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Issues Arising from Weak Ecclesiological Concepts in the Modern Day Pentecostal Church: Part 2

by William Toh

In this part, the author completes his discussion of the three ecclesiological concepts with a presentation of Sociological ecclesiology. This is followed by the author's conclusions.

Sociological Ecclesiology

The sociological concept of the Church covers two aspects of community, the community within the Church, and the Church in the community.

The Community within the Church

The Church is a spiritual reality that exists prior to individual Christians, in fact, before the foundation of the world (cf. Eph 1: 4-14).[1] It is not the Christians that make that Church, but it is the Church that makes the Christian to be identified as one who is baptized or grafted into a pre-existing reality, the Body of Christ.[2] Chan laments, "Protestants have tended to see the Church in purely sociological terms that is a depending largely on our own actions."[3] It is not the work of men. The Christians do not form the Church by their own action, but it is God's doing and they are baptized into it and nurtured by it. Chan states:

> The expression Body of Christ is not a metaphor for some social dynamics but a description of a spiritual reality created by the action of triune God. To call the church the Body of Christ means that in God's economy of redemption, he called people

[1]Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, 97.
[2]Ibid., 98.
[3]Ibid., 97.

> from the old creation and reconstituted them a new creation in Christ. This body is invigorated by the Spirit of life who raised Jesus from the dead.[4]

The Church exists in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and it is the Spirit baptism, which gave rise to the global church and remains the very substance of the Church's life in the Spirit including its charismatic focus and mission.[5] The Spirit unites believers with Christ and into fellowship with others.[6] Ralph Del Colle states, "the graces, energies, gifts, and power of the Holy Spirit help constitute the church, beckoning it toward the Kingdom, establishing its *koinonia* or communion, and enabling its life and witness until fulfillment."[7] The Church is a fellowship of committed believers, submitting their lives to Christ's lordship in the power of the Spirit. The Church is a redeemed community that has been "swept into a divine world of mutual love and begun to experience the very purpose of our nature as spiritual and social beings." Mirolsav Volf writes:

> Each person gives of himself or herself to others, and each person in a unique way takes up others into himself or herself. This is the process of the mutual internalization of personal characteristics occurring in the Church through the Holy Spirit indwelling Christians. The Spirit opens them to one another and allows them to become catholic persons in their uniqueness. It is here that they, in a creaturely way, correspond to the catholicity of the divine persons.[8]

The true *koinonia* in the community is not by human effort. Macchia comments that there is a dynamic relationship between koinonia and Spirit baptism: "Spirit baptism in the light *of koinonia* means that the church in the power of the Spirit is not just a voluntary association of individual believers but rather a growing and empathetic fellowship that reconciles diverse peoples who can bear one another's burdens in the love of God."[9]

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[4]Ibid., 98.

[5]Macchia, *Bapized in the Spirit - A Global Pentecostal Theology*, 155.

[6]Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective*, 124.

[7]Macchia, *Bapized in the Spirit - A Global Pentecostal Theology*, 194.

[8]Wyand J. de Kock, "The Church as a Redeemed, Un-Redeemed, and Redeeming Community," in *Toward a Pentecostal Ecclesiology: The Church and the Fivefold Gospel* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010), 53.

[9]Macchia, Baptized in the Spirit - A Global Pentecostal Theology, 167–8.

The Church in the Community

The Church is the spirit-filled community, and Pinnock rightly states, "Only when there is God's grace flowing in and through Spirit-filled communities will we have enough to enable us to challenge the broken and distorted relationships that are a feature in societies everywhere today."[10] Although evangelism and discipleship must always be the foremost task of the Church, the people of God cannot stand aside from the social evils and the injustices of our time, about which the Bible speaks so powerfully. In the Assemblies of God USA official position paper, it states:

> As we preach the gospel of peace and about the miracle-working, life-giving Prince of Peace, we must be alert to the brokenness and systemic evils of the world around those to whom we minister. If we are prayerful and willing, our Lord by His Spirit will lead us through our ministries to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), to help the needy (Matthew 25:35–36), and to minister in love and compassion endeavoring to obey everything He commanded.[11]

The early Pentecostals felt the urgency of the moment when they spoke in tongues, connecting individual Christians and churches with the need for global justice, reconciliation, and redemption.[12] To Seymour, *glossolalia* was not a badge to identify oneself as a Pentecostal, nor was it just a sign of a supernatural experience, but it was a symbol of God bringing together into one body people from every conceivable background.[13] The Church's social witness, both social welfare for individuals and social action that transforms social systems, makes tangible the Church's kerygmatic proclamation, confirms the truth of and validates the gospel's claims, and serves to exemplify the Church as a counter community even as it transmits or bears the Church's moral tradition.[14] To accomplish this, Dempster urges the Church to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and do what he did under the power of the Spirit: proclaiming and inaugurating the kingdom of God among the poor, the

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[10]Pinnock, 150.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Frank D. Macchia, "The Struggle for Global Witness: Shifting Paradigms in Pentecostal Theology," in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism : A Religion Made to Travel*, ed. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Oxford, England : Regnum Books, 1999), 18.

[13]Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, 103.

[14]Yong, 189-90.

oppressed, the sick, the demon-possessed, and others.[15] The Church's social witness remains its most powerful means of proclaiming the full gospel, since the gospel is not just talk, or a collection of ideas, but action. Empowered by the Spirit, such witness overcomes the structures and carriers of evil, and heals the divisions between human beings as far as is possible while awaiting the eschatological kingdom. These are the normative marks of the Spirit's presence and activity in the ecumenical tradition of Pentecostalism.[16]

A Weak Sociological Concept of the Church

A weak sociological concept of the Church will result in two negative consequences: consumerism and humanism.

Consumerism

A weak sociological concept of the Church tends to steer the church to defining itself as a service provider, catering to the needs of individual Christians. When the Church is seen as existing for the benefit of the individual, then the focus of ministry will be on individuals and how their needs can be met by the Church.[17]

This kind of Church will produce consumerist congregants and will treat her congregants as her customers. In everything that the Church does, she will think of how to satisfy her customers so that they will be pleased and will keep on "patronizing" the Church. Furthermore, the Church will focus on the rich congregants as they are her main financial source. They will be inwardly fixated, and the Church will function as a clubhouse, likely ignoring the poor and needy people in the world. In the 2006 July article of Christian Today, entitled From Lord to Label: How Consumerism Undermines Our Faith, the author comments:

> To appeal to religious consumers we must commodify our congregations—slapping our church's logo on shirts, coffee mugs, and Bible covers. And we strive to convince a sustainable segment of the religious marketplace that our church is "relevant," "comfortable," or "exciting." As a result, choosing a church today isn't merely about finding a community to learn and live out the Christian faith. It's about "church shopping" to find the congregation that best expresses my identity. This drives Christian leaders to differentiate their church by

[15]Ibid., 190.
[16]Ibid., 190.
[17]Chan, 98.

> providing more of the features and services people want. After all, in a consumer culture, the customer, not Christ, is king.[18]

A veteran Singapore Pentecostal pastor laments that in order to attract people to come to church, churches have adopted a concert style of worship and preach what their congregants want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3). Thus, these churches avoid the message of holiness, sin, commitment, sacrificial love, etc. He also observes that many Christians will move to another church if they are not happy in the one they attend. In his article, "Consumerism and the Church," Dr. David Lim reminds the readers:

> Biblically, the Church is the body of Christ, not a crowd at an event. The New Testament church was based on a commitment to stick together through thick and thin, and stand united as an army against enemies. Believers were meant to grow together, care for and minister to one another. They were supposed to stand side by side, loyally and fervently defending one another against Satan and the demonic realm, claiming victory over them.[19]

The Pentecostal Church will nurture a culture of consumerism if it conceptualizes the Church as existing for the individual. We need to switch the focus from the individual's needs to our common life in Christ, for example, how Pentecostals, as one people of God, can fulfill God's ultimate purpose for the universe.[20]

Humanism

Chan states that a weak sociological concept of the Church will result in a sociological understanding that sees the Church as a community brought about by people for a common purpose so that the *koinonia* is not primarily the creation of the Spirit of God but of a kindred human spirit.[21] Congregants will believe that they are the ones who make the Church, rather than Christ who said, "I will build my church" (Mt. 16:18)." Chan comments Christians need to understand that

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[18]"From Lord to Label: How Consumerism Undermines Our Faith," CT Pastors, http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2006/july-online-only/from-lord-to-label-how-consumerism-undermines-our-faith.html (accessed November 17, 2017).

[19]David Lim, "Consumerism and the Church," *The Assembilies of God of Singapore*, April 2018, 036 edition, 7.

[20]Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, 98.

[21]Ibid., 98-99.

"Congregants do not make the church. It is the church that makes them, and gives them their special identity."[22]

If the Church believes that it is the Christians themselves who make up the Church, the Church will look more like an organization than an organism. It is not biblical to picture the Church as an organization, because the Church is the Body of Christ. The human body is an organism and likewise, the Church is an organism rather than an organization. Christ is the head of the body and it is the Holy Spirit that makes the Church, runs the Church and keeps her alive. Once the organization replaces the Holy Spirit, the running of the Church will be by the human spirit. The running of such a church will likely be based on the latest leadership, management or marketing theories, and not depend on the leading of the Spirit. The Church will have the form but not the Spirit.

Secondly, the Church cannot be built on man's agenda, even when the agenda is of good intention, instead of God's agenda. Such a Church will use Jesus' name in vain to build the community without God's endorsement. The author has heard of stories that pastors who, being unhappy, or angry, or hurt by their church, decided to leave one church to build another church near their former church without ascertaining if it was the call of God to start a church there.

The Church consists of believers "baptized in one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free. We are all given the one Spirit to drink." (1 Cor.12:13), and this indicates that Spirit baptism not only forms the church as Christ's body, but it initiates people into its life, and it involves a diversity of participants united as one.[23] Macchia rightly states that the Church was formed with a charismatic structure and this structure is fluid and relational, because spiritual gifts are graced ways of relating to each other that depend on the will of the Spirit that is at work among us (1 Cor. 12:11).[24] Spiritual gifts signify and facilitate graced relationships and they open the Church to God's grace, and show forth signs of this grace in a graceless world.[25]

[22]Ibid., 97-98.
[23] Macchia, *Bapized in the Spirit - A Global Pentecostal Theology*, 201.
[24] Ibid., 242.
[25] Ibid.

Conclusion

Chan states that after a century, classical Pentecostalism is experiencing spiritual fatigue.[26] If the Church is fatigued, she cannot be the answer to the problems of the world. As D.T. Niles states:

> We often say that the answer to the problems of the world is Jesus Christ. Can I say with reverence that the answer to the problems of our world is not Jesus Christ? The answer to the problems of the world is the answer that Jesus Christ provided, which is the Church Jesus Christ has set in the world, a community bound to him, sharing his life and his mission, and endued with the power of the Holy Spirit. Pastors and leaders, the church is the answer that our Lord Jesus has provided for the world.[27]

There are many possible factors that lead to spiritual fatigue. However one thing is certain, when the Church has weak concepts of Christological ecclesiology, pneumatological ecclesiology, and sociological ecclesiology, the Church will suffer and be weakened.

As such, it is imperative for the Church to have a strong Christological concept so that the Church is built on the solid foundation of producing strong disciples. Additionally, the Church must have a correct pneumatological concept as this will result in the Church being dynamic and full of life. It is also imperative that the Church have the correct sociological concept, so that we will grow as community and be a blessing to the world outside the church. By acquiring correct ecclesiological concepts, the Church will arise to be the salt and light of this world, and the answer that our Lord Jesus has provided for the world.

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