Continuing the Critical Tradition of Pentecostalism

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Over twenty years ago, Walter Hollenweger published an article in which he endorsed the growing number of pentecostal scholars as representing a “critical tradition” within the global movement. Such a generation of pentecostal scholars, Hollenweger claimed, was the most recent manifestation of a tradition of self-criticism that had been part of the movement from its inception. As the articles in this most recent issue of *Pneuma* indicate, the tradition of self-criticism continues. Whether the scholarship originates from insiders or outsiders to the tradition itself, it serves a valuable purpose of helping the movement, not simply reclaim its original ethos, but also continue the task of critically engaging theologies in light of that ethos. This task takes on a new urgency in light of the recent discussions at Empowered 21 about how best to transmit the central concerns of the movement to the next generation.

Let me briefly suggest three ways to maintain the critical tradition within pentecostalism. First, scholars must continue to examine the inherited theological vocabulary within the movement. It is clear that early pentecostalism represented the convergence of a number of theological trajectories, whether Wesleyan, Reformed, High-Church Anglican, or Catholic. This is the case for global pentecostalism, not simply its North American expression, as Sloos’ article on the Hebden mission makes clear. As early pentecostals sought to move between scriptural language and spiritual experiences, they instinctively and, at times, unwittingly, employed the theological categories and ideas most familiar to them. Questions remain over what inherited vocabulary provides the best vehicle to transmit the pentecostal message. Some of the early debates, e.g., Finished Work, centered upon which tradition best reflected the message and its scriptural ground.

By examining the inherited theological vocabulary, scholarship will continue the task of situating the movement within the broader streams of Christian tradition. In a sense, this is what Braithwaite’s article attempts to do by asking how Seymour interpreted Parham’s phrase “Bible evidence” with respect to...
Spirit baptism. Did the inherited vocabulary of love from Wesleyan-holiness sources and its implications of moral transformation alter the way Seymour understood “evidence” in the way it seemed to alter Minnie Abram’s understanding? How did early pentecostals negotiate the conceptual space between, at times, competing theological descriptions? These questions move the critical task forward by helping each generation see how pentecostals sought to mine scripture, tradition, and spiritual experience as part of their restorationist agenda.

Second, scholars must move beyond the immediate decades prior to the emergence of pentecostalism and ask what broader cultural and intellectual antecedents early pentecostals may have embraced. McCall’s article returns to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Scottish common sense realism entered the “American experiment” through thinkers like John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Common sense realism was birthed by Scottish philosophers in reaction to Hume’s skepticism and thus it represents how the Enlightenment impacted early America. In addition, British and American revivalists like John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards were advocating for a moral sense in dialogue with individuals like Francis Hutcheson that thrust affectivity into the center of the conversation. When Coombs’ dialogue piece engages James K.A. Smith to talk about an implicit “affective epistemology” within pentecostalism, he is retrieving an intellectual current from eighteenth-century revivalism that pentecostals embraced whole-heartedly. Even though the current may have originated in North Atlantic intellectual traditions, the emphasis on affectivity and the validity of emotions fit well with the embodied worship and orality of early pentecostalism’s “black root” and explains in part how it became a “religion made to travel.” Continued investigations of intellectual and cultural antecedents will help pentecostals begin to unravel the cross-currents within the movement and how best to maintain them.

Finally, the more scholars learn about the inherited vocabulary and cultural ferment out of which early pentecostalism emerged and early pentecostals theologized, the better positioned pentecostalism will be to engage other voices in the contemporary discussion. As Richie’s article suggests, pentecostals in North America can and should engage in a constructive dialogue with President Obama on U.S. policies toward Cuba. Richie does this by engaging Obama’s “favorite” theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, whose Evangelical and Reformed Church became part of the United Church of Christ denomination that formed Obama in Chicago. Richie’s article attests to the emerging