The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology

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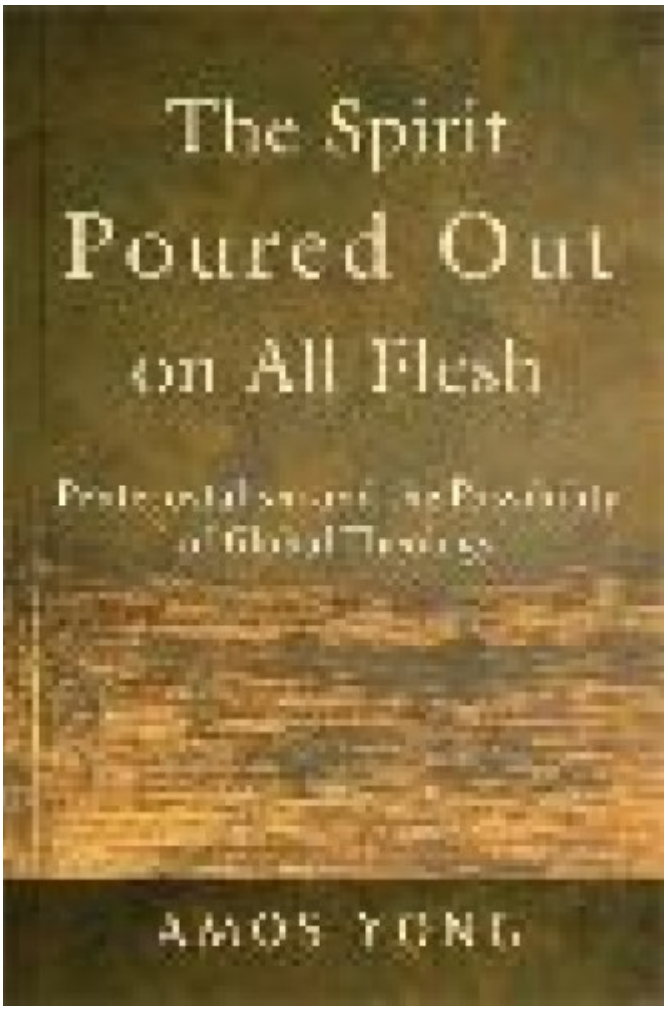
In Review



The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology

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Ever since the 1970s the theologies of distinctive groups of Christians have aroused much interest around the globe. Although such groups have long played vital roles in churches, it was once supposed that they had no theology. Theology, it was supposed, had to be explicit—the kind of formal, scholarly exposition developed in dominant Christian traditions.

These distinctive groups claimed, however, that they were guided by implicit theologies—by deep, if unarticulated, convictions about God, human nature and other crucial subjects. However, they continued, a lack of educational and other opportunities, and sometimes opposition from church leaders, had prevented their convictions from taking explicit form. Nevertheless, these groups insisted, their implicit theologies could contribute greatly to the wider church.

The theologies I refer to first emerged from the ethnic and gender groups that produced liberation, feminist, black, womanist and various Asian and African theologies. By the mid-1980s, similar efforts had appeared from traditions that had been known for particular emphases, such as mission (Baptists) or ethics (Anabaptists), but hardly for theology.

In *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, Amos Yong shows that Pentecostals were also theologizing back then. Though this magnificent volume is not a systematic theology, it synthesizes more themes in a more comprehensive, global fashion than any other current work by a Pentecostal.

Pentecostalism, the world's fastest-growing Christian movement, currently comprises about 30 percent of the world's Christians. Yong devotes about 50 intriguing pages to its development among Latin Americans, Asians, Africans and African Americans. He then focuses on six themes—salvation, the church, ecumenism, the Trinity, world religions, and creation and science—developing each one thoroughly and lucidly, in dialogue with numerous writers. This rich theological feast can be digested one chapter or even subchapter at a time.

Yong proposes that a Pentecostal theology must be experientially based; it must emerge "from the matrix of the pentecostal experience of the Spirit." Second, this theology should situate every topic in a "pneumatological framework." This will counter the dominant churches' tendency to marginalize the Holy Spirit in their lives and to subordinate the Spirit to the Son in their theology.

But how can an experience- and Spirit-based theology avoid subjectivism? The answer lies in Yong's third guiding principle: this theology must be guided by the New Testament and approached through a Lucan hermeneutic. Though the rest of the New Testament must be read alongside Luke-Acts, the Lucan books provide a lens through which to read the other New Testament writers. (The Old Testament receives little attention from Yong.)

Tackling his first subject, salvation, Yong highlights Luke's portrait of Jesus' life as that of a real human anointed and empowered by God's Spirit. Yong does not overlook John and Paul, who underscore Christ's deity and his death and resurrection, but he wants to stress the Spirit's role in all phases of Jesus' work and to connect this directly with salvation, which he conceives as "the gift of Jesus Christ himself to us in the totality of his Spirit-anointed life, death and resurrection." Salvation so sketched is beautifully dynamic and multidimensional, and it includes redemption of socioeconomic and political structures.

Yong grants that suffering plays a positive role in salvation. Yet this theme is muted in his book, as it often is among Pentecostals. Why? Is it because the Spirit crowds out suffering in Luke-Acts? Hardly. The Holy Spirit is mentioned neither in the second half of Luke, as Jesus' suffering looms large (12:12-24:50), nor in the last quarter of Acts, as Paul is imprisoned and put on trial (21:11-28:25).

This does not mean that the Spirit vanishes amid suffering, but it does show that Luke pays significant attention to suffering, and not in pneumatological categories. Would not a consistent Lucan hermeneutic follow suit? Despite Yong's considerable contributions to soteriology, might his emphases on experience and pneumatology outweigh his Lucan hermeneutic at this point? Has God's Son, or at least his way of the cross, been subordinated to God's Spirit?

Perhaps surprisingly, this volume strongly encourages and exemplifies ecumenical dialogue. Most Pentecostal denominations, including Yong's Assemblies of God, discourage or disallow participation in ecumenical organizations. Yong insists, however, that the worldwide missionary thrust in Acts envisions one global church. He shows how early Pentecostals expected true Christian unity to arise—through God's Spirit, not through institutions.

Drawing on Luke-Acts and a wide spectrum of theologians, Yong develops an impressive Pentecostal ecclesiology. He considers both unity and diversity

important, but nearly always favors the latter. He seldom mentions institutional and structural features.

But will not productive ecumenism require serious discussion with traditional churches on structural issues? Further, how can socioeconomic and political structures be redeemed unless the church itself is somewhat structured?

Luke-Acts does address structure (Acts discusses apostolic leadership, the appointment of deacons, the Jerusalem Council and the Pauline network vis-à-vis the Jerusalem church). Here again, Yong's experiential and pneumatological emphases may be overshadowing his Lucan hermeneutic.

Luke-Acts is much less visible in Yong's last three chapters (on the Trinity, world religions, and creation and science). To address world religions, he develops something like a public theology, though such theologies often differ greatly from those based on biblical narrative. When God's missionary Spirit unites different peoples, many features of their cultures and languages are preserved. Yong adds, crucially, that culture and language are inseparable from religion. Consequently, Christian mission will preserve some features of other religions. But how many features, and which?

Yong aims less at offering definite answers than at encouraging openness to other faiths. He hypothesizes that non-Christian religions belong in God's providential plan. Accordingly, they are "redeemable for the glory of God." God's Spirit is present and active in these religions, Yong insists, though also absent from them. But can areas of absence and presence be identified?

A theology that highlights God's Spirit also highlights the universal and invisible aspects of divine activity. This can incline Pentecostal theologians to suggest similarities among religions, but it yields few criteria for evaluating the differences.

For example, Yong examines God's Spirit in the Qur'an and finds many similarities between the Qur'an and the New Testament. But what if he had compared their views of Jesus as God's Son? Deep differences would have emerged. In the New Testament, God's Spirit is not self-focused but Jesus-focused. To determine whether God's Spirit is at work in any movement, theologians should focus on how fully the movement corresponds with Jesus' work and person; criteria for discerning the Spirit's presence, I propose, are christological. Is it possible that Yong has not simply redressed pneumatology's subordination to Christology at this point, but reversed it?

I intend such questions not mainly as criticisms, but as responses to the dialogue that Yong’s wonderful book initiates and invites. Precisely because I find this volume so important, I hope many others will respond likewise.