Response

Pentecostal Seminaries are Essential to the Future Health of the Church

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After approximately one hundred years of Pentecostal history in North America, there are currently four seminaries and university divinity schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) that may be considered Pentecostal/Charismatic.1 These four schools are Church of God Theological Seminary, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Oral Roberts University’s Graduate School of Theology, and Regent University’s School of Divinity. A fifth institution, the Charles H. Mason Theological Seminary, is sponsored by the Church of God in Christ, but is a constituent part of a larger seminary that, according to school officials consulted for this study, is not distinctively Pentecostal as a whole. A sixth school, Urshan Graduate School of Theology (United Pentecostal Church), is exploring candidate status with ATS. It is important that we define the entire universe of ATS-accredited Pentecostal seminaries (n = 4) so that questions concerning their spiritual integrity and legitimacy can be evaluated on the basis of whether they are based on any research into their actual practices. So far, no such research exists.

Since questions and even attacks do occasionally arise, it is good to present clear and compelling reasons why Pentecostal churches,

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1 Regardless of how one dates the beginnings of the Pentecostal Movement, I have chosen to define Pentecostal seminaries narrowly as schools founded by the classical Pentecostal denominations or by ministries related to the Charismatic Renewal. A further note about definition is that I will use the word Pentecostal to refer to the whole Pentecostal/Charismatic community.
denominations, and ministries should sponsor graduate-level theological *academies*.\(^2\) Regardless of whether these are called seminaries, divinity schools, or some other name, it is important for such schools to have a very clear sense of mission. One of the most fundamental reasons for the existence of such accrediting agencies as ATS is to keep seminaries focused on their special purpose of training ministers and doctors of the Church. For that reason, the leaders of ATS, like its executive director Dan Aleshire, will often be quoted as asking fundamental questions about the value and purpose of a seminary education. Such self-questioning is to be applauded, not taken as evidence of declension.\(^3\)

**Institutional Shortcomings of Seminaries**

In order to stay focused on their particular mission, seminaries must regularly recognize their strengths and face up to their shortcomings. A list of the shortcomings of graduate-level academic preparation for the ministry is easy to compile. First, seminaries can never become a substitute for churches. Like lawyers, doctors, teachers, and other professionals, theologically reflective ministers cannot be fully trained in the most practical aspects of their craft within the walls of the academy. Just as the hands-on learning of surgery, courtroom procedure, and teaching must ultimately occur in real contexts of internship and post-graduation practice, the practical aspects of ministry are best learned in practice in real churches. While seminaries can give a theoretical basis for ministerial practice, offer rudimentary experiences in artificial environments, and get students started in ministry through field education opportunities, they can never forget that it is the church that must always do most of the hands-on training of its ministers.

Second, seminaries can never eliminate the role of the non-professional Christian worker. Not all ministers need seven or more years of academic

\(^2\) It is curious that Jon Ruthven questions the validity of postgraduate seminaries, but he allows that university religion departments might be valid: “Perhaps the university, where the rules are somewhat less ambiguous, rather than the seminary, is the more appropriate venue for Christian scholarship.” Since he teaches in a university divinity school, the statement would seem to be self-serving. Does he propose that we ban ministerial candidates from studying in such university schools? If not, then it would seem that the problem is not whether a school is a seminary, but rather, whether it is called one.

\(^3\) It is important to state that ATS accreditation does not impose any kind of dampening on Pentecostal doctrine per se. The organization is far too diverse ever to get away with trying either to impose or suppress any particular doctrine.