

THE HOLY SPIRIT:
IN AZUSA STREET, ATHENS AND EDINBURGH

The first International Conference on World Mission and Evangelism for the new century took place in May 2005 near Athens, Greece. Its significance and some radical changes from the previous conferences have been well noted by mission watchers.¹ Two things are of great interest to the global Pentecostal communities: the theme of the conference and the participation of Pentecostal delegates in the conference.

The theme for this thirteenth gathering after the Edinburgh 1910 tradition is: “Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile.” Its pneumatological motif is immediately evident. Moreover, “healing” is a familiar topic, and “reconciliation,” even though less apparent than “healing,” is equally important to Pentecostals. The common scene at the Azusa Street Mission, at the turn of the last century, demonstrated the reconciliation power of the Holy Spirit. By the theme alone, one can imagine a festive Pentecostal camp meeting with ultra-modern and ear-piercing music. Therefore, it was rather strange to talk about the healing ministry of the Holy Spirit in this Orthodox country by the cobalt blue Mediterranean Sea.

In various discussions in the conference, their interpretation of “healing” in comparison with “cure” was rather striking to many Pentecostals. While we have accepted physical cure as healing, this world Christian community rightly argues that, in spite of the lack of cure, one can overcome sickness and disability through the grace of God. Although Pentecostals expressed their concern that among non-Pentecostal circles, discussion on healing often bypasses the physical and emotional dimensions and quickly moves to social and ethical dimensions, this new interpretation was quite challenging.

¹ E.g., for an missiologist’s evaluation of the conference, see Norman E. Thomas, “Athens 2005: ‘Come Holy Spirit — Heal and Reconcile’,” *Missiology: An International Review* 33:4 (Oct 2005), pp. 451-60.

The second feature of the conference was the participation of Pentecostal delegates. The list provided by the organizers included at least about two dozen Pentecostal participants, although some “evangelical” delegates, especially from Latin America and Africa, may also be Pentecostals. It was noted that in this conference, unlike in some gatherings, Pentecostals were not lumped together with evangelicals. Furthermore, participation of the Pentecostals in the conference programs was also unmistakable: a Pentecostal keynote presentation, a Pentecostal morning worship, several workshops (called synaxis in this conference) with Pentecostal themes and several plenary testimonies by Pentecostal delegates. This new feature of the conference reflects the mutual recognition of Pentecostal and mainline churches for each other’s role in global mission. Occasions such as this naturally provide a unique space and time for fellowship among Pentecostals.

After several meetings, the Pentecostal delegates adopted a formal statement:

A Statement by Pentecostal and Charismatic Participants
in the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism,
Athens, Greece, 9-16 May 2005

We, the following Pentecostal participants, gathered on several occasions and agreed to adopt the following statement. We do this in order to have a united voice to express our feelings and concerns which we Pentecostals at the conference share.

We would like to express our appreciation to the organizers of the conference for intentionally including a significant number of Pentecostal participants from around the world. Also significant is the participation of selected Pentecostals in various programmes of the conference. We have sensed the genuine openness in the leadership of the conference to the potential of Pentecostal contributions to the future of global Christianity.

We also share a common challenge in these ecumenical gatherings. In spite of the good will of many, we still feel that Pentecostals are often misunderstood, misrepresented, and even unfairly caricatured. We admit that we Pentecostals are equally responsible for the mutual suspicion and misunderstanding. In the context of healing discussions, for example, we heard more than once of the failure of healing as if these cases represented the entire Pentecostal healing ministry. Although we are fully in support of dialogue between different Christian traditions, we also found that some discussions were uncomfortable to some of us: such as the process of dialogue with other religions and the emphasis on the social dimension of healing over the physical healing as “cure” that is

prevalent among us, which should have received equal emphasis. Some Pentecostal delegates agreed that the pre-published “Pentecostal” liturgy did not represent their Pentecostal traditions. However, the apology of the leadership of the Spiritual Life Committee was received and the modification of the Friday morning worship was appreciated.

Considering that many of us will be critically probed by our own people because of our personal decisions to participate in this conference, we become aware of this difficult task of bridging the gap between Pentecostals and the wider Christian community. At the same time, we affirm our commitment to the spirit of church unity. With the conviction that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in recent days is to renew the church and empower it for witness to the world, we, Pentecostal participants, commit ourselves to the reconciling work among God’s people and to the meaningful participation in gatherings that promote this unity, as opportunity arises.

Come Holy Spirit, empower us all to be faithful witnesses of Christ!

Friday 14 May 2005

(Signed by Allan Anderson and Wonsuk Ma)

On behalf of the following Pentecostal participants

Allan Anderson, Washington Armas-Benavides, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Andreas Franz, John Gichimu, Chris Gnanakan, Young-gi Hong, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Mathew Kavunkal, Julie Ma, Wonsuk Ma, Jacinta Maingi, Lian Sian Mung, Ulises Muñoz, Robinson Nainggolan, Opoku Onyinah, Hector Petrecca, Joseph Suico, Gerard S. Valdivia

What does this say to us as Pentecostals? Is this another social “lift” of the Pentecostal movement that we can rejoice over? Do we feel that the World Council of Churches or its related committees should have recognized the Pentecostal contribution to world mission much earlier? Were we, the Pentecostals in the conference, accepting this new recognition with humility or triumphalistic pride? Frankly, would we Pentecostals be open-minded enough to invite Anglicans and Orthodox friends and pay for their way to participate in a Pentecostal gathering, such as Pentecostal World Conference or the Azusa Street Centennial celebrations? Would we be willing to have “their agenda,” such as “ecumenism” or “inter-religious dialogue,” as the theme for our conference and listen to them?

True Christian spirituality always contains the attitude of humility, and this is increasingly becoming a greater challenge to us as Pentecostalism is now more recognized by fellow Christians and even by the secular world.

As Pentecostalism is celebrating the centennial of the historic Azusa Street Mission of 1906, and also the historic Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 is preparing its own centenary, we may see the two most powerful missionary movements of the twentieth century may meet with each other. This will require the attitude of true “humility and hope”² for God’s mission. Then what will be the role of Asian Pentecostals who represent the new missionary forces?

W.M.

² This is the caption of the public statement of the Preparation Consultation for Edinburgh Centenary, Edinburgh, June 2005, available at <http://www.familyma.com/Edinburgh%2005/Edinburgh%202015%20Statement.htm>