

**Thank God for Friends that My Books Have Made: Reflections on Two Decades of Scholarship
(After Pentecost)**

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Thanks to Friends Speaking in and through Many Tongues

Early in my career I was at a session of the American Academy of Religion (if memory serves me right) devoted to a panel engagement of one of William J. Abraham's (of Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University) recently published books (at that time, which title I no longer recall), when I heard him open his response with something along the following lines: "Books are like children; as they grow up, you never know what kinds of friends they are going to bring home." I have repeated something like this in the years since, and its basic sentiment is gestured to also in the title of this response I am providing to the set of papers collected here. In the following, I want to both express my gratitude to these friends my books have made and do so by interacting with the thoughts they have expressed.

First, I want to express my appreciation to Christopher (Crip) Stephenson for organizing this session intended for the 49th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies in March 2020 that was then canceled by the onset of COVID-19; additionally to Jacqui Grey, Drenda Butler, and William (Bill) Oliverio for agreeing to participate as panelists and then to these four for agreeing to publish their responses despite the cancellation of the event; and finally to Jacqui, specifically, in her role as editor of *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* both for welcoming these papers and inviting a response from me. None of these I take for granted, as it is still true that I oftentimes marvel that anything I have written gets read, much less talked or written about. In this situation, it is further remarkable to me that we have in this group two theologians (Crip and Drenda), one philosopher (Bill), and one biblical scholar (Jacqui), surely an indicator of the many disciplinary tongues that are flowering in pentecostal scholarship at the present time, even if that is perhaps also a sign I have been as reckless as anyone in thinking I might have something to say in these (and other) disparate scholarly venues over the years. I am also thankful that what St. Luke says about the outpouring of the spirit¹ extending Christian witness to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) is coming to pass in this forum, both in involving someone like Jacqui from Down Under

¹ I will capitalize when referring to the *Holy Spirit* but not otherwise, even when intended as synonymous in reference; for rationale, see the introductory chapter of my *Mission after Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation*, Mission in Global Community (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

– the other side of the world the rest of us inhabit – as contributor and, now through her role as journal editor, as channeling our voices from the Australasian site of this journal transnationally because of its commitments to open access via the digital medium. Last but not least, I am encouraged by Drenda’s willingness, as a graduate student, to jump into this conversation; she may be responding to my work here, but she is following in the path of other Lee University alumni like Crip who went on to Marquette to study theology and returned to teach students like Drenda and have encouraged her to pursue doctoral studies. Ironically, Bill also went to Marquette, so that three of my interlocutors here have been formed by or are currently being tutored in and through the Jesuit tradition, which means that this pentecostal conversation is being refracted through Catholic accents – including the Thomistic and Rahnerian idioms of Bill’s essay, for instance – precisely how the symphony of a theological conversation after Pentecost ought to resound.

Let me now say a bit more about each of my friends and interact with what they have written.

Thanks to My More “Methodological” Friends

I may have known Crip and Bill the longest, my meeting of the former going back to the time when I got to know him serving as a member of his dissertation committee that he completed in 2009. Besides publishing almost two dozen scholarly articles and essays, researching and writing his own books (two of which will be forthcoming not too long hence), and editing a series on Ecumenical Studies (with Peter Lang),² he has been perhaps my most constant colleague in the last decade, not only in having read and provided immensely helpful feedback to at least another handful (by my count) of drafts of Yong monographs, but also in editing *An Amos Yong Reader: The Pentecostal Spirit* (2020). Intriguingly he and Bill were both doing PhDs at Marquette around the same time and they both included a section on interpreting Amos Yong in their dissertations, each also eventually published not far apart.³ These initial forays contributed, I am positive, to their being invited to write essays for the one edited volume so far devoted to explicating my work.⁴

If Crip has done more than anyone else I know to understand and clarify my theological method, Bill’s persistent focus has been more hermeneutically-philosophically focused. Even before the

² See also, outside of this series, Christopher A. Stephenson, Peter D. Hocken and Tony L. Richie, eds., *Pentecostal Theology and Ecumenical Theology: Interpretations and Intersections* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2019).

³ See Christopher A. Stephenson, *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit*, AAR Academy Series (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), ch. 4, “Systematic Theology as Philosophical and Fundamental Theology in Pneumatological Perspective: Amos Yong,” and L. William Oliverio Jr., *Theological Hermeneutics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition: A Typological Account*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies 12 (Leiden and Boston: 2012), ch. 5.6, “Amos Yong’s Trinitarian-Pneumatological Approach.”

⁴ Wolfgang Vondey and Martin W. Mittelstadt, eds., *The Theology of Amos Yong and the New Face of Pentecostal Scholarship: Passion for the Spirit*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies 14 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013).

latter finished his PhD, he provided one of the most helpful readings of my densest, and arguably most important, work—the early *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (2002).⁵ This was surely a bold venture for a doctoral student working in pentecostal studies, not least because my own book constituted its own first-of-its-kind attempt to develop a pentecostal philosophical and hermeneutical paradigm but also and more importantly because pentecostal scholars had barely begun to think philosophically even during the first decade of the twenty-first century. I would still recommend it for those wishing to unpack *Spirit-Word-Community*, but now, with his essay here, Bill has updated that report with a cross-sectional philosophical and hermeneutical reading of my entire corpus to date, no mean feat! I am particularly grateful to these friends since my critics have usually faltered, in my humble opinion, because they have engaged me partially rather than across my *oeuvre*. Now, for those wishing a guide to the broad scope of my writings, I'd say consult 1) Bill's assessment in the pages of this issue and 2) Crip's introduction to *An Amos Yong Reader*.⁶

Both are correct to note that attentiveness to all things methodological—theological, philosophical, hermeneutical, inter-disciplinary, etc.—has been central to my work since the beginning. The main reason for this is that, under the tutelage of my *doktorvater* Robert Cummings Neville, himself a global, comparative, and systematic philosopher of the highest caliber, I came to see that if one could articulate a sturdy methodological approach, one has a path toward the endless horizon of questions, no matter how much such continue in their receding and recession. In other words, a reliable methodology translates wonder into inquiry and then scholarship. At the end of her introductory paragraphs, Drenda summarizes that my method “*is Pentecostal at its core*” (her emphasis). This is right in some fundamental respects, even as I will return to comment further on it at the end. For the moment, it suffices to say what my friends here have noted in their own words: that I have sought to clarify (my) pentecostal experience as a methodological perspective and this has both allowed for curiosity to follow the path of inquiry wherever such has been perceived to go and even pushed my continuously wading into waters that from any academic and disciplinary-based perspective I would have no business navigating. Perhaps it has been because I have spoken in tongues since I was an early teenager and along the way therefore also always asking, “what meaneth this?” (Acts 2:12b, KJV), that such querying has been presumed to be a normal part of the journey of Christian vocation and discipleship.

Thanks to Friends in Biblical Hermeneutics

⁵ See L. William Oliverio, Jr., “An Interpretive Review Essay on Amos Yong’s *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective*,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18:2 (October 2009): 301-11.

⁶ See Christopher A. Stephenson, “Introduction – Amos Yong: Pentecostalism’s Premier Theologian,” in *An Amos Yong Reader: The Pentecostal Spirit*, ed. Christopher A. Stephenson (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2020), 1-19.

I do want to say more about what each of my friends have observed: that my theological and hermeneutical method began philosophically but has evolved in biblical directions. Let me tell a short story about how this happened.

When I first arrived at Regent University in 2005 I was greeted by a PhD student who expressed, among his various concerns of my early work (remember that Regent then was situated fairly squarely within the main lines of the evangelical movement and imbibed its political and theological conservatism), that I was too philosophical and insufficiently biblical in my efforts. This stung a bit, not least since as a pentecostal I knew such scriptural arguments were essential to gaining a hearing within the movement but also because each of my first three books by then (my dissertation in 2000, *Spirit-Word-Community* in 2002, and *Beyond the Impasse* in 2003) had scripture indexes—not always expected and even mostly absent in the books of systematic theologians, I might add!—and my fourth book, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, which appeared during the summer of my landing in Virginia Beach, not only included the same but also had two or three extended exegetical segments within an overall framing that drew directly from the Book of Acts. What else must a systematician do in order to be biblically convincing, I wondered aloud while responding apologetically to this broadside (unconvincingly so I gathered to the one who was casting the criticism).

In the fifteen years since, as my friends have now summarized, I have written two books that are fundamentally biblical in orientation, one that reads Acts-Luke (*Who is the Holy Spirit?* in 2011) and another that reads the entire Bible missiologically in light of the work of the divine spirit (*Mission after Pentecost* in 2019). I have also completed a theological commentary on the Book of Revelation that will be published in 2021 in Westminster John Knox Press' Belief Series. Let me say in passing, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that with the imminent appearance of this last mentioned volume, I will have made substantive pronouncements about the so-called end-of-the-world and with that said, there may not be much else to speak or write about thereafter, which may well be appropriate since I have in the last two years taken on senior administrative assignments here at Fuller Seminary that consumes the time I had been able to devote previously to scholarship. In that case, while one might conclude from Bill's essay calling attention to me now being only "in the prime" of my career that there is much more to come, it may instead be that my friends here, and others who would join them, will have to carry on the pentecostal scholarly baton into the 2020s. There comes a time that any scholar will need to hand things on to the next generation. Let me pause to express how providential and fortuitous it has been that I have come along at the time I did, which allowed me to pick up the baton from my predecessors and carry it a bit, so that no matter when the final hand-off may be, all of this must be acknowledged as fully the work of the Holy Spirit as I am, with each of my friends, incapable of such on our own and "successful" only insofar as we are empowered to bear witness.

But back to my point, that a systematic and constructive theologian such as myself has three volumes in the area of biblical scholarship, broadly speaking (here I realize that while not all of those in this arena of scholarship will recognize these efforts of mine by that label, at least my friend Jacqui does and it is therefore with such gratefulness of heart that I dare to even write this sentence), has come by not by accident but because I have since 2005 been intentional about this aspect of my work. As has been noted by my friends, most of my other books in the last decade-and-a-half beyond the three referenced in the preceding paragraph include substantive sections of scriptural interpretation. Looking back, I am not sure I have been a decent interpreter of the Bible, but I know that even with my sojourning far beyond the confines of traditional theological endeavor, much less pentecostal conversation – e.g., in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, in thinking about the environment and our cosmic inhabitation in conversation with the sciences, in engaging with the realms of disability and political theology, etc. – I keep seeking for biblical resources to address difficult matters and have cherished listening to and hearing from the voices of the Christian canon again-and-again.

Thanks to Friends Who Are Shifting the Balance of a Historically Male-Dominated (Theological) Academia

I now want to express more specifically appreciation to Jacqui and Drenda for their contributions. Drenda mentions at the end of her reflections about how she has been periodically discouraged in what must be an oftentimes lonely journey in theological academia. Ironically, while the Pentecost narrative says that the spirit is poured out equally on male and female, pentecostal communities, like other ecclesial traditions and movements, have not been immune from androcentricity. Jacqui will have her own testimony as a woman from Down Under, traversing church, guild, and mission-environments, and I am thrilled that she is now editor of this journal also. I know that she has been attentive to these questions of gender, even as I have also tried to give periodic voice to such matters in my own work.⁷

It is in this context, however, that I also want to build on the comments related to my *Spirit of Love: A Trinitarian Theology of Grace* (2012) that more than one of these friends have commented on. Yes, *Spirit of Love* attempts to balance out the pentecostal theological conversation from one of power, typically a masculine category, to love, normally associated with feminine imagery. I am going to here risk some generalizations, albeit to complicate the conversation rather than to perpetuate false binaries. My efforts in *Spirit of Love* led to a project on pneumatology and the affections,⁸ which some may say involves retrieving and

⁷ E.g., Jacqueline Grey and Shane Clifton, eds., *Raising Women Leaders: Perspectives on Liberating Women in Pentecostal and Charismatic Contexts* (Sydney: Australasian Pentecostal Studies, 2013); Estrela Alexander and Amos Yong, eds., *Philip's Daughters: Women in Pentecostal-Charismatic Leadership*, Princeton Theological Monographs Series 104 (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

⁸ See my chapter, "The Affective Spirit: Historiographic Revitalization in the Christian Theological Tradition," that

reappropriating feminist perspectives and which I characterize as providing allied resources for rethinking the theological tradition away from male-female binaries. A related work was my incursion into the field where theology and music meet, here to articulate how a musical hermeneutic, as it were, might expand the methodological repertoire not only for pentecostal theology but for the theological conversation at large, and this would also be consistent with, in my view, forging new alliances with feminist approaches insofar as the musical dimension provides complementary perspectives for asking fresh perceptual, experiential, and theoretical questions about the human condition.⁹ Last but not least, but building along these various lines, I have focused part of my recent scholarship on orality studies, chiefly for the purposes of understanding preaching, and have found that beyond rhetorical technique (that has dominated parts of the homiletical conversation historically), we have to attend also to the embodied and the affective domains of human discursivity that feminists have long called attention to but men have neglected.¹⁰ I say all of this, again, not to try to pretend that these are explicit efforts to promote feminist perspectives since I don't believe these scholarly venues can be divided into male-and-female spaces. However, I believe that these interdisciplinary explorations are showing how historically male-dominated discussions are being transformed methodologically and hermeneutically as more women have engaged the conversation and asked new questions.

To be sure, I realize we all need to do more to promote opportunities for women to enter into such traditionally male-oriented endeavors. I need to be more intentional myself and looking back, I wish I could have done more. I am certainly eager to hear more from Drenda as she makes progress in her studies.

Thanks for the Hermeneutics of Love

I now want to say a few more things about Jacqui's essay, not least given that she has been a

concludes Dale M. Coulter and Amos Yong, eds., *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 293-302.

⁹ See my concluding thoughts, "Improvisation, Indigenization, and Inspiration: Theological Reflections on the Sound and Spirit of Global Renewal," in Monique Ingalls and Amos Yong, eds., *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 2015), 279-88.

¹⁰ See my *The Kerygmatic Spirit: Apostolic Preaching in the 21st Century*, edited by Josh Samuel, commentary and afterword by Tony Richie (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2018), which therefore also intentionally provides web-links to audio and video recordings of the sermons transcribed in the book so that they can be heard alongside being read; cf. also my three-part article: "The Spirit and Proclamation: A Pneumatological Theology of Preaching, part I," "Orality and the Sound of the Spirit: Intoning an Acoustemological Pneumatology, part II," and "Proclamation in/of the Spirit: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Preaching," in *The Living Pulpit* (May 2015) [<http://www.pulpit.org/2015/05/>], as well as my book, *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and the Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2017), ch. 2, on "Understanding and Living the Apostolic Way: Orality and Scriptural Faithfulness in Conversation with African Pentecostalism."

trailblazer as a female pentecostal Old Testament scholar. In this regard, her contributions thus far have been as much in providing pentecostal hermeneutical approaches to reading the First Testament as directly related to the prophetic books of which her initial training focused on,¹¹ although we are soon to see the results of the latter in her contribution on the Book of Isaiah in the Pentecostal Commentary series. What I want to focus on, however, is her call for a hermeneutics of love.

Yes, Jacqui leaps off my *Spirit of Love* but I have not used the specific notion of *hermeneutics of love* before (so far as I know) that is featured in the title of her essay. I know I have long admired Tom Oord, my good friend, for his work (many books) as the premier *theologian of love* today, and it is in this spirit that I want to applaud and promote Jacqui's advocacy. She weaves in affectivity as central to such a hermeneutical approach, but concludes with its performative implications: that reading scripture through a love-lens invites living lovingly in relationship to others—both God and human others (first-and-foremost, but also creaturely others by extension). Both the affective connection and the extended application are important. On the former front, it is difficult to love others only rationally and in the abstract; rather, to love invites not only cognitive aspects but also response at the embodied and emotional levels (remember that Jesus invites us to love “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” [Luke 10:27, NRSV]). Jacqui is right: any hermeneutics of love involves an affective investment, much more costly than one that remains at the intellectual and speculative sphere.

I can't help but comment further next about how essential such hermeneutical cultivation is for our theological conversation and practical discipleship in the present time. In a global context with its extreme polarization and partisanship (I am writing this in the throes of the 2020 presidential election season in the United States), how might a hermeneutic of love change the way we respond to God and our neighbors? Yes, I have written about how the spirit-filled life ought to lead us to embrace others—religious others, others across the spectrum of dis/ability, political others, etc. —but such is now even more needed than ever. In a time when we must listen ever more intently to those who are different from us, we have instead vilified each other through an intensified hermeneutic of suspicion, one that divides “us” from “them” in so many different ways, so that the many tongues the human species utters are incoherent and incommensurable rather than leading pentecostally to mutual interpretation, amazement, and astonishment. Lord, have mercy: pour out your Holy Spirit afresh so that our hearts can be touched and turned and in order that we can hear one another again through the cacophony and

¹¹ E.g., Grey, *Three's a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014), and *Them, Us and Me: How the Old Testament Speaks to People Today* (Sydney: Australasian Pentecostal Studies, 2015).

begin to love the cultural, linguistic, religious, and political others in our midst.

Thanks and Blessings to “Pentecostal” Friends

In closing, I want to make a final set of remarks leaping off Drenda’s comment about my theology being “Pentecostal at its core.” I continue to retain ministerial credentials with pentecostal denominations, recently being commissioned with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, so I am surely still (and intend to remain) pentecostal in this formal sense. Yet while having started my vocation explicitly as a pentecostal theologian, I have always felt—and my friends have noted variously—that the witness I was called to bear was to the wider theological academy, one that included all those who did not have the experiences that I and others in our pentecostal churches had. I began to see early on, then, that my contribution was the theological version of precisely what modern pentecostal Christians have always understood about their own testimony: to speak of the presence and activity of God’s work in Christ by the Holy Spirit in their lives to any who were willing to hear. But if the Pentecost narrative called for speaking and hearing across cultural, ethnic, and linguistic divides, then so did my theological efforts invite such witness to those “outside” the pentecostal camp, so to speak, whether ecumenically, academically, or even disciplinarily.

I began to see also that while the pentecostal experience deserved to be understood better in order that its theological implications would be further explored, there was another sense in which Pentecost as recounted in the New Testament did not belong to those modern churches (or members of such) that went by the pentecostal name. In fact, on the contrary, precisely because that same narrative insisted that the outpouring of the divine spirit was upon all flesh, the witness of that spirit was being borne by those speaking in many and different tongues. As always, the question is not whether the divine spirit is speaking but who is listening!? From that perspective, I began to see that the pentecostal witness was as much testimony to the significance of Pentecost that continues to resound through the lives, narratives, and stories of others. By extension, the human family participates in the Pentecost reality, at differentiated levels to be sure, but yet inviting each of us, especially those who believe ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to attend to the possibility that those unlike us and that we locate outside of our immediate Christian (pentecostal) community may be “speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11, NRSV) in ways that might help us see and live otherwise, if we would be open to that invitation.

I therefore thank my “pentecostal” friends both for bearing witness to the Pentecost message and inhabiting our pentecostal space in ways that furthers the conversation in the many directions that the spirit wishes to take such, and I bless their efforts. May their voices be amplified so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21, NRSV).