

Pentecostal Thought and the Education Enterprise: Hearing the Spirit's Call

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Abstract

The paper explores the contribution that Pentecostal thought might make to public education, and specifically how Pentecostal parents, teachers and administrators can potentially influence curriculum and school life. The overarching goal is to extend the implications of recent Pentecostal reflection to the development of a theology of the Spirit for the classroom. Part of approach is concern not only for the development of the intellect for the betterment of society, but the development of values, and more importantly, the awakening of the transformative qualities of the soul, such as humility and compassion. These aspects of human flourishing need to be firmly established in early education but can also be emphasized in the secondary school environment where Pentecostal parents clearly concerned with the future welfare of their young people especially their character formation, can seek to become active participants. The conclusion is that Pentecostals can have a legitimate voice at the wider table of learning. It will mean an effort not just to adopt a generic evangelical educational methodology, but to place greater emphasis on the affective domain of human learning, the realm of aspects and habits of the heart. The paper invites ongoing discussion toward the development of a thoroughgoing 'pneumatological' approach to Christian learning both in person and virtually.

Keywords

Pentecostal — education — schooling — parents – transformative

Introduction

As we progress further into the 21st-century, if Pentecostalism is to be more than merely a historical and contemporary movement that has become the subject of extensive research and reflection, we will need to consider its potential reach into every sphere of human existence. Affirming the presence of the Spirit in our lives personally and corporately has far-reaching implications for life well beyond the local community of believers. Further, if Pentecostalism is to move beyond its frequent reputation as a strange sectarian phenomenon on the fringes of Christianity, Pentecostals will need to determine *how* their theology promises, in practical ways, to touch each facet of life and then be able to articulate that meaningfully. If scholars can help those in the trenches to see renewal in their own lives or

in their faith communities extending above emotionalism and manifestations, we will have done our job well.

The growing body of Pentecostal scholarship continues to explore the potential of Pentecostalism for multiple aspects of our social and cultural existence including human formation and flourishing. More specifically, much needed reflection has taken place in recent years on the contribution that Pentecostals are making to theological higher education. Arguably, the conversation needs to be extended to the total education endeavour from primary to secondary school, public, private and homeschooling, church education, and parachurch organizations. The focus of this article is primarily public education where Pentecostals and evangelicals usually have little official or formal voice. Reference is made, in particular, to the Pentecostal teacher and administrator in such a context on the one side, and the Pentecostal parent on the other. We can say with confidence that for Pentecostal teachers working in secular establishments, the help of the Holy Spirit is just as real as in church schools. Does Pentecostalism have anything to say to the broad field of education? I propose to answer the question from two sides. First, toward the articulation of a Pentecostal vision for education (pre-postsecondary). Secondly, toward the implementation of a Pentecostal vision for education (pre-postsecondary).

Several commendable attempts have been made in the last few years to bring credibility to Pentecostal higher education by arguing that the Pentecostal movement has come of age, and now has its own scholars with comparable giftings and qualifications to those of the broader evangelical and Protestant world. If we stop there though, the risk is real that we may end up speaking only to ourselves with respect to education, omitting consideration of the implications of the ongoing work of the Spirit for the entire spectrum of the educational endeavour. After all, institutions of higher learning within Pentecostalism are usually branches of the churches they serve, endowed with the mandate to perpetuate their Pentecostal version of the Christian message. Even those that are departments of larger universities are generally assumed to be in the service of the larger church. In essence, they have a distinctive missiological orientation.

Furthermore, Pentecostal theological higher education is an expression of Pentecostalism that we can largely control. That is, even with accreditation standards, we have a great deal of latitude in prescribing departments, programs, individual courses, and methodologies. We have become reasonably adept at knowing how to do this. Being at least indirectly connected with the church in mission, we can feel quite comfortable playing in our cul-de-sac. Just as in politics and the economy, the world of education seems hopelessly impervious to the penetration of any Pentecostal influence.

Granted that the state largely controls education and its curriculum, methodology and staffing requirements, does Pentecostal thought nevertheless have any implications for the education of our children and young people as we contend that it does for other aspects of life, including science, economics, and politics? Can we dare venture into territory where the

Spirit wants to speak and empower including, but going beyond, homeschooling and church education? Is it possible for Pentecostals to have a vision of education that recognizes the role of the Spirit in giving wisdom and empowerment to begin to think about practical ways of engagement at all levels and specifically for Pentecostal parents and teachers to be able to influence curriculum, methodology, and overall school life?

1. Articulating a Pentecostal Vision for Education (Pre-Postsecondary)

The author's early education—primary, elementary, and high school took place within a government funded denominational school system in the easternmost province of Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador. The system was one of the last vestiges of the British colonial system where learning had been the prerogative of the established Church of England and Roman Catholic churches. By the time the modern Pentecostal movement emerged in the early decades of the last century, several denominations including the Methodist and Salvation Army all controlled education separately with full public funding. The strange ways of Pentecostal worshippers did not endear them, and likewise their children, to school leadership in any of those denominations. Thus, Pentecostals developed their own fledging day schools working jointly and in early years under the auspices of community Pentecostal churches. Apart from the religious education curriculum itself as one subject among others freely and independently prescribed by provincial Pentecostal leadership, the education offered was arguably evangelical Christian rather than distinctively Pentecostal in philosophy. In retrospect, there seems to have been little space given to serious reflection on crafting a true Pentecostal vision for the entire education process. Survival in a hostile religious environment was paramount. In the 1980's, an attempt was made not to consider the implications of Pentecostalism for the task at hand, but to find some model within North American Christianity where educating "Christianly" was taken seriously. Apart from a few private American Christian schools whose promotional literature and curriculum were beginning to pique the interest of Pentecostal education leadership in Newfoundland and Labrador, it was the education publications of the Reformed tradition that became for a time the centre of attention for the Pentecostal teachers' association. The long-established Reformed conviction that the education of children is the primary responsibility of parents, not the state and that all truth is God's truth became the mantra for a Pentecostal day school system to defend its rights against the provincial political establishment that was becoming convinced that a public secular school system was the best economic option for the province and as well as against an emerging secular culture that was becoming increasingly hostile to what it perceived as indoctrination.

Connecting the Reformed vision of education with a Pentecostal school system may have been better than nothing, but it did not seriously consider the Pentecostal world view of life lived in the Spirit, of the transformation of the heart, of growth in holiness and grace in the entire delivery of education in all subjects from the lab to the gymnasium. It leaned toward

a Christian cognitive approach, but not toward a Spirit-conscious affective one that took seriously the spiritually transformative potential of all education, not just the Bible curriculum. Frequently, the term ‘wholistic education’ would get bandied around, but it often gave the impression that cognitive and skills learning, physical education, extracurricular activities including a separate spiritual life program was sufficient for a well-rounded education. What was not considered was the need for appeal to the affective domain of the student in all program areas as much as possible. For Pentecostalism, this neglect is significant given its historical and biblical appeal to the emotions and will and its aim toward the fundamental transformation by the Spirit of the human person in all aspects. It seems in retrospect that such education appealed first to the *head*, second to the *hands*, and third to the *heart* with emphasis in that order.

The requirements of the marketplace have admittedly dominated education in the west so that learning has concerned itself almost exclusively with the cognitive (thinking) domain and psychomotor (doing) domains of human learning as outlined in Bloom’s taxonomy. What I propose is a shift in thinking to a more balanced approach even in an environment where Pentecostals appear to have little or no voice at the table. Pentecostals have needed to ask the question for decades, “Can we have any influence at all, not just in how theological education is conceived, but in how all education is conceived?” Within the seemingly closed universe of secular education, there may yet be opportunity for positive influence through administrators and leaders from local to state and provincial levels who happen to be Pentecostal, teachers who happen to be Pentecostal and most of all, parents who happen to be Pentecostal and are earnestly concerned for the depth of quality of education that their children and youth receive.

Providing space only for religious education in any school, state-controlled or private, does not fulfill the Pentecostal priority of life as a reality where the Spirit is recognized as the ever-present power and presence of the Triune God. Lip service to a Christian heritage does not answer the Pentecostal question of whether the Spirit can be discerned in the wonders of creation and the marvels of human discovery and creativity—in music, art, math, science, and history. Perhaps more seriously, Pentecostalism is concerned with the ongoing transformation of human lives at their deepest level, not in a fragmentation of them so that Christian belief becomes only one aspect of life among several.

In the case of higher theological education, Amos Yong notes that “if education is to be theological, the latter involves not just the content of what is being taught ... but also the engine that drives the efforts.”¹ Similarly, Pentecostals cannot afford to view the whole spectrum of education as content only. If Pentecostals carry the Spirit with them into the economic, political, and social spheres of society, then they also carry the Spirit into the

¹ Amos Yong, “Theological Education Between the West and the “Rest”: A Reverse “Reverse Missionary” and Pentecostal Perspective” in Dave Johnson and Rick Waldrop Jr. (eds.), *Pentecostal Theological Education in the Majority World: The Graduate and Post-Graduate* (Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 2022): 52.

educational sphere. The relationality of the Spirit as a person rather than a force impacts student-teacher relations, for example, and in turn hopefully student-student relations. The many hurdles notwithstanding, a vision of a Pentecostal consciousness conditioning everything from school spirit to pedagogical practices needs to be taken seriously. In the Pentecostal way, spirituality and godly relations can never be separated from academic and professional preparation.²

So, such a vision reaches beyond the development of the intellect for the betterment of society in general to the development of values and even more profoundly to the awakening of the transformative qualities of the soul such as humility and compassion. These aspects of human flourishing can be firmly established in early education not only through private or homeschooling but through public schooling wherever any such positive influences are exerted. In addition, the secondary school as the exit point for youth from day school to post-secondary education is a strategic point for proactive, directional involvement on the part of everyone Pentecostal, particularly parents and grandparents concerned more than ever over the future welfare of their children and grandchildren, especially the degree of their character development. If Pentecostal higher education clearly fulfils the missiological and eschatological mandates of the Acts of the Apostles, to neglect the potential impact of Pentecostalism upon primary, elementary, and secondary schooling is likewise to neglect a big chunk of “all the world” and the emerging attitudes and values of the next generation. The presence of the Spirit through the presence of Pentecostal administrators, teachers, and parents’ associations can reasonably be expected to make a slow but certain difference in the environment of all levels of pre-postsecondary education.

2. Implementing a Pentecostal Vision for Education (Pre-Postsecondary)

Stating what can and perhaps should be in leadership, ministry as well as education is usually much less challenging than its application. The argument could easily be made that the separation of church and state requires that Pentecostals stay away from anything that has come to be seen as the exclusive jurisdiction of the state. In some cases, a major barrier admittedly consists in the long-standing impression that Pentecostals are anti-intellectual by nature, desiring only to be preachy in selling their version of Christian faith. Nevertheless, having come of age with the “charismatisation” of a significant portion of evangelical Protestantism and even a presence in other areas of society, we may be in a better position now to have some voice within the walls of public education than we did not too many years ago. The point is that in our attempt to reflect on the applications of the work of the Spirit

² Temesgen Kahsay, “Theological Education in the Majority World: A Pentecostal Perspective: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Theological Education” in Dave Johnson and Rick Waldrop Jr. (eds.), *Pentecostal Theological Education in the Majority World: The Graduate and Post-Graduate* (Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 2022): 175.

for higher theological education, the economy, science, politics, and especially social justice, we cannot turn a blind eye to this broad sector of society where the Spirit of God longs to work and assume that we are doomed never to be able to infiltrate its fortress.

Being intentional in relationship and community building, parents can persevere in being supportive and available even in what may seem to be a negative environment where teacher attitudes are not positive, perhaps as a result of the stress of the contemporary educational environment, and even fear for their own safety. Some input into curricular and extracurricular programs can result from such a willingness to build community. Chatting with teachers and hearing them as individuals with their own challenges builds strong bridges. A spirit of collaboration where there is mutual concern for students especially over the long-haul cultivates trust. For Pentecostals, there is an awareness that presence/embodiment is a significant contribution to any local school rather than a spirit of complaining that things are not the way Pentecostals want them to be. It would be good if groups of parents could say, “‘It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15:28) to be present in the life of our school.”

Since the Scriptures demonstrate that the people of God live within the wider culture of the world, Pentecostals will naturally want their children’s education to take account of their place within that culture, rather than be separate from it, and to be equipped like everyone else to take their place as contributing citizens.³ In a similar vein, they also bring to any effort to influence secular education a desire to ensure that schooling addresses the entire human being, not just the intellect or the body and that it values critical thought.⁴ They will be concerned that gender equality begin in schools and be modelled in practical ways. They will be intent on seeing that the uniqueness of each student does not get lost in the impersonal, monolithic tendencies of the age. A Pentecostal way of thinking seeks out ways to condition the content and methodology of gender and sex education. Destructive forms of behaviour on the part of students such as bullying and other dysfunctional activities will become aspects of school life that Pentecostals will not want to leave untouched in their ongoing mission to impact all of society. Poverty issues within public schools must be a huge Pentecostal concern. Even the psychological stress often triggered by the pressure of achievement is a concern that cannot be ignored and left only to the state—a pressure that almost always reflects the competitive ethos of the general culture.

It’s still unclear whether the astonishing acceleration of the homeschooling movement, as beneficial and perhaps necessary as it is in many situations on the one hand, is also an abandonment of the culture on the other. It began several decades ago with educators such as John Holt. (Holt established the *Growing without Schooling* magazine, August 1977). He argued secularly for home schooling. In 1976, he published *Instead of Education*, encouraging parents to abandon any efforts toward reforming the public education system and promoted

³ William K. Kay, Unpublished manuscript on education and Pentecostalism (2020)

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the notion of “unschooling.”⁵ Obviously this has not occurred which means that state and provincial education systems remain in place as a major untouched frontier in the work of building the Kingdom. One should not assume the task to be ubiquitously impossible because in many jurisdictions, leadership in schools has been downloaded from county and district education authorities to the local school administrators who get moved around frequently from one to school to another. This is not a call to political action but to a positive spiritual influence operating (or shall I say fermenting?)—a mission being exerted with love and humility. Indeed, it calls for a high-level of commitment over the long haul in the face of disappointment and frequent outright rejection.

In the delivery of primary, elementary, and secondary education through publicly funded systems and within state or provincially approved curricula, Pentecostal parents’ groups will want to search out ways to have meaningful input into the philosophical underpinnings of the overall curriculum. This would be with the intent to ensure that the focus is not totally on academic success and skills training but on personal transformational growth—a direction that involves not just the head and hands but also the heart, which for Pentecostals is viewed as a priority in the life of the student as well as the life of the school. This is a shift for so many educators that goes a step beyond mere values education to opportunities to experience the impact of the Spirit’s activity in the world. It works toward appreciation, respect, and awe at the beauty of the divine order especially in nature and the sciences, in music, and in human sexuality and reproduction. It answers the question, “Where can the creative and sustaining presence of God be detected in all aspects of life?” It can also help set the stage for a personal experience of the Spirit.

Pentecostals will be concerned about the environment of the school and especially the classroom. Since Pentecostals rightly thrive on a sense of community in all they do, there will be a desire for right attitudes and right practices to prevail.⁶ Here, while the individual teacher plays the key role, long-standing relationships of trust with Pentecostal parents can provide opportunities through collaborative events, projects, and ongoing classroom practices to positively condition the atmosphere of the classroom. Ensuring that every effort is made toward establishing student-led Christian clubs for the purposes of character and friendship building would be a major contribution. Pentecostals demanding the inclusion of Bible and doctrinal courses will most likely fall on deaf ears, but the practical aspects of biblically-based character attributes, attitudes and actions are of utmost importance to a Pentecostal worldview widely accepted among most educators.

⁵ Steven R. Clark, “Impact of Legal issues on Homeschooling,” in George Thomas Kurian and Mark A. Lamport (eds.) in *Encyclopedia of Christian Education* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

⁶ Katherine J. Nevins, “Calling for Pietist Community,” in Christopher Gehrz (ed.) *The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education: Forming Whole and Holy Persons* (IVP Academic, 2015), 62.

3. Conclusion

The vision of a Pentecostal worldview penetrating all of life and thus fulfilling its missiological and eschatological mandate must not end up being partial by ignoring the public education sector of society. Intellect and skill, head and hands will continue to drive education because the marketplace will dictate it. Emerging technologies such as AI show no sign of interest in developing the affective domain of students. But no parent or grandparent of whom I am aware, especially a Pentecostal, is insensitive or indifferent to the need for the gradual transformation of the human spirit with its attitudes and its appreciation for life. Nurturing toward wholeness is the essence of education and Pentecostals most certainly have something to contribute to the fulfillment of that objective. Public education in any way affected positively by Pentecostal administrators, teachers, parents, or students will therefore involve not just the head and hands but also the heart which are to be viewed as essential one to the other in the life of the school and in the lives of those who are its graduates.

Finally, Pentecostalism's accent on love poured out through experience of the Spirit, an emphasis going back to its holiness and Wesleyan roots compels a heightened sense of love for the neighbour (which in this case is the student) that resists seeing education as a product delivered to people identified only by a number. Pentecostals will want to seize every opportunity to ensure that students are treated as individuals who bear the *imago Dei* and therefore deserving of "respect, curiosity, and interest in their welfare."⁷ Wherever possible, school lunch and breakfast programs initiated by people on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests anointing them to care for the poor will all help to fulfil the mandate of going into "all the world" with the good news of the Kingdom. Isolation from the public school system reinforces the sectarian view of Pentecostalism as a branch of Christianity to be avoided. More than being a vocal advocate, as necessary as that can sometimes be, the Pentecostal way is one where the wisdom of the Spirit is prayed for and expected, and where a quiet, humble, and self-effacing influence keeps overcoming the darkness. The Spirit has been poured out so that every layer of life and sector of society is transformed on the way to the consummation of the Kingdom.

Because the Christian message is life-changing in its power, and because our country's children are at stake, let's acknowledge the problems and respond with infiltration rather than abandonment. Let's seek not only to raise our own children to know Christ, but to follow him in seeking the redemption and peace of the city, to infuse his creation with salt and light and new life, and to place a light upon a hill.⁸

⁷ Katherine J. Nevins, "Calling for Pietist Community," 62.

⁸ Catherine McNiel, "Should Christians Abandon Public Schools?" *Plough* (January 15, 2015)

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