A Perspective from Regent University’s Ph.D. Program in Renewal Studies: Theology in the Light of the Renewing Work of the Holy Spirit

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Introduction

I read Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen’s Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation with great interest. Christian scholarship need, indeed, not be pessimistic, but has much reason to be hopeful today. Regent University has embarked on an exciting new enterprise. In this essay the issue of Christian scholarship is being addressed from the perspective of the Regent University School of Divinity Ph.D. program in Renewal Studies.

On June 2, 2003, a group of doctoral students from as far away as South America and West Africa met together for the first time for classes at Regent University’s Virginia Beach campus. The group was comprised of pastors and college faculty of many nationalities. Diverse theological backgrounds—from traditional Lutherans and Episcopalians to representatives of various Pentecostal denominations and independent Charismatic churches—were represented. What bound them together was a deep appreciation for the renewing work of the Holy Spirit and their purpose: to study “renewal theology.”

A Message Relevant to the Unique Needs of Twenty-First-Century Humanity

History may reveal this small beginning as a significant impulse to one of the most important developments of the twenty-first century, namely, the development of a new direction in theology. Today we live in a world that is fundamentally different from that of thirty or even twenty years ago. In every generation God calls pastors, preachers, and theologians to address that specific generation. The postmodern society in which we live has a far greater appreciation for the fact that a human being is much more than a rational being. There is a renewed interest in “spiritual” issues.

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Despite this realization, finding true meaning is still elusive for postmodern society.

We value the great contributions of dedicated twentieth-century theologians. In the twenty-first century, however, new and refreshing perspectives on theology have emerged. We do not have to choose any longer between a "theology from below" (Schleiermacher) and a "theology from above" (Barth)—the great tension of the twentieth century. Renewal Theology as understood here at Regent University sees this tension resolved through the reality and activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit guides us in all truth (John 16:13). The Spirit of truth lives with us and in us (John 14:17). We need not choose between a "subjective" or "objective" perspective when thinking about the locus of God’s self revelation, for the Spirit is a "transjective" interpersonal reality relating "Creator and creature, the one to the Other."2 Whereas the twentieth century experienced the renewing power of the Spirit in worship, missions, and other aspects of ecclesiology, the twenty-first century is rediscovering the significance of the Spirit for Christian theology as a whole.

Embracing the Powerful Work of the Spirit

The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented renewing work of the Spirit. From a once abandoned church building in California’s Azusa Street, a mighty movement of the Spirit swept all over the world. Today, Pentecostal churches can be found in every city and almost every town around the globe. In the sixties, seventies, and eighties the Pentecostal Movement was renewed, refreshed, even modernized, and significantly broadened by the Charismatic Renewal. This renewal movement profoundly affected not only most Protestant denominations, but also the Roman Catholic Church, unlocking the gospel message in a way even the Reformation was unable to do.

The fact that the theology of this mighty movement is being developed as a second phase, following the experience of the powerful work of the Spirit, is consistent with the very nature of biblical theology, in which initial experience often precedes theological formulation. New Testament theology was developed as people reflected, under the guidance

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of the Spirit, on the experience of God through Jesus Christ in their midst. Sound theology based upon pneumatic experience remains crucial for guiding the continuing spiritual growth of the church.

Renewal Theology, therefore, embraces the worldwide Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement. This powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the impulse for Renewal Theology. Renewal Theology not only flows from the Pentecostal/Charismatic revivals, but also wants to serve this movement and the Church as a whole. Renewal Theology is possible only under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who reveals the deep mysteries of God in the context of prayer. As the theology of the New Testament both resulted from the experience of God’s activity and was intended to create and nourish faith, the aim of Renewal Theology is both to understand the biblical message more deeply and to strengthen the faith of those who have already experienced the reality of “God with us.”

The Context of Faith

Through the centuries God has called people to be witnesses of the cross and resurrection of Jesus to the world in which they lived: St. Paul, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine all articulated the meaning of the gospel in the language of their cultural milieu. Underlying their great theological work was the conviction, formalized by Anselm in the eleventh century, of fides quaereus intellectum (“faith seeking understanding”). They understood that the dialectical poles of theology include the dual principles of credo ut intelligam (“I believe in order that I may understand”) and intelligo ut credam (“I understand in order that I might believe”). The whole scientific enterprise took place within the context of faith; this attempt at understanding was essential for the development and articulation of faith itself.3 Theology is reflection, informed by faith, under the “signs of the times” (“Theologie [ist] Glaubensreflexion unter den ‘Zeichen der Zeit’”).4

Faith does not render a methodologically disciplined approach to the interpretation of biblical texts impossible, but rather stands as the framework

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within which such an enterprise is meaningful. The ceaseless movement of biblical interpretation begins and ends in the risk of a response that is neither engendered nor exhausted by commentary, namely, the risk of faith. In this sense, faith represents the “ultimate concern”—that necessary and unique reality by which I orientate myself in all my choices. Faith is a sense of absolute dependence, pointing to an initiative that precedes me.

Renewal Theology values the work of the Holy Spirit across denominational borders. The Spirit is like the wind, blowing wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going (cf. John 3:8). In an extraordinary way the Spirit gave rise to the Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement. But Pentecostal churches also need continuing renewal. Today the Spirit is working mightily in virtually all Christian traditions. Renewal Theology is, therefore, ecumenical.

**Faith and Learning in the Regent Context**

The vision of the founder of Regent University, Dr. Pat Robertson, is that this university may become a center of Christian studies. As a model he cites Oxford and the Sorbonne in the Middle Ages. This vision is undergirded by a deep conviction that there is no tension between faith and learning. As God created this universe, all truth is God’s truth. The study of law, education, communication, and divinity—to name only four of Regent University’s schools—share a humility in the face of truth and a sense of wonder at God’s creation. Regent University views itself as an institution in which faith and culture are united in such a way that human culture is deeply impacted by the message of a crucified and exalted Lord, present in this world through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

The dualism that modernity postulated between “faith” and “learning” is crumbling. Gadamer has correctly pointed out that all knowledge is influenced by the prejudices and horizon of the knowing person. He speaks in this regard of the “historicality” of all understanding. All understanding is influenced by history—the idea of objective, value-free knowledge

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is an illusion. Regent University proudly views itself as part of a centuries-old Christian tradition in which scholarship is viewed as a calling with profound consequences for the Kingdom.

There is a sense in which biblical theology is, in a very profound way, Pentecostal theology—*theology written by people who have experienced the reality of Pentecost.* "Pentecostal" is not used here in the sense of our present-day Pentecostal churches (which may have shortcomings, as all churches have)—but in its *original sense*, referring to the experience of the outpouring of the Spirit. Pentecostal theology appreciates and values the Holy Spirit, his power (Acts 1:8), his gifts (1 Cor 12–14), and his fruit (Gal 5:22).

In the center of Pentecostal theology is, however, the *crucified and risen Christ.* Viewed from this perspective, Regent University considers itself as *evangelical*—in the original sense of the word, referring to the "good news," the *euangelion* of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is a relational reality and actualizes the relationship of the believer with his or her Lord. Through Pentecost, believers experience their lives as "part of a biblical drama of participation in God's history." It is through the Pentecostal reality that believers throughout the centuries are enabled to cry out with Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). When believers worship with the words, "my Jesus, my Savior" it is not a mere privatization of their faith, but the expression of a very real relationship with the living Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

**Conclusion**

Through their book Douglas and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen aim to enlarge the conversation about scholarship and Christian faith. I have been asked to contribute to this conversation from the perspective of Regent University and especially its Ph.D. program in Renewal Studies, which is one of the very first programs offering Ph.D. studies from the perspective of the worldwide renewing work of the Spirit. We feel called to explain the wonder and the mystery of God to a world and a society (and perhaps even to a theological outlook) that have become stale, weary, and

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often hopeless. Our God is, however, the God who makes all things new. Through the Holy Spirit we can already see and experience the first rays of that day in the heavenly city when we shall not need the sun or the moon to shine, for the glory of God will be our light and the Lamb will be our lamp (Rev 21:23). It is the task of Renewal Theology to reflect prayerfully on the theological consequences of this heavenly reality.