

The Gift of Teaching in a Pentecostal Context: A Personal Reflection

“Who will I be today?” I frequently wondered as a young Bible college instructor in the late 1960s. If well prepared for a lesson (perhaps on the threshold of being “profound”!), I might feel like Stanley Horton, one of my former professors at Central Bible College. When passionately explaining a point, I briefly fancied myself as William Menzies, another mentor. A profitable interchange of ideas with students over the Biblical text would transform me into Donald F. Johns. And if my Greek class went well, it would seem that Anthony Palma had addressed the students that day. But who was I as a teacher?

Ministry or teaching? These terms had seemed antithetical when I enrolled in college. Three vocations enjoyed the limelight: pastor, evangelist, and missionary. But while I soon learned that ministers of music and Christian education also counted, the calling into Christian higher education rested under a cloud of suspicion. In fact, one had to justify this as a valid ministry because it appeared to be so far away from practical church work. Nevertheless, the greatest teacher of all said in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV): “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Discussing the critical role that teaching plays in the church, Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:11-15 that the risen Christ “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

Teaching, therefore, is indispensable for the well being and growth of the church. “Speaking the truth in love” takes place in a wide array of contexts that includes the multifaceted activities of local churches, Christian schools, church-based Bible institutes, Bible colleges, Christian colleges and universities, and theological seminaries. The fact is that all of us have been gifted for ministries of various kinds and regardless of whether we are behind the lectern full-time or not, all of us teach others in some way, if not through lesson plans then through example.

To the surprise of my professors, before graduating from CBC, I signed a contract to teach and serve as Dean of Men at Open Bible College in Des Moines, Iowa, a school sponsored by Open Bible Standard Churches, a small Pentecostal denomination. I can’t adequately describe the excitement I felt as I drove to Iowa from my home in Ohio to begin the ministry to which God had called me. In my VW bug was packed everything I owned. OBC was a small school with about 90 students at the time and financially very poor.

I worked hard in the three years I served on the faculty there before returning to CBC as an instructor. Nothing deterred me in my resolve to do the Lord’s work—Not the time students threw a dead skunk into my room in the dorm, Nor the time the student chef cooked the garbage my mistake, and I ate a dish of it because I was a representative of the college administration and felt that I had to set an example. In addition to teaching three or four (usually new) courses a

semester and supervising the men's dorm, I set the lofty goal of reading three books a week that were unrelated to my course work. Within a short time, however, I selected only very thin volumes.

Ministry activities took me to First Church of the Open Bible, one of the historic Pentecostal churches in the Midwest, and then to First Assembly of God where I worked under Charles Crabtree, now our Assistant General Superintendent. Those were joyful years in many respects, crowned by ordination as a "teacher" by the Iowa District Council of the Assemblies of God in 1969. They were also times of intense testing and tears, but I discovered that Bible college had prepared me well by driving home the meaning of commitment in the face of adversity.

But what about the validity of teaching and scholarship as a ministry? Several years into teaching, I came across a wonderful book that significantly influenced my thinking: E. Harris Harbison's *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation*. Harbison, a professor of history at Princeton, explained that great teachers of the faith from Augustine to Luther and Calvin viewed scholarship as a ministry and indispensable to the healthy growth of the church. Reading it marked a joyful event in my pilgrimage. Although I could never be a Luther, or a Horton for that matter, I knew that God had called me as well to the ministry of teaching—as Paul said "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12). In time I discovered my own gifts in the classroom.

The twin ministries of teaching and Christian scholarship have never had more importance for the Pentecostal movement than they have today. Issues related to basic Christian doctrine, Pentecostal spirituality, the nature and mission of the church in the world, and the discipleship of believers require the attention of teachers committed to ministry with solid academic credentials, disciplined study habits, the blessing and encouragement of church leaders, and (not least) the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Simply put, if we don't address the questions that face us today, we'll lose our way and fail the Lord of the Harvest. The questions raised by first generation Pentecostals were often different from those being asked by today's third, fourth, and fifth generations. Faithfulness to one's tradition, or "staying the course" requires careful deliberation. Pentecostalism now has a growing company of persons trained in theology, the biblical languages, church history, missiology, and various areas of practical theology who are willing to engage the issues. We have moved a considerable distance from the time not too many years ago when Pentecostal colleges struggled to find persons with master's degrees in the appropriate teaching fields, and persons with doctorates were even more difficult to find. Indeed the present Pentecostal academy has never been more vigorous.

Generally speaking, few Pentecostals questioned the valuable contributions that Bible scholars and theologians made to Christian theology in the past. A quick review of old Gospel Publishing House catalogs with their recommended lists of books demonstrates esteem for evangelical scholarship, scattered among the mostly devotional titles. Nonetheless, Pentecostals themselves ignored scholarly research for several reasons. First, few were formally trained in theology, the biblical languages, and missiology until after World War II. Early Pentecostal Bible institutes, lacking an academic vision, preferred the devotional study of the Bible and practical courses in order to expedite the student's entry into the ministry. Regrettably, however, Pentecostals have paid a heavy price through the years for minimizing the value of formal ministerial preparation.

Second, Pentecostals have also experienced, along with other Christians, past and present, the conflict between faith and reason. To the apprehensive, the danger is easily detected: those who focus on analytical reasoning will unavoidably lose their spiritual vitality and theological integrity. Can a person be educated and still hear the voice of the Spirit? Some in our ranks today will still answer “no” to that question! But we will prove them wrong! With the assistance of the Holy Spirit, seminary professors must use their skills to weave a tapestry of Christian reflection and training that stretches from the classroom to the Sunday school room, a fabric that can withstand the tearing of the secularism that continually challenges our faith and witness.

Finally, belief in the imminent return of Christ has continued to generate an atmosphere of living in the “last days,” virtually mandating that church leaders invest their resources in the publication of discipleship materials. One may label this a form of anti-intellectualism, since detailed and exhaustive examination of issues has often been excluded. However, it also indicates an important prioritizing of values for service to church constituencies—that is, the grounding of the saints in righteous living in readiness for the impending closure of human history. Eschatological expectation has pushed Pentecostals to excel as practitioners rather than as theorists. And since evangelical scholars have addressed the spectrum of theological subjects for many years, providing trustworthy expositions of Scripture and doctrine (with the exception of certain pneumatological interpretations), why should Pentecostals bother to duplicate their accomplishments? Furthermore, Pentecostal students learned their hermeneutics under the tutelage of evangelical authors, believers with little sympathy for classical Pentecostal truths. At the close of a century of Pentecostal endeavor, however, we can now see the sometimes-bitter legacy of the “evangelicalization of Pentecostalism” that has contributed to the decline of Pentecostal doctrinal and spiritual vitality at this critical juncture in the history of the movement.

Church leaders have begun to appreciate and encourage the endeavors of Pentecostal scholars, recognizing the indispensable contributions that the Pentecostal academy can make. There has never been a brighter day of opportunity for service to the Lord of the Church than today for the Pentecostal teacher and scholar.

Issues facing the church must be analyzed sensitively with prayer, honest reflection, and with an eye to application. The tools for the classroom do not include ridicule and skepticism. Rather, they comprise fidelity to biblical doctrine, skillful analysis, reflection, and meaningful application. Always concerned that doctrine have practical relevance, Paul commissioned Timothy: “what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well” (2 Tim. 2:2). The goal centers on building strong Christians with a prophetic witness in a hostile world.

Therefore, the lectern, like the pulpit, represents a sacred trust and brings with it several challenges: The first relates back to the traditional issue of faith and reason. To approach this conflict, the Pentecostal teacher should begin his or her work with prayer, be characterized by obedience to the Holy Spirit, and reflect an enduring commitment to a life of genuine holiness. In turn, this demonstration of servanthood to Christ signals that their life’s work is a gift to the Church. The leading of the Spirit should be welcomed in one’s pedagogical work. Paul’s remark about the “transformed mind” in Romans 12:2 may bear potential blessings for the teacher working in the academic marketplace. My experience has shown that the Spirit can prompt fresh insights and provide important directions in study and interpretation, nourishing their development so God is ultimately glorified and His kingdom advanced.

But the Pentecostal teacher must also allow reason to play its proper role. Willingness to enter into dialogue with the insights of historians, scientists, biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, psychologists and social scientists, regardless of their secular or Christian orientation, is essential. While not relinquishing Christian presuppositions (that is, the confidence that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” [Colossians 2:2b-3]) and reliance on the authority of Scripture, the teacher/scholar must investigate the evidence as objectively as possible in order to arrive at accurate conclusions. Not surprisingly, the teacher’s perspectives and faith may be severely tested, but unless they scrupulously turn over and examine every stone of evidence in their inquiries, they will fail in their task. Perhaps at this point, they may find new appreciation for Paul’s remark that the Spirit helps us in our weakness (Romans 8:26). Nevertheless, let us not be surprised, but rather celebrate the Spirit’s investment in teaching and scholarship that serves the life and mission of the Church.

The second challenge centers on the context of teaching and scholarship. There are no institutions in which scholars work totally unhampered by the conventional ideas of peers or administrators, be they secular or ecclesiastical. Church-related institutions erect confessional limits that serve as protective hedges around their heritage. This is a natural arrangement since they were founded and are supported to serve the church. Here at AGTS we proudly serve the Assemblies of God as its flagship graduate theological institution. This framework enhances the study of theology and ministry since progress is not hampered by conflicts over assumptions. And yet, we are well aware that the Word of God will always challenge the integrity of human traditions, worldviews, cultures, and methods.

The third and final challenge relates to practical application. The well being of the church that Paul anticipates through the ministry of teaching can be imploded when the union between teacher and pastor and between the academy and the church breaks down. In the ecclesiastical sandbox, teacher/scholars must keep their hands down in the sand to have an accurate feel for the needs of the laity and clergy. The investigation of esoteric subjects may be interesting, but have little relevance for the people we serve. The teacher has no less responsibility for the evangelization of the world and the advancement of the Kingdom of God than any other believer.

As I begin my thirty-fourth year of teaching this semester, I am grateful to the Lord for His calling and blessing, to the wonderful teachers who prepared me, to the thousands of students that I have been privileged to teach at home and abroad, to my esteemed faculty and staff colleagues, and to past and present administrators of this Seminary—notably H. Glynn Hall, Edgar R. Lee, Del Tarr, and Byron Klaus whose gifts of administration have enhanced my own gifts. And last, but not least, I am grateful to the national leadership of the Assemblies of God for the increasing value they have placed on Christian higher education.

On one occasion, Jesus remarked that “when you have done everything you were told to do, [you] should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Luke 17:10). I readily confess that I have only done my duty as a servant, but what a privilege it has been!