

BOOK REVIEW

NOEL, Bradley Truman, *Pentecostalism, Secularism, and Post Christendom*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015. 292 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9781498229364. \$28.

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Bradley Noel is an ordained member of a Canadian Pentecostal denomination, Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland and Labrador (PAONL). He is director of Pentecostal studies and associate professor of Christian ministries at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto (according to the back cover).

The book is an adaptation of his Doctor of Ministry project submitted to Acadia Divinity College. The school deserves a good commendation for its high standard for the degree program. The entire research is closely linked with his denomination's own process of inquiry on the present state and the future prospect. This Pentecostal church, presumably once recorded a dynamic church of spirituality and growth, is now experiencing a significant challenge, as the "business-as-usual" way of ministry is no longer effective to bring in and keep younger generations. The author identifies two major forces contributing to this challenge: the culture change (namely secularization and postmodernity in post-Christendom Canada), and the church's inability to realign itself to understand and minister to the younger generations which have been shaped by the new cultural forces.

The book attempts to offer both diagnosis and prognosis of the problem for his denomination to overcome this generational challenge and recover the vitality and influence it once enjoyed. The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 lays out background material, and I found Chapter 3 ("Current Societal Context") particularly useful. Part 2 introduces the PAONL. Then his main argument is found in Part 3. It is organized according to his eight suggestions. They are:

1. to understand culture changes in different generations;
2. to learn creativity and risk-taking as found in the life of Aimee McPherson (Chapter 6);
3. to learn from the Missional church movement;
4. to learn from the Emergent church movement;
5. to properly respond to post-modernism;
6. to properly respond to post-Christendom;
7. to reframe the understanding of Spirit-baptism; and
8. to reconsider differences in Pentecostal beliefs and values.

Clearly this is an ambitious project as it takes four major subjects (three appearing in the title and “postmodernism” which cuts through all the discussions). The extent of his discussion demonstrates quite an impressive breadth of reading and understanding. Each of these four subjects, albeit interconnected, requires a good grasp of its nature and historical development. The true value of this research, however, is found in that he brings these grand subjects into the real life of his own church. This is where one feels his pain, passion and the very motivation for his research. The book demonstrates how a study is to serve the church especially when it struggles.

This study also has a global value as the challenge of secularism and postmodernism is not limited to the global North. (On the other hand, the implication of post-Christendom will have a very different implication to the South). In large urban centres in Africa, Asia and Latin America, globalization is clearly evident in its culture and lifestyle. And the presence of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity is also visible in the form of large churches and ultramodern and dynamic worship. The impact of culture change poses a formidable challenge globally. For this reason, this book can serve as an important example for various contexts in its struggle. Many churches will ask similar questions, and the book shows the denomination initiative for the search for a way forward, the place of an in depth analysis and a set of proposals. I am personally interested to know how the church has received the study, and how its suggestions have been adopted in their congregations. Sometime later, a follow-up study will be useful to gather, analyse and evaluate the implementation process and outcome. Of course, the validity of the present study will then have its ultimate test. For the moment, this book will stand as an important contextual example of tackling powerful cultural forces that have seriously impacted churches including Pentecostal ones.

I paid particular attention to Chapter 9. It takes much courage for him to bring the belief in baptism in the Spirit, the cardinal doctrine for most classical Pentecostal denominations, into a close scrutiny. He rightly observes that the practice, as advocated for almost a century, has been steadily eroding, especially among new generations, and in the older ones as well (e.g. pp. 202–4). Equally correctly, he identifies the locus of the problem not in the belief itself, but its corollaries, namely subsequence and tongues as the “evidence”. His recommendations are sound and valid, including open discussions between (church and denominational) leadership and the younger generations. His discussion on the role of eschatology is also important as Pentecostalism has moved away from the urgency of the Lord’s return to a “not anytime soon” position (pp. 205–6). And I agree with him on the crucial role which eschatology did and will play in Pentecostal life. However, how the eschatological root of Pentecostalism can be recovered without alienating the younger (as well as older) generations is a crucial question. And, if and how a Pentecostal recovery and revision of eschatology will lead to the reframing of the belief in baptism in the Spirit remains unexplored. Furthermore, what eschatological vision is appropriate for today’s generation is another massive question. For sure, we do not want to return to the time-setting sort of eschatological urgency.

This study has already taken several major topics, as I mentioned earlier. However, I wonder also if the increasing multi-ethnic composition of the Canadian society has a significant bearing on the future health of the church. For example, how an average PAONL congregation matches the ethnic demography of the given community may be an important data in measuring the social proximity between the church and the community. For example, the massive Chinese immigrant community in British Columbia may have formed their own ethnic and language congregations with little or no exchange with the existing churches. However, their second generation will begin to impact the nature of Christianity beyond their Chinese ethnic boundaries. Creativity and openness, for which the author makes a passionate plea can be well used in this area.

As the author wishes, this will be a primer for his denomination, to North American and European Pentecostal churches, and even the global movements. As the extensive surveys and follow up programs will attest, the outcome of this study will be well used in his denomination. I am sure that this work will have many lives in different forms to serve the local churches and frontline workers. This is a good study, covering a broad range of topics, but at the end, very focused on the future life of the Pentecostal movement in the West. I strongly recommend that Pentecostal leaders should read and require their deputies and departmental leaders to read and study it. This book is that important.