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Item Type	Article
Authors	Petersen, Douglas
Publisher	Asia Pacific Theological Seminary
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-01 23:48:54
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/236554

[*AJPS* 16:1 (2013), pp. 51-60]

THREE CHALLENGES TO PENTECOSTAL SOCIAL ACTION

Douglas Petersen

Is it possible for Pentecostals, utterly dependent upon the Spirit for empowerment, to practice a moral imagination that envisions a future with creative and innovative social action programs? I believe the answer is yes. These programs, the fruit of linking theological reflection, the authority of Scripture, and the reality of concrete human experience, can make a difference in the individual lives of people and even in civil society. A moral imagination that includes Spirit baptism as an empowering focus in pursuit of justice could be a unique contribution of the Pentecostal tradition to evangelical social praxis.[1]

Pentecostals have demonstrated their capacity to function as creative agents in their own right. They have established institutional structures that made their emergence possible. They are quick to recognize a need and then mobilize people and gather materials to meet that need. But in spite of their many successes, they still face a myriad of common challenges. I will treat rather briefly three of these challenges: The emergence of a Pentecostal hermeneutic, further development of an essential connectedness between social action and the biblical text, and the importance of establishing and maintaining healthy, fair, and equal relationships within the community of faith.

Challenge 1 – An Emerging Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Worldview, Reading and Interpreting the Bible

Despite complaints that Pentecostals have neglected "the here and now" for the "sweet by and by," the explosive growth of Pentecostalism among the destitute provides a large-scale laboratory for us to examine their hermeneutical process and struggle to find solutions to the needs that confront them on a daily basis. Regardless

[1]For a fuller discussion see, "A Moral Imagination," 53-68.

of their diversity, all Pentecostals tend – in addressing their spiritual and physical needs – to adopt a more-or-less common hermeneutical methodology. Beginning with a supernatural/Pentecostal worldview as the starting point, this hermeneutic integrates the concrete historical reality of context with the biblical text.[2]

This type of contextualization offers grassroots Pentecostals a progressive and dynamic hermeneutic that, at times, may appear to be incongruous with the "rules" of traditional evangelical interpretation. Of course, theological contextualization has always been an exciting dimension of Pentecostal versatility!

Pentecostals have at their core a supernatural worldview perspective that is both overtly expressed and instilled in teachings and sermons. They approach the Scriptures with a "pre-understanding" that they are participants in God's unfolding drama. Pentecostals are confident that they are God's instruments even if their contextual reality may systematically deny them access to basic human rights, marginalize them to huge slums and shantytowns, or refuse them access to political and social opportunity. They have a personal sense that, in spite of their circumstances, the Holy Spirit has bestowed upon them an "enduement of power." The way that Pentecostals read the Bible offers a clear example of their worldview in action.

Common Reading of the Bible and a Praxis Hermeneutic

When Pentecostals read the Bible (a common reading), there is an inherent consistency in the interplay of linking their Pentecostal worldview of spirituality (pre-understanding) to the reality of daily circumstances to the biblical narratives of sorrow and pain, or of power and praise, that are interpreted theologically in turn into an application that addresses the concrete realities of their daily spiritual, social, or physical contexts.

Unconsciously or not, Pentecostals read and interpret the biblical text through the lens of their own contextual realities. Moving back and forth interpretively between the world of the biblical text and the realities of the world where they live, they interpret the "meaning or significance of the text" that emerges from this process into a practical application to their actual life context and for the local community of faith.

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[2]This argument, in part, is included in my chapter, "A Moral Imagination: Pentecostals and Social Concern in Latin America," in *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts*, ed. Veli-Matti Karkkainen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 53-68.

A "Pentecostal theology/spirituality" may be best understood not by looking at what Pentecostals say, but rather by analyzing their experiential expressions or spirituality. This worldview or spirituality is codified through religious symbols and practices such as *glossolalia* and healings, supernatural interventions, participative worship, and expressions in music. By reflecting, adapting, and appropriating the Scripture into new and refreshing perspectives that are informed by their supernatural worldview, framed by their historical context, and empowered by the Spirit--a dynamic hermeneutic emerges—a praxis hermeneutic--that enables Pentecostals to "do theology from the bottom up."

Applying the Method

Although not without risks, this hermeneutical method is remarkably trustworthy even when the interpreter is uninformed, untrained and naïve because it is done within the community of faith. I borrow and adapt a most fitting illustration from Professor Michael Sugrue. When a contemporary musician "interprets" Beethoven, the audience does not have the original Beethoven, meaning they obviously have an interpretation of Beethoven. For the audience to hear Beethoven, the music score has certain notes that are essential. If the interpreter decides to play Bach, no matter how beautifully, the audience will not hear Beethoven. If the musician decides to play her own notes, or if the musician is inept, then the audience does not hear Beethoven. The authenticity of the interpretation of Beethoven emerges, however, when the audience is no longer thinking about the musician—but rather when they find themselves simply enjoying the music of Beethoven. Where is the exact moment when one stops listening to the interpreter and hears the original? I am not sure, but I know it when I hear it!

Occasionally, to be sure, there will be interpretive flights of fancy. When error is apparent, however, the local community does not hesitate to correct it. While it may be difficult to describe exactly when and how the interpreter has transgressed the boundaries of authentic interpretation, most everyone within the community recognizes (discerns) the errors when they see/hear them.

Running the Risks

What are the guiding principles for a process like this? What avoids a purely postmodern relativist meaning of the text?[3] While the answer may be cloaked in ambiguity, not everything is unclear. For example, the commitment to the fundamental tenets of evangelical orthodox doctrines is not negotiable. But much is negotiable as the following common questions illustrate:

- Is there a process of reflective thinking and action where the principles and precepts of the biblical text are not abused?
- How can Pentecostals find their way among the complexity and diversity of voices and opinions?
- How can they safeguard the text from the interpreter who reads his or her own subjective impressions into that text?
- How can they respond with contextual resolutions that are meaningful and informed by their Pentecostal pre-understanding, but remain true to the "spirit" of the biblical record?

Clearly, resolving the interpretive predicament with questions of what can be known and how, and what should be valued, is anything but an easy task. But even the risk of misinterpretation in reading and interpreting the Bible where "meaning" emerges at the intersection between one's world and the world of the text should not preclude hermeneutical practice. When readers are willing to take the challenge of the text seriously in application to their daily contexts, they are in a better position, in keeping with Christopher Rowland's observation, "to hear what the text has to say." It would seem there is little to lose, and so much to gain.[4]

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[3]There is a certain irony in the use of the term "postmodern" to describe a hermeneutical method that until recently would have been labeled "pre-modern." In the space of just a few years, Latin American Pentecostals leapfrogged the rationality of the enlightenment and landed in the future, ahead of their time, as theological postmodernists!

[4]A recent survey of North American evangelicals underscores a biblical illiteracy that is both shocking and appalling. Pentecostals, while scoring abysmally, were nonetheless more knowledgeable and biblically orthodox than all other evangelical groups! I cannot demonstrate it empirically, but after teaching for 25 years in Central America, I have been amazed that within a few months of conversion, Pentecostal believers demonstrate high levels of biblical literacy and respect for biblical orthodoxy. The argument that experience-oriented and emotional Pentecostals think with their hearts--while the more traditional and rational evangelicals think with their heads, and therefore the conclusion that Pentecostals must be theologically suspect–is likely just another stereotype.

Some conservative theologians, especially Westerners, may be haunted by a style of postmodern theological thought that pursues questions of shifting contextual purpose and subjective meaning. Few evangelical scholars, including Pentecostals, would deny a sense of profound uncertainty about a "postmodern hermeneutic" that celebrates what may seem to be a regional fragmentation fraught with subjectivism and relativism. But can creative and dynamic theological reflection, concerning problems like poverty, sickness, oppression, and marginalization, be forthcoming, if rules and procedures about what is permissible hold the theological process hostage?

Challenge 2 – Further Developmentof an Essential Connectedness: Social Concern and the Biblical Text

Clearly, Pentecostals find little difficulty reading their Bibles and interpreting the guidance of the Spirit in such a way that moves them to ask for a better life for themselves and for their community. They readily show concern for other people's material and spiritual needs. Having demonstrated theological reflective evaluation of their individual action as it relates to personal morality and holiness, now Pentecostals must recognize the need to establish an "essential connectedness" between their experience of Spirit baptism (and other experiences of divine encounter) and the practice of social action. To respond even more effectively to the extreme needs that surround them, Pentecostals would do well to focus on the formulation of a social doctrine that enables them to evaluate their own actions and stimulate new thinking, a redefinition of methods, and out-of-the-box social action strategies.[5] Some of the most critical biblical and theological components comprising a coherent ethic of social concern are as follows:

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[5]Murray W. Dempster has done the most comprehensive work at connecting a Pentecostal social ethic to Spirit baptism. See "The Structure of Christian Ethic Informed by Pentecostal Experience*:* Soundings in the Moral Significance of Glossolalia, in *The Spirit and Spirituality*, eds. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (New York: T & T International, 2004), 108-140.

Biblical and Theological Foundations of Social Concern[6]

- God is at the center of all theological and ethical reflection and action. He is incomparable, sovereign, and unique. God is the Creator and ruler of all things. He is like no other. God is loving, just, and holy. He alone is our God and he alone is worthy of our worship.
- God created us in his own image and he desires to make himself known to every person reconciling the world to himself, through Jesus Christ, his own Son. God entrusts to us this ministry of reconciliation. Jesus has called us to be "his witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth."
- All persons are created in God's own image (Gen. 1:27). God endows persons with rights that entitle them to be treated with dignity, respect, and justice based solely on the reality that they bear his image.
- Moral actions should be modeled after an imitation of God's character. The basic ethical principle predominant in the Old Testament was that as God is, so God's people should be. As God acts, so God's people ought to act. Actions that demeaned, devalued, or otherwise diminished the dignity of any of God's created people were contrary to the nature of the character of God.
- The law and the covenant, established by God with His people after the Exodus event, contained an explicit prescription for what moral behavior and social justice should look like in the daily activities of life: The Ten Commandments (Exodus) and the law codes (Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy) spelled out in concrete terms that the ethical principles of love, justice, and holiness were inherent in God's character. God's people, therefore, were to freely extend compassion to the poor and needy including the displaced farmer, the widow, the orphan, the alien, the stranger, the hired servant, and the debtor.
- On the basis of this unfolding revelation of God's moral character and the prescriptions for moral behavior in the law and the covenant, the people of God developed a corresponding ethical view by which to judge the quality of their social and ethical life. When their actions did not measure up to God's character and injustice prevailed, the prophets reminded Israel that to be God's people, they needed to act like God's people.
- Jesus' teachings on how life should be lived were firmly rooted in the ethical tradition of the Old Testament. Jesus taught and embodied what life in the Kingdom should look like. The Kingdom of

[6]For a popular version see, "Why Compassion is Not Enough," in *The Pentecostal Evangel*, Sept. 23, 2012, 14-15, 18.

God that will consummate at the end of this age has already broken into the present. This supernatural reign is dynamically active among all people. Those who have submitted to the rule of the King can expect to be agents of the Kingdom for love, justice and holiness, bringing good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. This redeemed community, in its actions to bring about spiritual and social transformation, declares that the Kingdom of God has pressed into the present.

It is these principles of love, justice, and holiness that served as the moral foundation for the ethical structuring of the early church. In the Acts account, for example, (as I shall note shortly), the community of faith was to break down the entrenched gender (Acts 2), economic (Acts 4-5), cultural (Acts 9) and religious barriers (Acts 19) of a divided world. The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and the experience of Spirit baptism were to provide the power as to actualize these ethical demands and put them into practice. By the time the story of Acts concludes, this Spirit-empowered community had taken the good news of the gospel to every corner of the Roman Empire.

In summary, theological and ethical reflection must begin with an understanding of God's self-revelatory nature and character. Israel's socio-ethical actions were to demonstrate this theocentric nature and character. The law and the covenant provided 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 meant to live according to his character. Firmly within the tradition of the prophets, Jesus taught and embodied what life in the Kingdom should look like. This ethical construct served as the moral foundation of the primitive Christian church and the experience of Spirit baptism provided the power to actualize these ethical demands.

Challenge 3 – The Importance of "Discerning the Body" in the Community of Faith

As stated earlier, it is possible for Pentecostals, committed to a God who breaks into human history and utterly dependent upon the Spirit for empowerment, to practice a moral imagination that envisions a future with creative and innovative social action programs. This moral imagination that includes Spirit baptism as an empowering focus

in pursuit of justice could be a unique contribution of the Pentecostal tradition to evangelical social praxis.[7]

However, practicing a moral imagination is more than coming up with a few inspired ideas. A moral imagination is comprised of, indeed links together, a set of distinct parts. Being morally imaginative means embracing a systematic and entrepreneurial approach that links to and expresses the intent of the biblical text.

Social action, then, driven by a vision of the future, links together and integrates the teachings of Jesus with an aim to achieve the desired outcome.[8] To be sure, actions that minister to the poor who surround the community of faith are essential. But if Pentecostals are to practice all that "Jesus said or did," they will need to take seriously the ramifications of spiritual discernment, the supernatural, and divine empowerment; and they will need to start at home.

The Acts of the Apostles and the Breaking Down of Barriers

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and its contemporary application through spiritual transformation integrated the ethical character of God's reign into the moral fabric of the community of faith. By the help of the power of the Spirit, their task was to produce a living model, for the world to see, how the ethical demands of the Kingdom were to become operative and actualized in their own community.

From the concept of the transfer of Jesus' ministry to the disciples by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost one can discern in the Acts' narrative an organizing principle for such a model. The Kingdom ethic of Jesus was to be made operational within the charismatic community by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Certain ethical strands can be established between the Acts' account of Holy Spirit baptism and social justice and traced backward through Jesus' Kingdom teaching in Luke and the other synoptics to the Old Testament moral tradition of the Law and the Prophets. An analysis of the transfer of Jesus' authority for ministry to the disciples at Pentecost provides a hermeneutical foundation for the structuring of the apostolic community as the narrative unfolds. Jesus' ministry was to fulfill the entire Old Testament--including the demands of social

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[7]For a fuller discussion see, "A Moral Imagination," 53-68.

[8]Here I borrow this framework from Patricia H. Werhane, *Moral Imagination and Management Decision Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

justice. Even though the category of justice is not utilized by Luke, the Holy Spirit is presented in Acts as the One who empowers the church to overcome within its own community the entrenched gender, economic, cultural, and religious barriers of a divided world.

In Acts 2, the gender distinctions of male and female were overcome by the empowerment of the Spirit. 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. In Acts 19, the religious distinctions between the disciples of Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist were overcome by the power of the Spirit to instigate the first Christian ecumenism. By the time the story of the Acts concludes, the gospel had gone unbounded throughout the world by means of the Spirit-empowered apostolic community. 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.

Discerning the Body in Corinth and Everywhere Else

But all too often, even within the "ideal" first century community of faith, there was a disconnect between the real and ideal; a disconnect that threatened to extinguish divine life. It is with Paul's account of the Lord's Supper and his admonitions to the Corinthian community that I bring this lectureship to a close. In this narrative that includes the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the risen Christ, Paul preaches us a sermon. We are a mystical community and we must never forget it. In fact, everything depends upon it. We must give more attention to our relationships with one another in the body of Christ. Our task, and our absolute joy, is to receive anew the benefits of God's grace within the context of our relationships with one another by truly welcoming everyone in our community which is, after all, the body of Christ. We are without distinction recipients of the same grace.

Our mission as a welcoming community is focused on Jesus and centered in the cross. The cross provides us the authority for what we do. The enemies of sin, suffering, sickness, poverty, oppression and injustice, are defeated and destroyed because of the power of the cross. Whatever methods we might use to address the needs of people, we must "ultimately" include God's answer to the human predicament, the good news of the gospel. The good news, foretold in the Old Testament, and fulfilled in the New Testament through the incarnation,

cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the forgiveness of sins and gift of eternal life offered to all persons who repent of their sins and by faith declare Jesus Christ is Lord.

As the people of God we are called to live a holy, ethical life that is to be lived before God and in sight of the nations. As God is in his character so we should be, as God acts so we should act. Actions and social practices that embody love, justice, and holiness reflecting God's own ethical character constitute the normative moral structure in a social ethic reflective of Old and New Testament teachings. For Pentecostals, the experience of Spirit baptism provides access to empowerment not only to evangelize or experience miracles, divine healing and other supernatural interventions of the Spirit, but the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to demonstrate in tangible terms God's own character and empowers us to be living examples of everything Jesus said and did.

When we preach to the poor, proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind and release the oppressed, our actions stand as a signpost, declaring to the world what life should look like in God's Kingdom. For the Pentecostal community of faith, a social ethic saturated with spiritual discernment and supernatural empowerment becomes a powerful tool for creative thinking and action to practice all that "Jesus said or did."