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The Society for Pentecostal Studies at 50 Years

Ways Forward for Global Pentecostalism

Global Pentecostalism is the major renewal stream of world Christianity today. Some may even argue that it is one of the most innovative religions in recent human history. This rise to prominence and the movement from the margins of Christianity to the center of world Christianity has largely occurred in the last fifty years. The history of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS), founded in 1970, has participated in, mimicked, and challenged this movement during the same period. When the Society was founded, pentecostal scholarship and theology were often treated with disdain, if not disgust, by the global academy. Over the years, the SPS, working with other academic associations and pentecostal intellectuals, has largely overcome this obstacle and marginalization to raise pentecostal theology and pentecostal studies to an enviable status in the global academy. Pentecostalism can now be said to be an ascendent tradition. This double issue of *Pneuma* is a tour of global pentecostal futures along with a long historical note on the Society that documents, honors, and frames the dynamics within the Society at its fiftieth anniversary.

There are few who could provide the perspective that Glen Menzies does in his essay “The First Fifty Years of the Society for Pentecostal Studies: A Brief History,” a narrative rich with documentation and anecdotes worth preserving in corporate memory. SPS was founded in 1970 at a midday meeting of the Pentecostal World Conference in Dallas, Texas. Scholars, representatives of major fellowships, and others interested in the advancement of pentecostal studies attended this founding event and set the Society into motion. A debt of gratitude is owed to Vinson Synan, R. Hollis Gause, and William W. Menzies, who are rightly honored as the Society’s founders. Glen Menzies, a longtime member of the Society, is the son of William, the Society’s first president and the first editor of *Pneuma*. Glen in his own right has made many contributions in our guild in his three-decade career as a professor and dean at North Central University in Minneapolis. He has also done the Society a great service in narrating the story of our scholarly family. His careful scholarship has brought to the fore of our attention the distinguished role SPS has played over years to support rigorous study of Pentecostalism even as it worked to create a “family-like” atmosphere among those who pursue this scholarship.

We thus dedicate this edition of *Pneuma* to the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of SPS. Over the past half-century, SPS has become the premier global platform for Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals to gather and discuss new knowledge concerning the global pentecostal movements. For this special double issue, we the editors invited eight top scholars from all the inhabited continents to evaluate the state and consider the future of global Pentecostalism. How are Pentecostals working out their future in God in light of the foundational stories of their past and the complex cultural challenges of the present? In their responses, the eight scholars provide splendid analyses of the state of Pentecostalism in each continent and also offer diagnoses of the most important task facing the movement in the future. The key insight in their prognoses of the future is this: Pentecostals need to transform their practices, ideas, institutions, and theologies to live into a multicultural future in the light of the pentecostal narrative of Acts 2. Each of the authors reached this conclusion from different starting points.

Collectively these essays give us insights into the theological and sociological “weight” of Pentecostals all over the world. Being pentecostal is defined by the emphasis one puts on the Holy Spirit, but researchers differ about how much and what kind of emphasis is needed in order for someone to be considered pentecostal or charismatic. Scholars sometimes also use different categories of classification, so we warn our readers in advance that contributors do not always use the same terminology and numbers when referring to pentecostal believers.

In terms of overall numbers, *The World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd edition (2020) currently counts 644 million Pentecostals/Charismatics worldwide, including all the members of Pentecostalism’s 19,300 denominations and fellowships as well as all charismatic Christians whose primary affiliation is with other churches. This is 8.3 percent of the world population, so that one in twelve persons today is a pentecostal or charismatic Christian. Looking at the current global distribution of pentecostal/charismatic Christians, the *Encyclopedia* counts 230 million in Africa, 195 million in Latin America, 125 million in Asia, 68 million in North America, 21 million in Europe, and 4.5 million in Australia and Oceania.¹

Douglas Jacobsen, in *The World’s Christians*, 2nd edition (forthcoming 2021), provides a somewhat different perspective, dividing the movement into three categories rather than just two: (1) Pentecostals proper (members of explicitly

1 Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 6–8, 26.

pentecostal churches and congregations); (2) charismatic Christians (pentecostal-oriented Christians belonging to nonpentecostal denominations or congregations); and (3) a pentecostal *penumbra* consisting of people who have been deeply influenced by pentecostal spirituality but not enough to be considered fully pentecostal (many spirit-conscious Evangelicals would fit here). Jacobsen also treats Pentecostalism as a distinct Christian tradition alongside Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants whereas the *Encyclopedia* describes Pentecostalism as a diffuse movement that overlays Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism rather than being a separate and parallel Christian group. Using this different categorical grid, Jacobsen counts about 450 million pentecostal and charismatic Christians worldwide, but he then adds another 200 million or more who are part of the pentecostal-influenced penumbra, which brings Jacobsen's numbers and those of the *Encyclopedia* roughly into alignment with each other.²

Concerning the staggering growth of Pentecostalism over the last 120 years, the authors of the *Encyclopedia* state, in their list of ten “notable findings” for this massive volume, that “Pentecostals/Charismatics, less than 1 million in 1900, will likely be 1 billion in 2050.”³ The overall growth pattern of Pentecostalism has followed a fairly standard population curve with relatively modest growth taking place up until the middle of the twentieth century, and exponentially increasing growth thereafter. For many decades the primary factor in pentecostal growth was the gaining of new adherents. At present, a significant portion of Pentecostalism's growth is due to high birth rates within the global pentecostal population.⁴ As the numbers above demonstrate, Africa has emerged as the continent that holds the largest share of global pentecostal population, and this achievement represents a remarkable growth.

Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu's essay, “I Will Leave Not Leave You Orphaned: Global Pentecostalism and the Future of World Christianity,” argues that the best way to evaluate the state of Pentecostalism at this moment is to examine the distinctive contributions of the global movement to the making of world Christianity, a network of cultures and peoples experiencing the outpouring of God's Spirit on all flesh. He puts it this way: “The movement of the Holy Spirit that we refer to as pentecostal/charismatic is rooted in a global promise that

2 Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians: Who They Are, Where They Are, and How They Got There*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley/Blackwell, 2020).

3 Johnson and Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 5. The *Encyclopedia* considers 901,000 Pentecostals/Charismatics in Africa in 1900 on account of their spiritual practices, even prior to the events in Topeka (1901) and Los Angeles (1906–1909).

4 This is especially noted by Jacobsen, who serves on the editorial board of *Pneuma*.

was fulfilled in the life of the early church. This stream of Christianity has transformed the media landscape, and its charismatic leaders have gained iconic status in countries around the world. Through its spirituality, pentecostal religion has changed the way the Christian faith is expressed, how we worship, how we read the Bible, what we sing, and how we even live our lives. The impact of Pentecostalism across disciplines and every conceivable sphere of life, most notably on religion, means the destiny of world Christianity is permanently linked to that of the global pentecostal movement.”

The article by David Daniels III, “Future of North American Pentecostalism: New Diasporas, Denominationalism, Racial Politics, and Post-Secular Sensibilities,” takes up the theme of diversity in the dynamics of world Christianity from a different angle. He demonstrates how diasporas and transdenominations from the Global South are reinventing the North American renewal movement, which is the wealthiest of all pentecostal-charismatic movements in the world. This general, transnational impulse is countered by the particular, historical fault lines of North American communities: racism, racial divisions, and other forms of injustice experienced by minority populations. He posits that the potent combination of racism, materialism, and new diaspora transdenominationalism will deeply condition the trajectory of Pentecostalism in North America. Daniels argues that renewalists should seek ways to work together to address such contemporary social ills as racism and injustice. “Renewalists can extend the culture wars further into the twenty-first century or they can, possibly, participate in the fashioning of a post-secular society where Christian and secular values can be brought into constructive dialogue about the future of the society and the place of the church in that society; possibly, the dialogue will broach the future of humanity and the earth.” In his reasoning, the renewalist movement can begin this process of transforming North America by confronting racial politics.

The theme of migrant Pentecostals renewing Christianity in some of its historical sites is picked up by Simo Frestadius in his article, “European Pentecostalism: A European Past and a Pentecostal Future.” He argues that, given the turning away of Europeans from their Christian heritage and “foundational story,” migrant Pentecostals from the Global South have become valuable in helping Europeans to see their culture in a fresh light and to discern the future of Europe. As he nicely puts it, “Indeed, in some ways the story of Pentecost could become the guiding narrative for European multiculturalism, which some have seen as a failing European project.”

Meanwhile, Asonzeh Ukah maintains that Pentecostalism in Africa is also remaking the continent—albeit in a remarkably different way. And his observation raises the question, what kind of “fire from heaven” or pentecostal ethos

are migrants, new diasporas, and transdenominations from the Global South taking to America or Europe? In “Prosperity, Prophecy & the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Healing Economy of African Pentecostalism,” Ukah argues that Pentecostalism is remaking or unmaking sociopolitical and economic life on the African continent. His position is that while the numerical growth of Pentecostalism in Africa is very impressive, its practices and doctrines about salvation, prosperity, and pastoral authority undermine the socioeconomic wellbeing of Africans. “Pentecostal entrepreneurs have become stupendously wealthy by extracting resources from many sources and concentrating these in a few hands, mainly theirs and those of their immediate family members and collaborators. Commonly generated and owned wealth has not trickled down to church members or the larger society.” He concludes by suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic may be creating a context in Africa similar to that of the Peloponnesian War, in which religion and law were questioned, and that such has the potential to create the context for an uncertain future for a Pentecostalism in Africa that has been noted for its expansion in the past decades.

The story from Australia—“The Restoring of a Prophetic Community: A Vision of the Future of Global Pentecostalism from ‘Down Under’” as told by Jacqueline Grey—is similar to that of Africa. Pentecostalism in Australia is also characterized by the twin issues of growth and the commercialization of the inherited faith. Grey is quick to acknowledge that Australian Pentecostalism has recently blossomed, benefitting from migration and the boom in Global Pentecostalism. She is also quick to add that the movement is marked by individualized spirituality and “abundant living.” Grey goes on to raise an issue that is characteristic of Pentecostalism in other countries and continents. The Australian Pentecostals’ quest for relevancy, contextualization of the gospel message, and an embrace of the individualistic economic ethos of their surrounding cultures have in many instances led them into commercialism. Sadly, as she maintains, this turn to commercialism has led the movement to abandon the prophetic role of the church.

If Africa and Australia are turning to the capitalist ethos at the expense of the prophetic voice of the Holy Spirit, Nestor Medina’s essay, “An Emerging Social Ethics: The Development of Pentecostalism in Latin America,” generates some hope for the reader. He argues that Pentecostals in Latin America are beginning to take their social role seriously. There is a growing conviction that the Spirit operates also in the social context. This is to say, Pentecostals have come to a point in their understanding of the Christian faith where socially active engagement is interpreted as a work of the Holy Spirit in the world and as a proper response of Pentecostals to the triune God’s commit-

ment to life and justice. In this emerging extension of their Christian faith and spirituality, Latin American Pentecostals are drawing on their pentecostal experiences to reinterpret their relationships with the larger social context and internally. "Pentecostalism is being reconfigured positively to be conscious of its social role, grounded in its local story, able to carve a space for the contributions of women, and ready to celebrate local cultural and ethnoracial traditions."

All these essays have demonstrated the need for scholars to pay attention to local conditions as they study global Pentecostalism or world Christianity. This is precisely what Connie Au does in her essay. She offers vignettes of local analyses, examining the development of Pentecostalism as influenced by globalization, migration, and political freedom in selected Asian countries in the twenty-first century. Her careful essay demonstrates the importance of close study of local political dynamics in any attempt to adequately comprehend Pentecostalism on the Asian continent. Local politics in each of the countries, such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China, is crucial for understanding the logic and dynamic of world Christianity in Asia.

The final essay, "Pentecostalism as a Theological Tradition: An Ideological, Historical, and Institutional Critique" by Wolfgang Vondey, provides a theological capstone that brings us back to a global perspective on Pentecostalism. It closes the circle of our discourse opened by Asamoah-Gyadu's essay on global Pentecostalism. Vondey examines the transformation of Pentecostalism in the last fifty years from an eschatological movement into a religion. He argues that its enormous diversity and varieties of local adaptations notwithstanding, Pentecostalism has a unified global identity. He holds that a worldwide identity has emerged with some theological distinctiveness despite Pentecostals' penchant to focus on localized renewals or renewal movements.

In this task of forging an intimate and distinct pentecostal voice in the global academy, SPS has played an important role in the last fifty years. The Society has literally stood between the past of anti-intellectualism of early members of the pentecostal movements and the possible acidic dissolution of all particular theological voices into a secularized, totalizing least common denominator of religious theo-talk in order to create a space for the emergence of the theological distinctiveness of sophisticated academic pentecostal theologies and interdisciplinary endeavors. The Society for Pentecostal Studies is not only a sign of this distinctiveness, it lives, moves, and has its being in it.

And for this, let us lift up our glasses to honor the Society.

Let us toast the Society for a remarkable journey and achievement, and for future accomplishments.

Ladies and Gentlemen let us toast SPS for being an academic forum that allows great friendships to flourish among us and for a gift of home-sweet-home to many of us in the Christian renewal movement who are committed to the life of the mind.

Finally, let us all stand up and salute the founders of SPS: William W. Menzies, Vinson Synan, and Horace Ward. We are ever in their debt. God bless them.

November 6, 2020, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Society
Nimi Wariboko and L. William Oliverio, Jr.