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Pentecostal Identity and Christian Discipleship

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"Discipleship is the only epistemological location for understanding Jesus Christ,"¹ so could we hear the voice of Liberation Theology in 1989. Discipleship, however, is no longer a popular term. Today, a look at the major representatives in the field of religious education reveals that the "disappearing disciple"² has become a reality in much of Christian education. In this crisis many look to the growing Pentecostal movement in hope of finding a solution to the problem. This study will evaluate in two parts the relationship of Pentecostalism and contemporary Christian discipleship. The focus of the first part is placed on the role of Pentecostal identity. The second part evaluates implications for Pentecostal discipleship.

The term "discipleship" allows for a general and a more specific definition. In general terms it is the whole of Christian existence, the self-understanding of Christian believers as believers.³ In a more narrow sense, it is a "following-after" (*Nachfolge*) as an expression of a "teacher-disciple relationship with all its accompanying and derivative terminology."⁴ Physical and temporal separation from the one we follow, however, changes the nature of discipleship. It produces questions in regard to what we do (meaning), why we do (consequences), and how we do it (condition).

One starting point for approaching Pentecostal identity from the viewpoint of discipleship is the fact that the Christian faith is communicable.⁵ To further borrow from linguistic terminology, Christian education is "illocutionary."⁶ Contemporary approaches to Christian education, however, are by nature either "locutionary" or "perlocutionary". In simple terms, a "locutionary" act is the act *of* saying something,⁷ an "illocutionary" act takes a certain condition or force *in* saying something, and a "perlocutionary" act produces certain consequences *by* saying something.⁸ The keywords are "meaning", "conditions" and "consequences" respectively. How does this terminology relate to Christian discipleship?

A "locutionary" act of discipleship refers to an educational act done with a certain sense and reference to content and meaning. Examples of this are the contemporary approaches of Religious Instruction, Spiritual Development, and the Interpretation model. A characteristic statement of a "locutionary" act is "God is love." A "perlocutionary" act refers to the production of certain consequential effects, such as convincing or persuading. Examples of this are the contemporary approaches of Faith Community and Liberation theology. A

characteristic statement of "perlocutionary" education would be "*Because* God is love, we must also love God and one another." In contrast to these two, an "illocutionary" act connects both approaches by focusing on "the determination of the actual conditions that communicate meaning."⁹ Such conditions can be situation- and culture-specific, that is, they must be aligned with what the individual situation and culture demands of the educational act, conveying a certain force, such as warning, exhorting, or encouraging. A characteristic statement of "illocutionary" education would be "*How* do we love (knowing that God is love and we are to love one another)?"

To say then that Christian discipleship is by nature "illocutionary" is to put the focus not on what (meaning) or why (consequences), but on how (condition) to conduct discipleship. Furthermore, a holistic approach to Christian formation must place the focus on all three segments. The problems of contemporary approaches to Christian education illuminate this; "locutionary" education is biased toward the content and meaning of education and expects a higher level of professionalism than often present in a particular educational environment.¹⁰ This is particularly true of the Religious Instruction model. One of the side effects is that it leads to difficulty with actual theological reflection (the Interpretation model), as this is by nature an "illocutionary" act. Another common problem is the preference of one educational setting over another, disregarding the demands of a particular situation or culture, as in the case of the Spiritual Development model with its overemphasis on the individual.

"Perlocutionary" education, with its straight focus on consequential effects of discipleship, reveals further problems that can be clearly related to the absence of an "illocutionary" approach. As in the case of the Faith Community model, there is difficulty of intentionally utilizing particular cultural structures.¹¹ In the same manner, the Liberation model has problems dealing with the role of the church.¹² Educational approaches that center upon "meaning" (locutionary) or "consequences" (perlocutionary) are important segments of any approach to Christian education and discipleship. However, they are not holistic and sometimes mutually exclusive. The history of Christian education confirms this.

Education for survival,¹³ as in ancient societies, was a prime example of a "perlocutionary" act. The history of Israel, however, soon reveals a shift from "consequences" to "content", from keeping the covenant relationship (perlocutionary) to observing the law (locutionary). Both might have actually been present in society when the teaching of Jesus first introduced an "illocutionary" approach to discipleship. His methods ranged from instruction, discussion, asking questions, or telling stories to giving projects.¹⁴ His method was variety, his goal "illocutionary": determining the actual condition that best communicated his message.

The instrument Jesus used for his illocutionary education was his *identity*. Meaning was communicated and produced consequences only through the identity of Christ. A distinctly Christian discipleship emerged likewise only as the church became aware of its identity.¹⁵ This struggle for a definition of the identity of the church and the understanding of humans as rational beings returned the emphasis of Christian education to a "locutionary" act. Its prime expressions are monastic education, scholasticism, and the unprecedented institutional and hierarchical growth in the Middle Ages.¹⁶ The Renaissance and Reformation, finally, with their emphasis on liberty, criticism and universality, brought a revival of "perlocutionary" education. The emphasis was now divided among the two.

The history of Christian education in America clearly shows the grown strength of "locutionary" education with its emphasis on religious instruction¹⁷ and the emergence of the Sunday School.¹⁸ On the other hand, the renewed emphasis on nurture,¹⁹ holiness and the social gospel corresponded with the inherent desire of Christian education for consequential

effects. However, Christian education is still missing the very instrument with which to determine the actual condition that best communicates its message: the identity of the church.

Realizing this and reintroducing a form of social gospel, in 1965, Harvey Cox challenged the churches to join secular movements,²⁰ however, without much success. With the rise of liberation theology, emerging from a practice of transformation and directed toward future transformation, an educational paradigm developed on the borderline to illocutionary education.²¹ In 1970, Paulo Freire introduced the concept of *conscientization*,²² "the process whereby persons become aware of the socio-cultural reality"²³ that determines the actual conditions of discipleship. The purpose of this process is the development of critical attitudes in people which will then lead to the transformation of the world.²⁴ Freire's work is most akin to secular theology, political theology and liberation theology similar to the social gospel of the late 19th century.²⁵ Freire's focus, however, is "perlocutionary": an education necessary for bringing about consequences in form of drastic political and social changes in society.²⁶ Freire disregards locutionary education²⁷ and moves swiftly to its perlocutionary counterpart. Unfortunately, his failure to consider the identity of the church in sharpening the existing level of political, social and cultural awareness in society is one of Freire's greatest weaknesses.

In a recent re-evaluation of Freire's educational theory, Cheryl Bridges Johns identified Pentecostalism as an environment for conscientization."²⁸ Johns criticizes the neglect of developing a Pentecostal catechesis for conscientization and urges to move beyond Freire.²⁹ Her critique of the narrow, sterile and spiritually in-affective dimension of Freire's paradigm digs down into the heart of illocutionary education. As an alternative she suggests that conscientization may happen within the boundaries of a covenantal knowledge of God.³⁰ However, her thesis faces the danger of remaining meaningless in a Pentecostal church which educational paradigm is quasi-illocutionary: it seems to embody the content but fails to embrace the deep structure in such a way as to radically advance its understanding of the message. Christian formation begins with a self-cognitive development³¹ before it can move to socio-cognitive action.

The greatest obstacle to this Pentecostal conscientization is the neglect of developing a coherent *identity* of Pentecostalism. The nature of discipleship is deeply rooted in the identity of the church. Awareness of social, cultural or political structures begins with an awareness of who we are. Conceptions of Christian education, theology and reality are standpoint dependent.³² Christian formation begins neither with the content of education nor with the consequences of it but with defining the Christian standpoint by defining the identity of the church in the world and over against the world.

The theological basis for this identity is consequently not found in epistemological standpoints but in objective truth.³³ Jesus proclaims in John 8:32 that "the truth will make you free." He further explains that identity is not found in pedigree (John 8:33) nor in the physical world at all, but that it is a matter of authority (v. 34). Identity is found in a relationship with God (v. 35) through Jesus Christ (v. 36) in love (v. 42) and by the Word of God (v. 51). Jesus further proclaims that identity is found only through a life in the Spirit (Luke 4:18) which alone brings a liberated relationship with God and with others (2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 2:4). The Church is called to stand fast in this liberty which we received in Christ (Gal. 5:1) for the purpose of self-realization and serving one another (5:13). It is the authority within which we exist and by which we will be judged (James 2:12; 1 Peter 2:16).

The challenge of defining Pentecostal identity inevitably becomes a search, a struggle of

interpreting the role of the individual within the community of faith in an ever-changing environment.³⁴ In order to come to a conclusion, however, this search must be individual as well as communal. It is the story of one and yet many, all at one decisive point touching the story of Christ, which turns us around, defines us, calls us, and identifies us as who we are in the context of suffering and healing.

Implications for Pentecostal Discipleship

Pentecostal identity is the central issue in the quest for contemporary Christian discipleship. Only a Pentecostal movement that understands its identity will be able to communicate and pass on that knowledge to future generations. The church's work of Christian formation must return to the fundamental issue of identity of both the Christian and the Christian church. The crisis in discipleship is essentially reflecting a broader ecclesiastical identity crisis.³⁵

James P. Bowers identified five characteristic symptoms of this crisis in Pentecostalism.³⁶ First, the lack of adequate theological definition. Second, conflicting visions of spirituality. Third, socioeconomic differences between members from various parts of the world. Fourth, questions raised about identity by the media, and fifth, differing understandings of the nature of hermeneutics. Additional symptoms, which are often neglected, are individualism, cultural seclusion, racism, spiritual content and secularism. The question is, "How do Christians confused about their identity make disciples?"³⁷

In order to develop an appropriate model of discipleship within Pentecostalism we need to first answer the question of Pentecostal identity. The need is for a vision that is a) spiritual, b) theological, c) renewing, and d) unifying.³⁸ In other words, discipleship that is identity-forming must on its basis be spiritual, theological, renewing, and unifying.

Spiritual discipleship. Spiritual discipleship is spirit-centered formation³⁹ that is from God through Christ; a discipleship in which the Spirit is instrumental to the purpose of God through Christ⁴⁰ in the believer. It is spiritually and not theologically defined. To say it more clearly, the basis for discipleship is life in the Spirit of God not in the knowledge of God. In concrete terms, this calls for people born of the Spirit and not born out of educational paradigms, people born for formation not for education. This does not exclude instruction and knowledge from the agenda of Christian education. It does, however, remove it from first place. The Spirit forms instruction out of transformation and knowledge out of understanding.⁴¹

Spiritual discipleship is discipleship coordinated under authority. God not humankind initiates true education. Under God's delegated authority all must serve in coordination.⁴² Authority is God's appointment not human attainment. This understanding has several consequences for Christian education that is Pentecostal. First, the Christian teacher exists and acts by divine appointment (1 Cor. 12:28). Teaching must be a response to the call of God not the mere carrying out of a (secular) profession. This means that a pastor is not necessarily called to teach any more than any available member of the congregation. The keyword is not availability or obedience⁴³ but submission. Submission is a matter of attitude, and is thus absolute, obedience is a matter of conduct, and is thus relative.⁴⁴ The crisis in discipleship is not based on matters of outward disobedience; mostly it is related to a lack of inward submission. Submission as a teacher, however, requires that such a person

denies himself and acknowledges that all authority comes from God in a life of constant fellowship with God. Secondly, the teacher must live a sanctified life. Without sanctification there is no true discipleship.⁴⁵ A holy and sanctified life is the appropriate basis for discipleship that has as its primary purpose to glorify God. Thirdly, sanctification must also be the goal of the teacher-student relationship. Knowledge does not provide adequate means to achieve this purpose. Rather, discipleship must call on the exercise of Christian rituals and spiritual gifts. Water baptism, footwashing, testimony, healing rituals, Spirit baptism and songs and dances are essential to the task of Christian education. They will provide identity and direction as part of a truly Pentecostal formation.

Theological discipleship. Discipleship that is spiritually defined must be theologically informed. The dynamic, experiential relationship that can be developed in spiritual discipleship calls for sufficient theological attention to the definition of the nature of life in the Spirit.⁴⁶ In more concrete forms this demands the adequate theological education of teacher and student in all areas of Christian living. The need is not for specific theological expertise and segmentation but for a balanced curriculum that is identity-forming through the communication of the essentials of discipleship, such as salvation, sanctification, ecclesiology, and eschatology.⁴⁷ The curriculum must be reflective of its spirituality. As James P. Bowers exclaims, "borrowed educational resources will not support true Pentecostal formation."⁴⁸ A thorough rethinking of methods, purpose, content and contexts of Christian education, as it is called for,⁴⁹ has at its basis a reflection on educational resources, paradigms, assumptions, models, and processes characteristic of a life in the Spirit. Discipleship must step aside from a deductionist model and reflective method and return to inductive study and "imaginal insight."⁵⁰ Yielding to the Spirit of God in the theological context of the movement will answer the question of who we are.⁵¹ The role of the teacher is then to provide opportunity for conscientization and transformation under the leadership of the Spirit. Response must be both individual and corporate, or in other words, the response of the individual must be expressed in the community of God's people. Such response must be expressed spiritually rather than theologically and brings Christian formation back to the exercise of spiritual discipleship in the form of rituals and spiritual gifts.

Renewing discipleship. Discipleship that is both spiritually defined and theologically informed is inevitably renewing. It moves from identity formation and transformation of the individual and the community to a response to God's authority and transformation of the environment. However, renewal is illocutionary not perlocutionary. Thus, transformation of the self and the community comes before transformation (or liberation) of the environment. The Spirit liberates to life, as Jürgen Moltmann writes,⁵² a life that is first renewed and transformed and from this new identity draws its new vitality.

This focus has often been neglected in reality.⁵³ A transformed understanding of our identity under the authority of God and the response to this transformation are not interdependent.⁵⁴ Only a well-informed and developed identity will lead to transformation and cause an appropriate response. Discipleship that focuses on formation but neglects the identity of the disciple and of the transforming community is doomed to repeat its mechanisms until they are run down. Response must be sought in light of the purpose of discipleship, that is, to bring glory to God.

Unifying discipleship. Discipleship that is spiritually defined, theologically informed, and responsive to God's call by giving glory and thanksgiving to God is ultimately unifying. Unification is the absolute expression of glory to God.⁵⁵ This view has several consequences for Pentecostal formation. First, the community of faith must be aware of its potential for formation and transformation of its members and the body as a whole. Christian education

calls for the unifying practices of worship, fellowship, witness, sacraments, and ministry to be part of discipleship not apart from it.⁵⁶ Unifying discipleship will have to seek more ways to enhance the corporate character of Christian education by eliminating the walls that currently exist between age, gender and race.

Secondly, discipleship must not be denominational. The quest is not for disciples that are denominationally circumscribed as Pentecostals or Catholics or Evangelicals but for those that are spiritually, theological and responsibly defined as children of God. Thus discipleship and the development of educational models must happen in dialogue with others. Christian education must essentially become ecumenical.⁵⁷

Pentecostal discipleship is facing one of its greatest challenges. It is possible for Pentecostalism to eventually become synonymous with an ecumenical umbrella that is capable of overcoming Christian and educational boundaries. The challenge is less in the content nor in the consequences of Christian discipleship but rather in how the content is going to be applied to a people that are unaware of their identity and unconcerned about the consequences. The first turn must be a turn to the Spirit of God and with it to the ultimate authority. This move must be a corporate move of the body of Christ not just of some of its members. The mission is for spiritual union not theological agreement. Shared responsibility and accountability will have to become the characteristic hallmarks of Pentecostalism. It will then be able to lead Christian discipleship beyond an already apparent paradigm shift into a new era.

Notes

¹ Jose Miguez Bonino, "On Discipleship, Justice and Power." D.S. Schipani (ed.) *Freedom and Discipleship: Liberation Theology in an Anabaptist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 132.

² Lawrence O. Richards acknowledges the phenomenon in Biblical interpretation; cf. "The Disappearing Disciple: Why Is the Use of "Disciple" Limited to the Gospels and Acts?" *Evangelical Journal* 10 (Spring 1992):3-11.

³ Fernando F. Segovia (ed.), *Discipleship in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1971), 15.

⁶ This terminology was first introduced by J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1962), 98.

⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁹ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 63.

¹⁰ Cf. Jack L. Seymour, et.al., *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 33.

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² John L. Elias, *Conscientization and Deschooling* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 58-59.

¹³ James E. Reed and R. Provost, *A History of Christian Education* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 25-58.

¹⁴ J.M. Price, *A Survey of Religious Education* (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1959), 39-41.

¹⁵ Reed, 107.

¹⁶ Cf. Eleanor Daniel et al., *Introduction to Christian Education* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1991), 40-43.

¹⁷ Henry C. Potter, *Principles of Religious Education* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900) gives a good picture of the ideas of that time.

¹⁸ C.B. Eavey, *History of Christian Education* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), 215-304.

¹⁹ Especially Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner and Co., 1861).

²⁰ *The Secular City* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1965).

²¹ Cf. Matias Preiswerk, *Educating in the Living Word* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 112.

²² *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 19.

²³ Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 13.

²⁴ P. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: The Seabury Press, Inc., 1973), 34.

²⁵ Elias, 62.

²⁶ Cf. in particular *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970).

²⁷ He states "the specific subject matter of education is of little importance ." "The Educational Role of the Churches in Latin America." (Washington, D.C.: LADOC, 2, 29c, 1972), 14.

²⁸ Johns, 13, note 1.

²⁹ Ibid., 138

³⁰ Ibid. 139.

³¹ Daniel S. Schipani, *Conscientization and Creativity* (New York: University of America Press, 1984), 13.

³² Cf. Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Freedom, Discipleship and Theological Reflection." D.S. Schipani (ed.) *Freedom and Discipleship: Liberation Theology in an Anabaptist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 170.

³³ One may object that truth is an epistemological concept. That understanding would then reflect on a particular Christology and would make it a rationale of knowledge rather than of faith. Truth, however, is independent of all human concepts of perception and bound only to a righteous discernment of the person of Christ.

³⁴ Cf. Grant S. Schockley, "Liberation Theology, Black Theology, and Religious Education." M.J. Taylor (ed.) *Foundations for Christian Education in an Era of Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 80-95 and Robert A. Evans, "The Quest for Community." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 30.2-4(1975), 188-202.

³⁵ James P. Bowers identified this problem in Pentecostalism in 1995. "A Wesleyan-Pentecostal Approach," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 6 (April 1995): 58.

³⁶ Ibid., 58.

³⁷ Ibid., 58.

³⁸ The need is not for a return to past models and foundations, such as Wesleyanism (cf. Bowers, 60), but for a development of a renewed, re-defined or completely new model for a true identity of the church.

³⁹ This does not elevate the Holy Spirit above the role of Christ but expresses that in the Trinitarian relationship the Spirit is the instrument of God in order to work through and to essentially be with us (Acts 10:38).

⁴⁰ Cf. Acts 10:38. "God anointed Jesus with the Holy Ghost..."

⁴¹ With the words of J.D. Johns and C.B. Johns, "the Spirit will bring the mission and being of the resurrected Christ into the present reality of the church." "Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study", *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992):132.

⁴² The principle of coordination has been laid out by Watchman Nee in his masterpiece *Spiritual Authority* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc., 1972), 28-31.

⁴³ Availability has long been the predominant teaching, cf. Robert J. Wicks, *Availability: The Problem and the Gift* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986). Availability, however, is an autonomous act. Discipleship does not require availability in the first place but rather faith, calling and obedience.

⁴⁴ Nee, 107 –109.

⁴⁵ As R. Hollis Gause says, "the Holy Spirit is the personal agent by whom this grace is given... it is the cleansing of the vessel for the infilling of the Holy Spirit." *Living in the Spirit: The Way of Salvation* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1980.), 47.

⁴⁶ For this problem in Wesleyan-Pentecostalism see Bowers, 63.

⁴⁷ Bowers lays out eight pedagogical objectives as reflective of the Wesleyan-Pentecostal vision of Christian life. *Ibid.*, 78-81.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁰ This term was coined by Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 87. This underlines that the "events that give our lives their particular shape and quality" form our identity in relationship with one another and with God.

⁵¹ The question "Lord, what would you have us do in response to your word?", as asked by J.D. Johns and C.B. Johns, overlooks the critical aspect of identity. "Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study", 134. We need to know who we are before we can respond to God's word. Those who know their identity will then automatically respond "correctly to the word of God.

⁵² *Der Geist des Lebens* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1991).

⁵³ Whether it is Lois LeBar's approach of "Way-Truth-Life" , cf. *Education that is Christian*; Donald Joy's paradigm "Intersection-Investigation-Inference-Implementation", cf. *Meaningful Learning in the Church* (Winona Lake, IN: Light and Life Press, 1969); Larry Richards' "Hook-Book-Look-Took", *Creative Bible Teaching* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), or J.D. Johns and C.B. Johns' paradigm of "sharing-searching-yielding-responding", "Johns, 124; the response to God's authority and our identity has often been left underdeveloped.

⁵⁴ This was suggested by Jackie D. and Cheryl B. Johns, 125. Mutual dependence is only reached if identification and transformation lead to response. The neglect of an appropriate response is due largely to a misunderstood identity which then leads to incomplete transformation and deformed response.

⁵⁵ The theme of union as a means to give glory to God is often repeated in the Word of God. Consider especially Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 10, 12; Eph. 2, 4; Col. 3:15.

⁵⁶ As James P. Bowers remarks, this also involves "identifying obstacles and hindrances to vital community experience," Bowers, 83.

⁵⁷ Konrad Raiser noted a paradigm shift in the ecumenical movement in 1989 but was yet unclear about what the new paradigm (*Orientierungsrahmen*) would be. Cf. *Ökumene im Übergang* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1989), 51-86. Ten years later the ecumenical movement is in its last stage of that paradigm shift from the classical Christocentric universalism to a Pentecostal pneumacentric orientation. Christian discipleship must not miss this development or it will be left behind.