The Living Tradition of Pentecostals and Charismatics

Nostalgias, Shibboleths, Histories, and Identities

Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity are geographically, theologically, and socially diverse, making simple identification and categorization of their histories, doctrines, and practices difficult. In fact, attempting to establish a singular origin or history of the modern pentecostal movement is misguided. Although the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles remains arguably one of the most influential of these early events, especially in the USA, historiographers continue to discover data from around the globe about numerous revivals occurring in the nineteenth century or in the first decades of the twentieth century. In many cases these revivals not only predated the events of Charles Parham in Topeka, but many of them were also independent of Azusa Street. While the various revivals held in common a renewed emphasis on the teachings about and manifestations of the Spirit, they also exhibited a range of theological opinions on how to understand these phenomena. Thus, the various catalysts that contributed to the development of early Pentecostalism are not so easily reducible.

Scholarly evaluations of the movement have been well aware of this diversity, which, incidentally, continues to expand. Nevertheless, this has not prevented the reification of overly simplified summaries. These abridged histories frequently occur in popular-level assessments and may include caricatures that exaggerate certain aspects of the movement, such as the emotionalism of its adherents, their economical deprivation, and their lower than average educational levels. Equally misleading are some nostalgic histories that presuppose that all early Pentecostals held univocal views on distinctive theological doctrines and practices—views that are assumed to be identical to those of the contemporary classical pentecostal denominations. At best these reductionistic theories fail to appreciate the rich and thick diversity of the movement, and at worst they have the effect of calcifying the tradition into a short list of embattled shibboleths.

Scholarship on Pentecostalism, therefore, including the critical tradition within the movement, is vital for the continued health of the tradition. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, ongoing arguments are essential for living traditions.
tions. “A living tradition,” writes MacIntyre, “is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.” When a tradition becomes fixed or static, “it is always dying or dead.” It should be noted that scholarly assessments are not immune to the ailments of codification. Received academic views that are accepted as the definitive account are rarely interrogated and can be treated as though they were unassailable.

In the spirit of perpetuating a living tradition, the articles in this issue contribute to the ongoing argument concerning the history and theology of modern pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. Jon Bialecki, lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, opens the issue with an analysis of the effects of global Pentecostalism on the development of the missionary theories and practices of the so-called “Third Wave.” Although a significant amount of work has been done on the influence of North American Pentecostalism on global Christianity, less work has been conducted on the influence of global Pentecostalism on movements in the USA. Utilizing existing literature, interviews, and archives, Bialecki identifies that leaders in the Fuller School of World Missions, particularly C. Peter Wagner, adjusted their thoughts and pedagogy regarding missionary strategies after witnessing the growth of global Pentecostalism vis-à-vis evangelical missionary efforts in the same geographical regions. Special attention is given to John Wimber’s role in actualizing the renewal and revitalization of Third Wave church growth theory.

David M. Gustafson, associate professor of mission and evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, offers an intriguing contribution to the pre-Topeka historiography of a distinctly pentecostal form of American Christianity. He focuses on the life and work of August Davis, a leader of a group of Swedish Americans known as the Free-Free—an early branch of the Evangelical Free Church of America. Gustafson notes that Davis taught that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was a second work of grace and that he and his devotees were known for exhibiting a variety of pentecostal-like phenomena. Davis’s ministry had other hallmarks of early Pentecostalism, including the approval of female ministers. All of this occurred between 1885 and 1900. Furthermore, Gustafson highlights a chain of influence from Davis to certain Swedish-American Pentecostals in Minnesota and South Dakota.

Venturing into the much-chartered topic of the life and thought of William H. Durham, Christopher Richmann challenges the received wisdom of pentecostal historiography on this seminal figure. Although he acknowledges

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2 Ibid.