

CHAPTER 2

“As the Spirit Gives Utterance . . .”

Pentecost, Intra-Christian Ecumenism, and the Wider *Oekumene*

RATHER THAN BREAKING NEW ground, my goal in this paper is to explore the question of what may happen if three distinct topics of current theological discussion were to converge. I refer to work that is presently being done on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), the theology of mission and evangelization, and the reality of religious pluralism (*theologia religionum*). In order to lay the groundwork for the deliberations that follow, let me briefly comment on the state of the discussion in each of these areas.

During the past generation, theological reflection on the Holy Spirit, long thought to be the silent or shy member of the Trinity and referred to as the orphan doctrine of Christian theology, has begun to emerge. Arguably, Henry Pitt van Dusen's *Spirit, Son and Father: Christian Faith in the Light of the Holy Spirit* (1958) signaled the dawn of this new age in Christian thinking. Since van Dusen's richly suggestive work, theologians have been working hard to retrieve the doctrine of the Spirit from the back burner where it has sat for centuries. The result has been an increasing number of monographs not only on pneumatology, but also a reframing of other theological loci in pneumatological perspective.¹ In each case, distinctively pneumatological resources and approaches have reopened questions long

1. For a recent summary of the contemporary discussion, see Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*.

thought to have been either answered or unanswerable, and charted new ground for ongoing exploration.

Theological reflection on the Christian mission has also intensified and taken new turns as we have entered into what some have called the postmodern world. The magnum opus of the late David Bosch suggests that what may be called a postmodern missiological paradigm would include at least the following elements: a rethinking of the nature of the church (ecclesiology and ecumenism); a reconsideration of the doctrine of salvation (soteriology); the quest for justice and liberation; more sophisticated theories of knowledge (epistemology) and of culture, along with more precise notions of contextualization and inculturation; the role of the laity in particular and of the whole people of God in general for the Christian mission; continued exploration of the idea of “eschatological missiology”; and, directly related to our topic today, the tension between dialogue and evangelization vis-à-vis people of other faiths.²

Christian reflection on other faiths has also traversed a variety of routes since the Parliament of Religions over a century ago (1893). The traditional exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist models for understanding other religious traditions is now seen to have been motivated primarily by Christian soteriological concerns and assumptions rather than by serious consideration of these traditions on their own terms. This acknowledgment of the need for a more robust theology of religions (rather than a theology of the unevangelized), however, has also recognized the danger of slipping into purely descriptive modes of discourse. After applying historical, phenomenological, sociocultural, and other methodological tools toward understanding these religious others, the persistent Christian theological questions remain: what is the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions? What is the truth about salvation and other religious doctrines? How should Christians relate to members of the non-Christian faiths?³

It is certainly the case that connections between these topics have already begun to be explored. The idea of a pneumatological missiology has been discussed,⁴ as has that of a pneumatological approach to a theology

2. See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Part 3.

3. For my previous work in this arena in general and on some of these questions particularly, see Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)* and *Beyond the Impasse*.

4. Previous attempts to develop a pneumatological theology of mission include Gordon, *Holy Spirit in Missions*; Allen, “Pentecost and the World”; Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*; Taylor, *Go-Between God*; Pomerville, *Third Force in Missions*; Penney, *Missionary Emphasis of Lukan Pneumatology*; McConnell, ed., *Holy Spirit and Mission Dynamics*; and, most recently, Bevans, “God Inside Out.” See also the entire issue of

of religions.⁵ And, the ecumenical movement has long debated the means and ends of the Christian mission in light of the emerging consciousness of the vitality of the non-Christian faiths.⁶ What has yet to receive attention is how a triadic convergence of these topics—pneumatology, missiology, and religious pluralism—might be mutually illuminating. To my knowledge, no sustained deliberation has been given to the implications of a pneumatological understanding of mission and evangelization in a religiously plural world.⁷

In what follows, I wish to take up this question in a very preliminary way. To do so, my own pentecostal background and formation leads me intuitively to the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2. The main body of this paper (section II) will attempt to unearth Pentecostal and pneumatological resources for rethinking the Christian encounter with other faiths. The concluding section (III) will present theses for a pneumatological theology of mission and evangelism in a religiously plural world.

PENTECOST, CHRISTIAN MISSION, AND THE NON-CHRISTIAN FAITHS

The thesis I wish to explore is the following: The Holy Spirit is the ground of a) human encounter; b) identity in diversity and unity in plurality; and c) the arriving eschatological kingdom of God. How does the Pentecost narrative specifically and Luke’s pneumatology in the book of Acts generally support this tripartite thesis, and how does it inform the quest for a pneumatological theology of mission and evangelization in a religiously plural world?

International Review of Mission 80:317 (1991), which was devoted to the missiological implications of the WCC Canberra conference, the theme of which was “Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation.” See especially the editorial introduction of Duraisingh, “Mission and the Holy Spirit.”

5. Besides my own work (see note 3), see the exploratory but undeveloped proposals of Khodr, “Christianity in a Pluralistic World”; Samartha, “Holy Spirit and People of Various Faiths,” ch. 5 of his *Courage for Dialogue*; and Knitter, “A New Pentecost?”

6. Discussion of religious pluralism has become standard in missiologies published during the past generation. For an introduction to issues for Christian mission in a religiously plural world, see the essays in section one of Anderson and Stransky, eds., *Faith Meets Faith*.

7. Some initial thoughts can be found in Pinnock, “Evangelism and Other Living Faiths,” and Kärkkäinen, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology*, ch. 17.

The Holy Spirit is the Ground of Human Encounter

Pentecostal theologian Jean-Jacques Suurmond has previously called attention to seeing the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit “upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17) as signaling “a decisive new change in the relationship between God and the world and thus also in relationship between human beings.” More specifically, Suurmond suggests that the coming of the Spirit into the world on the Day of Pentecost released charismatic gifts that enable human beings to encounter each other authentically other rather than as projections of and for the self. And, of decisive importance, this possibility of new modes of relationship extends beyond what Christians experience with other Christians to what Christians experience with those outside the church.⁸

How can this be argued from the Pentecost narrative? The clue, I suggest, is derived from a phenomenological reading of the Acts 2:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” (Acts 2:1–13)

Among the many miracles of Pentecost, the most important for our purposes is that it made possible the encounter of human beings with each other that, left to themselves, would not have entered into relationship. Whether such was a miracle of speech or of hearing is not of concern here. The crucial issue is that understanding occurred across linguistic lines: “in our own

8. Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play*, 198–203; quote from 201.

languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” More specifically, in this case, Galileans who spoke Aramaic were able to communicate with those from around the Mediterranean world, Luke’s identification of native languages being a nonexhaustive listing of the visitors present in Jerusalem on that day. On this point, then, one of the miracles of Pentecost was to reconcile a human race divided by language since the Tower of Babel, only that the uniting tongue was not of merely human provenance, but spoken as the Spirit gave utterance.

Yet I suggest that the encounter made possible here goes beyond linguistic lines toward what we might call intercultural or cross-cultural communication. Certainly, those present at Jerusalem were identified as “devout Jews” (v. 5) and to that extent, were not “culturally” other than the 120 who descended from the Upper Room. But it needs to be noted here that to identify Jews only as a cultural category during the first century is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it would imply the anachronistic distinction between “cultural Jews” and “religious Jews” that derives more from the modern period than from the Second Temple period. Diaspora Jews during the Second Temple period were certainly ethnically distinct, but less certainly culturally demarcated.⁹ Second, and more importantly, Jewishness also functioned during the first century as an ethical and a political marker, and as such, complexifies the cultural and linguistic distinction.

In addition, however, to assume that no Gentiles were present in Jerusalem because Luke explicitly identifies devout Jews at the scene is to overlook other exegetical clues. First, Luke qualifies his description of these Jews by noting their derivation “from every nation under heaven” (v. 5). Second, they also heard the 120 speaking “in the native language of each” (v. 6). Finally, and most revealing, is the presence of proselytes—Gentile converts to Judaism—on the scene at hand (v. 10). While most commentators read Luke straightforwardly and see these proselytes as hailing only from Rome, it is also (at least grammatically) possible that Jews and proselytes “does not refer to any specific national group with its own language . . . , but covers *all* the preceding groups with respect to religious affiliation.”¹⁰

In any case, what we have here is the presence of both the Jewish diaspora and Gentile converts to Judaism.¹¹ The Jews present had remained devout worshippers of God in spite of their dispersion abroad, and had visibly set themselves apart through various practices—e.g., their observances

9. See the discussion in Barclay, *Jews in Mediterranean Diaspora*, esp. 402–12.

10. Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 171; italics orig.

11. On the Jewish diaspora, see, e.g., Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, and Rajak, *Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome*. On proselytes, see Levinskaya, *Book of Acts*, esp. chs. 2–3.

at mealtime, of male circumcision, and of the Sabbath. Yet having been removed from their “homeland” for generations if not centuries, they had certainly grown up in other places, learned other languages that were now native to them, and been shaped by these languages and the cultures within which they flourished. In the case of the Gentile converts to Judaism, the situation is even more complex. Some proselytes stopped short of circumcision, even while adhering to Jewish law. Is it also possible that others were not pure monotheists, or perhaps had not severed ties with the pagan communities from which they came?¹² The fact that there were degrees of conversion to Judaism should caution us against homogenizing the “proselytes” Luke identifies as eyewitnesses on the Day of Pentecost. This group of persons undoubtedly had fused (or were in the process of fusing) a variety of practices, values, customs, and traditions into their Jewish identity.

In either case (of devout Jew or Gentile proselyte), whereas previous generations may have overlooked the interconnectedness between language and culture, no longer can we responsibly do so. To speak a language fluently because one has grown up with it is significantly different from taking on a second language. The former includes the socialization that language provides. That those present in Jerusalem were natives of places as disparate as Asia (Minor), Mesopotamia, and North Africa, among others, means that their experience of the one God had been similarly shaped by the particularities of their linguistic, sociohistorical, and cultural backgrounds. The Pentecost narrative therefore portrays an intercultural encounter of wide magnitude.

To make the association between language and culture, however, raises a further connection: that between language, culture, and religion. Current scholarship in religious studies continues to debate the links between religion and language, and religion and culture. Can religion be clearly demarcated from language and culture? Is it possible to understand religion in its purity, apart from cultural considerations? What would religion abstracted from language and culture sound or look like? On the other side, are there purely linguistic, cultural or cultural-linguistic phenomena apart from religion? In these various disciplines there are arguments made about the interdependence of language and religion and of culture and religion. While

12. I pose this as a question since such was clearly the case with the “God-fearers” who become prominent later in the book of Acts (e.g., 10:1–2 and *passim*; cf. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 270). Did proselytes to Judaism differ from God-fearing Gentiles who resisted conversion to Judaism precisely on these points? Yet it is also the case that the God-fearers were very close to Judaism in various ways, many being practically adherents of local synagogues even if they did not take out formal membership. Regardless, the difficulty of the category of “proselyte” should be evident, which is my main point.

language, culture, and religion are certainly distinguishable for purposes of communication and reflection, in reality, however, they overlap and are deeply interconnected. The boundaries between these domains of human experience, if existing at all, are seriously contested. These questions, along with that of whether one is more primordial than the other two, and if so, which one, are beyond the scope of this paper.¹³

I need to be clear that I am not suggesting Luke intended his account of the Day of Pentecost to be anything other than an account regarding the miracle of communication, either of speech or of hearing. Whether or not Luke understood Pentecost as a intercultural or interreligious event will not be decided exegetically. The line of exploration I am raising is first and foremost theological. Yet I am suggesting that implicit in the Pentecost narrative are significant and heretofore untapped resources for the intercultural and interreligious engagement.

The Holy Spirit is the Ground of Identity in Diversity and of Unity in Plurality

In order to pursue this theological line of thought, I turn to the second thesis. Here again, I want to suggest that a pneumatological grounding of identity in diversity, and of unity in plurality, is implicit in the Pentecost narrative. This point has been argued most powerfully by a non-pentecostal theologian who has served as a suggestive dialogue partner for pentecostals: Michael Welker.¹⁴

Welker’s pneumatology is actually self-characterized as a “realistic biblical theology” that pays as much attention to the diversity as to the unity of the biblical narratives and traditions.¹⁵ In his excellent chapter on the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and in the book of Acts, Welker suggests that the miracle of Pentecost “lies not in what is difficult to understand or incomprehensible, but in a totally unexpected comprehensibility and in an unbelievable, universal capacity to understand”; to be more precise, “this difference between the experience of plural inaccessibility to each other and of enduring foreignness, and unfamiliarity, on the one hand, and of utter

13. I would suggest that religion, language, and culture be seen as equi-primordially informing the human condition. For succinct overviews of the pertinent issues, see the articles especially in sections III and V on “Religious Languages and Scripts” and “Beliefs and Language,” in Sawyer et al., *Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion*.

14. I rely primarily on Welker, *God the Spirit*, esp. ch. 5, on the Spirit in Acts. This book spawned a fruitful exchange with the pentecostal theologian Frank Macchia: see Macchia, “Discerning the Spirit in Life,” and Welker, “Spirit Topics.”

15. Welker, *God the Spirit*, x–xi.

commonality of the capacity to understand, on the other hand—this is what is truly and shocking about the Pentecostal event. . . . An astounding, indeed frightening clarity in the midst of the received complexity and variety, a dismaying familiarity in the midst of the received inaccessibility and unfamiliarity—this is what is miraculous and wonderful about the revelation at Pentecost. The Pentecost event connects intense experiences of individuality with a new experience of community.”¹⁶

Notice that Welker’s account calls attention to the radical pluralism implicit in the Pentecost account. Yet this pluralism, rather than being erased or sublated by the universal outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh, is that which actually constitutes the powerful universality of the pentecostal gift. The result is what Welker calls an “overcomprehensibility” that both amazes and perplexes the onlooking spectators.¹⁷ Therefore, the response “What does this mean?” (v. 12) was not a request for explanation of what was spoken, but was an expression of the bewilderment that the crowd felt in being able to understand the testimony of the 120 about “God’s deeds of power” (v. 11). Read in this light, then, the Pentecostal event signifies nothing less than that “God effects a world-encompassing, multilingual, polyindividual testimony to Godself.”¹⁸

This unity-in-diversity theme of the Day of Pentecost should not be underestimated. The first *ekklesia* (2:37–47) emerged precisely out of those who congregated that day on the streets of Jerusalem. Notice again some of the regions represented from around the Mediterranean. There were devout Jews, and possibly Gentile proselytes, from Egypt, perhaps denoting what is now called the African continent and thereby including the black race. (Even if this is only implicit in Acts 2, that the book of Acts includes the African in the congregation of the Lord is undisputed given the account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in ch. 8). Further, there is reference to Jewish, and possibly Gentile, Cretans, of who it was alleged were all “liars, vicious brutes, [and] lazy gluttons” (cf. Titus 1:12). While this stereotype remains as a challenge to the church regarding how she views “foreigners” or those “outside” her walls, it also served as an ongoing reminder of the radical diversity—understood both positively and negatively—within her ranks. Translated theologically and colloquially, the church of Jesus Christ consists of none other than sinners saved by grace. Last (but not least) for our purposes, what about the Jewish, and possibly Gentile, Arabs present, and perhaps even constitutive of the 3,000 baptized that day? Might the

16. Ibid., 230–31 and 233.

17. Ibid., 232.

18. Ibid., 235.

history of the Middle East have been any different if Jews and Arabs would have developed sustained relationships by the power of the Spirit from that pentecostal experience?

This theme of unity in diversity—neither being subordinated to the other, and both mutually informing the other—has far-reaching ecclesiological implications. In his essay, “The Ephesian Moment,” Andrew Walls suggests that the present Gentile-dominated church has for too long taken for granted the Gentile identity of the people of God and neglected the revealed mystery that astounded even the angels: that in Christ, God has accomplished a new, reconciled humanity from that which was formerly antagonistically set off as Jew and Gentile, and that it was precisely the goal of the unity of the Spirit to produce an eschatological unity of faith according to the full measure of Christ.¹⁹ Walls further suggests that reread in this way, the letter to the Ephesians reveals how the early church struggled with deep theological issues as the presence of Gentiles in the community of faith grew. Rather than retrenching into the secure confines of its Jewish identity, however, the church creatively incorporated Gentile (read: pagan) elements into its language and liturgy; the adoption of the Greek *Kyrios*, used by Gentiles for their cult divinities, as a christological title; and the cosmic interpretation of Jesus’ significance.

The point I wish to emphasize, however, is that the unity of the newly established body of Christ preserves rather than cancels out the diversity of its members. This ecclesiological reading of the Pentecost narrative can illuminate the structure of personal identity as well. In my own case, I was born in the country of Malaysia to Chinese parents replete with Confucian values (even while retaining some Confucian practices), and grew up speaking three languages (English, Cantonese, and Malay). Our family moved to California, USA when I was ten. I am married to a Hispanic (Mexican) American, and we have lived in the radically individualistic Pacific Northwest, in an Italian community in New England, and now in what may be called the “New Scandinavia” of the Upper Midwest region of the USA. While raised in a typical pentecostal home—in the Assemblies of God, with whom I remain affiliated as a credentialed minister—with an undergraduate degree from a pentecostal Bible college, I have also attended Holiness and Methodist seminaries, and currently teach in a pietist Baptist liberal arts environment. I carry memberships in academic societies as diverse as the Society for Pentecostal Studies, the Evangelical Theological Society, and the American Academy of Religion, among others. Furthermore, having spent the last ten-plus years studying the Buddhist tradition in some depth has led

19. See Walls, “Ephesian Moment,” ch. 2 of his *The Cross-Cultural Process*.

me into the circles of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. This past year, I got a chance to revisit Malaysia for the first time, during which I not only reconnected with extended family members (most of who continue to live there), but rediscovered ethnic, cultural, and social aspects of my own personal identity that had long been submerged due to my emigration. Along the way, I have lost fluency in the non-English languages I grew up with, but have picked up some Spanish, French, and German, not to mention a bit of biblical Hebrew and Greek—even while I am far from having mastered any of these—along the way.

When I look back over my own personal journey, it is no wonder (at least to me) why I oftentimes feel confused about my own identity. Yet this confusion, while potentially debilitating, has never actually been so. Rather, as I have discovered, such “confusion” can also be understood as a sign of “richness,” evidence of the diversity of traditions, narratives, and stories which combine in my life history. Are we not the experiences that have shaped and formed us? If so, then to greater or lesser degrees and to be developed in some ways and neglected in others, I am (in no particular order) pentecostal, evangelical, pietist Baptist, Chinese, American, Malaysian, Confucian, Buddhist—the meanings of each and every one of these constructed categories subject to extensive debate—and, perhaps even a Christian. As such, this plurality and diversity serves to provide a wide pool of resources from which I can draw as needed in life’s situations.²⁰ In and through all of this, then, I am an individual constituted by plurality. And how is this possible? Explicating from the Pentecost narrative, the answer is analogous to how the church is the one body of Christ constituted by a diversity of members: by and through the gift of the spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit is the Dynamic Ground of the Arriving Eschatological Kingdom of God

My third thesis flows forth from the first two, emphasizing and preserving the otherness and the diversity of the other who the Holy Spirit enables us to encounter. I am thinking here, for example, of the imagery in the Apocalypse regarding the pluralism of nations bringing their honor and glory into the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:24–26; cf. also the many peoples, tribes,

20. From reading the personal reflections of other Asian-born immigrants to the US, I learned how not being centered in any one community while belonging to and being constituted by many narratives and traditions could be empowering rather than incapacitating; see Phan and Lee, *Journeys at Margins*. See also Yong, “Review of *Journeys at Margins*.”

tongues, and nations standing before the throne of the Lamb and rejoicing in the salvation provided by him in Rev 7:9–10).²¹ Put in Lukan terms, I want to briefly explore several aspects of this thesis that the Pentecostal Spirit dynamically grounds and anticipates the arrival of the eschatological kingdom of God.²²

To begin, note that Peter himself identifies the Pentecost experience as an eschatological event. In response to the confusion of the crowd, he refers to the prophecy of Joel that “in the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28). “This is that which was prophesied,” Peter in effect proclaims. As such, the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit also inaugurated the “last days” of the world. Leaving to one side the question of the *terminus ad quem* of these “last days” (the Christian Testament itself notes this issue—cf. 2 Pet. 3:3–4), what is more germane to our present discussion is the eschatological nature of the Pentecost experience.

But what is it that identifies or distinguishes Pentecost as an eschatological event? I suggest, building on the previous theses, that it is the reconciliation of humankind in all its diversity as a new people of God, temporarily in the church of Jesus Christ in anticipation of the arrival of the kingdom of God. Note that the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit recognizes no ethnic, racial, gender, age, or even socioeconomic barriers, to put it in today’s politically correct terms. Sons and daughters will prophesy; young and old will see visions and dream dreams; slaves and free persons will receive the gift of the Spirit (cf. Acts 2:17–18). And I have already commented on the likelihood that the first 3,000 who were baptized included Jews and proselytes from every nation under heaven. As such, the Pentecost event serves as a microcosmic lens through which to view and anticipate the “universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21). It is also a foretaste of the results of the Spirit’s empowering work so that the gospel can go from Jerusalem through Judea and (even!) Samaria, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), to include the Gentiles with whom it was unlawful for Jews to associate (cf. Acts 10:28). This would simply be a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, that “in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Acts 3:25; cf. Gen 12:3 and 22:18). In Luke’s terms, “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts

21. And the key, as Kobus de Smidt points out, is that it is the Spirit leads the church to bear witness to Christ precisely because the Spirit is sent from the throne of God into the world; see Smidt, “Hermeneutical Perspectives,” esp. 37–39.

22. Bilaniuk, *Theology and Economy of Holy Spirit*, talks about “The Mystery of the Eschatological Fulfillment as the Definitive Pentecost” (ch. 10).

10:34–35). More specifically, both “*everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord” (Acts 2:21) and “*everyone* whom the Lord . . . God calls to” (Acts 2:39) shall be saved (*italics mine*).

But it is also important, especially in any discussion of religious pluralism, to emphasize that what Christians hasten and yearn for is the arrival not just of any kingdom, but that of the kingdom of God. The Pentecostal Spirit is not any spirit, but the Holy Spirit poured out upon all flesh by Jesus according to the promise of the Father (cf. Acts 2:32). Entrance into the kingdom involves (at least in this dispensation) repentance (before God), baptism in Jesus’ name for the forgiveness of sins, and reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). In short, the Spirit is but the spirit of Jesus Christ and the spirit of God, and any pneumatological theology, rather than being a “monism of the Spirit,” is an opening toward the triune God.²³

From this, the Christian mission that is empowered by the Spirit and directed to the kingdom of the Father through Jesus Christ demands our full immersion into the liberating and reconciling work of the spirit of God in all spheres of life. If the work of the kingdom is to redeem the fallen dimensions of human existence, then it is the mission of the Spirit to heal and reconcile the social, economic, political, etc., divisions and fragmentations of our world.²⁴ This is consistent with the Lukan theological vision whereby the Pentecostal outpouring (in Acts) is simply the completion of the redemptive work of God accomplished in the life and death of Jesus (in Luke), and as such, an invitation to human beings to participate in the life of Christ and to do the things that Jesus did.²⁵ And, of course, Jesus recognized his own mission as being anointed by the Holy Spirit to “bring good news to the poor . . . , to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19).²⁶

The question I have is why would this reconciling work of the Spirit (and of Christ) not include the redemption of the religious sphere of human life?²⁷ This reconciliatory work is especially important since the religions, no less than other dimensions of human experience, are fallen and in need

23. On this point see Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith in Today’s Mission*, esp. 75–76.

24. See Potter, “Mission as Reconciliation.”

25. This is one of the emphases in the splendid and detailed work of Anderson, *A Vatican II Pneumatology of Paschal Mystery*, esp. 277–94.

26. And Maurice Hobbs notes that Jesus accomplished his mission in part by meeting people at their point of need; see Hobbs, “Our Lord’s Approach to People of Other Cultures.”

27. On this “reconciliation with people of other faiths,” see Clapsis, “What Does the Spirit Say?,” esp. 337–38.

of redemption.²⁸ Yet while Christians have been open to considering the redemption and appropriation of the cultural, social, economic, and even political dimensions of life, some have been much more resistant when the religions have been brought into the equation. My own sense is that Christians have traditionally drawn a line in the sand on this point because the choice had been between Christian *faith* and non-Christian *religions*. In this way, an absolute dualism has been established between these two kinds of realities.

Today, however, we can no longer define Christianity and the other *faiths* in such dualistic or essentialistic terms. And if religion, language, and culture are not so easily distinguishable, neither are religion, society, politics, gender issues, etc. This does not make all religious ways of life equally appropriate, or all religious claims to truth commensurate. If we can affirm that the Spirit’s outpouring upon all flesh does not necessarily lead to universalism, then we can also affirm that the Spirit’s presence and activity in national, cultural, socioeconomic, political, and even religious spheres of human life does not necessarily mean that every aspect of each dimension must be uncritically accepted or that every spirit be seen as divinely inspired.²⁹ To determine what is what, discernment has to proceed cautiously, on a case-by-case basis. Making this affirmation of the Spirit’s presence and activity in the religions, however, does require Christians to rethink what it means to embrace the reconciling work of the Spirit directed toward the kingdom of God.

More specifically, if the radical particularity of otherness is preserved in and through the pentecostal experience as a foretaste of the kingdom, I wonder about the particularities of religious otherness that we are more alert to than ever today. Herein lies the rationale of extending the insights of Pentecost for intra-Christian ecumenism toward the wider *oekumene*.³⁰ David Bosch has called attention to how the evolution of themes in World Council of Churches (WCC) conferences devoted to the relationship of

28. This is the important qualification I would add to John Taylor’s suggestion that all religions are traditions of response, even if of unequal value, to the Spirit of the triune God (*Go-Between God*, ch. 9, “The Universal Spirit and the Meeting of Faiths”). Because of this fallen character of religiosity, I follow Barth in rejecting any religious tradition, as such, even Christianity, as salvific. Only God saves.

29. This importance of not confusing the Holy Spirit and other spirits in the religions and cultures of the world was sounded clearly by evangelical and Orthodox participants at Canberra; see Kerr, “Come Holy Spirit,” esp. 101–3.

30. See the discussion of this ecumenical development in the editor’s introduction, Phan, ed., *Christianity and Wider Ecumenism*, esp. ix–x. Here, I am applying Frank Macchia’s ecumenical strategy—in Macchia, “Tongues of Pentecost”—toward the inter-religious encounter.

Christianity and other faiths has reflected the progression of Christian consciousness on exactly this point (my emphases in what follows):

- Commission for World Mission and Evangelism meeting in Mexico City (1963): “The Witness of Christians to Men of Other Faiths” (one-way monologue, although others are recognized as being of faith rather than not)
- East Asia Christian Conference in Bangkok (1964): “The *Christian Encounter* with Men of Other Beliefs” (Christian initiative)
- Ditto (1967): “*Christians in Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths*” (still a Christian enterprise and concern)
- Ajaltoun (Lebanon) (1970): “Dialogue *between* Men of *Living* Faiths” (otherness affirmed positively and others seen as equal dialogue partners)
- Chiang Mai (Thailand) (1977): “Dialogue *in Community*” (fully egalitarian—i.e., non-gendered—attitudes assumed)³¹

Now again, I reject the kind of conservatism that sees this development as leading down the slippery slope to relativism. Rather, I believe a Lukan, Pentecostal, and pneumatological orientation to the interreligious encounter enables us to ask not “Why should I choose Jesus rather than the Buddha, etc.?” but rather, “How does my Buddhist, etc., identity inform my commitment to Christ and my Christian confession in anticipation of the impending kingdom of God?”³² In this way, we would not need to deny the particular experiences of women and men, young and old, the poor and the affluent, oriental and occidental, Jew and Greek, red and yellow or black and white, those who speak and those who sign, and even the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Confucian, etc. Rather, each of these can be seen to give particular testimony to the nature of humankind and of humanity’s relationship to God (theological anthropology) in anticipation of the full reconciliation to be accomplished in the kingdom.³³

31. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 484.

32. My putting the questions this way was assisted by Lee, “A Response to: Why Jesus?” esp. 90.

33. Assuming, here, Calvin’s conviction of the interrelatedness between self-knowledge and the knowledge of God elaborated in chapter one of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. [The particularity of these “witnesses” are certainly partial and even fallible, although for these reasons no less true; yet from a Christian faith perspective, these testimonies are completed, fulfilled, and vindicated finally, if at all, in the light of the coming Christ.]

THESES FOR A PNEUMATOLOGICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSION AND EVANGELIZATION IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL WORLD

Let me conclude with five theses and a set of practical suggestions emergent from the preceding reflections.

Thesis #1: A viable contemporary theology of mission and evangelization is necessarily pneumatological. While the connection between the Holy Spirit and evangelism has long been recognized,³⁴ the fundamental and irreducible relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Christian mission as a whole has slowly been rediscovered. A generation ago, Harry Boer called attention to the New Testament emphasis on Pentecost, not the Great Commission, as the central axiom from which emanates the missionary dynamic of Christian faith.³⁵ As such, any theology of mission and evangelization has to be nothing less than pneumatologically founded, framed, and delineated.

Thesis #2: A viable contemporary theology of interreligious ecumenism can be understood in part as an outgrowth of a pneumatological theology of intra-Christian ecumenism. Just as the ecumenical implications of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit are now widely recognized,³⁶ so I am suggesting that Christians begin to rethink the interfaith encounter from within a pneumatological framework. I have sketched aspects of such a perspective from the Pentecost narrative. Much more biblical and theological work can and should be done in this area. Part and parcel of what will continue to emerge is what ecumenical statesman Albert Outler calls a “pneumatological or ecumenical hermeneutics,” a method of reading texts and interpreting religious experiences that is increasingly dialogical in taking into account the perspectives of others.³⁷ I would suggest that so long as we proceed with proper caution and discernment, there is no reason why such an ecumenical hermeneutic should not be informed by the interreligious encounter.

Thesis #3: A pneumatological theology of mission and evangelization in an interreligious context is able to safeguard the perennial tension which exists between dialogue and proclamation. On the one hand, as Lawrence Folkermer put it some time ago, “Interfaith dialogue must be seen increasingly

34. Keener, “Spirit Empowers Us for Evangelism,” ch. 3 in his *Gift and Giver*.

35. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*, chs. 1–2.

36. Raiser, “Holy Spirit in Modern Ecumenical Thought,” overviews the place of pneumatology in the history of the WCC.

37. Outler, “Pneumatology as Ecumenical Frontier,” esp. 370. Cf. also Thomas Oden’s call for a “consensual theological method” in *After Modernity*, 160–64. For more on a pneumatologically informed, ecumenical, and consensually hermeneutic and theological method, see my *Spirit-Word-Community*, esp. Part III.

as an arena for the working of the Holy Spirit.”³⁸ The Holy Spirit is the one who has not only sent the church into the world, but also gone before the church into this same world. As such, the Spirit meets us in and through the image of God etched in the faces of religious others and their communities, and provides the common ground—the common humanity or meeting point—of the Christian encounter with them. If this is the case, then there needs to be a genuinely dialogical encounter between Christians and those in other faiths. One of the marks of whether authentic dialogue is occurring is whether or not Christians are willing to subject their faith assumptions, claims, and criteriologies to the criticism of their dialogue partners.³⁹ So long as Christians are unwilling to test the viability of their beliefs across the spectrum of human life, they betray a fideistic attitude that hinders veritable encounters with non-Christians.

On the other hand, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus, sent to turn the world to Jesus and to remind the world of his words and deeds. As Roland Allen notes, the Acts account shows that neither the monotheism of the Jews nor the philosophy of the Greeks were sufficient apart from the *evangelion* of Jesus Christ.⁴⁰ Apart from the Christian witness to Jesus the Christ, no authentic representation of the Christian faith would occur, and in this case, the dialogue would once again slip into a monologue, this time from the religious other to the Christian. Genuine dialogue requires the presence of Christian conviction and testimony. Christian mission is thereby necessarily marked by both dialogue and proclamation, openness and responsiveness, sensitivity and activity, and humility and boldness⁴¹ (here, I do not mean to imply that the latter elements of the preceding pairs has priority over the former). I am proposing that a pneumatologically informed approach to the wider ecumenism can protect both moments as essential to genuine encounters and engagement.

Thesis #4: A pneumatological theology of mission and evangelization will also enable a truly crucicentric and, hence, liberative solidarity to emerge in the interreligious encounter. Given that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus, a robustly pneumatological theology of religions will be, as previously mentioned, a Trinitarian theology of religions, and, as such, also a christocentric theology of religions. With regard to the latter, the Spirit not only witnesses

38. Folkemer, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” esp. 429–31; quote from 430.

39. This is the thesis of Chapman, “Phenomenological Method of Post-Dialogue.”

40. See Allen, *The Ministry of the Spirit*, 37.

41. Here, I resonate with Henry E. Lie’s “open particularism” proposal, forged in the Asian religious context, which is christocentric, biblically committed, evangelistically motivated, soteriologically inclusive, and yet dialogically open, even to the point of learning from religious others; see Lie, “Open Particularism.”

to Christ and enables confession of Jesus as Lord, but also is the anointing who empowers the ministry of Jesus the Christ, leads him to and through the passion of the cross, and culminates with raising him from the dead. This enables the understanding that “the cross as clue to the suffering of God is at the heart” of the confession of Jesus Christ in a world of religious pluralism.⁴²

Following from this, however, the life and death of Christ binds him together with a suffering humanity. It is precisely through the solidarity of Jesus with the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, etc., that the redemption of humankind from sin and from the bonds of the devil is accomplished. Extended toward the interreligious encounter, then, a pneumatological theology of mission and evangelization is shaped by this cruciform event to empower the words and deeds of human beings—both Christians and their interfaith dialogue partners—in liberating suffering humanity in every sphere, in seeking for and establishing justice and peace in the world, and in truly declaring and hastening the healing and reconciling Day of the Lord.

Finally, *Thesis #5: On a practical level, a pneumatological theology of mission and evangelization in a religiously plural world will need to be especially alert for what the Spirit is saying and doing in and through the churches, be sensitive to the presence and activities of religious others, and be discerning about the broader context of the Christian ministry.* Life in the Spirit is necessarily thoroughly contextual, attentive to the specifics of the situation at hand. Why should a pneumatological approach to mission and evangelization in a religiously plural environment be any less so? There can therefore be no hard and fast rule of action that should dictate Christian approaches to engaging with religious others motivated by following after the Spirit.

In this case, then, what can and should we do? Among other things, Christians in the past have

- established denominational offices and organizations to facilitate congregational awareness of and engagement with non-Christian faiths
- strategized about how and when overt evangelism should proceed from their churches, thereby requiring discussions of what conversion means, how Christian initiation occurs, the issues regarding proselytism, the nature of interreligious relationship and dialogue, etc.
- developed formal intercongregational and interreligious events in order to foster better relationship, understanding, and mutual respect

42. Thomsen, “Confessing Jesus Christ.” For an in-depth argument regarding the Spirit who raises Jesus from the dead, the impossible possibility which is suggestive of what might be called a “pneumatology of the cross,” see Dabney, “*Pneumatologia Crucis*.”

- nurtured community solidarity and development across faith lines⁴³

Why should Christians not continue to do all this and more? By so doing, as John Taylor has suggested, other religious traditions receive “blood transfusions” from Christ and the Christian faith.⁴⁴ As a result, they are re-formed precisely through the interreligious encounter with Christians by the Spirit. Further, however, authentic interreligious encounter transforms Christians as well. If deeper commitments to Christ and to our neighbors—the brothers and sisters of Jesus who are hungry, thirsty, sick, in prison, etc.—result, is this not also the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst?⁴⁵

SAMPLE

43. The preceding derives from Neely, “Religious Pluralism,” esp. 39–42. Cf. also Hooker and Lamb, *Love the Stranger*.

44. Taylor, *Go-Between God*, 194–97.

45. This paper was originally presented to the North American Academy of Ecumenists, Washington, DC, September 27–29, 2002, under the title, “Pneumatology, Mission and Evangelization in a Religiously Plural World.” My thanks to Jeff Gros, FSC, of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, not only for recommending my participation in this meeting, but also for providing critical feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. Needless to say, the faults that remain are my own.