

“Can You Spread Pentecostalism Thick?”

Pentecostalism as a movement has been an explosive and powerful new “kid” around on the block and has made its presence well felt. It is more than a religious movement, but a social force impacting various aspects of community life. Obviously this strange, unique and powerful new “kid” has received increasing attention from within and without. If one is just different from the rest, normally there are two conflicting forces pulling it toward opposite ends. This is true for an individual, a group of people or a socio-religious movement like Pentecostalism. It is more so for an extremely focused and, thus, inevitably narrowly defined entity like Pentecostalism that has stood out conspicuously in the religious world.

One of the two gravitating forces of the movement may be called the centripetal force that demands the movement to explore new horizons and expand its parameters of belief and ethos far beyond its original small confines. Some of this “expansion” came naturally. For instance, the original “religion of the poor” has slowly expanded its membership among the middle class and even celebrity classes. We know that, for instance, the Attorney General of the United States of America is a devoted Pentecostal believer. Other changes have “just” come, as our society and we ourselves experience changes. For instance, this powerful spiritual movement began with a very simplistic worldview believing that almost all the evil in this world whether it is illness, bad habits, or “ungodly” thoughts, is caused by evil spiritual forces. Of course, Pentecostals soon began to develop sophistication of their reflection. As a result, at least in some part of Pentecostal Christianity, for instance, the doctor get to see the ill Pentecostal believer before the Holy Spirit ever has a chance. However, there are other areas for expansion that require more intentional consciousness and efforts, and much stretching. Pentecostals’ interaction with other Christian traditions has challenged us to pay attention to otherwise never-thought-of areas, such as ecumenism, social concerns, environmental issues, inter-religious dialogues, involvement in politics, et al. This exploration normally began in the minds of academicians with their openness and perceptive thinking. They

have a vision that goes beyond their own religious traditional confines, and willingness to do new things. If new topics and areas are investigated through the perspectives of Pentecostalism, that is ideal. In this way, the Pentecostal core is even strengthened as new areas receive a fresh new light from Pentecostal perspectives. To the credit of this learned Pentecostal community, Pentecostals are now more accepted and even respected, at least in some parts of the world.

However, this “expansion” tendency may have come from their desire to be similar to others. We have heard that political move to align with Evangelicalism has eventually led to the theological evangelicalization of Pentecostalism. It is particularly true in many non-western cultures where conformity is their cultural virtue. If Pentecostals’ desire to be accepted or to be like others is the driving force for this expansion, Pentecostal core is in danger of being compromised or even replaced by something that is not Pentecostal. This often happens when one does not have full self-understanding, and consequently lacks an appreciation to the movement.

Now the other force that pulls the movement is to be truer to its original beliefs and practices. While Pentecostals may have heard criticisms from other Christian traditions, it is equally possible that many desire for Pentecostals to remain as Pentecostal as we can be. There is also a theological and historical consciousness or call among Pentecostals to be faithful to their tradition deepening its uniqueness. One may be motivated to do so by a healthy understanding of the movement that he or she is part of. Being clearly aware of its historical and theological mandate and call, there is a strong desire to sharpen its identity to be a unique blessing to the wider church world. However, it is also possible that some sort of ecclesial pride mixed with ignorance of other church traditions can motivate one to dig further to establish the identity of the movement. This bad mix can easily lead into a sectarian tendency.

Then what is the bottom line? First of all, Pentecostalism should not for any reason become less than Pentecostal. To remain faithful to its historical and theological calling is the best service the movement can render to the kingdom of God. Second, it is equally critical for Pentecostals, and any Christian tradition for that matter, to be well informed of various Christian traditions uniquely shaped as God’s response to specific human setting through history. If Pentecostalism can be spread far and wide, while deepening its identity thereby being spread on “thickly,” it would be wonderful. However simple physics prove it is impossible. Then Pentecostals, especially in their learned community,

should be careful not to be spread too thin (thus becoming shallow not deep). When do we know it? While we insist that healing is our uniqueness, but praying for healing is not part of our daily practice, then we have been spread too thin.

This issue contains several contributions that look toward far horizons, and we welcome this pioneer spirit. But we also enjoy the flow of articles recovering valuable historical material. The editors express their commitment to this important equilibrium for the future of Pentecostal scholarship in Asia.

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