CHAPTER TEN

TRADITIONALIST OR REFORMIST:
AMOS YONG, PENTECOSTALISM, AND THE FUTURE
OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

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In this chapter, I have the privilege and challenge of providing a distinctly evangelical response to the work of Amos Yong, whom I have known since 1996, when we were both first-year PhD students in theology at Boston University. The challenges facing me as I assess Yong’s work are many, but by way of introduction, allow me to mention three. First, my admiration for Yong’s work presents something of an obstacle to the distance necessary to give a critical assessment that his work deserves. I am responding as kind of an evangelical “outsider” to Pentecostalism, yet there is so much in Yong’s theology, specifically, and in Pentecostal theology, more generally, with which I have deep affinity (even if I am not a Pentecostal in the classical sense). The enticement is therefore to provide more of an insider view than outsider perspective and to be theologically autobiographical rather than provide a fair and honest treatment of Yong’s work. Nonetheless, Yong and I share a common theological pedigree, with our approach to the theological task having been profoundly shaped by our work together and as students of Robert Cummings Neville. I believe that Neville’s influence, especially in mediating the thought of Charles Sanders

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1 My own tradition (Nazarene) has historically sought to distance itself from the Pentecostal movement with its emphasis on certain charismata (especially glossolalia) as a sign and consequence of the infilling of the Holy Spirit in believers’ lives. But, Nazarenes have a common heritage and much in common with Pentecostalism, which the two groups are currently rediscovering. Both grew out of the late nineteenth-century holiness movement and emphasized that believers can experience a “second blessing” (or second “work” of God’s grace subsequent to regeneration) by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Early Nazarenes even referred to themselves as Pentecostals, officially calling themselves the “Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene” from 1907 to 1919. For the common roots of Pentecostalism and other holiness groups see Vinson Synan, The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

2 Neville, who is a philosopher, theologian, and Methodist minister, served as Dean of the Boston University School of Theology during most of the 1990s, including the years that Amos Yong and I were PhD students there.
Peirce (founder of American Pragmatism) for contemporary theology, provides a helpful way of situating Yong’s theology within the complex tapestry of current evangelical theology.

My second challenge concerns a definition of evangelical theology. As church historian Donald Dayton has aptly pointed out, what it means to be evangelical is highly contested, both among those who call themselves evangelicals and scholars who study the evangelical movement. In the 1990s, scholars could identify as many as twelve distinct subgroups within evangelicalism with tremendous diversity among these subgroups. Over the past two decades, with the rise of the independent mega-church, the demise of denominationalism, and the movement of evangelicalism into mainstream culture, evangelical thought has become both more diverse and more diffuse. Nevertheless, I believe that the category of “evangelical theology” remains useful in limited respects, and that it therefore remains possible to broadly identify two general approaches to or styles of evangelical theology—traditionalist and reformist—between which we may situate Yong’s theology. I begin this chapter by outlining these approaches to evangelical theology, especially as they relate to the core commitments of all evangelicals.

The third challenge is the complexity of Yong’s work. Yong has produced a truly startling quantity of books, essays, and edited volumes in his early career. He covers a vast array of subjects including theology and science, political thought, and disability. The reader is tempted to follow either a superficial reading of Yong’s writings, on the one hand, or a select treatment of isolated ideas not representative of Yong. I suggest that there is a discernible methodology at work in his theology, made especially explicit in his earlier writings, that provides the basis for identifying Yong’s theology in relationship to the two chief evangelical camps. Yong’s methodology will be the focus, therefore, of the latter portions of this chapter, where I will argue that Yong, while in many respects aligned with reformist theology, also expresses a deep affinity for traditionalist theology. In so doing, he charts a path for Pentecostal theology that ultimately

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3 Dayton believes that evangelicalism is so complex, especially contemporary evangelicalism, that the term “evangelical” has completely lost its usefulness, leading to more misunderstanding than anything else. See Dayton’s “Doubts about the Category ‘Evangelical’,” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton & Robert K. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

4 There are twelve different groups looked at in Dayton and Johnston’s *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, op cit. Robert Webber identifies fourteen groupings of evangelicals in *Common Roots: The Original Call of an Ancient-Future Faith*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).