Pentecostal Theology in the Twenty-First Century

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Pentecostalism is a relatively recent phenomenon in comparison to its Christian siblings, given that its formal origins only go back about a hundred years. By any means of calculation it continues to grow very rapidly in many places around the globe and accounts for a not insignificant percentage of the world's Christians. In a gathering of scholars who specialize in Pentecostal studies, it is not necessary to rehearse the many sources that have exerted influence upon the tradition's identity and thought. Although there are differences of opinion on various points among many of those working on these issues of Pentecostal identity, there appears to be an emerging consensus that despite the enormous cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and theological diversity of those who make up the movement, certain defining characteristics may be identified that many in Pentecostalism share.

If it is true that Pentecostalism is still in its adolescence as a movement,¹ with the many resulting conflicts that such a stage of maturation brings, then one would think that the tradition will at some point in the not-too-distant future enter its period of adulthood. Normally adulthood brings with it a growing sense of one's own identity and raison d'être, an independence, and a host of responsibilities, especially with regard to various dependents — some daughters and sons, others inherited. The nature and significance of Pentecostal theology in the twenty-first century will be determined in large part by how the movement makes the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

In the editorial of the inaugural issue of the Journal of Pentecostal Theology, the history of Pentecostal scholarship was sketched in terms

of three distinct phases.

First there came a generation of Pentecostal scholars who completed graduate theological programs in an environment which did not encourage nor even perceive the viability of interaction between Pentecostal faith and critical theological scholarship.²

One could perhaps say that these scholars received their theological training despite being Pentecostal. The most one could do in that environment was to undertake research on a topic or issue of some relevance to the tradition. But more times than not, even this luxury was denied with the unspoken suspicion that the individual scholar in question could not be sufficiently objective.

A second generation of Pentecostal scholars found opportunity for the first time to bring their Pentecostalism to bear upon their graduate research, but only in the area of descriptive historical study or social scientific analysis of the Pentecostal movement.³

One of the best known and earliest such study was that of Vinson Synan on the history of the Holiness-Pentecostal movement in the United States.⁴ But a variety of such works could be cited here as well.

Now Pentecostalism is witnessing the rise of a third generation of theological scholarship, in which the distinctives of Pentecostal faith are informing critical theological research across the entire range of theological subdisciplines.⁵

Among the earliest such attempts were Ronald Kydd's Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church,⁶ Roger Stronstad's The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke,⁷ and Harold Hunter's Spirit Baptism: A Pentecostal Alternative.⁸ Now, despite the best efforts of William Faupel, and Peter Hocken before him, it is difficult to keep up with the many theses and dissertations that either address Pentecostal topics or take a Pentecostal approach to a given topic.

If the assessment of that inaugural editorial was anywhere near the mark, the last few years have perhaps witnessed the emergence of still