

The Pygmies and the Pentecostals

by Mark Hisle

We must not be willing participants in our own demise, oblivious to the spiritual impartation God has entrusted to us.

IN 1997, Alan Rabinowitz hiked hundreds of miles into the mountains of Myanmar to find a group of Pygmies who had been discovered four decades earlier. No outsider had been in contact with the Taron Pygmies since the 1950s, when 150 families were found living together in an almost inaccessible mountain village.

Unfortunately, when Rabinowitz found the village, he discovered that only a few of these Asian Pygmies were left. The reason? One of the remaining Pygmies, Dawi, told him the tribe had made a conscious decision to fade into extinction. They could have traveled across the mountains to intermarry with their Chinese neighbors, but they chose not to. The Taron Pygmies were dying out because they had no appreciation for their identity and no vision to perpetuate it.

In the mid-19th century, the Spirit of God gave birth to a group of people in the United States who were called “Holiness” people. They were the people who, in large part, gave way to the Pentecostal Movement; one denomination even named itself the Pentecostal Holiness Church.

Since 1896, the Church of God has viewed ourselves as “Holiness” and “Pentecostal.” Perhaps that dual identity helped give rise to our being labeled “Holy Rollers.” We did not appreciate that title then; today, we no longer have to worry about it.

As a kid in grade school, I remember being asked by friends what kind of church I attended. I was unsure whether to respond with “Pentecostal” or “Holiness” because I knew we were both. It concerns me that we are not passing on that sense of identity to the next generation. How can they perpetuate our legacy without a strong sense of who we are?

In a day in which we celebrate the eradication of many denominational barriers, I still want my kids to understand what it means to lead a pure life and walk in the Spirit. There are voices in the Body today seeking to redefine *holiness*. They claim how we dress or how we entertain ourselves is unimportant because we must not be isolated from the culture. My response is that I cannot impact the culture if I am just like it.

It is true that in the early days we fell into legalism rather than true holiness. Paul addresses this imbalanced teaching which says, “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle. . . . These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:21, 23).*

We have difficulty avoiding extremes. From days of legalism, we have moved to days of license. As a teenage preacher who gagged on the legalism I saw around me, I believe God impressed me that a day would come when a message of biblical purity would be needed again.

When we examine our history in the Church of God, it is clear we were established as holy, Spirit-filled people. If we are to endure, we must cultivate an appreciation for who we are and a vision to impart it to another generation. Our roots are in simple mountain people who lived right and worshiped unashamedly with Pentecostal fervor. We struggle to translate that to a postmodern 21st-century culture. However, I saw an example of it being done well at a youth outreach where the music and the clothes were different, but the call to holy living and the passionate worship were familiar. Certainly, culture has evolved, but the witness and

manifestation of the Spirit taught in Scripture does not go away.

As I have plowed through the Pauline Epistles, I have become convinced that our understanding of our core identity has often been incomplete, particularly as it relates to holiness. Whenever Paul addresses right living, he does so in two dimensions—the moral and the relational. He admonishes us to avoid any kind of immorality and discusses our relationships with others, and he does it repeatedly:

- “Do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).
- “Walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints” (Eph. 5:2-3).

- “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering” (Col. 3:12).

How can the DNA of a classical denomination be transmitted to this generation? Simply, our holiness must be relational. Does this mean we must reinvent ourselves? Yes and no. We must discern between the familiars and the essentials. People today are usually more interested in compassion than dogma. However, that is not an excuse for the church to mindlessly address the “warm fuzzies” and abdicate our theology. We need truth *and* love.

We struggle between theological understandings and contemporary worldviews. At the present, theology seems to be losing. Holiness and Spirit-empowered living no longer seem to be central concerns. Paul told us to be “established in

the faith, as you have been taught,” and warned us, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world” (Col. 2:7-8). For centuries, the church preached theology without practical application. It became lifeless. Today, we have become so touchy-feely that saints have no idea what they believe. If the Holiness Pentecostal Movement is to avoid going the way of the Taron Pygmies, we must know who we are, what we believe, and why we believe it.

A century ago, parts of the Holiness Movement embraced the Pentecostal outpouring, and parts did not. Thus, today’s classical Pentecostals and Charismatics stand alongside our brothers from the Wesleyan traditions. All of us are in some level of identity crisis. All of us need to be reminded that the theological understandings which gave rise to our movements are still valid and needed. Our prayers must be informed by Judges 2:10, so that we pray, *May the next generation know the Lord and the works He has done.* Our structures and institutions may or may not survive, if Jesus tarries, but our beliefs must be passed on. If this happens, we will have survived in a way that pleases God.

Being Pentecostal does not make us better than anyone else . . . but it does make us better than we would have been without the fullness of the Spirit. Early Pentecostals understood this movement as being part of God’s work of restoring a New Testament church. The passion of our worship, the presence and power of the Spirit, and the pursuit of holiness all speak to our core identity. We must not be willing participants in our own demise, oblivious to the spiritual impartation God has entrusted to us. Unlike the Pygmies of Myanmar, we must live another day. The world needs us. 

**All scriptures are from the New King James Version.*

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