Douglas Petersen


Not by Might Nor by Power: A Pentecostal Theology of Social Concern in Latin America was first published by Regnum in 1996 based upon Douglas Petersen’s doctoral thesis at the Oxford Center for Mission Studies. The book was well received within academic Pentecostal and missionary circles and was subsequently named as one of the important books of the decade (1990–200) by the International Mission Bulletin.

Petersen currently serves as professor of world missions and intercultural studies at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa California. His text is largely based upon his research and experience while serving as the president Latin America ChildCare (LACC) which he cofounded in 1977. LACC quickly expanded into 22 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean providing basic necessities such as food and medical assistance to 100,000 children in 300 schools.¹

Petersen is a member of the Assemblies of God Pentecostal denomination and thus writes his text as a convinced and militant insider. By contrast, most sociologist and anthropologists who have written on Pentecostalism have done so as outsiders or at best as “observer participants” which has limited their knowledge of Pentecostalism to a social and cultural phenomenon (ix). Petersen’s insider status enables him to dig much deeper into the cultural, theological and supernatural aspects of Pentecostalism, with the ultimate goal of arriving at a Pentecostal theology for social action.

Petersen begins his project in chapter one by mapping out the historical backdrop of Pentecostalism emerging from Azusa street along with its theology of social change and empowerment. In chapter two he concentrates on the development and spread of classical Pentecostalism in Latin America. Chapters three and four deal with how classical Pentecostalism has been indigenized within the Latin American context. Chapter five: “Latin America ChildCare: A Case Study In Pentecostal Praxis” is the culmination of the previous chapters into a real world example viewed as a case study.

Petersen begins chapter six by summarizing the previous five chapters:

“The previous chapters have demonstrated that Latin American Pentecostals, indigenous and autonomous in nature, practice a social ethic as part of their faith. However, despite considerable informal, mutual assistance and

¹ http://religion.vanguard.edu/faculty/douglas-petersen/.
some structured programs intended to meet the material and social needs of specific groups like children, single-parent heads of families and prison inmates, little effort has been devoted to the formulation of a Pentecostal social doctrine” (186). This is Petersen’s ultimate aim with his text, the formulation of a Pentecostal social doctrine.

To this end Petersen argues for a hermeneutical circle as the answer. He begins by using Juan Luis Segundo’s definition: “the continuing change in our interpretation of the bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal” (188). The process is provoked by having a profound question which causes traditional interpretations of scripture to be lacking. In seeking out the answer a fuller and deeper biblical exegesis must be undertaken. And thus “the profound question from the encounter with the context triggers a more profound understanding of the bible” (189).

Petersen lists six conclusions of adopting this hermeneutical circle:

1. The first step for all participants in social service and social action ministries is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
2. This radical spiritual overthrow that takes place in people’s lives thrusts them into the world as agents of change.
3. Pentecostals who have received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit can expect this empowerment to motivate them towards evangelism and social justice.
4. The tension of the present order of the kingdom and its final consummation is the key to understanding the ethics of love, justice, mercy and peace.
5. The actual social context is not a starting point. Rather it is the point of insertion into the ministry process as a part of the radical spiritual transformation Pentecostals have undergone.
6. The emphasis of Pentecostals in social ministry should not be exclusively on the poor but on human need in all its forms (224).

The greatest weakness of the text is that Petersen spends the first five chapters (about seventy five percent of the text) giving the background for his thesis before presenting his actual argument. Spending so much time setting up the problem and context before actually presenting the answer may cause many readers to become disinterested and fail to finish reading the text. Instead of spending so much time developing the background Petersen could have spent more on drawing out the implications and practical applications of his thesis.

Nevertheless, Petersen’s central purpose to map out a Pentecostal social doctrine is of extreme importance. There can be no debate that there is a need