

THE CHALLENGE OF BALANCING SPIRIT AND ACADEMICS IN ASIAN PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS

By David Lim

Introduction

The tension between Spirit and academics that we see in the modern day Pentecostal movement likely began shortly after the Protestant Reformation when Pietism struggled with the lifeless orthodoxy of the reformers.

The early reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther were scholars of their day. In reacting against the rigid Catholicism and legalism of the time, they focused on justification by faith and grace alone. Those following the reformation movement de-emphasized experience and focused on Reformation theology. Luther held to all the traditions and rituals that did not violate the tenets of the Reformation, so Lutheranism in Germany became focused on rigid orthodoxy and looked very much like the Roman Catholic Church of that day.

After the Thirty Years' War, Christians in Germany became very lax, and cruelty and drunkenness was evident among the peasants. Out of this context, the Moravian brethren and the Pietistic movement arose in the 1700's seeking holy living as the fruit of true salvation. These groups argued that we are justified by faith, but we must show the fruit of our salvation by our lives. They were followed by the Methodist movement under John and Charles Wesley and then Holiness movements of the 19th century. (Much of the above can be sourced in Wikipedia under "Pietism," and Gary DeLushmutt's, "Early German Lutheran Pietism's Understanding of Justification.") These movements tended to prefer experience to academics. As a result, the Holiness movement, which stressed a second work of grace defined as sanctification, was never clear regarding the academic discipline of

how to define that sanctification. Did one never sin after being sanctified? Could certain imperfections be allowed?

Around the turn of the 20th century, the Holy Spirit fell upon hungry seekers in a Bible school in Topeka, Kansas, at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, and in key areas around the world. They began to speak in tongues which gave clear definition to the “second work of grace” – the empowerment of the Holy Spirit accompanied by the gift of tongues. The modern day Pentecostal movement was born.

In the early days of the Pentecostal revival, despite the presence of true Bible scholars and teachers, Pentecostalism became known as a revival movement, emphasizing gifts of the Spirit, visions and revelations, and intense personal encounters with God. Pentecostals were not so concerned about developing a full systematic theology as establishing that their experience was genuinely biblical. If they were to move to higher education, they preferred the Bible institute route to the Bible college and seminary route. The general opinion of that day was that degrees were “liberal” and not to be sought. That was the case in Canada. Shortly after the first school, Western Pentecostal Bible College in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, attained accreditation, the other Pentecostal schools followed with their B.A. degrees. Now the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada has a seminary offering Master’s degrees.

I remember well beginning to teach at Western Pentecostal Bible College in the 1970’s. The emphasis in Pentecostal truths classes was teaching the five cases of Spirit baptism in the book of Acts and describing the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit, followed by giving examples of the manifestations of those gifts. Evangelicals viewed this teaching as meager and noted that Pentecostals had no “Pentecostal hermeneutic.” On the other hand, some “Pentecostal professors” did not reveal “Pentecostal practice,” either in their Pentecostal truths classes, or in their personal lives. So our early schools had some faculty with good academic backgrounds and little pastoral experience and some with solid ministry experience but weak academic backgrounds.

Because of these factors, Evangelicals thought Pentecostals were more experience oriented than theology oriented and, in addition, they contended that theology should not be dictated by experience. But Pentecostal scholars have risen to counter these claims. Gordon Fee, a world class Bible scholar with an Assemblies of God background, made it a lifelong goal to combine academics with Pentecostal experience. His monumental volume on Paul’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit, *His Empowering Presence*, unapologetically describes the

normal Spirit-filled Christian life. Roger Stronstad, Luke-Acts theologian, insists that while theology must be preeminent, for every theology, experience unavoidably informs that theology. He, along with other Pentecostal scholars (such as Dr. William Menzies, Dr. Stanley Horton, Dr. Benny Aker, Dr. Del Tarr), helped to develop a strong Pentecostal hermeneutic.

This issue of the dichotomy between education and experience still impacts Pentecostal Bible schools and seminaries in many parts of Asia today. These institutions are not strongly supported financially by their national councils. Some charismatic mega-churches of Singapore do not encourage their pastoral staff to attain a high level of theological knowledge, preferring to train them within their own setting for one to three years to make training more “practical” and “powerful.” Arising to meet this need for training that addressed this tension between solid academics and Pentecostal experience were schools like Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (formerly known as Far East Advanced School of Theology), in Baguio City, Philippines. The challenge has always been to teach theology with analytical, critical, and scholarly studies and, at the same time, exemplify what true Pentecostal scholarship is when lived out and confronting the forces of darkness. All too often when Pentecostal students went to a non- Pentecostal seminary, it became a “cemetery experience.” Their pursuit of knowledge and critical thinking was not balanced by ongoing Pentecostal practice.

The New Testament church had no such dichotomy between Spirit and academics. Inspired by the Spirit, each gospel writer wrote with purpose and expertise. Matthew shaped his gospel into five sections, corresponding to the Pentateuch. He showed how Jesus was the Jewish Messiah by fulfilling prophecy. The Gospel of Mark was concisely written, and Mark proved himself to be one of the most prolific preachers of the first century. He showed how Jesus confronted the demonic, and the Holy Spirit surprises us at every turn, just as Peter found out at Cornelius’ household when the Holy Spirit interrupted Peter’s sermon and filled Cornelius and his household. Luke, the beloved physician, carefully developed theology in Luke-Acts based on the Septuagint usage of words describing the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (see Roger Stronstad, *A Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*). Luke showed how the same Holy Spirit who was at work in the Old Testament and in Jesus’ ministry, is the same Holy Spirit at work in the life of the church, only now the Spirit has come upon “all flesh.” John wrote simply but powerfully and profoundly of the Spirit’s work in prophecy, judgment and anointing. Paul the Apostle, trained under

the eminent scholar Gamaliel wrote nearly half the New Testament, pioneered churches, developed strategy, encountered demons and faced persecution. While the authorship of Hebrews is a matter of debate, it is a very carefully planned and documented argument as to why Jesus is greater than all previous revelations while at the same time it urges Roman Christians not to devalue their experience in God. The scholarship was so good and the experiences so real that the church has been studying each gospel and epistle for the past 2000 years! There was no dichotomy between Spirit and academics, between theology and personal relationships, between miracle and solid biblical exposition.

At Lausanne II, held in Manila in 1989, Bible school educators gathered from all over the world in a special forum. They concluded that there was a major dichotomy between theology and practice. After a week of discussion, they said, "Oh that teachers could be evangelists and that evangelists could be teachers!" They implied that evangelists needed more depth and teachers needed more practical ministry. My life has been consumed with the desire to combine Spirit and academics. There should be no dichotomy. I have pastored, been a missionary, taught in seminary and Bible college, and written books. Of course, my academic teaching reflects my understanding of the church, and my preaching reflects my academic background. I believe every sermon should be birthed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, each professor should seek to be a mentor, to disciple his students in the way Jesus worked with his followers and Paul disciplined future leaders. Our goal should be that the future leaders could stand on our shoulders and see a greater vision (academically, harvest wise, and Spirit empowered) than we have seen and be more effective leaders than we were. The goal is not just to reproduce academics, for often teachers reproduce teachers and pastors reproduce pastors. The natural tendency for academics is to dig deeper, analyze carefully, discuss critically, and show flaws in opposing arguments. It becomes easy to see the flaws in Pentecostal exercise and ministry, to dismiss some ministries as lacking depth, or, on the other hand, fail to truly divide the Word of God. Only those faculty who personally live out Pentecostal experience and engage in hands-on ministry will bring out the positive experiential side. Without this academic/Pentecostal ministry balance, instructors can easily educate people out of their rural environment so they are no longer effective where they are. It is easy to move from a mission oriented theology to a classical theology that argues different questions than those we face today.

On the other hand, it is easy for those who are missionaries and pastors to be critical of an intellectualized, theoretical environment in academia as not sensitive to the Spirit. Do the professors live in the context of the revival in Asia or in the context of formal classical theology? Is it possible to do both? We tend to teach as we have been taught.

Should curriculum be revised to combine the theoretical with the on-the-ground issues of Asia? Should ecclesiology teach apostolic approaches to leadership, conflict management, effectiveness and the limitations of various organizational structures, and change management? A proper theology of the church is all-important. Should pneumatology be taught by Pentecostal theologian-practitioners? Should homiletics be co-taught by professors who know basic structure and preachers who have impacted Asian nations and understand communication to their cultures? For the most part, formal Pentecostal education has not succeeded in developing great preachers. How many pastors are true students of the Word of God? How many expositors of the Word do we have in Pentecostal/charismatic circles? Very few. Many pastors preach topically to the contemporary mind but tend to repeat themselves over the years, and they do not grow in depth. The modern urban mind asks probing questions, and some of them study on a level deeper than their pastors. Some pastors think they can “wing it” by the wind of the Spirit as they always have. I often shock pastors when I tell them I spend 15-20 hours in preparing one weekend sermon and that I subconsciously run every sermon through a one hundred question filter. These questions include: does this really bring forth the truth of the passage (being true to proper hermeneutical principles)? Has this truth changed my life, and will it change theirs? Is there an urgency about this message that they must hear? Have I birthed this sermon in prayer and the anointing of the Spirit? Will this message have sufficient biblical depth and practical application to appeal to the highly educated professional and yet be simple enough that secondary school youth will understand it? There is a price to pay for Spirit anointed, Biblical exposition of the Word! Dr. David Cho has said that besides signs and wonders, powerful preaching is key to the growth of the church.

I have based all my seminary teaching upon the premise that God’s strategy to win the world is the local church. All other ministries—evangelism, academics, media, social concern, and parachurch—are good, but my primary and highest goal was to develop local churches in each location and to disciple, mature, equip, and send

believers into the harvest field. I have even taught Advanced Greek with that in mind. I believe all professors should teach their courses with this perspective in mind. Are we not seeking to train church leaders for the harvest in Asia?

I was privileged to know Korean missionary educators at APTS, Won Suk and Julie Ma. Not only was Won Suk an outstanding Old Testament professor, (Julie later got her doctorate in missions and taught as well), but they had a vision to pioneer many churches in the Philippines. He understood the spirit world as well as the world of academics. What a humble, gracious spirit they always manifested! I think also of the first international church in Baguio, pioneered and pastored by Casey and Davina Ng, students from Singapore, a work that carries on to this day. Whenever I could, I would bring Filipino students along when I spoke for seminars or district conventions. I wanted pastors to see what God could do through students. God mightily used them. Those personal relationships turned into lifelong friendships and effectively maturing ministries.

Since I left APTS for Singapore, APTS has held a number of special seminars to understand those from different world religions. Hands-on experts are brought in to teach. I well remember Dr. Stuart Robinson, a Baptist missionary, who came to know missionary Calvin Olson in Bangladesh. That acquaintance opened him up to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin Olson had the faith to pray for the dying son of a chauffeur for the prime minister of Bangladesh. The son was healed and the prime minister, in gratitude, sold a valuable piece of property to Calvin Olson to build a church in downtown Dacca. As the church was being built, Stuart Robinson and Calvin Olson were on the rooftop when they saw a typhoon headed straight towards the church. Calvin Olson was fearless. He stood up and claimed God's protection. The typhoon actually split into two and God spared the church! That so revolutionized Stuart Robinson's life that he, by the power of the Holy Spirit, devised creative ways to reach the Bangladeshi people which resulted in a people movement that would produce a huge harvest for the kingdom of God. These kinds of professors came to APTS to teach leaders how to reach people of that culture and other cultures as well. That was teaching under the anointing of God!

The Western missionary scholar also needs to deal with the issues that are fought in Asia. Most issues that are fought in the Western seminaries are not relevant to those in Asia. The issues of inspiration of scripture are already assumed in the Asian Christian

context. Asian Christians do not worry about higher criticism, the documentary hypothesis, deutero- or trito- Isaiah, or trichotomy and dichotomy, or differing views on the nature of Christ, western organizational structures or a staid ecclesiology. They are more concerned with the absolute authority of the Word of God, sensitivity to the Spirit, power over the demonic, apostolic leadership, healings, deliverance from evil spirits and spiritual warfare.

Western missionaries and theological faculty, rather than just fighting against Asian theological issues such as animism need to become more attuned to the spirit world. When I was in the Philippines, a common statement was, the Filipino goes to church to worship God, but he goes to the witch doctor for his daily needs. In China the issue is what to do with the false cult “Lightning from the East” where a lady claims to be Jesus returned to earth and has deceived millions into following her. In one country in Africa, the shocking statement is there are no more witch doctors in the streets; they are all in the churches! In third world countries the issues are how to serve God without being corrupted by Western money and how to deal with doctrines that are weak biblically. How can Christian leaders take the wheat and sift out the chaff? How can Christians prosper with a kingdom purpose in their prosperity and avoid a fall into greed? Indeed, not only must experience inform our theology, the context of the harvest must inform how we teach our theology.

A clear understanding of context-informed ministry and teaching is critical in Asia. The challenge of understanding contexts and bringing Pentecostal experienced-informed theology to bear on these contexts highlights the advantage of a school like APTS that is celebrating her 50th anniversary. Every year students from 15-20 different countries and cultures gather to study God’s Word. Some are experienced pastors, yet they come to an abrupt realization that their culture is not always right or Christian and that others have equally important and valid world views. It is marvelous to see that the result of carefully blending these cultures is not a tower of Babel--a confusion of tongues--but a Pentecost, where allegiance to one another is built on relationship to God and the church. This mirrors New Testament experience where the power of the Holy Spirit descending on all flesh brought Jew and Gentile together as one. Paul at Mars Hill realized that God set the people in nations and cultures so that they may come to know Christ. (Acts 15:27-28) When we understand the cultures, we can then see the Spirit of God working in them.

One of the great blessings of APTS is the lifelong bonding of key leaders to one another during their time of study. Sharing how the Spirit of God moved in the different nations broadens the perspective of all the students and increases their faith in the Lord of the harvest. They realize that indeed we are all laborers together in God's harvest field.

The perspective on indigenization in each country is also something to behold. Some countries in Asia are now first world countries. In South Korea, for example, the missionary role is not "over-under" but "under-over". "Over-under" implies the superiority of the missionary in knowledge, authority, and role. "Under-over" implies the national church is strong and in charge. If the missionary serves at all, he is there to serve the leadership of the national church. In Singapore, the missionary works side by side with the church. As the national churches grow in strength and insight, the missionaries' roles change as well. Servant leadership takes on a new meaning. John Piper in *Desiring God* gives the analogy of Christ the Great Physician and we as the patients. He suggests that the best missionaries identify with this analogy. I have pastored in Singapore for twenty three years, not because I am the great leader or hero, but because the Great Physician prescribed that as the best place for me to be. National churches now need to flex their muscles and grow into mature churches doing their own missions, empowered by the Spirit of God. They will do a greater job than the Western missionaries will do. Of course, the Western missionary is needed in crucial roles of education, media, evangelism, training, non-government organizations (NGOs—social concern) and strategic thinking and financing. But even these roles are rapidly changing.

The value of an education at APTS is the constant intermingling of perspectives. Western missionaries learn from and grow together with Asian students who are at the forefront of revival and harvest in Asia. Asian students grow in their appreciation of many other cultures. They develop a greater worldview and understanding. They seek to apply their insights and to see their own situations in a different way. This is hard academic work.

Balancing academics with the Spirit is a constant struggle, a tension, but that will always be the case. We need to be aware of this tension. We need to be stretched by it. We need to grow with it. Many key leaders of Pentecostal churches in this half of the world called Asia have graduated from APTS and returned to their home countries. These leaders are examples of those who have learned well how to use this tension between Spirit experience and academics in their ministries.

APTS will always exist in tension: the tension of academics and Pentecostal experience in the context of the tension of western and eastern mindsets. Handled properly, this tension is good and enriching. Under the power of the Holy Spirit it broadens the mind and empowers ministry. Will the healthy balance continue? It will always demand effort and mutual submission. There must be a constant effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We must continually submit to one another to learn from each other. As Confucius so notably said, “If three of us walk together, one of you will be my teacher.” May we learn from each other and serve faithfully until Jesus comes.

Congratulations on the 50th anniversary of APTS!