

Reflection on Pentecostal Mission for the Twenty-first Century

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Synopsis

The historic roots of the Pentecostal movement are thoroughly connected to an urgent eschatology that fostered a worldwide missionary initiative. A century later the urgent eschatology, which was part of that earlier social landscape, is no longer as prominent. This contemporary reality necessitates a revisiting of the nature of the missionary identity inherent in the Pentecostal movement. Both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal missiologists are providing critical reflection, important for looking at the missionary nature of the movement. The New Testament theme of apostolic function is central to Paul's focus on missionary efforts. A revisiting of this key biblical framework is necessary to fully actualize the continuing growth and nature of this global mission movement that has its origins in early 20th century Pentecostal revivalism.

The Missionary DNA of Incipient Pentecostalism

The self-understanding of Pentecostals includes a clear identity as a people of mission. Everett Wilson explains, "Mission for most Pentecostals had never been merely the dutiful fulfillment of an obligation. The missionary task for many came close to being their movement's organizational reason for being."¹ This missionary theme is reiterated by Grant McClung who notes that "Pentecostalism by its very nature is intrinsically missiological."² Allan Anderson's research on the missionary nature of early Pentecostalism chronicles the very human nature of the participants in this incipient era,

¹Everett Wilson, *Strategy of the Spirit: J. Philip Hogan and the Growth of the Assemblies of God Worldwide 1960-1990* (Oxford: Regnum, 1997), 15.

²L. Grant McClung Jr., "Try to Get People Saved: Revisiting the Paradigm of an Urgent Pentecostal Missiology," in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion made to Travel*, ed. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), 32.

chronicling their stories “warts and all.” While the clay feet of these early pioneers are self-evident, Anderson’s conclusions reinforce the understanding of early Pentecostalism’s essential missionary nature. He posits that Pentecostalism has always been a missionary movement in foundation and essence. Its firm conviction was that the Spirit had been poured out in “signs and wonders” in order for nations of the world to be reached for Christ before the end of the age.³

Arguably, the single most enduring contribution the late Pentecostal historian Gary McGee made to the understanding of the Pentecostal movement was his description of the “radical strategy” that typified early Pentecostal mission. While acknowledging a missiological perspective shared in varying degrees by a broad set of Christian tradition, he highlighted the emergence and significance of this *radical strategy* as a critique of the Great Century of missions represented in the 19th century. This radical strategy was a uniquely pneumatological approach to mission that affirmed a belief in the need for a subsequent spiritual empowerment that sent the recipient toward a destiny connected to the continuing redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. The empowerment was for the purpose of world evangelism and the soon return of Christ made it necessary to “work while it is day” (John 9:4). This work, empowered by the Holy Spirit, was accompanied by signs and wonders, thus energizing missionary efforts and hastening the return of Christ.

While some might argue that Pentecostals have historically been more “doers” than thinkers and/or theologians, McGee’s description of the radical strategy provides an alternative view to such conventional wisdom. The missiological quandary that was felt

³Allan Anderson, *Spreading Fire: The Missionary Nature of Early Pentecostalism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 294.

by missionary efforts in the late 19th century was how their efforts could be accomplished more rapidly and effectively. The growing passion among this deeply committed cadre of mission-minded people (typified in the Student Volunteer Movement) was to seek the restoration of the Spirit's power as taught and illustrated in the New Testament. The DNA of Pentecostalism, personified in the radical strategy, was the clear mark of a fresh theological reflection and strategic critique offered by these early pioneers as an intentional response to the missionary quandary of "how to reach the world in this generation."⁴ It would not be an overstatement to describe incipient Pentecostalism as both strategically pro-active and theologically aware.

Shifts in the Context

As we enter, what some would call, the second Pentecostal century, the urgent eschatology of the century past is less obvious. Won Suk Ma has observed that the eschatological expectations present in Western Pentecostals are not quite as evident in Asian Pentecostal churches. He notes that a "this world" message is much more obvious than an "other-worldly" message. The question is now arising as to whether or not this growing reliance on the "this-worldly" empowerment may actually disconnect Pentecostals from the "eternal dimensions" of their urgent eschatological rooting.⁵

The unique historical context in which Pentecostalism emerged leads to a particular understanding of what constitutes mission. The radical strategy is a clear

⁴Gary McGee, "The Radical Strategy in Modern Mission: The Linkage of Paranormal Phenomena with Evangelism," in *The Holy Spirit and Mission Dynamics*, ed. C. Douglas McConnell (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1997), 69-95. See McGee's last volume published posthumously *Miracles, Missions and American Pentecostalism* by Orbis Books to be released in April 2010.

⁵Won Suk Ma, "Asian Pentecostal Theology," in *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1998): 28.

critique of the *evangelization by civilization* strategy central to the 19th century missionary efforts from the West. There is no doubt that the kerygmatic/proclamation/church planting focus, favored by early Pentecostals, clearly reflected their urgent eschatology and resulting strategic priority. This priority is clearly seen in the writing of Alice Luce who summarized mission strategy of the day when she said, “When we go forth to preach the Full Gospel, are we going to accept an experience like that of denominational missionaries or shall we look for signs to follow?”⁶

Simply put, the success of the expansion of the gospel connected to the first century of Pentecostal efforts requires critique exactly because of the explosive growth of the movement. The movement’s growth is so obvious in the majority world that a new set of contextual factors must become part of Pentecostal theological reflection. The realities of poverty, injustice, and violence will certainly require fresh and critical theologizing on the nature of Pentecostal mission. Gordon Fee’s life-long championing of the biblical theme of the Kingdom of God will find a more exhaustive understanding as Majority World Pentecostals bring a fresh understanding of the diakonic and koinonaic dimensions of Kingdom life that are perpetuated in the planting of local churches globally.⁷ The tension-filled terrain of gospel and culture will most likely see followers of Jesus, in contexts of violence and injustice, read the book of Acts and identify with their brothers and sisters of the Early Church. This contemporary vanguard of Spirit empowered

⁶Everett Wilson and Ruth Marshall Wilson, “Alice Luce: A Visionary Victorian” in *Portraits of a Generation: Early Pentecostal Leaders*, ed. James R. Goff, Jr. and Grant Wacker (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 159-176.

⁷Gordon Fee, “The Kingdom of God and the Church’s Global Mission,” in *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, ed. Murray Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, Douglas Petersen (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 7-21.

believers will obediently follow Jesus, being empowered by the Spirit, while oblivious to the price of trusting God in a faith-filled way.

If it is true that Christianity's center is now in the Southern Hemisphere, a refined understanding of the identity of Pentecostal mission certainly needs to acknowledge the insights and theological reflection of this burgeoning center of influence. Indicative of the maturity of this new global synergy is found in Veli-Matti Karkkainen's publishing of *Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts*.⁸ What is clear is that well-trained scholars and church leaders are in place to speak prophetically to the historic sending Church in the North.

Representative of this growing majority world voice is Indian Pentecostal, Ivan Satyavrata, who served as the 2009-2010 J. Philip Hogan Professor of World Mission at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. He delivered a set of lectures that provide a significant voice demonstrating the keen awareness that exists in the Majority World as to the place we find ourselves as we enter the second decade of the 21st century. These lectures moved beyond the expected discussions of the indigenous church, contextualization, and even mission partnership. All of these themes are necessary dimensions of missiological understanding, but Satyavrata offered new frameworks for understanding 21st century Pentecostal mission around a unique understanding of being peers and friends. Gone were the us-them categories of missionary and national and now present were categories more attuned to the heart of relationships and communication in our globalized world.

⁸Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Context* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009), xiii-xxiv.

Satyavrata's lectures offered a sterling example of clear thinking from the new center of influence in Christianity and, in particular, Pentecostalism. He suggests that the current context of globalization and urbanization may in fact be the contemporary "fullness of time" for Pentecostal Christianity to surge in new and vital ways. He offers a set of challenges that require specific responses by Pentecostals. Our corresponding actions will have serious impact on our identity and sense of biblical mission.

- **Massive human migration** necessitates a focus on urban centers
- **The deterritorialization of culture** requires us to radically rethink our understanding of indigenous culture, because previous understanding of culture, as a local and even geographical category, is inadequate.
- **Culture shock and religion-quake** necessitates the response to multiculturalism and religious pluralism that rethinks the nature of "the other."
- **The shifting center of Christianity** requires us to work toward new covenants in mission endeavor that moves beyond the category of object to partner/friendship categories that have yet to be fully experienced.
- **The rise of global poverty** and resulting threat to humanity requires the development of a theology of integral mission and interdependence.
- **Political resistance to traditional missionary activity** requires pursuing creative avenues of access and a more complete theology of suffering in violent contexts
- **The explosion of information, communication and technology** requires creative new innovation that moves beyond blind acceptance of technological advancement.⁹

⁹Ivan Satyavrata's three lectures are entitled, *Following the Wind and Riding the Wave: Pursuing the Hogan Legacy into the Second Pentecostal Century*. All lectures can be accessed at http://www.agts.edu/news/news_archives/2009_16satyavrata_lecture.html.

Satyavrata's critical work is not just about discussions of the missionary and national, but global partners and friends addressing challenges that face followers of Jesus who have embraced a spirituality that implicitly values the vibrancy of a Spirit-empowered life.

Haunting Questions That Remain

The first decade of the 21st century has provided clarification that Christianity has a new center and it is geographically in the Southern hemisphere. Globalization, urbanization, and immigration patterns that are fueled by violence, politics, and economics present complexities for the Church and its mission that is overwhelming.¹⁰ In these shifting realities, Pentecostalism has grown with incredible vigor. As early as the mid-1990s some were predicting that the vibrant fabric of Pentecostalism would be central to 21st century Christianity.¹¹ The growing breadth of Pentecostalism's impact is seen in Miller and Yamamori's extensive research viewing global Pentecostalism as the new face of Christian social engagement. Far from a limited view, the authors spent nearly four years documenting Pentecostal ministry in the majority world. They dispel stereotypes and create a wide-ranging portrait of this movement, characterizing it as a major new social movement that is shifting Christianity's center of gravity to the developing world.¹²

¹⁰Philip Jenkins is the academic scholar (not self-identified as a mission scholar) who champions what most mission studies had been stating as reality for over a decade previous to Jenkins publication. See Dana L. Robert, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945," in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Gallegher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 46-62; see also Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹¹Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995), 102.

¹²See Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

There can be little doubt that the 21st century creates a vastly different landscape in which Pentecostalism must navigate. While the sturdiness of our theological reflection can be questioned historically and I have attempted to offer at least some alternative views, there is no doubt that a critical evaluation of the nature of the heart of Pentecostals' contemporary understanding of mission is still necessary. A most helpful framework for understanding a theology of mission that links the first century of Pentecostal experience with our contemporary realities of charismatic and Renewal theologies arguably comes from British charismatic Andrew Lord. This comprehensive missiology tracks a broad set of themes acknowledging Pentecostal roots and current pneumatological considerations. The Kingdom and gospel-culture themes are present in his work. In addition, Lord raises the issues of religious experience as a legitimate category for theologizing about mission and as a doorway for epistemological purpose. Because he is not encumbered by the historical gospel-versus social action bifurcation so prevalent in American 20th century church life, Lord can weave together themes of the necessary spirituality that impacts contextualization alongside issues of mission and community. Most critical to the Pentecostal dynamic is Lord's insistence on understanding first the mission of the Spirit. Lord's work brings fresh awareness of the redemptive agenda of the Spirit's continuing mission as a primary consideration for looking at the continuing vibrancy in a movement now over 100 years old.¹³

¹³Andrew Lord, *Spirit-Shaped Mission: A Holistic Charismatic Missiology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 1-9. See the Spirit dynamic in the historical work done by Everett Wilson in *Strategy of the Spirit: J. Philip Hogan and the Growth of the Assemblies of God, 1960-1990* (Oxford: Regnum, 1997). See also the work of DeLonn Rance, "A Passionate Call to Spirit-Driven Missiology" in his 2008 Hogan Lecture Series at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (accessible at http://www.agts.edu/news/news_archives/2008_10rance_lecture.html)

Pentecostal theologian Frank Macchia's theological work is an ever-growing contemporary resource giving re-focused attention to Spirit baptism as Macchia sees the energized growth of a global church which, by its very nature, renews the essential substance of the Church's life.¹⁴ Interestingly, we can find in the work of Reformed mission scholar, Harry Boer, unique insights that serve Pentecostalism's clarification of its historic DNA. Boer persuasively argues that the real motivating ingredient in the Early Church was actually inherent in the Pentecost event itself. Boer posits that Pentecost, not the Great Commission, is the central driving force for expansion in the Early Church.¹⁵ In other words, regardless of contextual factors, such as those which existed with incipient Pentecostalism, the pneumatological initiative for global expansion of the Church is inherent in the Pentecost event and the contemporary spiritual encounter of Spirit baptism. This observation stands in contrast to much of modern mission discussion which locates the mission imperative of the Church in its obedience to the Great Commission. We must view the guarantee of Pentecost as the continuation of the mission of Jesus in our day, by the power of the Holy Spirit, with the same purpose, character, and power as is authoritatively described in the Gospels. Thus, the current context which does not lend itself to the eschatological urgency of a century ago, can actually find clarification and substantive enrichment when we realize that the mission initiative of the Church is not an appendage, but part of its very nature as clearly revealed at Pentecost. Pentecost becomes

¹⁴Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 153-154.

¹⁵Harry Boer, *Pentecost and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 98.

pivotal because it reveals the inner logic of the incarnational manifestation in Jesus Christ and orients us to the ongoing redemptive ministry of Christ continuing to this very day.¹⁶

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A further integration of a current reflection on this significance of Pentecost must be applied to our mission theology. Over a decade ago, the late Ralph Winter questioned whether or not the Christian world still took seriously the maintenance of aggressive missionary efforts across geographical and cultural barriers.¹⁷ Pentecostal missionary scholar, Alan Johnson, has recently offered his detailed response to Winter's inquiry. Johnson posits that in the past we have focused on the *why* of global mission in terms of motive; the *what* of mission in terms of content of the message and the *how* of mission in terms of methodologies and strategies, but the *where* question, in terms of where we send cross-cultural workers, has been assumed as meaning crossing geographic boundaries alone. Johnson's serious reflection on the idea of apostolic function as a biblically derived paradigm of missionary self-identity provides for Pentecostal mission a clear source of contemporary revitalization. Johnson aggressively makes the case for apostolic function being cross-cultural work that is framed around how the apostles understood their work and how they actually did that work. Johnson argues that apostolic function is the focus on the apostolic task of preaching the gospel where it has not been heard, planting the church where it does not exist, and leading people to the obedience of faith so that they will express Jesus Christ in their social world and participate in God's global mission. He argues that this is the heuristic (foundational principle) that should define our

¹⁶Ray S. Anderson, **Title of Book** (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 23-24.

¹⁷Ralph Winter, "The Meaning of Mission: Understanding this Term is Crucial to the Completion of the Missionary Task," *Missionary Frontiers* 20, no. 3-4 (March-April 1998): 15.

identity and practice.¹⁸ In so doing, Johnson is offering the possibility that may provide an integrative biblical theme to help navigate continued vigor in Pentecostal mission.

Above all, Pentecostals must consider how delinquent we have been in keeping sharp our discernment of the “strategy of the Spirit.” People of the Spirit need not act like dependence on Holy Spirit empowerment is necessary only in incipient stages of our tradition’s experience. Heightened consciousness of the Spirit’s presence and activity with the Church’s self-theologizing and evangelistic engagement is necessary to critique a natural default to pragmatism and over-reliance on humanly devised strategies and resources.¹⁹

Conclusion

People of the Spirit who are described by such terms as Pentecostal, Charismatic, Third Wave or some more contemporary “brand” must refuse to believe that they are the somehow immune from the inevitabilities of maturation as a historical movement of God’s people. One of our greatest delusions is that the new wineskins for the Spirit’s work have nothing to do with older versions or attempts to faithfully follow the Spirit’s leading. In this essay I have attempted to offer the observation that from the roots of incipient Pentecostalism, it is hard to describe the continuing developments of that early 20th century Holy Spirit renewal without seeing its deep commitment to world evangelization. What is most critical to our efforts 100 years later is that we acknowledge

¹⁸Alan R. Johnson, *Apostolic Function in Twenty First Century Mission* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), 51-102.

¹⁹Robert Gallagher with Charles Van Engen and Nancy Thomas, *Footprints of God: A Narrative Theology* (Monrovia: MARC/World Vision, 1999). Gallagher et.al. chronicle the paucity of pneumatological discussion in mission studies. See also the seminal work done by Roland Allen that informed early Pentecostal self-understanding. A good anthology of Allen’s writings can be found in David Paton and Charles H. Long, *A Roland Allen Reader: The Compulsion of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

that the Spirit's work a century ago occurred in a particular place and time. God's sovereign work was interpreted and responded to with a set of assumptions attuned to that era. If world evangelization is really the heart of this movement of the Holy Spirit over the last century, then the missional efforts that are a part of its organizational life must ask some very serious issues which would include:

- Critical reflection to make sure that every institutional expression of the movement defines itself in terms of a "ye shall be witnesses" identity
- Critical reflection that assures congruence between the gospel that is proclaimed and the way the institution carries out its work
- Critical reflection on whether or not the years have yielded any reductions or compromises in faithfulness to the gospel
- Critical reflection on a continuing conversion that actually repents of conformities to cultural influences that reduce the transformative nature of the gospel being proclaimed.²⁰

As we are serious about our critical reflection on our identity as a "people of the Spirit," we must spend considerable time in our further understanding of the essence of Pentecost as an historical event. There are theological depths which are yet to be considered that could be enduring antidotes to the loss of the eschatological urgency so obvious in incipient Pentecostalism. Additional resources for contemporary reflections come from those who were once the object of our missionary efforts and have now taken their places as our friends in 21st century mission. Their contexts of violence, injustice, and religious pluralism are all untapped resources for rich understanding for the largest

²⁰Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 202.

global family of Protestant Christians. Integral to following the wind of the Spirit and riding the wave of globalization in the 21st century is an increased focus on apostolic function which calls us continually to obediently take the gospel where it is least accessible and most resisted so that the followers of Jesus, gathered together as the Church, can express faithfully their commitment to Jesus Christ in particular social worlds.