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POWER TO THE POOR: TOWARDS A PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

By Ivan Satyavrata

The extraordinary success of the Pentecostal movement is largely due to its outreach to those on the periphery of society. Some see the reasons for this success as due to sociological factors; others see it in essentially the "power" factor associated with the Holy Spirit's dynamic empowerment. The Pentecostal message is very good news among the poor; it answers their immediate felt needs and provides powerful spiritual impetus and community support for a better life. Several recent studies have shown that the intervention of Pentecostal mission into severely deprived communities unleashes powerful redemptive forces resulting in upward social mobility of believers. The genius of Pentecostalism has thus been its relevance to the powerless─its ability to penetrate the enslaving power structures of the socially and economically marginalized.

Although Pentecostals have from their outset been deeply involved in works of compassion, they have in general been better at doing it than articulating it in statements of faith or theological formulations. Thus Doug Petersen, writing just over a decade ago, laments the fact that despite the substantial contribution of the Assemblies of God to social involvement, "a certain 'gap' exists between pragmatic compassionate outreach and an adequate understanding of biblical foundations which must guide these actions."[1] Petersen's own work in this area has contributed significantly towards bridging this gap.

Dr. George O. Wood, Chairman of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship and General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God, USA, observes, "It's probably been the nature of the Pentecostal experience that we have the experience first and then develop the rationale!"[2] A statement issued at the conclusion of the European

[1]Douglas Petersen, "Missions in the Twenty-First Century: Toward a Methodology of Pentecostal Compassion," *Transformation* 16:2 (April 1999]: 54.

[2]George O. Wood, *Letter to Dr. Joseph Dimitrov*, March 29, 2010.

Pentecostal Theological Association on the theme "Pentecostals and Justice" in July 2010, observed the following:

> We agree that our heritage as Pentecostals demonstrates a profound concern for works of mercy, justice and compassion for the poor and that the Full Gospel that we have historically proclaimed addresses the whole range of human need, be it spiritual, physical or social. However, we recognize that we have only of late rediscovered the implications of what that means in terms of our holistic mission to the world.[3]

There were, however, some features of Pentecostal belief and practice which mitigated a proper theology of social engagement, most of which were a carry-over from the fundamentalist antecedents of many early Pentecostals. Some reasons why social action was not prominent on the theological radar of Pentecostals were:[4]

1. Millennial eschatology - Pentecostals came at a time when "evangelicals" didn't have time to think about building the kingdom of God, because of their conviction of the imminent return of Christ and the shift towards a pre-millennial position. Apocalyptic doomsday scenarios with the inevitable impetus towards "otherworldliness" leave little room for concern about social engagement.
2. The rise of old liberalism and the social gospel tended to taint Pentecostal, Holiness, and Evangelical involvement with issues of social justice. As Pentecostals rubbed shoulders with Evangelicals they also adopted the values and concerns of Evangelicals who stood against the liberals who employed the social gospel.
3. Dualism – Again in reaction to reductionist tendencies in modernist versions of Christian mission which highlighted this-worldly, physical benefits of the gospel, Pentecostals sought to give priority to the salvation of the "soul."
4. Apolitical posture – Pentecostals seemed reluctant to integrate anything in their doctrinal statements that seemed politically tainted. Both the Assemblies of God and the Church of God (Cleveland) for instance took a strong pacifistic position during World War I, though not explicitly expressed in their

[3]EPTA Statement on Pentecostals and Justice, Mattersey Hall College and Graduate School, England (July 9, 2010].

[4]Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., (Editorial), Pentecostals and Social Ethics*, Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, Volume 9:2. (Fall 1987): 106.

> statement of faiths developed during those very turbulent years.

Other challenges included the impact of the prosperity gospel which, by postulating almost a *karma* like cause-effect relationship between faith and material wealth, implied that the poor deserve their status. Furthermore, concern for practical social needs was commonly viewed by Pentecostals as a natural inseparable part of evangelism, and hence they never felt the need to develop a distinct theology for it. A final observation worth noting in this regard is that as a revival movement, Pentecostalism was in general less concerned about developing theology than it was about seeing the Holy Spirit infuse the Church with spiritual vibrancy and a burden for world evangelization. The limited theological concerns of Pentecostals were thus devoted to providing biblical justification of their distinctive doctrinal emphasis on the baptism in the Holy Spirit and related teachings. While there is no denying the fact that, especially in the early stages of the movement, the urgency to evangelize tended to blur the vision for social justice, right from the beginning Pentecostals have also excelled in various kinds of social programs.[5]

Whatever the reasons for the lack of adequate articulation of a theology of social concern, it is impossible to deny that social engagement is today an essential component of the Pentecostal missionary movement in most regions of the world. As an astute researcher observes, ". . .engagement in social ministry by Pentecostals has practically exploded in the last few decades."[6] But is this a welcome development? Is this the result of the Holy Spirit's leading or something that Pentecostals have wandered into inadvertently? How firmly is this trend anchored in Scripture? When Pentecostals embrace this heightened emphasis on social engagement, are they being faithful to the roots of their tradition or are they merely yielding to cultural pressures?

Whether or not we agree with those who would view this as an unhealthy trend, the questions raised are not only valid, but vital for the future of the movement, and highlight the need for us to develop a cogent and cohesive Pentecostal theology of social engagement. A task of this nature is necessarily both communal and cumulative: *communal* because it has to emerge from an ongoing conversation within the global Pentecostal community; and consequently *cumulative*, because it

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[5]Velli Matti, "Spirituality and Social Justice."

[6]Kent Duncan, "Emerging Engagement: The Growing Social Conscience of Pentecostalism," *Encounter: Journal for Pentecostal Ministry* 7 (Summer 2010): 2.

must bring together perspectives that reflect the various contextual Spirit-illuminated readings of Scripture and the actual experience and praxis of Pentecostal reflective practitioners in different regions of the world. What follows must be viewed as a modest contribution to this ongoing conversation.

Our strategy in outlining a theology of social engagement both builds on the two earlier presentations and carries it forward. To begin with, we must ensure that our theology emerges from, and is in close alignment with, the clear teaching of Scripture. "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."[7] Our consideration of the biblical material which shapes our understanding of Pentecostal mission in the previous lecture has helped us lay a foundation for this.

Secondly, although Scripture is our final authority in any theological formulation, it helps our case if we can draw corroborative support from the testimony of history. A robust theological formulation will explore the sources of Christian tradition and glean what it can from the insights of the fathers of the faith. The witness of those who lived closest to the apostolic era is especially helpful in this regard.

Thirdly, we focus on the distinctive theological resources of the Pentecostal movement itself, in particular, Pentecostal spirituality. Pentecostal theological thinking and action springs from a transforming spiritual experience (a distinctive second work of the Spirit), usually evidenced by speaking in tongues, given for an endowment of spiritual "power" for witness and/or to be active participants in God's mighty works. This experience provides a sense of the nearness and redemptive power of God's Spirit break into our life today. We evaluate briefly how this Pentecostal experience helps shape the Pentecostal social conscience and social engagement.

A Biblically Rooted Social Ethic

The Genesis account of creation is designed to show among other things that humankind was the climax of God's creation program. In the first recorded encounter between God and Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28, God blesses their existence and defines their role in creation. The following two verses describe God's provision for them and all living creatures. This means that God's first word to human beings is a word of direction; the second word is a word of provision, indicating God's intention that all of humankind are provided for in

[7]Duncan, "Emerging Engagement," 4.

their journey of life. Poverty is thus a contradiction of God's primary intention that the basic living needs of all of humanity are properly provided for. Both Old and New Testaments clearly support this assertion that God in his providence seeks the subsistence and survival of all his creatures (Ps 104; Ex 16; Matt 6:32-33; Acts 14:17). Hence, poverty is not in itself a blessing; it contradicts God's primary intention of providence.

Murray Dempster summarizes the Old Testament (OT) basis for a Christian social ethics in three convincing arguments.[8] In the first place he argues that Christian theological reflection must be grounded in God's self-revelation of himself and his character. God reveals himself repeatedly and unmistakably in the OT as a God who is especially concerned with the needs of the poor and the powerless, and may even be viewed as possessing a "preferential" bias for the poor against the rich. Secondly, the biblical concept of the *Imago Dei* obliges us to value all human beings as created in the image of God. Our social ethic should thus flow out of our desire to treat with respect and dignity all other human beings who are also made in the image of God.

Thirdly, the unilateral Sinai covenant between God and Israel indicates that God is not merely concerned about our salvation, but also with the well-being of his creation. The Ten Commandments show that a right relation with God (Ex 20:3-11) should be complemented by a right relationship with people in society (Ex 20:12-17). The law and the covenant were a prescription of what life should look like for the people of God. The ministry of the prophets reminded God's people of what it means to live according to his character. Israel's socio-ethical actions were to thus demonstrate God's nature and character. God's covenant people were chosen to reflect who God is and what he does.

The nation of Israel was thus explicitly commanded by God to imitate God's special concern for the poor and oppressed (Ex 22:21-24; Deut 10:17-18; 15:13-15). This command is echoed in the New Testament (NT) in Jesus' teaching to his followers to imitate God's mercy and kindness (Luke 6:33-36), as well as in apostolic instructions to the Church to give generously to the needy (1 John 3:16-18), as evidence of authentic Christian discipleship (James 1:27). Not only that, the Bible also expressly warns God's people against neglect or mistreatment of the poor and the oppressed, in OT prophetic

[8]Murray W. Dempster, "Pentecostal Social Concern and the Biblical Mandate of Social Justice," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, Volume 9:2. (Fall 1987): 130-137.

admonitions (Isa 1:10-17; 58:3-7; Amos 5:21-24) as well as NT exhortations (Luke 1:46-53; 4:18; 6:20-25; Mark 12:38-40; James 5:1-6).

Jesus and the poor were, of course, inseparable. The needy flocked around him everywhere he went: the beggars, the sick, the destitute, the bereaved, the hungry masses, and he was always touched by their needs. Ten times the NT records that Jesus was "moved with compassion," and each time it was when he was confronted with suffering people. We have already looked briefly at Jesus' teaching concerning the kingdom of God, which is the unifying theme that provides a description of what life would look like under God's redemptive kingdom reign. Firmly within the tradition of the prophets, Jesus teaches and embodies through his parables and miracles, what life in the kingdom should look like—a life marked by justice, mercy, love, and peace.

The kingdom, the central theological concept used by Luke in his gospel to describe Jesus' mission and ministry, is the connective between the Luke-Acts account. "Those things which Jesus began to do and teach . . ." (Acts 1:1) both summarizes his earthly ministry and sets the agenda for the ministry of the apostles subsequent to their receiving the transfer of the Spirit. In effect the kingdom mission of Jesus (including his kingdom ethic) is transferred to the charismatic community by the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. The kingdom ethic of Jesus is made operational within the charismatic community by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and becomes thereafter the moral foundation for the life of the early church.

The Holy Spirit is presented in the Acts as one who empowers the Church to overcome the entrenched gender, economic, cultural, and religious barriers of a divided world. The book of Acts mentions two immediate results of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. First, "many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles" (2:43); and second, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (2:44-45). This is further elaborated in Acts 4:32-35:

> *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.*

In Acts 2, the *gender* distinctions of male and female were overcome by the empowerment of the Spirit. Also in Acts 2 but detailed further in Acts 4 and 5, the *economic* distinctions between rich and poor were overcome in the economic *koinonia* established by the power of the Spirit. In Acts 10, the *cultural* distinctions between Jew and Gentile were overcome within the Christian community by the coming of the Spirit. Acts 9:36 refers to the disciple Tabitha from Joppa "…who was always doing good and helping the poor." When the prophet Agabus predicted a devastating famine, "The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea" (Acts 11:29). The Book of Acts demonstrates that the preaching of the gospel resulted in a loving community, where they felt responsible to meet both spiritual and material needs.

This finds resonance in the rest of the New Testament. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul mentions that the one thing which the apostles asked him and Barnabas to do as they ministered to the gentiles was that "…we should continue to remember the poor" (Gal. 2:10). In his closing remarks he admonishes the Galatians, "Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10). Paul's instructions to Titus also have "good works" as a central theme and concludes with the exhortation, "Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives" (Titus 3:14; cf. 2:7; 3:8). James is very explicit in his appeal to demonstrate our faith by good works, when he states, "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17), and "to look after orphans and widows in their distress" as a mark of a "pure and faultless religion" (James 1:27). In his letters, John interprets compassion as the practical translation of God's love, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17-18).

The full significance of the NT Church's appropriation of the kingdom ethic of Jesus must not be diluted. Its purpose was to confirm the validity of the claim that the gospel had the power to institute in the practice of the believing community the kingdom ethic of Jesus, which fulfilled the Old Testament proclamation for social justice to reign. This establishment of a just community governed by the Holy Spirit is used apologetically by Luke to demonstrate that the Church was established by the exalted Jesus Christ (Acts 2:33, 4:32-37, 10:24-48). The Church's social ethic and engagement is thus not merely a helpful

appendage to the Church's witness, but an essential and integral part of it. The Church's social witness, in fact, authenticates its verbal witness─works and wonders must always complement word.

A Historically Attested Social Conscience

A detailed treatment is beyond the scope of this paper, but the following illustrations should suffice as evidence that the Church's social conscience remained active through the early years of its history. Justin Martyr wrote in 151 AD:

> And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.[9]

A few decades later in 195 AD Tertullian observes in his *Apologeticus*:

> Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety's deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession.[10]

In his classic treatment of *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries,* researched over a century ago, Adolf Harnack meticulously documented the works of charity of

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[9]Justin Martyr, The Fist Apology – Chapter 67: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.ii.lxvii.html (Accessed September 26, 2015).

[10]Tertutllian, *Apology,* Chapter 39: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0301.htm (Accessed September 26, 2015).

the early church. Harnack was convinced that the early church's social witness was a critical factor which contributed to its extraordinary growth. Harnack categorizes his profuse references from early church sources into ten areas of social involvement:

1. Alms in general, and their connection with the cultus and officials of the church.
2. The support of teachers and officials.
3. The support of widows and orphans.
4. The support of the sick, the infirm, and the disabled.
5. The care of prisoners and people languishing in the mines.
6. The care of poor people needing burial, and of the dead in general.
7. The care of slaves.
8. The care of those visited by great calamities.
9. The churches furnishing work, and insisting upon work.
10. The care of brethren on a journey (hospitality), and of churches in poverty or any peril.[11]

Harnack's work is a gold-mine of research both for its wealth of detail and the breadth of insights it offers into the social witness of the early church. For our purpose it offers indisputable evidence that an active social conscience and earnest social engagement was a vital feature of the Church's life through the earliest years of its existence.

A Socially Transforming Spirituality[12]

The main distinguishing mark of Pentecostalism is its spirituality. The theme of the Holy Spirit's empowerment has always been at the heart of Pentecostal belief: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses . . . " (Acts1:8).

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[11]Adolf Harnack, The *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, 1908, trans. by James Moffatt, 154-190: http://www.preteristarchive,cin. Books/1908_harnack_expansion. html (Accessed September 26, 2015).

[12]Murray A. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen, eds., *Called and Empowered: Global Mission of Pentecostal Perspective* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991); Eldin Villafañe, "The Politics of the Spirit: Reflections on a Theology of Social Transformation for the Twenty-First Century," 1996 Presidential Address, *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, vol. 18 (Fall 1996): 161-170; Cecil M. Robeck Jr., "Pentecostals and Social Ethics," *Pneuma*, vol. 9 (Fall 1987): 103-107; Richard J. Mouw, "Life in the Spirit in an Unjust World," *Pneuma*, vol. 9 (Fall 1987):109-128; and Murray W. Dempster, "Pentecostal Social Concern and the Biblical Mandate of Social Justice," *Pneuma,* vol. 9 (Fall 1987): 129-153.

Spirituality—living the life of the Holy Spirit—energizes and enables the Church to witness to the kingdom through evangelization and social engagement. The believer's encounter with the Holy Spirit results in a spiritual transformation that reshapes her moral and social consciousness, causing her to become an instrument of social change. Transformed people are empowered by the Spirit to transform the world in the light of the in-breaking kingdom of God. We will examine how Pentecostal spirituality shapes Pentecostalism's social response as we look at five key features of Pentecostal spirituality.

Prayer/Worship

Individual and corporate prayer and worship experience is a very important feature of Pentecostal spirituality. We have already observed (in our previous lecture) the critical role of prayer in missionary engagement of the powers of evil that hinder the advance of the kingdom. Prayer is in actuality the "cry" of the kingdom in response to Jesus' exhortation to his disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom (Matt 6:10).

God's kingdom by its very nature is God's gift and work. Believers do not construct the kingdom, but rather ask for it and welcome it. It comes by grace and grows within us by the power of the Spirit. Prayer empowers us and compels us to strive for just and loving relationships among people, in family, in community, and in society. The corporate worship experience of Pentecostals is a crucial element in the shaping of Pentecostal spirituality and is a crucial stage in social engagement when directed towards kingdom advancement and in opposition to the powers of evil.

Liberation

The Pentecostal experience of Spirit baptism is basically one of empowerment, and the overwhelming reality that this experience opens to believers is liberation from captivity to the powers of evil that keep them from fullness of life. Pentecostals have always understood the empowering of the Holy Spirit as the power "to be" and the power "to do." It is liberating to those existing in the shadows, marginalized from the economic and social center of society, to those whose experience of poverty leaves them feeling helpless and disempowered. Frighteningly powerful and destructive forces that hold the poor captive must yield to the power of the Holy Spirit.

The liberating experience of the power of the Holy Spirit counters the negative experience of power as an inescapable descending spiral.

The gifts of the Spirit empower their recipients "to do" and "to be," negating the significance of popular prerequisites to power, education, wealth and other status symbols. Pentecostals place high value on giftedness and spiritual power. Those who are of no consequence outside of the Church find themselves part of a rapidly growing alternative society in which they are highly esteemed and appreciated because of their giftedness. This experience of liberating empowerment has become the basis for the upward mobility of Pentecostals in society.

Healing

The belief and practice of divine healing has been a vital component of Pentecostal spirituality since the movement's inception and the earliest indisputable pointer to its holistic concern. This is one area in which Pentecostals departed early from the theology of their evangelical and fundamentalist predecessors when they sought to apply the benefits of the atonement of Christ to the whole person─body, soul and spirit. This is one reason why Pentecostals have tended to naturally and easily been moved to respond to the felt physical needs of the poor. It was impossible to believe that God's "real presence" manifested through the power of the Spirit could miraculously heal sick bodies and not want his people to care and respond to the felt physical and social needs of the poor and dispossessed.

Community

One of the signs of the Holy Spirit's empowering presence is *Koinonia*. The word *Koinonia* occurs 18 times in the NT and denotes *that fellowship among believers which the Holy Spirit creates* (2 Cor 13:14; Phil 2:1). The *Koinonia* of the Holy Spirit involved a sharing of a common life within the Church (Acts 2:42-46; 5:42) and is illustrated in its description as the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12). This means that the members of the Body have an obligation within the Body to "*one another,*" and these obligations constitute hall-marks of *Koinonia*, marks or signs of the distinctive kingdom lifestyle, such as love, unity, justice, healing, godliness and other gifts and fruit of the Spirit.

The *Koinonia* of the Spirit enables the Church to demonstrate what the reign of God is like, to incarnate the values of the kingdom that Jesus taught. Thus "witnessing" was not something the Church did; it was a function that flowed out of the common life and experience of the Church-as-community. The early church communities did not act

from a concept of social justice. The concern they showed for the poor, widows and strangers, was not a separate activity, but rather an extension of their worship and witness.

Spirit-inspired *Koinonia* at the local level has been a powerful agent of social transformation since the beginning of the Pentecostal movement. The strong sense of community, patterned after the model of the early church helps Pentecostals find a new sense of dignity and purpose in life. The *Koinonia* experience of the early Pentecostals resulted in the emergence of communities which functioned as social alternatives that protested against oppressive structures. Their solidarity created affective ties, giving them a sense of equality, and causing them to challenge inequality in the treatment of minorities, women, and the poor. During a time when racial and gender inequality was endemic, Pentecostals welcomed black and white, male and female, rich and poor.

Hope

Pentecostals view their experience of the Spirit in eschatological terms, offering a present foretaste of a promised future (Eph 1:14). Pentecostals believe that they have been called by God in the "last days" (Acts 2:17) to be Christ-like witnesses in the power of the Spirit. The hope in the imminent coming of the Lord has sustained Pentecostals during persecution, harassment, imprisonment and martyrdom during the last century. They have consistently taught that the Church must be ready for the coming of the Lord by means of faithful witness and holy living. Pentecostals today continue to believe that intense hope has been and will continue to be necessary for endurance, healing and engagement of the forces—both social and spiritual—which oppress and violate people.

A common popular understanding of future events presumes the annihilation of the world, and clearly undermines the need for sustained social engagement. But as Kärkkäinen points out, for many Pentecostals eschatological hope has brought with it optimism about the work they are doing to bring about social transformation. They view their efforts as visible "signposts," evidence that the kingdom of God has pressed into the present.[13] Miroslav Volf adds further theological validity to this position on the basis of Rom 8:21 that the liberation of creation cannot occur through its destruction but only through its transformation. He argues that kingdom oriented social projects have eschatological significance, and eschatological continuity

[13]Petersen, Pentecostal Compassion, 57.

between God's present reign and the reign to come "guarantees that noble human efforts will not be wasted."

When such eschatological continuity is postulated Pentecostal social engagement takes on different significance with fresh potential for sustaining an enduring vision of eternity as articulated in the words of a leading Pentecostal social ethicist, "Expressions of Christian social concern that are kingdom-signifying deeds of anticipatory transformation are the kinds of human effort that God preserves, sanctifies and directs teleologically toward the future age of God's redemptive reign."[14]

[14]Murray W. Dempster, "Christian Social Concern in Pentecostal Perspective" (Presidential address, conference of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Lakeland, Florida, November 7–9, 1991), 36.