

The Assemblies of God: A Bibliographic Essay

by Timothy Senapatiratne

This essay will focus on some of the more important Pentecostal literature that specifically relates to the Assemblies of God (AG) denomination. The AG is the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world, with approximately 50 million adherents worldwide. Conservative estimates place the total number of Pentecostals worldwide, including the AG, at 250 million. Thus, it is probable that the Pentecostal movement will have a lasting impact on global Christianity for many years to come. The term *Pentecostal* is derived from the biblical story in Acts 2 which describes the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church on the day of Pentecost. The AG is a subset of a larger group that claims the title *Pentecostal* or *Classical Pentecostal*.¹ Classical Pentecostals trace their beginnings to the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 and are typified by their Methodist Holiness origins, a genesis in the lower socio-economic strata of society, and a doctrinal insistence on evidential glossolalia, commonly known as “speaking in tongues,” as proof of the “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” The AG and the Church of God in Christ are the two largest Classical Pentecostal denominations—although technically the AG’s origin was about ten years after the Azusa Street Revival when racist motivations led to the exodus of the white congregants from the revival. Getting accurate, scholarly, and up-to-date information on the AG can be very challenging for researchers and librarians. There are several reasons for this including the fact that the movement is still in its infancy. Unlike other parts of Christianity with long histories, the AG is not yet 100 years old. Also, the movement has historically been anti-intellectual (at worst) or skeptical of the theological academy (at best), and, therefore, few academically valuable secondary materials have been produced over the years, although this trend is quickly being reversed.

The purpose of this essay is to inform the librarian or a beginning researcher about the most important and relevant literature concerning the AG. I do not purpose to offer a comprehensive account of AG literature, but rather to detail the basic reference and research sources needed for orientation in the subject. Most of the works mentioned will be products of AG scholars. Where materials specifically about the AG are not available (for the reasons listed above), other Pentecostal sources will be suggested to fill in the gaps. This essay will group these resources into reference works, histories, theologies, biblical studies, global issues, and journals.

AG REFERENCE WORKS

Currently, no reference materials are available that specifically deal with the AG; however, a few reference works cover Pentecostalism and consequently the AG. There are two separate works edited by Stanley M. Burgess that offer some help, but they are limited in their usefulness because of their size. *The Encyclopedia of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) is a collection of brief essays written by a broadly representative group of Pentecostals and Charismatics. Many of the articles will be enigmatic to the non-Pentecostal since the work is directed toward insiders, but the work does offer a helpful look at topics important to the AG. *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) is better suited for the non-Pentecostal or introductory student and has the feel of an encyclopedia with very

¹ Two further clarifications of the term *Pentecostal* are important. First, many in the AG, especially lay people, use the term *Pentecostal* synonymously with the phrase “member of an AG church.” Thus, at times it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine if someone is referring to the Pentecostal movement as a whole or the AG in particular. Non-AG Pentecostal groups sometimes find this ambiguous use of the term to be problematic. Second, many scholars who identify themselves as members of an AG church will often use the term *Pentecostal* when doing academic research because of its broader scope for research, as well as its broader appeal within the academy.

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short articles on a wide variety of people, places, and events significant to Pentecostalism. This newer edition, updated from a 1988 volume called the *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library), also has a helpful overview of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements around the world providing valuable bibliographies after every article. Walter J. Hollenweger's *The Pentecostals* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972; German original: Zürich: Zwingli, 1969) is a survey of worldwide Pentecostalism and was, for many years, the *de facto* reference source for tracing and tracking the different streams of Pentecostalism, including the AG. Today it is dated, but it still holds a special place in Pentecostal scholarship because of Hollenweger's different categorizations of Pentecostals, which have become fuel for continued scholarly debate.

HISTORIES

While several historical works on the AG exist, most of them are not scholarly and lack primary source documentation or references to scholarly secondary sources. Compounding the problem is a tendency within the denomination to lean toward a revisionist history that, for example, removes much of the darker side of the denomination's flirtation with racism. Indicative of this lack of historical reflection, it was not until the 1980s that a dissertation, "For Such a Time as This," by Douglas J. Nelson (University of Birmingham, 1981), was written by a Pentecostal on William Seymour, the African-American leader of the Azusa Street Revival and founder of the Pentecostal movement.

The Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, the Assemblies of God archives located in Springfield, Missouri, has the largest collection of primary source materials on the AG and recently has been digitizing many of their important documents to increase the ease of access. The archive staff is also making a concerted effort to increase access to primary resources found in many small denominational archives throughout the country by working with them on cataloging and preservation. The David du Plessis Archive at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, also has many important primary source documents and serves as another important archive for Pentecostal researchers, as does the Holy Spirit Research Center at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Christian Life Books has published some of William Seymour's sermons, writings, and letters: *The Doctrine and Discipline of the Azusa Street Apostolic Faith Mission of Los Angeles, California* (Joplin, MO: Christian Life Books, 2000) and *Azusa Street Sermons* (Joplin: Christian Life Books, 2000). These documents, previously unavailable except to those willing to travel to archives and libraries, have added a much-needed depth to the collection of primary source materials available for the study of the AG and Pentecostal history. These sermons and writings reveal Seymour as a thoughtful and articulate theologian and lend much weight to the claims that he was largely responsible for the beginning of Pentecostalism. Frank Bartleman's *Azusa Street* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos, 1980) was, until the publishing of Seymour's works, the only published first-hand account of the revival. Bartleman's work is still significant in AG history because of his willingness to critique some of the movement's leaders, especially the white pastors who later went on to form the AG church.

The most important historian of the AG is Cecil M. Robeck. Robeck has produced many important articles and books on the Pentecostal movement and is currently working on what promises to be the definitive history of the Azusa Street Revival, including the revival's implications for the AG. This work will be an expansion of his book *The Azusa Street Mission* (Nashville: Nelson Reference, 2006). Robeck's most important claim in his book is that the Azusa Street Mission was not a multi-racial church as many in the AG have claimed, but rather an African-American church that invited whites into fellowship. Robeck's work has often served as a critique of the AG by questioning its revisionist history and casting doubt on some of its claims about the development of its doctrine.

For example, in his article “The Past: Historical Roots of Racial Unity and Division in American Pentecostalism” (*Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research*, 2005), he questions the notion that there was no racism present in the creation of the AG. One of his most important articles to date, “An Emerging Magisterium” (*Pneuma* 25 [2004], 164-215), is a work critiquing the AG hierarchy.

Vinson Synan is another important historian of the Pentecostal movement, and his book *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) is the most accessible introductory history of the movement, chronicling much of the early AG history. Allan Anderson’s *Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) is a well-written look at both the American beginnings of the AG and its spread to the rest of the world. William Menzies’s *Anointed to Serve* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1971) has for years been the *de facto* official history of the AG and is required reading for most AG college students. It is published by Gospel Publishing House, the printing organization of the denomination. It is now out of date and suffers from Menzies’s desire to downplay many of the conflicts within the denomination and suggestions that the movement’s history itself will “stimulate the reader to greater faith in our Saviour.”² Edith Blumhofer’s two-volume *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1989) is the most complete academic history of the movement and demonstrates a real knowledge of the key people involved in the development of the movement. Other important histories include Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), in which he looks at the influence of American culture on the emergence of the AG; Estrela Alexander, *The Women of Azusa Street* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005); and Estrela Alexander and Amos Yong, *Philip’s Daughters: Women in Pentecostal-Charismatic Leadership* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009). Alexander has become a leading historiographer of women who influenced the formation of the AG.

Margaret Poloma creates an interesting bridge between history and theology with her sociological examination of the AG. Her important *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989) surveys the differences between the professed doctrinal beliefs of the AG denomination and the actual beliefs of those who attend AG churches. Her recent book *The Assemblies of God: Godly Love and the Revitalization of American Pentecostalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010) updates and develops some of the themes discussed in her previous work.

THEOLOGIES

Tracing the theological history of the AG is not an easy task. Due to the congregational governance structure in AG churches and the anti-intellectualism of some of its leaders, little has been produced in the way of “official church theology.” The major theological formulation of the denomination is the “Statement of Fundamental Truths”—often referred to as the “16 Fundamentals” since there are sixteen statements. This short statement of less than three pages can be traced to a gathering of some Pentecostal ministers in 1914 in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Currently, some debate exists regarding how closely the current version of the document reflects the original formulation of the doctrines, but since no original document from 1914 appears to have survived, the matter is yet to be settled.

William Menzies and Stanley Horton’s *Bible Doctrines: a Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: Logion, 1993) continues to be the standard AG textbook for introductory theology classes in AG colleges; however, this book is more apologetic than systematic and more summary than thorough. Until recently *Where We Stand* (Springfield,

² *Anointed to Serve*, 13.

MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1994) contained the official position papers of the AG. In the summer of 2010, however, several of the position papers were changed without comment by the denominational leadership, and, as a result, the book is no longer current. There is no word yet on when the book will be updated with these changes. These position papers and the current Statement of Fundamental Truths can be found at the AG website (www.ag.org).

Several theologians are attempting to break out of the traditional AG theological mold and engage AG thought with theology at large. One of these theologians is Amos Yong, whose major contribution to AG theology is in his developmental work on a global theology of the Spirit found in *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) and *Discerning the Spirit(s)* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 2000). Frank Macchia has attempted to do the same with the Pentecostal doctrine of the Baptism in the Spirit, but ultimately falls into troubled Pentecostal categories toward the end of his book *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006). Although he does not write as a Pentecostal, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen is another important voice, especially in the area of pneumatology. His works include *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002) and *The Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007). Interestingly, Randy L. Maddox's *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994) is currently the closest representation of what an AG systematic theology might look like, even though he writes as a Methodist. No AG theologian is currently involved in writing a complete systematic theology that reflects the beliefs of the denomination. In fact, it is unlikely that a project like this would be welcomed by the denomination since the denomination tends to view these kinds of academic activity with suspicion.

HERMENEUTICS AND BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Hermeneutics is a burgeoning field of inquiry in AG literature. There are many new and forthcoming books on the topic, and it is sure to be an area of further research in the near future. Of particular note is the forthcoming Pentecostal Commentary Series that will be published by Deo Publishing. The editors are currently in the process of contracting with scholars for the series, several of which will be AG scholars. No list of Pentecostal biblical scholars would be complete without Gordon Fee. Fee's commentaries, particularly his one on 1 Corinthians (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), have earned him acclaim throughout the scholarly world. Fee's *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996) is an especially important example of AG biblical scholarship that engages the larger academy. Roger Stronstad's *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1984) and Robert Menzies's *Empowered for Witness* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1994) continue to be standard reading for AG college students and are important because of their defense of the Pentecostal doctrine of the Baptism in the Spirit. However, they have had little impact on the larger academy of biblical studies. Although Kenneth J. Archer's *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004) suffers because of its narrow view of hermeneutics, it does represent a serious attempt at developing a theological and biblical hermeneutic that is specifically for the AG. Andrew Davies's article "What Does it Mean to Read the Bible as a Pentecostal?" (*Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18 [2009]) is a brief, but very helpful, look at the future prospects of AG hermeneutics. Finally, we can hope that L. William Oliverio's unpublished dissertation entitled "Theological Hermeneutics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition" will soon be published, as his work on hermeneutics offers a strong recommendation for the future of AG hermeneutics.

GLOBAL ISSUES

It is surprising how few resources are being produced by the non-American and non-Western parts of the AG, especially since the non-American constituency of the AG dwarfs the American. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that most of the non-Western material being published has a tendency to merely mimic the material published in the United States. One notable exception is the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Theology* (Baquio City, Phillipines: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, 1998-) published in the Phillipines. The articles in this journal are uneven in quality, but the journal has consistently been getting better in scholarship and relevance. A very recent collection of essays that focuses on the global scope of Pentecostalism and that features some of the best non-Western Pentecostal theologians is *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts* (ed. M. Kärkkäinen, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). This collection of essays often pushes the boundaries of what is considered Pentecostal and certainly would not be accepted by many in the AG today. Another noteworthy book is *Global Pentecostalism: Encounters with Other Religious Traditions* (ed. David Westerlund; London: I. B. Tauris, 2009) which documents some interesting interactions between Pentecostals and other religions.

JOURNALS AND SERIALS

Several well-regarded academic journals with relatively long histories are devoted to Pentecostal theology and issues. The flagship journal for Pentecostal theology is *Pneuma* (Leiden: Brill: 1979-), the official publication of the largest Pentecostal academic society, the Society of Pentecostal Studies. The *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* (European Pentecostal Theological Association, 1996-) is the product of a similar European academic society. The *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1992-) is another valuable and important Pentecostal journal, the editors of which are also responsible for the very important Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series that is currently being published by Deo Publishers, with prior imprints from Sheffield and Continuum. The series currently has about 36 volumes on a range of Pentecostal biblical and theological topics written by scholars such as Lee Roy Martin, Matthew K. Thompson, and librarian David W. Faupel, among others.

For current AG denominational news and popular level articles, *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1913-) is the official publication of the AG. Many articles and news items of popular interest are also carried in *Charisma* magazine (Mary Lake: Strang Media Group, 1987-).

