

**Presidential Response
to the
First Annual Doctor of Ministry Symposium**
Assemblies of God Theological Seminary

This is an historic moment; it is a first-time event. Just 100 years ago, Charles Parham was entering the first summer of ministry after the historic outpouring of the Spirit in Topeka, Kansas and he was experiencing considerable opposition. William Seymour was still a part-time holiness preacher making ends meet by waiting tables in the hotels of Indianapolis and Cincinnati. Yet last week, just several miles away from site of the Azusa Street Mission, the Los Angeles Times recorded the following headlines:

Global Convention Testifies to Pentecostalism's Revival

"At the Faithdome in South-Central Los Angeles this week, one of the most dynamic religious movements in the world is out in full force. "

"A century after a one-eyed preacher in Los Angeles fired up the Pentecostal flame that has now spread to half a billion worshippers worldwide, several thousand believers from more than 40 countries are congregating here for the World Pentecostal Conference. At their nightly gathering, differences seem to melt away as they worship in the same of language of God and give remarkably similar testimony of miracles worked, lives transformed and native lands spiritually afire."

" The Pentecostal movement is more powerful today than ever and will continue to gain momentum, - a leader of the faith, Thomas Trask declared. "No man can stop it. It's a God thing."

The LA Times account fits the self-image we have of ourselves as Pentecostals. Simple beginnings ----- profound empowerment to take the Gospel to all the world --- and an acknowledgment by outside observers that Pentecostalism has been reshaping the nature of Christianity worldwide. But how does that picture fit with the snapshot taking place this morning here in the Seymour Chapel at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary?

My good friend, Dr. Peter Wagner, would point to the historical fact that any time a denomination commits to a seminary, stagnation is only one to two generations away. I cringe at Dr. Wagner's observations, not because it isn't possible, but because what is occurring here this morning embodies different priorities than those that have lead to Dr. Wagner's predictions.

Allow me to illustrate the polarity highlighted by the curious events we are witness to this morning, with a somewhat apocryphal story about John Wesley. One day a lady, who obviously didn't think much of Wesley, confronted him by saying, "Mr. Wesley, did you know that God is not impressed with your Oxford education?" To this somewhat in-your- face conversation starter Wesley calmly replied, "Madam, Neither is God impressed with your ignorance."

In the thoughts of the future that may have filled the minds of Charles Parham and William J. Seymour, I don't think an event like the one this morning, could have ever been imagined. How does Bethel Bible School in Topeka or the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, that represent sacred and sovereign encounters with God, connect to the rigors of the academy represented in the first nine earned doctoral degrees the Assemblies of God has even awarded?

There is no doubt that the journey to this symposium has been circuitous. The report of the Education Committee of the A/G in 1959 to the General Presbytery noted that over 100 A/G men and women were studying at non-A/G seminaries. The Committee predicted serious implications for future denominational leadership. Cordas C. Burnett and Charles Scott hoped to champion the establishment of a seminary to the General Council in 1959. The ensuing debate in the General Presbytery highlighted our fellowship's love-hate relationship with higher education. In a compromise that was certainly borne out of expediency the General Presbytery voted to include the establishment of a seminary in the long-range planning of the Assemblies of God. 15 years later the Assemblies of God Graduate School was established.

The history of AGTS is only one small slice of the love-hate relationship that our Fellowship has had with education. The ethos of the words recorded in Zechariah 4:6 (It is not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit) have shaped a tradition that has a healthy fear of overreliance on human knowledge. The bedrock belief in divine initiative that is our hallmark is something that stands in stark juxtaposition to the autonomy of the human mind championed by the tradition of the academy. And we would do well to fear anything that can deter the divine initiative of God to call and empower movements to carry the Gospel in words and deed to the world, not yet reached for Christ.

Yet in our fear of the academy and in the resulting efforts to ward off its humanistic priorities, we have fallen prey to an equally sinister force. In our well-intended efforts to keep the "flame of the Spirit" alive, we have all too often, like Nadab and Abihu, settled for "strange fire." (Leviticus 10:1) In our zeal to protect ourselves from the evils of higher education, we have allowed the "spirits" of pragmatism to emerge uncritiqued. Pragmatism is the affirmation that success validates effort. If it works (i.e. increases the size of the structure, budget, customers) it is deemed successful. The growth of our tradition into the largest Protestant group globally is a wonderful affirmation of the grace of God; it is also the seedbed for triumphalistic pragmatism. The end result of allowing pragmatism to gain a foothold in our ecclesial world is recorded in Matthew 7:21-23:

" Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven. Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me your evildoers! "

In this passage people are shocked that their *success* is rejected by the Lord as having no Kingdom legitimacy. The verdict by our Lord is not a response of "nice try, here's a consolation prize." Rather the Lord says, "you lose, your efforts are not only worthless, they're evil."

So if we have defended against the evils of academia and in so doing have all too frequently succumbed to the perils of pragmatism, how is it that this Doctor of Ministry symposium models

a corrective to these stated dilemmas? I would humbly suggest that what you have experienced in the presentations here this morning is a model of educational **thoroughness**. I am taking some presidential prerogative this morning to postulate the thoroughness model as a lens through which to see meaningful formation of Pentecostal leadership that will not shun the rigors of exhaustive educational investigation nor scoff at the necessity that that investigation actually yield useable resources for the Kingdom. The **thoroughness** model refuses to allow the *ad nauseum* debates between the ecclesial and academic worlds to continue. My own doctoral mentor Ray Anderson expressed this tension as follows:

"Can the Church tolerate the separation of the theoretical task from the concrete situation of its own existence? Will theologians be permitted to do their work in cool absentia while pastors sweat out their existence in the steamy space of the Church in the world? When theological thinking is practiced in abstraction from the Church in ministry it inevitably becomes as much unapplied and irrelevant as pure. When the theological mind of the minister is being educated primarily through experience, an ad hoc theology emerges which owes as much (or more) to methodological and pragmatic concerns as to dogma. The task of working out a theology for ministry begins properly with the task of identifying the nature of and place of ministry itself. "

The thoroughness model unapologetically affirms rigorous study not as an end in itself, but as service to the Church it serves. Effective ministry cannot be construed solely as the practical application or technique that validates itself by pragmatic success. Nothing could be more Pentecostal than to believe that the Jesus whose ministry is authoritatively recorded in the Gospels, is the Jesus who, by the power of the Spirit, continues His redemptive ministry today among us. Jesus' ministry on earth essentially affirmed that real time and real place contexts are the places that God is at work and therefore require our utmost attention.

Just look at the topics represented in the research of our doctoral candidates. The research is connected to the context of ministry; of service to the Church. For example, conflict in the church is a painful reality. Is our goal to resolve or manage conflict in the church merely to gain a little bit of peace or to avoid society's scoffing that the church is full of hypocrites? Conflict in the church inevitably casts shadows on the central goal of any local church which Paul records as being "Christ ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us, be reconciled to God." (II Corinthians 5:20) To faithfully be Christ's ambassadors and make an appeal to be reconciled to God certainly includes the members of that church be reconciled among themselves. (See Gary Allen and Sol Codillo)

Isn't it reasonable that reconciliation between ethnic groups and historically opposed Christian traditions be given motivation. I am not talking about shadowy ecumenism espoused by the likes of the World Council of Churches, but a meeting of heretofore- hostile entities around the sovereign intrusion by the Holy Spirit. The prayer of our Lord in John 17:21 needs to have new and powerful impetus because the world deserves to see true followers of Jesus Christ who truly act like the One they declare as Lord. (See Doug Norwood)

Who would deny that church staffs can make or break the ministry of any church? What district official or experienced pastoral leader could not give testimony to the "sin nature" that exists untamed on some local staffs. The tales of destruction and broken lives is endless. Could this real

life ministry context be the place where thorough investigation might yield wonderful fruit so that the Kingdom's impact could be extended? (See James Davis)

A network of churches with an 87 year history faces the inevitability that some congregations will have not only plateaued, but actually be in decline. Revitalization of our congregations requires a thorough awareness of cultural and demographic changes. Yet, church revitalization is not a mere application of current techniques successfully implemented across town or in another part of the country. Revitalization is not about restoring former glory, but the necessary spiritual refinement of a community of believers to most fully reflect the Kingdom they represent. (See Gary Denbow)

The task of revitalizing a local congregation by refocusing attention on the unchurched seems like a worthwhile effort, yet many churches no longer even have a single conversion annually. What could be a more fruitful place for doctoral research in service of the Church, than struggling with the dynamics of redirecting the comfortableness of our congregations toward the messiness of winning the lost? (See Steve Allen) In addition, what could be more productive over the long-term, than instructing young leaders emerging in our Assemblies of God institutions of higher learning about the realities of winning the lost in the 21st century in a nation increasingly unchurched? (See Jim McCorkle)

Our Assemblies of God history is thoroughly a history of our missions efforts globally. While we have committed ourselves to the planting of indigenous churches we are just now fully realizing the potential of those indigenous churches to themselves become missionary movements. Therefore what could be more useable than to biblically focus the attention and the zeal of the young non-western missionary force waiting to be unleashed on the world with a new wave of sacrificial and visionary missionary effort? (See Robert Rose)

How can we most accurately assess the spirituality of our leadership? Any experienced leader in our Fellowship would have to acknowledge that the decibel level in worship is no guarantee that deep-rooted spirituality exists. Could there be any more fruitful effort than to intentionally form the spirituality of Pentecostal leaders studying at AGTS? When the models for such a process are overwhelming housed in the Catholic tradition, I'd suggest there is room for fruitful research in the service of the Church. (See Jay Taylor)

So what you have experienced this morning is more than an exercise in the tradition of the academy. I don't think this event ever existed in the consciousness of Charles Parham, William Seymour or the attendees at Hot Springs in 1914. Yet this symposium has been a statement about the critical role in our Fellowship played by AGTS and the Doctor of Ministry program as its terminal degree. With this first time event today we are clearly affirming:

Thoroughness and rigor in study, which is offered in the service of the Church, counters our world's propensity to waffle between detached academia and unattached pragmatism.

The contexts of ministry in which we serve are the arenas in which Jesus continues His ministry by the power of the Spirit. His presence makes them holy places and therefore legitimate places where thorough discernment and evaluation with care and humility is the order of the day.

AGTS is committed to being central to serious research that will propel Spirit-anointed ministry and leadership into a century where the future can no longer be predicted by replicating an updated version of the past. This seminary, as a sacred trust of the Assemblies of God, is well worth the investment of its supporting publics. Today's symposium is only one more indicator that we are fulfilling our commitment *to shape servant leaders with knowledge, skill and passion to revitalize the church and evangelize the world in the power of the Spirit.*

I leave you this morning with some words of wisdom from the namesake of this chapel. In response to some highly pragmatic participants at the Azusa Street Mission. Brother Seymour said, "We are measuring everything by the Word, every experience must measure up with the Bible. Some say that is going too far, but if we have lived too close to the Word, we will settle that with the Lord when we meet Him in the air."

Some may say the rigor of this Doctor of Ministry program is unnecessarily thorough and thus of little service to the Church. I would respond by saying "we will settle that with the Lord when we meet Him in the air." Until that day, AGTS will serve "this church" with thoroughness.

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