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A RESPONSE TO PAUL LEWIS' "WHY HAVE SCHOLARS LEFT PENTECOSTAL DENOMINATIONS?"

Shane Clifton

I had the opportunity to read Paul's paper last week, after what turned out to be a very difficult time for me, precisely because of a difference of opinion (in fact, a difference of philosophy) between my senior pastor and my wife and I. We resolved our issues amicably, but as I sat down to read this paper I found myself in increasingly vigorous agreement. Why have scholars left Pentecostal denominations?

- Anti-intellectualism – yes, makes sense to me
- Cult of personality – yes, its hard sometimes to be a scholar in a movement that gives itself so quickly to the shallowness of fame and charisma
- Domineering leaders – again, yes – in fact, my own recent difficulties arose precisely because a pastor could not deal with questioning that he deemed to be a challenge to his authority
- Theological issues and spiritual elitism – yes and yes; for a movement that has so little interest in theological reflection, we are certainly capable of being terribly dogmatic and narrow minded

Paul's paper, then, stands on its own, and I need not repeat its argument for you. Its significance is not only to be found in its explanatory power, but in the quality of its sources. As a movement and as Pentecostal schools, we really have to take seriously criticisms levelled at us by "the children who have left our house." Our tendency is to blame and alienate the departed, but, in fact, it is not in our interest to ignore those as thoughtful and influential as Allan Anderson, Gregory Boyd, Walter Hollenweger, Ronald A.N. Kydd, James K.A. Smith, Roger Olson, Grant Wacker – and more. So for all these reasons, I commend this paper to you.

Yet for all its merit, as Paul himself admits, this research "is a work in progress" and, indeed there is so much more that can and must be said about the question at hand. The underlying issue is more fundamental than mere differences of opinion between academics and pastors, but relates to the institutional values that frame the interaction between the movement and its scholars. At the level of social and political authority, the very structures of Pentecostal ecclesiology work to dis-empower academics and, indeed, anyone other than senior pastors, so much so that most pastors don't even know the Pentecostal academy exists (there is a world of difference between the common idea of a bible school and a Pentecostal academy). Paul says as much in his comments about leadership. While, theoretically, Pentecostals assert notions of universal Spirit baptism and the priesthood of all believers, in fact church life revolves around the charisma of the senior pastor. In places that have adopted the so-called apostolic model, the exclusive authority of the pastor is built into the ecclesial structures. But given the tendency of Pentecostalism globally to seek out the charismatic individual, Pentecostal churches, whatever their model of governance, are generally dominated by the senior pastor. As Mark Hutchinson commented yesterday:

The model of the charismatic leader is to hear from God and to tell the people what has been heard. The concept that they may, in fact, be serving a community which can hear from God and which is capable of dealing with what they've heard is not a common one.

As a result, it is the charismatic "man" (and it normally is a man – except in the spectacular example of Naomi Dowdy) who runs the church is the only person with any real power. In the face of this power, alternate voices, especially those that are deemed contrary (academics, prophets, artists) tend to be alienated and silenced, or at least, tightly controlled and kept within constrained sphere's of influence (i.e. put in out of the way locations such as bible colleges). Any that do speak up are presumed to be divisive, ungodly, even demonic, and therefore forced out. While the status quo is thereby reinforced, what is lost is the diverse insight of people of the calibre of Grant Wacker. Of course, as Paul notes in the conclusion to his paper, our loss has been someone else's gain, but such does not bode well for the future of our churches, whatever its contribution to the Church at large.

At the level of cultural values, the difficulty facing our movement is its tendency to be oriented to the practical and pragmatic. This situation can be attributed to the movement's rejection of traditionalism (i.e. slavish adherence to creeds and practices of the past) as well as its desire to develop a spirituality that transcends the divisions that have coloured many Evangelical communities wedded to dogmatic and doctrinaire cultures. Rather than debate the nuances of theology, Pentecostals have preferred to engage in the practical tasks of evangelism and church growth. What this means is that our churches are oriented to the concrete, whereas scholarship, by its very nature, tends toward abstraction. This is all well and good, and I, for one, would rather be part of a movement that is concerned for the practical everyday relevance of the gospel, than one taken up in seemingly outdated metaphysical speculation. Taken too far, however, pragmatic church cultures fail to recognise the extent to which the practice of ministry necessarily derives from a deep-rooted theological heritage; from the abstraction of the "idea" of God and the "ideals" of a gospel that is often-times impractical and thereby, at least according to St. Paul, foolish. And since Pentecostal pragmatism makes little space for abstraction, scholars are sidelined, and as Paul (Lewis not St.) has shown us, many move on. This is unfortunate precisely because scholarship should play a vital role in church mission, since it is the scholar's job to engage with an ancient theological heritage and respond to the horizons of the contemporary culture. That is to say, since the mission of the church is necessarily theological, a movement that alienates its teachers is in danger of proclaiming a narrow and distorted message.

Again, more can be said, and I am sure that members of this august body can add further answers to this very important question, Why have scholars left the Pentecostal movement? Explanations aside, Paul ends his paper with a vital question. What do we do? He suggests we need to establish forums for discussion, ones in which scholars can practice "loyal critique" and denominational leaders can "hear scholarly concerns" and take on board scholarly insights. I agree – we must find a way to engage in dialogue – to expand one-another's horizons. But I must also say, Paul, the ideal of a forum between pastors and academics sounds pretty unlikely to me. For the all the reasons I have outlined above – structural, cultural and spiritual – why would the pastor's come? To listen to our "faithful criticism?" I doubt it.

Ultimately, the solution is a longer term one. My own theological mentor, Professor Neil Ormerod, is a Catholic, and he notes that cultural change takes a generation. For obvious reasons, Catholic scholars have a sense of perspective that we sometimes lack or, at least, that I, in my natural impatience, lack (just ask my boss). I have to remind myself that my task is not, in fact, to imagine that I can change the attitudes and social structures of pastors and churches. Such would be to claim the prerogative of the Spirit, and to forget that I don't have all the answers (or, in fact, any answers at all). And in this light, all I can do is pursue my call and be faithful to the open pursuit of truth; all I can hope is that the horizons of my students might be expanded, and that they might learn "faithful or loyal criticism" as I model an openness to unity in diversity in the classroom; and all I can pray is that God might give me the wisdom and insight to know what to say and how to say it when the sorts of forum's Paul describes eventually become a reality (even if I am an old man when that occurs). And finally, at least within my own sphere of influence at Southern Cross College, I hope to create the sort of culture that encourages the emergence of young Pentecostal scholars, people who will feel empowered to engage thoughtfully with both the ancient theology of the church and contemporary cultural trends and who, in so doing, will become vital participants in the task of Pentecostal mission.