J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu

Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context,

J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu is Professor of African Christianity and Pentecostal Theology at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana, and one of the most significant scholars of African Pentecostalism. The current work continues Asamoah-Gyadu’s investigation of what he calls “pneumatic Christianity” in Africa. While his first study on this form of Christianity, African Charismaties (Brill, 2005), focused on the development of what has been described as the “prophet-healing” section of African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Ghana, the current work focuses on neo-Pentecostalism in Ghana. In addition to two forewords, the book has nine chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter 1 situates African neo-Pentecostalism as a renewal movement in contemporary African and world Christianity. Chapter 2 deals with the experiential nature of Pentecostal worship, which “as a continuous experience in the anointing of the Holy Spirit is ... the heartbeat of Pentecostal Christianity” (20, emphasis in original). This experiential worship is expressive, expectant, dynamic and interventionist, demonstrating signs of the presence of the Spirit among worshipers. The signs of the presence of the Spirit are demonstrated through speaking in tongues, healing, prophesying, among others. This chapter is an insightful exploration of the nature and context of African Pentecostal worship; it would have benefited from engaging the work of African liturgical theologian, the Nigerian Roman Catholic Spiritan priest, Elochukwu Uzukwu, who has extensively engaged the experiential nature of African Christian worship: Liturgy, Truly African, Truly Christian (1982) and Worship as Body Language (1997)).

Chapter 3 discusses the prayer life of neo-Pentecostals in Ghana. This prayer life is expressed especially in settings such as “live worship, prayer vigils, revival services, and evangelistic crusades” and “healing camps and centers” (36). Christians form prayer teams, known as “prayer warriors,” and sometimes select places such as forest and hills for prayer. This chapter on prayer is titled “Jericho Hour,” inspired by the weekly prayer service started by Bishop James Saah of Action Chapel International, Ghana, in 1998. Chapter 4 discusses Pentecostal ecclesiology using the expression “12/70 Shift.” The 12/70 shift is a way of discussing the differences between the ecclesiology of Pentecostal and historic mission churches. The 12 represents the 12 apostles of Jesus and is also a metaphor for the clericalism of the mission churches. Asamoah-Gyadu points out that, in Pentecostal ecclesiology there is “democratization of charisma,” the
ministry of the church is apportioned according to spiritual gifts rather than clerical ordination. This democratization of charisma is analogous to the additional seventy disciples Jesus sent out to ministry (Luke 10). Thus ministry is not limited to the twelve apostles (clerics) but is the work of all, depending on the gifts of the Spirit. However, given that neo-Pentecostalism appears to see itself as replacing rather than complementing the historic mission churches, one may wonder about the propriety of using the 12/70 metaphor.

Chapter 5 deals with the interpretation of giving in Ghana’s neo-Pentecostalism and is one of two chapters in which the author is critical of neo-Pentecostalism. Giving in the forms of tithe and offering in neo-Pentecostalism is often seen as means of occasioning blessing or “open doors.” Asamoah-Gyadu describes neo-Pentecostalism as having a transactional rather than a sacrificial understanding of giving (79). Transactional understanding of giving views tithes and offerings and other gifts to the church as means to entice God so that God may bless the giver. This view of giving, Asamoah-Gyadu avers, is similar to the sales of indulgences in the Middle Ages where salvation was sold to the highest bidder. Chapter 6 addresses the thorny issue of prosperity or health and wealth gospel central to neo-Pentecostalism. While not denying that the gospel preaches health and wealth, Asamoah-Gyadu insists that emphases on health and wealth need to be tempered by the theology of the cross, a theology that demonstrates that the Christian life is not always rosy.

Chapter 7 deals with the issue of anointing in neo-Pentecostalism. Anointing is the mediation of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit through the use of oil, especially olive oil, but it also describes the manifestation of the power of the Spirit in Christian individuals, especially for the purposes of performing ministries such as healing and preaching. Chapter 8 deals with the perception of the Eucharist or Holy Communion as miracle meal. Unlike historic mission churches that see the Eucharist as a means of participating in Christ, neo-Pentecostalism sees it as manifesting the power of the Spirit of Christ for healing and breakthroughs.

In Chapter 9, Asamoah-Gyadu argues that African Pentecostalism has grown because of its perception of the Bible. Unlike the West, which has allowed academic study to vitiate its perception of the sacred and supernatural dimensions of the Bible, African Pentecostals in particular and African Christians in general still maintain high regards for the supernatural provenance and effects of the Bible. This trust in the Bible enables neo-Pentecostals to see it as talisman and reliable guide to their lives. In the conclusion of the book, the author states his conviction that the growth of neo-Pentecostalism in Africa is powered by the Spirit and gives five ways by which we may be certain that the Spirit is present among Christians. Where the Spirit is present, the author affirms,