SURE SUGGESTED AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH IN PENTECOSTAL STUDIES

by Russell P. Spittler

Surely it can be argued that the term "Pentecostal studies" is a contradiction in terms. Although academic achievement marked some of its early leaders, the classical Pentecostal movement showed considerably more strength in the renewal of piety than in the advancement of learning.

Pentecostals have made better missionaries than theologians. They write pamphlets, not books—tracts, not treatises. When a Pentecostal book is published, it will reflect more likely personal testimony than reasoned argument.

Such experientialism has its strengths. But one weakness is the emergence of a significant religious tradition without, really, a literature. Walter Hollenweger has been right to speak of Pentecostalism as an oral, pre-literary culture. It's worth recalling that only 30% of the world's people can read anyway.

Russell P. Spittler (Ph.D., New Testament, Harvard University), is Associate Professor of New Testament and Associate Dean for Academic Systems at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. Dr. Spittler has served as president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies and currently is executive secretary of the Society. Dr. Spittler, an ordained minister in the Assemblies of God, delivered this address at the Society's 1982 meeting.
Correct also is my esteemed colleague, Jack Rogers. Recently, he described in *Theology News and Notes* (the Fuller Seminary alumni/ae publication) "The Search for System: American Theology in the 1980s." Cataloging major recent movements in theology, Jack explains an omission: "Let me pause to explain," he writes,

why I have not mentioned many of the really significant movements of religious experience which are affecting millions of Americans. Why, for instance, have I not mentioned charismatic theology? The reason is that its leading exponents contend that it is not a theology....

Energetic movements of religious experience influence existing theologies and modify them with new insights. But they are also dependent on basic, more systematic presentations of the Christian faith for a foundation which is rooted in a vision of reality as a whole. Experience and reflection need each other.

"Dependent on basic, more systematic presentations...?" How well that describes the classical Pentecostal tradition. As I was preparing this paper, the quarterly letter to ministers of the Assemblies of God arrived from our headquarters. An inserted advertisement urged purchase of the three volume *Dogmatic Theology* of William G.T. Shedd. Curious it is that a century-old Calvinistic classic gets such a semi-official Pentecostal push. Proof too, if any were needed, that we've not yet done much of our own written reflection on our ample experience.

I return to Jack Rogers' point that charismatic experience is not a theology. He is mostly correct. But when Donald Gelpi published a half-dozen years ago a book titled *Experiencing God: A Theology of Human Emergence,* published charismatic theology was born. The work is intentionally American, rising from its one-principle use of the distinctive role of experience in the American philosophic tradition. It is a learned book, some will say difficult, the product of a multi-competent priest who is as much exegete as systematician—but in his heart he knows he's a philosopher of religion.

---
