Pentecostal in Outreach and Social Action: Mission by the Spirit

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The Tension

Throughout its history the Church has wrestled with the tension between evangelistic outreach and social action. On one extreme is a disembodied and dualistic spirituality that equates the world with evil, seeks to escape it, and rejoices in its apocalyptic doom. In this scenario, our mission is simply to save as many souls as possible before Jesus returns. On the other extreme is a social gospel that sees the church’s only mission as making this world a better place. The former makes the world irrelevant, the latter makes the spiritual life irrelevant. So which is it? Is our primary mission to save souls or to serve society? Thankfully, nowhere in the Bible, early Pentecostal history, or thoughtful Pentecostal theology do we find this kind of dichotomy. Rather, these three areas clearly teach a holistic model of evangelism that highlights the multidimensionality of salvation and the Spirit’s role in it. The work of the Spirit involves the transformation of both human beings and all creation through personal salvation and social action.¹ Therefore, debating whether our missional priorities should be weighted more towards evangelism or social concern makes no sense—they are an integrated whole and we cannot fulfill our mission without both. Because of the tendency within Pentecostalism to emphasize “soul-winning” at the expense of social action, this chapter will primarily focus on mission through social action in an attempt to bring a more balanced and integrated approach that is closer to our Pentecostal origins. It is my contention that our Pentecostal beliefs— informs by the Bible, history, and theology—call us to Pentecostal practices that integrate the Spirit’s work in souls and society, evangelism and social action, worship and mission.
Pentecostal scholars generally accept that there is a paradigmatic relationship between the life of Jesus in Luke and the life of the Church in Acts. Of primary importance is the relationship between the empowerment of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21-22) and the Spirit baptism of the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). The descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism prepared him for and propelled him into his mission, and the Spirit baptism at Pentecost does the same for the disciples. Luke’s thesis for Luke-Acts is that if the Spirit of God who anointed Jesus now dwells in the Church, then that same Spirit will inform and enable the Church to do the same works—in fact, “greater works than these”—that Jesus did. So what are these works that, aided by the power of the Spirit, the Church is called to do? After the empowerment of Jesus at his baptism, we see him liberating the poor, marginalized, and oppressed; delivering people from sin, sickness, and evil; and blessing the hungry, the blind, and the hurting (Luke 4:18-19; 7:22-23). In sum, Jesus was anointed by the Spirit to break down social, economic, racial, and gender barriers and to inaugurate God’s reign of love, justice, and shalom in the world. And it is clear that if the Church wants to follow the footsteps of Jesus, then it must do what he did under the power of the Spirit. All this is exactly what we see happen at Pentecost and in the subsequent works of the Church in Acts. The prototype of Jesus’ inauguration and ministry anticipated and laid out the trajectory for the “greater works than these” of the Church, namely, the breaking of barriers and liberation of all peoples through works of justice, equality, inclusion, and demarginalization. As Michael Wilkinson and Steven Studebaker highlight, we have often focused on the charismatic manifestations of Acts 2/Joel 2 at the expense of the social message and liberating work of the Spirit in the text. As we see in Luke-Acts and as we will now see in Pentecostal history, one should always lead to the other.
History

In his teaching and writing, Martin Mittelstadt laments that Pentecostals suffer from “historical amnesia.” This forgetting of our history, combined with the institutionalization and quest for respectability that comes with the growth of a new movement, has led us to overlook the important social dimensions of early Pentecostal history. What we find is a similar pattern to that found in the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus and the Spirit-initiated breaking of barriers in Acts. At Azusa, the Pentecostal experience of being baptized in the Spirit overcame gender, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic barriers in a way that “reembodied” the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit on the early Church. Early Pentecostal leaders gave thoughtful reflection and passionate action to social issues. They developed careful rationales for resistance, nonviolence, and prophetic opposition to systems that catered to the powerful and to agendas that usurped allegiance to the Kingdom of God. What Azusa and our Pentecostal history teach us is that the Pentecostal experience leads us to our mission of bringing, binding, and reconciling people together—even in a world still tainted by patriarchy, racism, sexism, and classism.

Theology and Practice

Part of the problem facing Pentecostals is we have not taken the time to develop a thoughtful theology of mission from within the Pentecostal experience itself and therefore have unreflectively borrowed from fundamentalist theology and its sister, dispensational eschatology. Embracing this theology has put us behind in the area of social concern when our Pentecostal experience and understanding should actually be causing us to lead the way! Informed by Scripture and history, a Pentecostal theology of mission will consider not only one’s “personal Pentecost,” but also the corporate Pentecostal reality that is in line with the work of the outpouring of the Spirit and its social implications as experienced in Acts and at Azusa. In this
way, the initial inward experience of the Spirit immediately pulls us outward—both in our imagination (with regard to eschatological anticipation) and in our participation (with regard to Kingdom inauguration). Our call as a Pentecostal people is to be an eschatological community that is a foretaste of the world to come; this is our mission and the “end” toward which we move. But what might this “foretaste” look like? How can we be Pentecostal in practice when it comes to outreach and social action in our particular contexts?

Thankfully, the same Spirit who inspires our beliefs also engages us in practices congruent with those beliefs. The interplay between belief and practice, worship and mission, is best thought of in the church as the rhythm of gathering and dispersion in which union with Christ through the Spirit leads to mission in the world by the Spirit. As pastors, we must continually remind people that communion with the Holy Spirit is not an invitation to escape from this world; rather, the experience of the Spirit is what enables us to better understand the world and to care for it more deeply. The same Spirit who causes us to long for the day when there are no more tears, sorrow, or pain, is also the Spirit who sends us right into the tears, sorrow, and pain of our world. If our Pentecostal worship is not relevant to the issues facing our world, then we will become an “idle faith” which, to use Miroslav Volf’s imagery, “spins in one place, like a tire stuck in an icy hole.” In order to avoid this stagnation, we must invite people not only to experience a foretaste of God’s future kingdom through the Spirit but also to participate in social action and witness that makes the work of the Spirit credible and tangible.

Specific actions for churches are hard to recommend; we need to be open to the creativity of the Spirit who leads us to social action unique to our contexts. But the general principles that inform all Spirit-led outreach are consistent from Jesus to the early church to Azusa to today. We are to be anticipatory, nonconformist, counter-communities that seek God’s salvation, justice,
and peace by redeeming fallen social structures that are antithetical to the inbreaking of Christ’s rule and reign in the world. The work of the Spirit will cause us to prophetically oppose all forms of racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and ageism—any structures that support the “normal” and punish the “abnormal,” profit the rich at the expense of the poor, or favor the haves over the have-nots. We can do this by resisting unjust legislation, providing interest-free loans to the poor, sharing our possessions, opposing gentrification, aligning with pregnancy care centers, seeking healing and reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples (www.trc.ca), promoting creation care, fighting sex trafficking, exposing economic or environmental exploitation, helping abused women, supporting new immigrants, encouraging equal-opportunity education, advocating for mental health programs, participating in foster care and adoption, and otherwise contributing to endeavors that bring justice, beauty, and flourishing to our communities. How this is fleshed out will be different in the Lower Mainland and the cities from how it will be in rural areas and the Yukon. But as Spirit-led, Spirit-baptized people we should be at the forefront of these kind of barrier-breaking endeavors, for we are all called in our social outreach to participate in the eschatological work of the Spirit which becomes a visible witness of God’s love, rule, and reign in the world. So let us join together in longing and prayer for the day when our Pentecostal churches—being biblically, historically, and theologically informed—are known for outreach and social action that is fueled by the Spirit of Pentecost and is a foretaste of the world to come.
NOTES

1 See Amos Yong, The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 91ff.


5 Yong, The Spirit Poured Out, 137.

6 Simon Chan says that our historical association with dispensationalism has led us to develop a “crisis eschatology” which has had positive results for the mission of evangelism but has caused us to fall behind in the area of social justice (Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 15-16).


BIBLIOGRAPHY

In addition to the books cited above, the following sources are recommended for further reading:


