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“WHEN THE POOR ARE FIRED UP”: THE ROLE OF PNEUMATOLOGY IN PENTECOSTAL-CHARISMATIC MISSION

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1. As We Begin...

During the one-hundred years of the modern Pentecostal-charismatic movement, it has made many impacts on Christianity in general, but its role in mission is extremely significant. The explosive growth of churches, particularly in the non-western continents, is but one example. As discussed below, there are several important roles of the Holy Spirit that are evident in the mission practices of Pentecostal-charismatic believers.

However, before we take this journey of discovery, it will be helpful to clarify several issues. The first is the complexity of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in the world today. Many have argued that the “fountainhead” of the movement is found in North America at the turn of the twentieth century, especially at the Azusa Street Mission (1906-1909) under the leadership of the African-American preacher William J. Seymour. However, more evidence has been presented to contest this theory, with India and Korea being examples. Also, the stunning “discoveries” of so-called “indigenous Pentecostals” from Africa and Asia appear to support the theory of “multiple fountainheads” for the origin of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity.¹ In fact, we may be arriving at the notion that “the church is charismatic” after all, from its inception.

As I try to present this fastest-growing segment of Christendom, I do so with evident limitations. First, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity is not homogeneous encompassing classical (or denominational) Pentecostals, Charismatic (or Neo-) Pentecostals, and indigenous (or Neo-Charismatic) Pentecostals. The last category is particularly problematic because of its diversity and also some questionable doctrines some groups believe, thus with possibilities to have groups “more Pentecostal, but less Christian”. Second, thus, its pneumatology is not always “standardized”. For example, while Classical Pentecostals are characterized by a unique experience namely “baptism in the Holy Spirit”, many other groups may not necessarily subscribe to such doctrinal statements but are open to the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. This growth and vast diversity also poses a challenge in defining this movement; but,

¹ For a good review, see Hwa Yung, “Endued with Power: The Pentecostal-Charismatic Renewal and the Asian Church in the Twenty-first Century,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* (2003), pp. 63-82.

as I attempt to present this loosely identified groups of Christian all over the world, here is a minimal working definition for our discussion: “Segments of Christianity which believe and experience the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit, including supernatural demonstrations of God’s power, with consequent dynamic and participatory worship and zeal for evangelism.”²

My reflection comes with two main points: Pentecostal-charismatics represent the “poor,” for whom poverty and sickness are a part of their lives, and the core of Pentecostal-charismatic pneumatology is “empowerment” for witness.

2. The Spirit and the “Poor”

2.1 “Religion of the Poor”

Early Pentecostals at the turn of the twentieth century were “poor” in many ways. Most participants of the Azusa Street revival came from the lower socio-economic bracket of society. Urban African-Americans and ethnic immigrants, with “sprinkles of whites,” made up this controversial epicentre of one of the most significant revivals in modern church history.³ Practically marginalized by the society, and sometimes by established churches, they understood themselves to be the eager recipients of the Messiah’s message of hope, who came “to preach good news to the poor” under the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18).⁴ These socially “dislocated” found such strong solidarity among themselves, courageously going against commonly accepted social norms such as racial segregation, that they forged a social and spiritual culture where the hopeless found a space to experience God’s grace and power. This “haven for the disinherited” created a powerful drawing force to make Pentecostal Christianity a “religion of the poor.”⁵ The context of “poor,” as the socio-spiritual context of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, has left several unique contributions.

This characterization is important in that Pentecostalism is a religion *of* the poor, not *for* the poor. Marginalized by existing churches, this group of people coming from the lower socio-economic strata, found themselves to be the main players in the church. Their “primal spirituality” is expressed in the participatory and expressive worship as well as testimony times. The very fact that the Holy Spirit chose to visit them through powerful experiences such as healings, baptism in the Spirit, prophecy, and miracles, as well as drastic conversion experiences, was in itself a social upliftment.

As observed in many non-western continents such as Latin America and Asia, Pentecostal believers have achieved social upward mobility, and this has been viewed as God’s special blessing. This is also the reason why Pentecostal mission has been traditionally focused on evangelism (the spiritually lost) and the poor and marginalized. In many cultures where women are considered not appropriate for ministry, the Pentecostal faith has brought “liberation” for them. One such example is the cell system of David Yonggi Cho. In this highly male-dominant society, Cho organized, trained and empowered women laity to exercise their ministry gifts over vast number of cell groups of Yoido Full Gospel Church.

2 Wonsuk Ma, “Asian Pentecostalism: A Religion Whose Only Limit Is the Sky,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 25:2 (Aug 2004), pp. 191-204 (192).

3 William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, *a Spirit and Power: Foundation of Pentecostal Experience: A Call to Evangelical Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 22 argues: “The uniqueness of the modern Pentecostal revival lies in its very survival – surviving long enough to gain a hearing in the larger church world and to emerge as a significant component of the Christian world”.

4 Scripture quotations are from New International Version.

5 David Martin, *Tongues of Fire* xxxx. Also Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 1992).

2.2 Immanence of God

The “outpouring” of the Holy Spirit in the early twentieth century brought several powerful paradigm shifts. First, their self-understanding changed drastically: from the marginalized to the conspicuously “called” for God’s ministry. Second, it was also seen as a strong eschatological sign for the immediate return of the Lord, and this brought urgency to their divine call to minister. Third, this “apostolic” movement had a strong restorational expectation in the early church. Having inherited the holiness spiritual traditions, supernatural interventions of God, such as healings and miracles, were regularly expected. Even if “classical Pentecostalism” did begin in North America, their beliefs exhibited a strikingly holistic worldview where the supernatural world intersects with the natural world on a daily basis.⁶ Fourth, their unique experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit and other supernatural manifestations made this religion a religion of experience.

This emphasis of God’s immanence (closeness) and the unique religious worldview strongly suggests its potential for an exclusive growth in the non-western world and that is exactly what we have had in the past one-hundred years. Testimonies of healings, exorcisms, miracles and the like are heard daily. Unlike many other Christian traditions, Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality includes the real level of daily human existence, including particularly physical and material aspects, as well as spiritual dimensions. This is a “religion with flesh and bones,”⁷ and compares well with many church traditions where the Holy Spirit and his work is moved to ethical, moral and spiritual levels, quickly bypassing the physical and material dimensions.

3. When They Are “Fired Up” for Service

There are several important studies enumerating distinct characteristics of Pentecostal mission. One of them, for example, is by Allan Anderson, a South African Pentecostal missiologist. His list includes: 1) pneumatocentric mission, 2) dynamic mission praxis, 3) evangelism: central missiological thrust, 4) contextualization of leadership, 5) mobilization in mission, and 6) a contextual missiology.⁸ In order to highlight several important characteristics of the work of the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal mission, I will select several models, including two individuals and several organizations. Not all may overtly identify themselves as “Pentecostal,” but either their link with Pentecostal Christianity or their unique practices reflect its influence. As any real case is a complex matter, duplication of certain elements is unavoidable.

3.1 “Prophethood of All Believers”: Youth With A Mission (YWAM)

Established by a Pentecostal minister in 1960, this powerful mission group has mobilized Christian youth for mission all over the globe. Loren Cunningham, the founder, once saw “waves on a map” which “turned into young people, going to every continent, sharing the good news about Jesus.”⁹ YWAM’s ministry is focused on evangelism, training and mercy ministry with 900 bases (or centers) in over 140 countries, with a staff of over 11,000.¹⁰

6 Among others, this may come under the category of the “Black Root” of Pentecostalism. Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), pp. 18-24 for the Azusa Street Mission.

7 Wonsuk Ma, “Jesus Christ in Asia: Our Journey with Him as Pentecostal Believers” (A paper presented at the Asian Consultation, Global Christian Forum, May 2004, Hong Kong) to be published in *International Review of Mission* (forthcoming).

8 Allan Anderson, “Towards a Pentecostal Missiology for the Majority World,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 8:1 (2005), pp. 29-47.

9 “History of YWAM” (http://www.ywam.org/contents/abo_his_introhistory.htm, 2004).

10 “Introducing YWAM” (http://www.ywam.org/contents/abo_introduction.htm, 2004).

The most significant “Pentecostal” tradition observed in YWAM is the “liberation” of ministry from elite clergy to the hands of every believer. For Pentecostals, one of the most important passages is Acts 1:8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The coming of the Holy Spirit (or “baptism in the Spirit” as they call it) is for empowerment, and empowerment is for witnessing. Cunningham had difficulty in convincing his own Pentecostal denominational leadership to envision mobilizing youth for mission. Its training program practically aims to turn the “ministered” to the “ministering” believers. The life-changing testimonies of participants are heard almost daily. In order to be a “missionary” in this organization, what is required is one’s willingness to give time and talent in mission, be it a week or a year. Now, this tradition of “democratization of ministry” is being expressed in various creative ways in many parts of the world. In the academic realm, a new expression has been suggested: “prophethood of all believers,” such possibly becoming an active move from the traditional notion of “priesthood of all believers.”¹¹

3.2 God of Healing and Miracle”

David Yonggi Cho, perhaps best known as the pastor of the largest single congregation in the world, Yoido Full Gospel Church, has changed millions of lives throughout his 45-years of ministry. He was born in (1936) and grew up in Korea under an oppressive colonial rule, went through the difficulties of war, and spent a hopeless youth, with a deadly terminal case of tuberculosis.¹² His encounter with Christianity, particularly a Pentecostal-type, is described as follows:

On what was thought to be his deathbed he was visited by a Christian girl who was a friend of his sister. His Buddhist parents had forbidden her to visit their home, but she persisted and gave Cho a Bible, preaching the gospel to him. Soon Cho became a Christian and his health began to improve dramatically.¹³

His radical experience of God’s love and power through healing made him an evangelist of a “good God” who heals and blesses those who seek him. Coming from a Buddhist religious tradition and extremely poor social conditions, his message has been consistently about a God who loves and cares for the daily needs of his people. Stories of God’s miraculous healing, blessing and restoration (of families, relationships and the like) filled the pages of the *Shinang-gye* (World of Faith), once the most popular monthly magazine (both religious and secular) in the country. It impacted not only Christians, but also the entire society as the magazine was read in schools, military camps, prisons, etc.¹⁴ Now he terms this as a “ministry of hope.”

His ministry and theology demonstrates a holistic worldview, including the physical and material aspects of human life, as much as the spiritual level. A bowl of rice and healing of terminal diseases in a poverty-stricken society are as important as the matter of sin and salvation. In the “majority world,” if the most powerful and loving God cannot heal a person, he is not as useful as the ancestor spirits many have been relying on for such needs. God is expected to be the savior, not only after this life, but also during this earthly existence. This is where the work of the Holy Spirit comes in with “signs and

11 Earlier used in James Luther Adams, ed., *The Prophethood of All Believers* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), the expression is recently appropriated to Pentecostal beliefs by Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke’s Charismatic Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

12 Among many biographies of Cho, see Nell L. Kennedy, *Dream Your Way to Success: The Story of Dr. Yonggi Cho and Korea* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1980).

13 Young-hoon Lee, “The Life and Ministry of David Yonggi Cho and the Yoido Full Gospel Church,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 7:1 (2004), pp. 3-20 (4).

14 Myung Soo Park, “Korean Pentecostal Spirituality as Manifested in the Testimonies of Members of Yoido Full Gospel Church,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 7:1 (2004), pp. 35-56.

wonders.” Often the demonstration of God’s power through the Holy Spirit triggers a “people’s movement” or conversion by groups. This partly explains the phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal-charismatic churches all over the world.

3.3 Priority of Inner Change and Evangelism: Teen Challenge

Established by a North American Pentecostal minister, David Wilkerson, in 1958,¹⁵ this drug rehabilitation program has become the “oldest, largest and most successful program of its kind in the world,” with over 170 centres in the United States and 250 world-wide.¹⁶ The “National Institute on Drug Abuse Report” found at their website argues that the drug rehabilitation program of Teen Challenge records a 70% success rate, while most secular programs reach a 1-15% success rate.¹⁷ The programs include residential rehabilitation facilities, seminars among youth for education and prevention and others. The residential program involves a strong spiritual component which underlines the theological assumption that any transformation of a society begins with individuals, and a change in a person begins with his or her inner (in this case, spiritual) being. This inner change involves not only a conversion experience, but also an encounter with God’s reality, often through baptism in the Holy Spirit. For instance, the first entry in the testimony section reads, “John Melendez was spiritually lost and confused on the streets of New York, as a teen and young man.”¹⁸ As human suffering begins with a spiritual loss, the restoration should also begin with the spiritual component of a human being.

The practice of Teen Challenge epitomizes two Pentecostal values. The first is the primacy of evangelism as a Pentecostal mission focus. Driven partly by the eschatological conviction that the Holy Spirit was poured upon them for the last-minute harvest before the return of the Lord, many committed their lives to “reaching the lost.” Synan coined the term “one-way missionaries” to characterize such commitment. Many, particularly young women, left to sail to far countries, understanding that they would never see their loved ones again in their lifetime. They were church planters and evangelists. Everything they did, be it mercy ministry or training, was to achieve the ultimate goal of evangelism and church planting.

The second is the Pentecostal pattern of social ministry. Many of the social ministries were to care for the “poor,” such as girl’s and boy’s homes in India, orphanages in Egypt and many other countries, educational programs in Latin America, feeding and educational programs in India, vocational training schools in Korea, etc. This value is well expressed in a well-known statement: when asked by a fellow Christian in Latin America if there are any social programs among Pentecostals, the answer was, “We *are* social programs!” Although this “care for victims” is not good enough to remove structured evil in this world, Pentecostals have modeled the ministry of Jesus as their paradigm found in Luke 4:18-19.

3.4 Empowered for Witness: Brother Badol’s Story ¹⁹

Brother Badol, as we call him, was a young man who lived in Papasok, a village of the Kankana-ey tribe, deep in the mountains of the northern Philippines. Reachable only by foot, this totally isolated community had served ancestor spirits and many gods for generations. About twenty grass-roofed houses welcome rare visitors, who are by now exhausted from the long mountain hike.

15 David Wilkerson, *Cross and the Switchblade* (New York: B. Geis Associates, 1963) details the story of Teen Challenge.

16 “About Us” (<http://www.teenchallenge.com/index.cfm?infoID=1¢erID=1194>, 2005), accessed: April 27, 2005.

17 “National Institute on Drug Abuse Report” (<http://www.teenchallenge.com/index.cfm?studiesID=3>).

18 “Can a Drug Addict Really Change?” (<http://www.teenchallenge.com/index.cfm?testimonyID=1>, 2005).

19 The full text available in Julie C. Ma, *Mission Possible: The Biblical Strategy for Reaching the Lost*, Regnum Studies in Mission (Paternoster, 2005), pp. 18-22.

Badol and his wife lost their two young children on the same day. A simple fever took both lives. As advised by village elders, he offered animal sacrifices to appease the angry ancestor spirit who took them. During this time, a Christian worker visited his community once in a while and introduced a God who made pine trees, pigs and humans. He told them that this God loved everyone dearly, and that he also hears prayers, even if there is no animal offering.

Badol and his wife soon had two new children, but they also died young, following another epidemic which took many lives in the village. He decided to try this new God who seemed to be quite different from the spirits he had served. Of course, this was never easy, as the entire village expected him to be punished by the spirits, as the two began their strange new worship in their house. Very soon, a neighbor quietly asked him if this new God could heal his dying child. Badol laid his hand upon the motionless baby and prayed in the name of Jesus who had given life to her. The next Sunday, the entire family, with the now recovered baby, joined the “church.” Badol believed that the Holy Spirit came not only to save him from darkness, but also to empower him so that he could share the gospel with effectiveness. In fact, the villagers regularly asked him to pray for the sick, and most of them were healed miraculously.

About fifteen years later, everyone in Papasok serves this new God who can heal the sick. Badol and his wife had ten more children and none died. He visited nearby villages and shared this good and powerful God with them. Because of this missionary work, seven villages have their churches.

This story from our place of ministry is representative of millions of Pentecostal-charismatic believers all over the world, who are never properly recognized as “ministers” or “missionaries,” and yet, are faithfully and powerfully carrying out God’s call for mission. The coming of the Holy Spirit as promised in Acts 1:8 has been understood as “Pentecostal missiology”: The Spirit calls, empowers and sends his people to the ends of the earth to be his witnesses. The Holy Spirit, whom they experienced through healings, miracles and empowerment, is also expected to perform miracles and healings. Even the promise of the Lord for supernatural power as recorded in Mark 16:15-18 is understood in the context of mission:

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

3.5 “The Spirit Who Makes Us One”: Azusa Street Mission

Among the many challenging traditions observed in this renewal movement, the work of the Holy Spirit to remove human barriers is distinct. This incredible counter-cultural phenomenon against the social norm of the day appeared on two fronts. The first was the multi-racial composition of the mission. Under the leadership of an African-American holiness preacher, twelve leaders were an equal mixture of black and white. An observer, who happened to be Seymour’s teacher, reported the eruption of this spiritual movement in a distasteful flavor:

Men and women, whites and blacks, knelt together or fell across one another; frequently a white woman, perhaps of wealth and culture, could be seen thrown back in the arms of a big “buck nigger,” and held tightly thus as she shivered and shook in freak imitation of Pentecost. Horrible,

awful shame! Many of the missions on the Pacific coast are permeated with this foolishness, and, in fact, it follows the Azusa [sic.] work everywhere.²⁰

However, this congregation where “the ‘color’ line is washed by the blood”²¹ is a powerful demonstration of what the Holy Spirit can do in a complex and troubled world. The second was the ecumenical nature of the mission. The participants of the Azusa Street revival came from a variety of Christian traditions. Stories abound about how a visitor, theologically suspicious, was overwhelmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit and ecclesial differences suddenly disappeared. This ecumenical potential was again presented during the Charismatic renewal when “Spirit-filled” members of various churches (often from mainline churches, including the Roman Catholic Church) were able to celebrate common faith with genuine Christian love and appreciation.

However, this unique demonstration of the Spirit’s work short-lived, at least in the Azusa Street revival. Soon, various Pentecostal denominations were organized, often along racial lines. Also, the ever-increasing number of Pentecostal-charismatic congregations from splits remains as a testimony against its spiritual tradition. However, the recent spread of the “Pentecostal” practices (or culture) in singing and worship has reminded us of its potential to bring a divided humanity (including the church) together through the Holy Spirit.

4. As Concluding...

This purposefully brief presentation incorporates narratives (to be truthful to the Pentecostal testimonies). The role of Pentecostal-charismatic churches and believers in fulfilling God’s mission will become increasingly important in the coming years. Particularly significant will be the role of the non-western churches, which I represent, with their explosive growth and increasing challenges. This will require the active exchange of experiences with the members of the world church.

The highlighted strengths are shared, not to argue that the Pentecostals have at last found the secret formula for world evangelization, but to humbly present to the church community at large, that the Lord has brought this movement with its unique set of gifts to the larger body of Christ, particularly in fulfilling God’s missions mandate. The one hundred-year history of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement is an unfortunate combination of the Spirit’s empowerment and human shortcomings, and we Pentecostals know this all too well.

As a “new kid on the block,” Pentecostals have much to learn from the historic churches with their rich histories and traditions. At the same time, the rise of a new movement (particularly the renewal type) such as this itself serves as God’s reminder to his people of his missionary mandate to the world. If the Pentecostal-charismatic movement can serve this purpose by strengthening and renewing the body of Christ through its healing and restorative potential, its primary historical calling is fulfilled. May this be the case by the help of the Spirit. Thus, come Holy Spirit and empower us for your mission!

20 Charles F. Parham, “Free-Love,” *The Apostolic Faith* [Baxter Springs, KS] 1:10 (December 1912), pp. 4-5.

21 Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street*, foreword by Vinson Synan (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1980), p. 54.