps in an Evangelical seminary. One would ask: Why not in one of the existing Pentecostal denominational seminaries? It is possible that parochial concerns may make it difficult to provide as broad a base of study as the emerging international Pentecostal movement requires. Denominational interests might preclude the wider platform needed to encourage such studies.

When this is further applied to geographical interests, as mentioned above, the “outsider’s” role becomes quite noticeable. Again, for the Latin American scene, the majority of books have been written by non-Latinos who may or may not be Pentecostals. This pattern may not be much different in Asia or Africa. However, the situation in South Africa is in sharp contrast to this pattern. Happily, Pentecostal scholars in South Africa have been able to provide a much better model. The concept of an Evangelical institution providing a forum for broadly-based Pentecostal scholarship is presented here as a seed thought, an idea perhaps worthy of further reflection. It is on this note that we present the tenth issue of the *Journal*.

As indicated in the previous issue, the current issue begins with four papers presented during the International Symposium on Non-Western Pentecostalism. Interestingly, we have three women presenters here.

We continue to rejoice in the warm support we have received from our readers, and we thank you for your continued encouragement.

W. Ma