The Search for Pentecostal Identity

When the Pentecostal Movement first burst on the religious scene at the turn of the twentieth century, the early participants in the revival self-consciously wrestled with the issue of Pentecostal identity. At times early Pentecostals seemed almost fixated on the issue of identifying what was distinctive about their movement and their particular brand of Christian experience. Frank Bartleman, one of the eyewitnesses at the Azusa Street revival, for example, creatively constructed an apologetic scheme from Protestant church history in order to herald the eschatological significance of the Pentecostal experience for world Christianity. In his writings and ministry Bartleman argued that the modern Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit signaled the culminating events in a process which was readying the church for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, a historical process of divine preparation that started with the Reformation. Through Martin Luther and his recovery of the biblical truth of justification by faith, God restored to the church the personal experience of salvation. Then later, through John Wesley and his recovery of the biblical truth of sanctification, God awakened the church to the life of holiness and Christian maturity. Finally, through the modern day Pentecostal revival, God was restoring to the church the power of Holy Spirit baptism, the miracles of divine healing and the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. This restoration was designed by God to empower his people for the task of world-wide evangelization as the few remaining grains of sand were sifting through the hourglass of human history.

How widely Bartleman’s historical apologetic was known and accepted by other early Pentecostals is a matter of speculation, but the conception of the full gospel shadowed in this rationale pervasively shaped the religious identity of those who were swept into the movement. Those who experienced the early twentieth century outpouring of the Holy Spirit conceived of themselves as God’s end-time people who, by God’s grace, were saved, sanctified and baptized in the Holy Spirit. Pentecostal psychology was shaped at its core by an eschatological intensity and an existential identification with “the full gospel” of New Testament Apostolic Christianity. To be Pentecostal was to be shaped by the New Testament narrative in its fullness.

Of course, the small band of Pentecostal faithful at the beginning of the century could hardly foresee the different historical forces, theological developments, socio-cultural changes, ecclesial political alliances, and Christian renewal movements that would transfigure Pentecostalism into a global movement of some significance by the end of the century. At the end of the twentieth century there is little doubt that Pentecostalism, like the proverbial “grey mare,” ain’t what she used to be. Little scholarly debate can be generated over whether or not
the Pentecostal movement has changed in its identity over nine decades, but the debate is fully charged over what kind of continuities in identity, if any, link the Pentecostals of today with the pioneers of the movement. The articles and review essays in this issue probe various aspects of the questions of what the Pentecostal movement was, what Pentecostalism has become today and what challenges lay ahead for the Pentecostal movement in the future.

The lead article in this issue is Bill Faupel’s Presidential Address, delivered last fall at the 22nd Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies. Professor Faupel’s address, “Whither Pentecostalism?” articulated two alternative visions which are currently competing for the soul of the movement in the United States, although the implications for Pentecostals world-wide can be readily discerned in his analysis. One vision views Pentecostalism historically as an offshoot of Fundamentalism and links its current identity and mission with the fortunes of a reinvigorated Evangelicalism. The other vision locates Pentecostalism historically with the pietistic and experiential forms of faith associated with the more liberal wing of Christianity. Within this latter vision, the current identity and mission of Pentecostalism is linked with the experiential recovery of its pietistic roots and its future service of Christian renewal within the many expressions of the Christian community.

What is fascinating about Professor Faupel’s articulation of this challenge is his analysis of what brought the Pentecostal movement to this fork at the crossroads. Utilizing the theological thought of Charles Briggs, Faupel seeks to show the ideological compatibility between Briggs’ understanding of orthodoxy and the theological convictions of the early Pentecostals. From a conceptual perspective, Pentecostalism is the logical outcome of liberalism--both share an identity with the pietistic traditions of Christianity. This common bond with Pietism shared by early twentieth century Pentecostalism and late nineteenth century liberalism is significant, Faupel notes, because Pentecostalism emerged when the Fundamentalist-Modernist battle was heating up. The leaders of the early Pentecostal movement felt a sense of dissonance with both groups. Pentecostals sought to chart their own way. Expressing their independence from the theological constraints of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, Pentecostals conceived of their identity as “Fundamentalists plus.” The “plus,” however, was the experience of Holy Spirit baptism, belief in present-tense miracles and the practice of walking with the living God. By making such qualifications, Faupel underscores that Pentecostals linked themselves neither ideologically nor historically with the “Orthodoxism” of the Fundamentalists; instead, the Pentecostals demonstrated that their convictions were compatible—whether they knew it or not—with the brand of “orthodoxy” described by Briggs.