



A Pentecostal Curriculum for the 21st Century

Revisiting the Essentials in Pentecostal
Theological Training

Denzil R. Miller

A Pentecostal Curriculum

For the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

Just a few short years ago, if you were to drive into the front gate of the Assemblies of God School of Theology in Lilongwe, Malawi, you would have read on the main signboard, along with the name of the school, this motto: “Dedicated to quality theological education.” The time came, however, when the administration and teachers of the school decided that this was not a satisfactory mission statement for their school. They felt that quality theological education was not a mission, but simply a means to fulfilling a greater mission. It was not, in itself, a sufficient reason for the existence of a Pentecostal Bible school.

They wanted a mission statement that would reflect the powerful missionary vision of their school. It would also have to reflect the school’s strong biblical and Pentecostal orientation. After much discussion and prayer a new mission statement was finally drafted. Now, as you enter the school, you will read the school’s new mission statement: *“Biblical training to touch the nations in the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

The adoption and internalizing of this mission statement has helped to revolutionize the school. Now, everything that is done or taught is evaluated in the light of that mission statement. If an activity or course helps the school to fulfill its mission, it is adopted; if it does not, it is discarded. Since that time the Assemblies of God School of Theology has become a powerful force in the training and mobilizing of Pentecostal ministers in Africa.

My purpose in writing is to share some insights on a Pentecostal model for training in the 21st Century. If, however, our discussion is to

be of any lasting value, it must be about more than curriculum. It must be about mission— about fulfilling the mission of God. It is only as we stay focused on God’s mission that we will be able to develop an effective curriculum for the new century.

From its genesis the God-ordained mission of the Assemblies of God has been to evangelize the nations in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our more than 2000 Assemblies of God Bible schools throughout the world (including 859 resident schools, 1131 extension schools, and 39 seminaries) exist to assist in fulfilling that great mission. The unique mission of our ministerial training institutions is to equip and help to mobilize a mighty worldwide army of Spirit-empowered harvesters. This can only be done if our understanding of our mission is crystal clear.

As we contemplate this mission, we must be guided by two clear principles:

- First, our curriculum must be *clearly missional* in its focus. It must be missional because our reason for being is missional.
- Further, our curriculum must be *boldly Pentecostal* in its orientation. It must be Pentecostal because it is only in the power of the Holy Spirit that our missionary mandate can be accomplished.

In this booklet I will share some of my thoughts on the second guiding principle, the absolute necessity for our curricula to have a strong Pentecostal orientation. I will discuss three crucial issues that Pentecostal educators must face in developing a truly Pentecostal curriculum for the 21st Century: In Chapter 1, I will discuss the urgency of building all of our theological training on a deliberate Pentecostal foundation. In Chapter 2, I will talk about how we, as Pentecostals, uniquely approach the Bible, and how that approach must be reflected in our curriculum development. And finally, in Chapter 3, I will suggest ways in which we may work together to build a truly Pentecostal curriculum for the 21st Century” on a firm Pentecostal foundation.

CHAPTER 1:

THE URGENCY OF BUILDING OUR THEOLOGICAL TRAINING ON A DELIBERATE PENTECOSTAL FOUNDATION

All indicators seem to point to the fact that, worldwide, the Assemblies of God is poised for the greatest ingathering of souls in its 94 year history. Seeing these indicators in Africa, Don Corbin, former Regional Director for Africa, recommended to our Africa Assemblies of God Alliance that the first decade of the 21st Century be slated as the “Decade of Multiplication” for the continent.

One thing seems certain, as we enter the new century we must stay focused on the twin tasks of evangelism and church planting. And we must ensure that those churches we plant be churches capable of reproducing other churches, that is, we must plant Spirit-empowered churches.

The Power of Theology

With these things in mind, we as Pentecostal educators must be ever conscious of how our theology affects the Church that we plant. This is because our theology directly impacts our beliefs and values, our beliefs and values in turn directly affect our practice; and finally, our practice contributes directly to our effectiveness in fulfilling the mission of God (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1

The Effects of Theology on Practice

Theology → Beliefs/Values → Practice → Effectiveness in Fulfilling the
Mission of GOD

Powerful implications flow from these facts. If we are unsure of who we are as Pentecostal educators, and of our God-ordained mission, we are bound to produce, what could be called a “reticent Pentecostal theology.” Such is a theology in which we are almost apologetic about being Pentecostal. It is an accommodating theology, more concerned about being accepted by the larger evangelical community than it is about fulfilling the mission of God. Such a theology can only result in trepid practice, and less than acceptable results in fulfilling God’s mission.

However, if we clearly understand our God-given mission—and our God-given means of accomplishing that mission—we will boldly strive for what could be called a “forthright Pentecostal theology.” Such is a theology whose main aim is not to accommodate, but to fulfill mission. It is resolute and unbending in its beliefs and values. Such a theology will result in powerful Pentecostal practice and in biblical results in our churches (see Fig. 2).

Type of Theology	Beliefs/Values Produced	Resulting Practice	Effectiveness
An “Reticent” Pentecostal Theology	Diluted Beliefs and Values	Trepid Practice	Mediocre Results
A “Forthright” Pentecostal Theology	Resolute Beliefs and Values	Powerful Practice	Biblical Results

Figure 2

A Time for Bold Examination

These truths serve to illustrate the importance of this issue. We as Pentecostal administrators and educators must not fail in our endeavors. We must be very courageous in what we do. We must boldly reexamine, and when necessary replace, our sometimes inadequate training models of the past and present. We must ask the hard questions: Has our curriculum at times been too generic and “kingdom oriented.” Have we too often written curriculum with one eye on the evangelical church at large, rather than keeping both eyes focused on the needs of our own churches? In doing this have we at times toned down our Pentecostal emphasis? I fear that such a marketing strategy, however well intended, has served to dramatically weaken the very church we are trying to establish in the world.

In Africa, we are facing a crisis of experience. Recent statistics have revealed that across Africa only 17% of our constituency is baptized in

the Holy Spirit. This means that of our 15 million constituents in Africa only 3 million have been baptized in the Spirit, leaving an astonishing 12 million who have not been baptized in the Holy Spirit. This means that, if we were to begin this Sunday getting 10,000 per week baptized in the Holy Spirit, it would take us almost 23 years to get everyone filled with the Spirit—and that is assuming no new believers are added to the church during that entire time.

The sad fact is, our African pastors have simply not been sufficiently trained in the importance and methods of getting their people filled with the Spirit. We in Africa are keenly aware that this situation must be remedied. Could it be that we as Pentecostal Bible school trainers share at least part of the blame for this deplorable situation? Have we in our curriculum development, at least to some degree, compromised our Pentecostal uniqueness? Have we become too tame, too generic, too domesticated?

If the answer to any of these questions is “Yes,” then we must move quickly to remedy this tragic situation. In the next two chapters I will seek to suggest some remedies.

CHAPTER 2:

A PENTECOSTAL APPROACH TO CURRICULUM

As Pentecostal educators we must learn to think “Pentecostal-ly” in our approach to interpreting Scripture and in developing curriculum. We must see the Bible through Pentecostal eyes. It is axiomatic that one’s Christian experience (or non-experience) influences the way he approaches the interpretation of Scripture. As Pentecostals, our experience with the Spirit speaks to our approach to Scripture. While Pentecostals share certain basic presuppositions with other evangelical believers concerning Scripture, we also hold certain distinctive presuppositions.

Along with other evangelicals, Pentecostals approach the Scripture with the assumption that the Bible is the divinely-revealed Word of God. We believe, as they do, that the Scriptures in their original autographs are without error, and we share with them the belief that the Bible is our only absolutely authoritative rule of faith and practice.

And yet, as Pentecostals, we hold certain distinctive presuppositions in approaching Scripture. This is especially true in our approach to texts dealing with miracles and the work of the Holy Spirit. Let’s look briefly at three of these uniquely Pentecostal presuppositions:

Direct Relevance. An oft-quoted verse in Pentecostal circles is Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever.” When a Pentecostal reads a biblical account about one of Jesus’ miracles, he assumes a direct relevance between the miracle and his own

life and ministry today. Think with me for a moment how non-Pentecostals and Pentecostals differ in their approach to a biblical miracle. A non-Pentecostal, when approaching a miracle of Jesus in the gospels, or an apostolic miracle in Acts, will typically approach it using the following thought sequence: He will first examine the miracle. He will then look for spiritual truth contained in the miracle. And finally, he will make present application of those spiritual truths he discovered (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3

Typical Evangelical Approach to a New Testament Miracle

Examination of the Miracle → Spiritual Lessons → Present Application

To the non-Pentecostal, therefore, there is no direct relevance of the miracle to his present situation. He sees only an indirect relevance, through spiritual application, to his life and practice.

The Pentecostal, however, sees a more direct relevance in his interpretation of the same miracle. When the Pentecostal examines the miracle, he will see a direct application of the text to his own personal life and ministry. His thought processes will proceed something like this: Like the non-Pentecostal, he will examine the miracle; however, unlike the non-Pentecostal, he will not immediately look for spiritual truth, but he will make a direct application to his present situation. He will reason like this: If Jesus healed the sick man, then he will heal me. Or, if God used Peter and John to heal the sick, then He will also use me to heal the sick. He may then look for other spiritual lessons found in the text (see

Fig. 4). The Pentecostal thus sees a more direct relevance between the text and his present belief and practice.

Figure 4

Typical Pentecostal Approach to a New Testament Miracle

Examination of the Miracle → Direct Application → Other Spiritual Lessons

Practical Immediacy. Closely akin to direct relevance is practical immediacy. Along with seeing a direct relevance to his present situation, the Pentecostal also sees a practical immediacy between a miracle of Jesus or the apostles and his own present life and immediate situation. Since he recognizes that the same Spirit is at work in his life who was at work in the lives of Jesus and the apostles, the Pentecostal believer anticipates the same practical and immediate results.

Supernatural Expectancy. Pentecostals also draw from the miracles of Jesus and the early church a certain present supernatural expectancy. They expect that God can and will act supernaturally now as He did then. They think: If God did it for them, then He will do it for us. Did Jesus heal the blind man? Then, He will heal you too. Did Jesus rebuke the fever of Peter's mother-in-law? Then, I also rebuke your fever in the name of Jesus. Did the disciples speak in tongues when they were filled with the Spirit? Then, we should speak in tongues when we are filled with the Spirit. Pentecostals expect God to act supernaturally today just as He did in New Testament times.

A Pentecostal Approach to the Ministry of Jesus

Further, Pentecostals approach the ministry of Jesus somewhat differently than other evangelicals. While both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostal evangelicals see Jesus as their example for life, Pentecostals take it a step further. They also see the ministry of Jesus as their pattern for ministry (see Fig. 5).

Figure 5

A Comparison: Pentecostal and Evangelical Approaches to the Ministry of Jesus

The non-Pentecostal approach: Jesus is our example of life

The Pentecostal approach: Jesus is our example for life
and ministry

Pentecostals believe that, just as the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus, anointing Him for ministry (Luke 4:18), the same Spirit is upon them, anointing them for ministry (Acts 1:8). They, therefore, expect to do the same works as Jesus, in the same way (John 14:12). They see Jesus not only as their example for life, but He is their example and pattern for Spirit-anointed ministry.

A Pentecostal Approach to Interpreting Acts

Pentecostals also approach the biblical text with certain hermeneutical presuppositions. While non-Pentecostals say that normative practice cannot be derived from the “purely historical” portions of Scripture, meaning specifically, the narrative portions of Acts, Pentecostals contend with Paul that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” and that it is “profitable for doctrine” (2 Tim. 3:16). Pentecostals further contend that Luke was *both* a historian *and* a

theologian. They believe that he had clear theological intent in writing Luke-Acts, and that this intent can be seen in his extreme selectivity in his choice of materials, as well as in his precise use of language.

The Importance of These Issues

Why are these things important? They are important because, as we develop a Pentecostal curriculum for the 21st Century, it is essential that we understand that we, as Pentecostals, have a unique approach to Scripture. When writing and examining our curriculum, we must see Scripture through Pentecostal eyes. We must ensure that those who write our texts and develop our curriculum are thoroughgoing Pentecostal scholars in experience, in theology, and in practice. We must also ensure that those who review and approve our curriculum are able to discern whether any given teaching serves to promote or mitigate our Pentecostal testimony in the world. If we are to train Pentecostal leaders for the 21st Century, we must learn to develop curriculum from a clear Pentecostal perspective.

CHAPTER 3:

BUILDING A PENTECOSTAL CURRICULUM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY ON A FIRM PENTECOSTAL FOUNDATION

The question naturally arises: How must we go about building a Pentecostal curriculum for the 21st Century? If we are to build a truly Pentecostal curriculum, we must be both dedicated and very deliberate in our efforts. The development of such a curriculum will involve at least three elements:

Reaffirmation

We must begin our curriculum development by strongly reaffirming our Pentecostal-ness. We must come to terms with who we are, why God has called us, and how we are to fulfill that unique calling. While rejoicing in our past successes, we must, at the same time, humbly reflect on the reason for past and present failures. In doing these things we must constantly reaffirm our Pentecostal orientation toward Scripture and toward biblical training. While doing this, we must recommit ourselves fully to the training of truly Spirit-anointed leadership in the coming century.

Review

Beyond reaffirmation, we must boldly review our present curriculum, asking the questions: Is this a curriculum suitable for producing Spirit-anointed leaders, church planters, pastors, missionaries and evangelists? Is it capable of developing Pentecostal preachers who will be thoroughly equipped and able to lead their people into dynamic Spirit-filled living? Can it produce ministers who are able to confront and defeat the spiritual powers that they encounter daily, especially in the Majority World?

Further, we must review each course in our curriculum asking, “Does this course clearly reflect our unique Pentecostal orientation to Scripture and leadership training? Is it clearly aimed at training truly Pentecostal leadership for the coming century?” As we do these things, we must also take a fresh look at our school’s mission statement, asking ourselves if it forthrightly reflects the unique Pentecostal orientation and missionary vision of our institution.

Implementation

Finally, we must begin today taking deliberate steps to consciously implement the needed Pentecostal emphasis into all of our curricula. This task must include implementation of our Pentecostal emphasis in the following essential areas:

- The selection of courses and textbooks
- The delineation of desired outcomes for each course
- The choice of those who write, edit, and review our courses
- The process of individual lesson building

It is only as we boldly address these critical issues that we will begin to develop a curriculum that will adequately prepare Pentecostal ministers for the 21st Century.

CONCLUSION

The 21st Century is upon us. Jesus is coming soon. There is a great harvest yet to be reaped. We must, therefore, with courage address the task at hand, that is, the task of shaping and delivering to our constituents a truly Pentecostal curriculum for the 21st Century.

In a recent meeting of some of the leading Assemblies of God educators in Africa, the principal of one of our leading Bible schools gave us all a startling wake up call. Reflecting on what he believed to be the growing separation between what his students needed, and the curricula provided by some of our AG training institutions, he asked, “Are our AG ministerial training institutions prepared to reinvent themselves, or will Africa be forced to look for another means of training its pastors?”

What will our answer be to this Bible School principal, and to our Bible schools and ministerial students around the world, crying out for a truly Pentecostal curriculum. Our answer can only be, “We will not abandoned you. We are indeed ready to reinvent ourselves. We are ready to provide Africa and the world the most focused, the most dynamic, the most missionary-oriented Pentecostal curriculum the world has ever seen—so help us God.