

## **The Challenge of “Zeal with Knowledge” in the Context of Myanmar Churches, Based on Some Pauline Letters: Part 2**

by Stephen Shwe

### **Introduction**

The challenges of the tension between zeal and knowledge in the churches in Myanmar was explained in Part 1 of this article. Also, an analysis of the concepts of zeal and knowledge in some of Paul’s writings was made in the light of this tension.

Part 2 is an examination of the balance between zeal and knowledge in the lives of two biblical characters, Moses and Paul, and a proposal on how a healthy balance between zeal and knowledge can be achieved in the churches of Myanmar today.

### **Examples of Zeal and Knowledge in Biblical Characters**

#### Moses

One can see both zeal and knowledge in the life of Moses. After he was trained in Pharaoh’s house as a prince for forty years, he decided to protect and save his people by killing an Egyptian after the Egyptian afflicted Moses’ fellow Israelite (Exodus 2:11-12). At this point, his zeal for his people was obvious. Abraham Park aptly states that “when Moses turned 40 years old, he desired to begin the active work of saving his people.”<sup>1</sup> But God did not permit him to start at that point and because of that zeal for his people, he had to flee to Midian. After another forty years, God appeared to Moses and used Moses and his holy zeal for God and His People (Exodus 19; 32).

It is also noteworthy that when Moses was in the king’s house “he received the same treatment as any other Egyptian prince. He also enjoyed the privileges of receiving the highest education in Egypt, which

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<sup>1</sup>Abraham Park, *The Covenant of the Torch: A Forgotten Encounter in the History of the Exodus and Wilderness Journey* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 2010), 131.

included academics, technology, military warfare, architecture, religion, and other subjects. He was well equipped to become a leader – ‘man of power in words and deeds’ (Acts 7:22).<sup>2</sup> All those skills and experiences were not in vain. The knowledge that he gained in an Egyptian’s house became useful when he led the people of Israel—building tabernacles, exercising leadership and management, and commanding his soldiers to fight the enemy. Best of all, Moses is reputed to have written the first five books of the Bible. Rick M. Nanez says that “It may be more than coincidental that one-fourth of the Old Testament was written by Moses, of whom it is said that he was ‘instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, (Acts 18:24).’”<sup>3</sup>

### Paul

This balance between zeal and knowledge can also be seen in the life of Paul. Paul was a zealous person before and after his conversion. Before he came to know Christ, he killed Christians for the sake of Judaism. His religious zeal was so strong that it caused him to persecute the church (Philippians 3:6), but after he met Christ on the Damascus road, his zeal turned to saving people and adding them into the church by preaching the glorious gospel. His eagerness to preach the Gospel was shown in Romans 1:14-15: “*I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome*” (NIV). His great desire to bring the good news to the lost compelled him (1 Corinthians 9:16), (NLT). This verse clearly states that the Apostle could not stay silent. Regarding Paul’s passion for preaching the gospel, Ron Cline states that “zeal for the Lord is what kept the man who never got a break going throughout a long, difficult life that, according to church history, ended in martyrdom, but only after he had finished his course for God. His vision was completed.”<sup>4</sup> Such great zeal!

Moreover, regarding the use of speaking in tongues which is a spiritual gift, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:18, “*I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all*” (NKJV). One can see that Paul was using his gifts, not only tongues, but most of the other gifts as well—miracles, faith, and prophecy. Not only did he exercise them, he also urged the churches to desire, practice and use those gifts. (1 Corinthians. 12:31; 14:1; 14:12).

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>3</sup>Rick M. Nanez, *Full Gospel Fractured Minds?: A Call to Use God’s Gift of the Intellect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 32.

<sup>4</sup>Ron Cline, *Feel the Zeal* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: HCJB World Radio, 2001), 288.

When it comes to knowledge or intellectual matters, one can call Paul an excellent scholar and a theologian. He was trained under Gamaliel, an honored teacher of the law (Acts 5:34), gaining a superb educational legacy. Moreover, based on Acts 17:27-28 and Titus 1:13-14, it is evident that he knew Greek philosophy and literature. He was also well acquainted with Old Testament literature evidenced by the books of Acts and Romans. The Apostle Peter believed that Paul wrote some difficult writings through wisdom he received from God (2 Peter 3:16).<sup>5</sup> The most obvious evidence is that Paul wrote almost half of the New Testament books according to this inspired wisdom from God.

In summary, both Moses and Paul have similarities: before they were greatly used by God, they had a burning desire for their own people. Also, these two men encountered God in a significant way and after that their zeal became a driving force to do greater works for God. In this sense, their zeal, which was naturally rooted in their heart for their people, turned into a holy zeal and that zeal was channeled according to God’s direction. Furthermore, their educational backgrounds helped them to write most of invaluable books in each Testament which benefit all believers today.

### **Application to the Churches in Myanmar**

In studying selected texts from the Pauline Letters, both zeal and knowledge have their own significant functions that Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal people can apply in Myanmar churches. First, the word “zeal” in Paul’s letters implies all activities of the Holy Spirit which include spiritual gifts, being on fire, and power that believers received from God. Therefore, one should understand that zeal here functions not in a religious sense, but it is referring to the works of the Holy Spirit. Paul encouraged believers to desire good gifts of the Spirit and he told us not to quench the Spirit. Since this is the time of the Holy Spirit, the churches in Myanmar should realize that only when the churches allow the Holy Spirit to move and receive His guidance, closed doors will be opened for spreading of the gospel, churches will grow, and miracles will take place. All of these things happened in history and are still happening today in churches where people allow the Holy Spirit to move. Therefore, believers in Myanmar, especially non-Pentecostal people and whoever has a negative understanding of the move of the Holy Spirit must understand this truth and seek for this zeal.

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<sup>5</sup>Rick M. Nanez, 32-33.

One must pay close attention to the flow of the Spirit in one's life and in the church. The torch of spiritual fire should not be put out. I heard one story about being on fire from a Pastor, who said:

Rev. Reinhard Bonnke was asked by someone, "why does God use you so much?" Bonnke replied with an example. He said, "If there are two stoves, one is hot and the other is not, and if you want to cook something, which stove will you use? The inquirer answered, "the hot one." "You're right," said Bonnke. "In the same way, God will use the person who is on fire or passionate for God more than the one who is cold or passive."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in order to see revival and life transformation, believers in Myanmar must be fervent in Spirit. Pastors and ministers should be on fire for the Lord so that the flame of their spiritual torch can be contagious among the people around them. Let the fire of the Spirit keep burning in Myanmar churches!

In contrast, knowledge is a great blessing from God that the servants of the Lord can also benefit from. People in Myanmar churches, especially Pentecostal believers, must have a clear understanding concerning intellectual growth. Having a deeper knowledge of the Bible can help believers to rightly handle the Word of God (2 Timothy 2:15) and defend their stand. Also, it will aide them in protecting the body of Christ from the false teachings and doctrinal errors within their community. To make a correct judgment or test, Christians need to have full knowledge so that they can weigh controversial issues in a right and healthy way.

Furthermore, in order to transmit invaluable truth or faith from one generation to another, knowledge plays a vital role because it involves writing books and other publications. Professor Hla Pe aptly says, "every scholar is known and remembered by his publications."<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Myanmar churches, especially Pentecostal people, are weak in this area. I have observed that most books that Myanmar Bible Schools use are translated from English, which shows that we need scholars who can write books within the Myanmar context and language. Although a few books can be purchased in Myanmar, most books in Pentecostal Schools are written by non-Pentecostal scholars. Chin Khua Khai defended the condition of Pentecostal education in his article, saying that Pentecostal

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<sup>6</sup>Zaw Lin Aung, *Opens Heaven – Live Worship*, 36 min., DUMC Opens Heaven Album (Dec. 1, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>Hla Pe, *Burma: Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life, and Buddhism* (Pasi Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), n.p.

people have strongly encouraged theological education in Myanmar since the very beginning of the movement.<sup>8</sup> In fact, we need to do more than just run Bible schools and train believers to be pastors and missionaries or evangelists. Bible colleges or seminaries need to focus on producing students who are capable of writing books and publishing them for the churches in Myanmar.

It is true that it might not be easy to convince the older people, who are anti-intellectual like the AG pastor from Mandalay, to rethink the value and advantage of academics. Because of this, the younger generation of Myanmar Christians, who see the value of academic contributions, will have to take a step to do something different. Without criticizing those older people, these young people should show them by their lives and their practical examples that higher education or having theological knowledge is not demonic but rather a gift from God to be a blessing to the church and the people. Therefore, practical steps need to be taken to move towards the right direction.

First, a good way to start is by opening a forum or panel discussion about the importance of academics and its contribution in some of the seminars and conferences attended by denominational leaders, Bible school students and young people who will get involved in this process. In those discussion times, the leaders can exchange their views and find the best way to implement plans that meet the needs. Secondly, the Pentecostal community should consider establishing an association to manage the writing of Christian literature. For instance, the Assemblies of God in Myanmar can organize a department which mainly focuses on Christian literature publication—writing theological articles, journals, and books. This project will have many needs such as writers and publishers that can be organized by the leaders of their respective denominations. Thirdly, Bible Colleges or Seminaries need to have strategic plans to emphasize training students who are competent to pursue higher education. It could be said that this is an indispensable agenda to equip people who can make scholarly contributions to the Pentecostal Christian community. This project is not necessarily about degrees as much as it is about quality. In fact, some people, especially in Myanmar, just love to have doctoral degrees without meeting the requirements or qualifications. For this reason, the Bible Schools need to focus on training people who have the burden to do the hard work and produce scholarly contributions by writing books and publishing them in Myanmar. For example, as the writer is teaching in a Bible School, he could train some of his qualified students for this specific purpose. While

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<sup>8</sup>Chin Khua Khai, “Pentecostalism in Myanmar,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5, no. 1 [January 2002]: 67.

other students have their own plans and visions, the teachers could encourage some potential students to put more emphasis on academics and to pursue a higher level of education so that they can be trained and educated to write books and to offer scholarly writings to the churches. If we specifically put more emphasis on this work of equipping and encouraging people, it will make a difference.

This will take time, perhaps another twenty to thirty years, but I believe that there will more qualified scholars in the days to come in the Myanmar Pentecostal community if the churches focus more on this need. It is encouraging to see that, compared to the past, there are some who understand the importance and the need of academics in our Pentecostal society. At APTS there are more people from Myanmar who are pursuing both master's degrees and post graduate degrees. At the same time, some good examples can be seen like Dr. Saw Tint Sann Oo, the director of Evangel Bible College in Yangon, who is an inspiration to students who are pursuing higher theological studies. I believe that by a clear understanding of the need of academics and intellectual work, and also through these great examples, there will be qualified writers and scholars in the near future who can contribute to the Pentecostal Christian community in Myanmar.

In summary, in order to run a longer race, zeal and knowledge must be combined together. Why? Because zeal without knowledge can burn out. In the same way, knowledge without zeal can dry out. These two ideals need to work in cooperation. Dave Johnson, based on the argument of Harold Kohl, states that "scholarship without spirituality is dead and barren . . . spirituality that is not deeply grounded in God's Word easily becomes fanaticism. True Pentecostal education would strive for both in balance, although the challenge of holding these two ideals is not easy."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, non-Pentecostal churches in Myanmar should never neglect being fervent in Spirit and being zealous for God and His work; in the same way, knowledge and should be valued resulting in scholarly writing and publishing in the Pentecostal Myanmar Christian community so that all churches in Myanmar will be strong, healthy and growing.

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<sup>9</sup>Harold Kohl, "From the President's Desk," BBI Gazette, July-August, 1965, 2-12; quoted in Dave Johnson, "Knowledge with Zeal: Biblical Examples of Using a God-Anointed Intellect in His Service," in *Theological Education in a Cross-Cultural Context: Essays in Honor of John and Bea Carter*, ed., A. Kay Fountain (Baguio City: APTS Press, 2016), 147.

## Conclusion

Based on the examples of Moses and Paul, we come to know that zeal has a vital role in the Christian life. This zeal implies being zealous for spiritual gifts and being on fire with a fire which is not to be quenched, but must keep burning. It can be implied that in order to see revival and spiritual transformation in the churches, believers in Myanmar must be fervent in Spirit. In this sense, always being on fire for God and His work will make a difference. A holy zeal for spiritual renewal is the answer to church growth. The spreading of the Gospel in the land will be seen among Spirit-filled believers who earnestly seek God and preach the good news with boldness and power. A contagious spiritual atmosphere can be experienced in the midst of people who are hungry and thirsty for the move of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual awakening will take place where people are on fire for the Lord. In these last days, the churches, especially non-Pentecostal churches, definitely need this zeal.

Also, in the instruction of Paul about knowledge, it is very clear that the people of God must be filled with all knowledge. This “all knowledge” can signify that believers have to know the Word of God. At the same time, a deeper understanding of the Bible should be encouraged to defend our faith and withstand false teachings and doctrinal error. In other words, believers must be able to distinguish which teachings are right and wrong, for God has given us a sound mind. We must be qualified to test all sorts of practices in worship services. Finally, like Moses and the Apostle Paul, the churches need many educated people and scholars who can write books that are applicable in Myanmar culture and context. The churches need to consider this as one of their priorities especially in the Pentecostal community.

To find a balance, zeal and knowledge should not be separated since the churches need both. To reiterate once again, zeal without knowledge can burn out; also, knowledge without zeal can dry out. Therefore, only when these two ideals are combined together, all the churches, both the Pentecostal and the non-Pentecostal in Myanmar, will grow in a stronger and healthier way.

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