

Social Responsibility and the Pentecostal Church

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*If you want to help the poor, you must disciple the rich.
If you want to help the rich, you must understand their poverty.
If you want to help both poor and rich, you must believe in the abundance of Christ.
May we His people proclaim and reflect His abundance.*

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Introduction

The relevance and effectiveness of the church's ministry have come under great scrutiny by both sceptics and saints as they wrestle with the harsh social realities around them. As the number of congregations increases there seems to be a corresponding increase in social ills as evidenced by the high crime rate and lack of social cohesion in many societies, the increasing prevalence of HIV/AIDS, the large number of persons living in poverty and the relatively high levels of illiteracy and low levels of technological competence. The question that is frequently asked by us is, "what is the church doing?"

The critique of the church comes out of the expectation that the church ought to make a difference in society but it also arises from those who are of the view that the church needs to justify the need for its presence in society. The Pentecostal community cannot afford to ignore concerns related to its relevance in and impact on the society. The spotlight is on the Pentecostal community because of the growing presence and influence of this group on the religious stage. Pentecostalism is undoubtedly the most important religious movement to have emerged in the twentieth century. The phenomenal growth of the movement has attracted the attention of scholars not only from the field of religion and theology but also the humanities. The doctrines and practices of this movement have been admired and scorned, embraced and rejected, criticized and praised with equal intensity by persons around the world.

One of the areas that has been receiving increased attention by many surrounds Pentecostals and their commitment to societal and community transformation. How do we understand Pentecostal engagement with society, and how are Pentecostals engaging issues of poverty, social justice, community development, gender, and ecology? What impact does theology have in motivating Pentecostals to respond to social issues? What categories best explain Pentecostal responses to social issues in Jamaica? How do they compare to Pentecostal responses elsewhere?

In exploring this issue it is important to give a brief overview of the history and theology of the movement and see how its historical and theological foundations have helped to shape the ways in which it engages the wider community. This reflection must be done by both those who are within the movement and those who are outside looking in. Those on the outside must be willing to examine the movement's commitment to social transformation through lenses of objectivity and openness while those on the inside should not shy away from external scrutiny even as they engage in self-examination.

¹ Quote from the acknowledgements done by Dr Cheung featured in the text presented at The Fourth ATS Theological Forum "He Has Filled the Hungry with Good Things: The Church and Poverty in Asia," sponsored by Asian Theological Seminary and held at the Union Church of Manila February 2008.

Historical Foundations

The historical ambivalence among Pentecostals about their relationship to culture and society needs evaluation. The inauspicious beginnings of the Pentecostal movement at the turn of the twentieth century make its phenomenal growth astounding. It is very difficult to put numbers to this emergent expression of Christianity. According to the *World Encyclopedia of Christianity*, "approximately a quarter of the world's Christians fit this description."² "Remarkably, whereas in 1970 less than 10 percent of Christians identified with Pentecostalism, by 2025, fully one-third may be Pentecostal. Since religious trends typically move at a glacial pace, this is a relatively abrupt shift in the character of the Christian community."³

Early American Beginnings

The movement grew out of the Holiness revival during the second half of the nineteenth century. Social and religious restlessness gave rise to this movement. This revival was an expression of both social and theological discontent among the nation's lower and middle-class groups. The Progressive Era (1870 – 1920) was a period of tremendous social change. The rise of the new middle class and decline of rural island communities (islands where?) created an impersonal society.⁴ Holiness advocates disapproved of the moral decline and growing secularism in mainline denominations and were alienated by the growing wealth and elaborateness of their churches. A spirit of discontent led holiness advocates to form new religious communities committed to the theological doctrine of perfectionism. These former Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists believers were spurred by a deep conviction that they were experiencing a renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit much like the early church experienced in the Book of Acts. The holiness revival spawned zeal for "Spirit Baptism" and for other gifts of the New Testament church such as healing and prophecy. Holiness leaders such as Charles Cullis, John Alexander Dowie, and Albert B. Simpson established healing missions across the U.S. They, like other holiness advocates, believed a new, miraculous era of the Spirit was occurring, which would end in the second coming of Christ.

Pentecostalism took "Spirit Baptism" and the restoration of New Testament gifts one step further. In January, 1901, holiness minister Charles Fox Parham asked the students at his Topeka Bible School to study the Scriptures and determine what evidence might be given of Spirit baptism. Using the Pentecost account in Acts chapter two, they concluded that speaking in tongues was the confirmation of Holy Spirit baptism. This first wave of Pentecostalism spread in the revival that followed, but remained regional, moving into Kansas, Missouri, Texas, and Arkansas.

The Azusa street revival in 1906 signaled the second chapter of the Pentecostals' origins. William Seymour, who studied under Parham in Houston, Texas, carried the message of Pentecost to Los Angeles where he initiated a revival in one of the poorer sections of the city. The revival gathered the "ethnic minority groups of Los Angeles," who found a "sense of dignity and community denied them in the larger urban culture."⁵ From Azusa Street the revival moved throughout the U.S. Holiness leaders from the Church of God in Christ (Memphis, Tennessee), the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), and the Pentecostal Holiness Church (Georgia and the Carolinas), were

² David Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Harold D. Hunt ed. *The Azusa Street Revival and its Legacy*. (Cleveland Tennessee: Pathway Press. 2006), 30-36.

⁵ Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 69.

present at Azusa, and transported its message back to their churches. Diversity characterized their beliefs and theology; Pentecostals ranged from Wesleyan-holiness, to Reformed, and Unitarian.

Pentecostal Theological Tenets

Many scholars also have explained the origins of Pentecostalism by locating the movement within late nineteenth century religious streams. Donald Dayton suggests that the roots of Pentecostalism lie in the emergence of four theological doctrines during the second half of the nineteenth century: personal salvation, divine healing, baptism of the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues being regarded as the initial evidence, and the second coming of Christ.⁶ Dayton traces how these doctrines developed within the Holiness movement and were then taken up by Pentecostals. He stresses both the Wesleyan-Holiness origins, which accented (accentuated?) the perfectionist side of Spirit baptism, and the Keswick-Reformed origins, which emphasized Spirit baptism as a spiritual empowerment in the believer.⁷ These doctrines are really what distinguish Pentecostals from other faith groups within the Christian community.

At best these tenets have injected in the worship and work of the Pentecostal community a level of religious intensity and boldness that cannot be ignored. These same doctrines however, especially when lived out in an image driven, power craven culture have the potential to be distorted.

Early Tension

It is not surprising therefore that Pentecostals' responses to social concerns have been wide ranging. There are those at one end of the spectrum who are of the view that the church should be concerned with transforming the souls of persons while there is an emerging group that holds dearly to the view that religion is no longer just about raising a hand to God. It's also about reaching out a hand to the needy. This range of view is seen in the history of the movement. In the formative years of the movement, Pentecostalism's eschatological fervor tended to blur the meaning of social improvement; why invest in a world that was believed would fade away?⁸

From the earliest days of twentieth-century Pentecostal renewal, both proclamation and social engagement have always served as expressions of Christian mission, but Spirit-filled believers have struggled to define exactly how much social engagement ought to accompany the preaching of the gospel message. "Early Pentecostals both praised and vilified ministries targeting social issues."⁹ The case below bears testimony to this tension.

For example, an early edition of *The Weekly Evangel* celebrated ministry efforts at an orphanage in China and the opening of a school in South America. But four years later in that same periodical (now renamed the *Pentecostal Evangel*), J. Roswell Flower declared that institutional ventures (such as orphanages and schools) were "clearly out of bounds for Pentecostal missionaries serving in 'the last days.' Pentecostal missionaries, he wrote, cannot follow the methods laid down by those who have gone before them, neither can they bend their energies in building up charitable institutions, hospitals and schools as do the denominational societies. ... The Pentecostal commission is to witness, **witness**,

⁶ Dayton, *The Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987), 11, 173-174.

⁷ Ibid 92-104, 104-106

⁸ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen *Distinctives of Pentecostalism – Experience and Theology*, 7.

⁹ Kent Duncan, *Emerging Engagement: The Growing Social Conscience of Pentecostalism*. *Encounter: Journal for Pentecostal Ministry*, Vol. 7 (Summer 2010), pg??

WITNESS. ... It is so easy to be turned aside to do work which is very good in itself, but which is short of the Pentecostal standard. Our missionaries are in danger of this.¹⁰

Pentecostals wanted to break with the traditions of churches that 'had gone before them'. They were consumed with evangelistic passion, which was fueled by an eschatology of urgency. The philosophical dichotomy between proclamation and social action was captured further in a 1933 edition of the *Evangel*,

Frank Madeley, a missionary to China, wrote that he had been asked by a local village to launch a school. He reported that he replied, "We did not come to establish schools, but to preach the gospel." Yet in that same issue, the *PE* celebrates "the magnificent philanthropic work that is done by out-and-out Christians," specifically celebrating Christian relief work done among orphans and widows in Germany, England, India, Egypt, and Argentina. The suspicion concerning the alleged lack of social concern has some theological support in the texture of Pentecostal spirituality and theology.¹¹

It is the presence of this dichotomy that makes the need for a clear Pentecostal social agenda so urgent. For many Pentecostals this clearly defined social agenda would simply serve to put words to their action but for others it would be a call to action. The power and attractiveness of Pentecostalism may be under threat if Pentecostal thinkers do not heed this call for a clearly articulated theology and philosophy of social justice and social action.

The Platform for a Pentecostal Social Agenda

Pentecostals are not lacking in spiritual fervor especially with regards to enacting their rituals. It would appear however that this same passion is not as discernible when it comes on to social justice concerns. Though not all Pentecostals are guilty of this it is cause for concern in countries like Jamaica which boasts a strong and growing Pentecostal community. The way forward is to carve out a Pentecostal social agenda that will, at a minimum, avoid extremes, be Christ centered and Bible based and an agenda that brings together proclamation and practice.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid.

Avoiding Extremes

As Pentecostals seek to articulate and practice their theology of social action care should be taken to avoid two possible extremes. There is the temptation to either embrace an eschatology that leads to un-Christ-like disengagement from the world or to uphold a theology that leads to false expectations and a denial of the presence of evil in the world.

The reality of increasing poverty and misery in the world or growing oppression and exploitation often leads many Christians to a place of hopelessness. Some have given up hope for the world and have assumed a posture of passive tarrying for the Lord's return. This fuels insensitivity to the plight of humanity and the state of the community. This certainly cannot be the posture that followers of Christ should assume. The expectations of the Lord's return should be used as a source of inspiration to all Christians as we seek to partner with God in establishing his Kingdom in the lives of men and women. Our eschatology must not allow us to become so concerned about dates and times that we misuse the time that God has afforded us to make a difference. The hope of the Messiah's return propels us to 'work the work of him who sends us, while it is day for the night comes when no man can work.' (St. John 9:4) This work is twofold, to proclaim the gospel of Christ and to practice the love of Christ in a world that knows great evil. The rebuke that comes from the '1983 *Wheaton Consultation* on the Church's response to human need,' remains applicable to this day. In referring to sections of the Christian community, the document charges that, "There are those who are tempted to turn their eyes away from this world and fix them exclusively on the return of Christ that their involvement in the here and now is paralyzed."¹²

If this is true then it means that the church would be abdicating its responsibility to defend the cause of the weak and maintain the rights of the poor and the oppressed as stated in Psalm 82:3. Lack of involvement ultimately lends tacit support to the existing systems of inequality and oppression. This extreme should be avoided.

There are others who are inspired by a utopian vision which seem to suggest that the fullness of God's Kingdom can be built on earth. This view clearly overlooks or denies the reality of personal and societal sin, a reality that is fully captured in the words of the prophet Amos (Amos 2:6 – 8):

“This is what the LORD says: “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.⁷ They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name.⁸ They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines.”

For Pentecostal ministry to be relevant and effective there has to be an acknowledgement of the reality of evil. This evil is present not just on a personal level but is deeply embedded in political, economic and social structures. Whenever the world is viewed through the perspective of the Divine seer what results is not hopelessness but rather a troubling dissatisfaction of the soul that gives rise to a new vision of the world. It is this Spirit inspired vision that must propel us to not only 'see like Jesus' but also speak and act like Jesus as we become salt and light in the world. It is important to avoid both passivity ('we can't achieve anything') and over expectation ('we can bring in the Kingdom').

The Centrality of Christ

¹² Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden ed. *The Church in Response to Human Need*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1987)

Pentecostal social responsibility should be built on the solid rock of Jesus Christ and an understanding of his saving mission in the world. The church is the body of Christ set apart in the world. Proclamation, witness, and disciple making best define the church's mission. If Pentecostals are to practice social justice, feeding the homeless, empowering the powerless through education and training, providing for the needy, they do so in the name of Christ, for the sake of Christ and empowered by the Spirit of Christ. Our love for God with all our hearts, with all our souls and with all our minds is manifested when the beneficiary of our love is able to say, "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matthew 25: 35-36). We, the instruments of God's love and mercy are to remember the words of Jesus Christ, "...just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). Jesus affirms the concern for the socially powerless and the weak through his words, life and ministry and impressed upon humanity the need to further this, which is understood as the love and reign of God that is seeking to break into our world.

The principles that influence and determine social responsibility ought not to be based on that which is abstract or on cultural or denominational biases. Social responsibility cannot be built on a platform of perceived needs which operate independently of the biblical witness because the life of the church is based upon Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection and his mission of salvation and transformation. In his life and through his death Jesus exemplified compassion for the poor and the oppressed. On the cross, God shows us how seriously he takes justice, reconciling both rich and poor to himself as he meets the demands of his justice. We serve by the power of the risen Lord through the Spirit as we journey with the poor, finding our hope in the subjection of all things under Christ and the final defeat of evil.

The church is blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit who enables, empowers us and guides us to Christ. This is what provides a firm foundation for understanding the character of the social responsibility of the church that is built by Christ and empowered by the Spirit.

The Biblical Imperative

Grant Wacker observed, "Pentecostals are deadly serious about doctrine." If this engagement of social responsibility exists as a legitimate expression of Pentecostal ministry, then it must reflect biblical roots and align with sound biblical doctrine.¹³ Social responsibility must not be viewed as simply a possible option given to the church. When the biblical witness is heard it is clear that the church is given an imperative and also a rationale for social engagement and justice.

The prophet Micah not only echoes the sentiments of the Old Testament prophets but seem to capture a significant and consistent theme in Scripture in outlining that which the Lord requires of the righteous. "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

This text calls the community of the righteous to do what is right for others. In a world that is filled with injustice the church ought to embrace justice and mercy not just as a theological ought but also as daily action. A theology of justice should not only be articulated within the walls of the church but must be expressed in the neighbourhood and the marketplace through loving, compassionate action. "Good news and good works belong together and without good works the good news lacks credibility."¹⁴ Jesus makes it clear in Luke 4:18 that his Spirit empowered mission is about good news

¹³ J. Roswell Flower, *Encounter: Journal for Pentecostal Ministry*, (Summer 2010), Vol. 7: 4

¹⁴ Chris Sugden, *Mission as Transformation*. (UK: Ragnum Books International 1999) 236.

and good works. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Proclamation and Practice

Pentecostals speak eloquently and passionately about the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian church. Their Spirit theology is however often limited to the confines of the sanctuary and reflected mostly in the worship rituals. Jesus, on the other hand, speaks of the Spirit's anointing as marching orders to liberating action in the world. It is about proclamation and practice. The Spirit of Christ urges us to a life of righteousness that will seek to restore people's wholeness, dignity and humanity. If there is no proclamation of the gospel, we 'defraud the poor of the essential truths that God intends to be their great hope and comfort.'¹⁵(Is the preceding a quotation?- Earl) Where there is no Gospel proclamation the poor along with the victims of sin and evil, are destined to a life of limitation and confinement. The powerful, passionate and loving proclamation of the gospel must be at the very core of the church's ministry. Failing this, our commitment to social action will lead only to transitory amelioration of the human plight instead of transformation of the person and society.

Isaiah exposes the inadequacy of the faith of people who place emphasis on loving God, proclaiming God's truths while ignoring man and his plight in the world. Addressing the futility of religious utterances and rituals in the absence of concern for others, the prophet calls the righteous to action.¹⁷ 'Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.' (Isaiah 1:17)

When proclamation is matched with practice then faith comes alive. The church's voice must be supported by our hands and feet as we become the embodiment of the Gospel among the oppressed. Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson provide us with practical ways to become the light of Christ in our communities, in their very simple and accessible volume, *The Externally Focussed Church*.¹⁶ The authors argue that each church should seek to identify the needs of their communities and seek to respond through ministries and programmes. They also advocate for church partnering with existing ministries and or human service agencies that are seeking to accomplish a shared mission in the community. One of the most effective ways to reach people with the message of Jesus Christ today is through real and relevant acts of service. Honest, compassionate service can restore credibility to the crucial message we have to share. To tell the truth, we must show the truth.¹⁷

Pentecostals are being urged to engage in ministries that focus on relief at one end while at the other end paying attention to programmes intended to effect systemic change. This combines relief and development which is the balance needed for transformation. Donald Miller, writing about progressive Pentecostals, offers us a useful array of programmes that can help Pentecostals to balance proclamation and practice.¹⁸ The categories suggested are mercy ministries, emergency services, education, counselling services, medical assistance, economic development, and policy change (public

¹⁵ John Hayes. *Submerge: Living Deep in a Shallow World*. (California: Regal Books, 2006.)

¹⁶ Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson. *The Externally Focused Church*. (Colorado: GROUP 2004.)

¹⁷ Rusaw, 11.

¹⁸ Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostal: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*. (London: University of California Press, 2007), 42.

social policy, legislation – what precisely?). These programmes not only seek to provide food, clothing and shelter but also set out to oppose corruption and injustice while offering education and health services. The aim is to restore human dignity and enhance the quality of the human village.

Conclusion – The Emergence of a New Pentecostalism

"There is a new Pentecostalism emerging, a more meditative movement, a more social justice [oriented] movement, [a movement] more concerned about the outside of the church rather than [only what goes on] inside."¹⁹ This new Pentecostalism must become the new norm for all Pentecostals. Pentecostals can become an irresistible force in God's arsenal when there is a broader engagement in compassionate ministry and social concern combined with a commitment to Spirit filled proclamation, animated worship and holy living.

God is at work in the world through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Christian principles of social responsibility and social justice must be grounded in an understanding of God's action in Jesus Christ and ought not to be regarded as versions of secular or humanist thinking. As Pentecostals seek to become more socially responsible their history and theology should inform and inspire them rather than make them passive and ineffective. Through the application of Scripture, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Pentecostals must seek to understand and read the context in which we (they) exist. It is only then that we can fulfill our God given potential of not simply being a fast growing movement that brags about its numbers but also becoming a new community that partners with God in the transformation of men and women and bring people under the loving and redemptive Lordship of Christ. The next wave in Pentecostalism is the emergence of Spirit baptized believers proclaiming biblical truth, doing good, giving a dream to the destitute and new desires to the downtrodden and distributing hope in the name of Jesus the Christ.

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¹⁹ Robert C. Crosby, "A New Kind of Pentecostal" <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/august/newkindpentecostal.html>

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