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THEOLOGICAL VITALITY IN THE PAOC TODAY

by Adam Stewart & Andrew Gabriel

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 vision of the PAOC Fellowship rightly includes a concern for theological vitality. One can think about theological vitality in at least two ways. First, theological vitality includes adherence to a certain set of truths. When theological vitality is present, people “teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1, NIV). Second, theological vitality includes engaging in theological reflection. When theological vitality is present, people do not simply place a set of doctrinal beliefs on the shelf where they can be conveniently consulted now and then.

Rather, those with theological vitality are like the Bereans who “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11, NIV). The 2014 survey of PAOC credential holders indicates that there is theological vitality within the PAOC.¹ Although some earlier PAOC beliefs are currently being rethought by credential holders, there is also strong consistency, as well as an increasing consensus, among credential holders regarding a wide variety of theological beliefs.

I. DECLINE IN COMMITMENT TO EARLIER BELIEFS

When comparing the responses of credential holders from 1985-1986 to those from 2014, we observed an overall decline in commitment to earlier PAOC beliefs on all but two issues: abortion and the distinction between conversion and Spirit baptism. In some areas, decline in commitment was only slight. The drop in agreement with the statement, “Evolution of humans from a lower form of life is incompatible with the Scriptural account of creation,” for instance, only decreased from 86 to 80 per cent, still demonstrating a strong disagreement with the idea of evolution.² Decline in commitment to other beliefs, however, was more precipitous. Agreement with the statement, “The rapture of the church will take place before the seven-year period known traditionally as the tribulation,” dropped from 84 per cent among 1985/86 respondents to 64 per cent among 2014 respondents.

Perhaps more important for understanding the changing nature of Canadian Pentecostalism is an examination of the decreases in commitment among credential holders to beliefs regarding speaking in tongues as a necessary component of Spirit baptism, which is for some people the litmus test of classic Pentecostal identity. Although overall agreement with the statement, “Speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit,” only decreased from 95 to 84 per cent, there was a more significant change among those who strongly agreed with this statement in 1985/86 (75 per cent) as compared with those who did in 2014 (46 per cent), suggesting less enthusiastic support for the idea of speaking in tongues as the only initial evidence of Spirit baptism. Decline in overall agreement with the statement, “No individual has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit who has not spoken with tongues,” was much more significant. In 1985/86, 85 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement, while in 2014, only 46 per cent agreed. The decline in agreement regarding the necessity of speaking in tongues in connection with Spirit baptism might, on the one hand, further indicate less enthusiastic support for the initial evidence doctrine; or, on the other hand, it might indicate that some PAOC credential holders are interpreting the initial evidence doctrine differently than most credential holders did 30 years ago. More analysis of the data needs to be done in order to better answer this question.

One interpretation of the overall decline in commitment to earlier PAOC beliefs among credential holders could be to view it as a loss of theological vitality. How could the fact, one might wonder, that some PAOC credential holders no longer appear to support the denomination’s official theological position on the baptism of the Holy Spirit be understood in any other way?

However, a second way to interpret this finding is to see it as evidence of theological vitality. In other words, PAOC credential holders are refusing to accept the theological status quo and are seriously

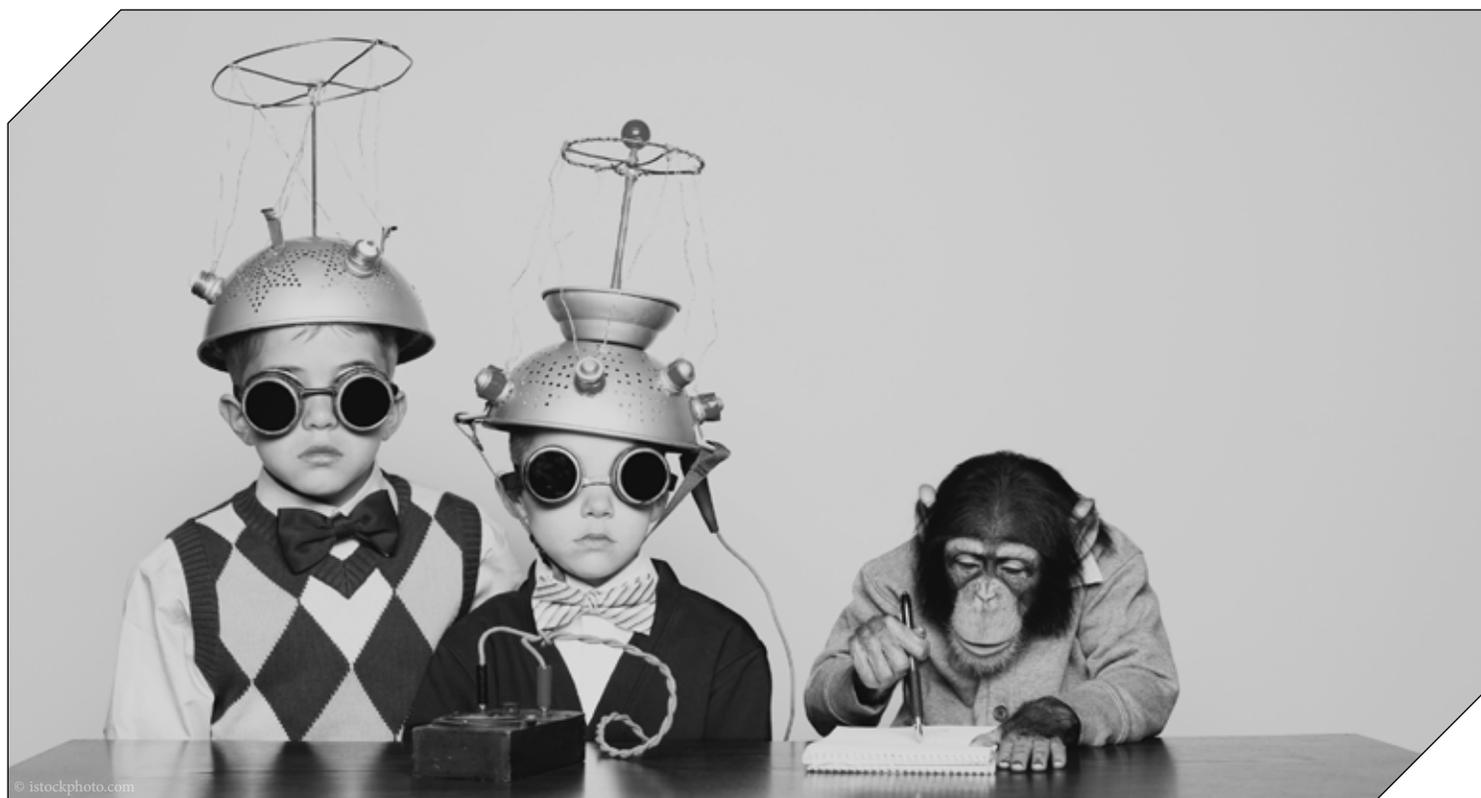
examining their own theological beliefs. Perhaps credential holders are beginning to engage the full corpora of Pentecostal history and theology that includes, for instance, multidimensional understandings of Spirit baptism proposed by early Pentecostal leaders—American and Canadian alike—such as William J. Seymour and James E. Purdie.

A third interpretation of this finding could be to see it as evidence of the sustained engagement that Canadian Pentecostals have had with broader North American evangelical subculture over the last three decades. Some scholars have hypothesized that this engagement has resulted in a reframing of Canadian Pentecostal belief so that it more closely aligns with mainstream evangelicalism at the cost of some denominationally-specific theological distinctives. It would similarly be difficult to understand this as a loss of theological vitality. Rather, it may be seen as evidence of engagement with the broader world of Christian ideas. We do not prescribe any one interpretation of these findings over another, but strongly suggest that these changes need not be viewed as evidence of a loss of theological vitality. As one important Christian thinker once put it, “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”

At the same time, the fact that the decline in commitment to some of the beliefs noted above surprises some credential holders, indicates that there is room for the PAOC to grow in theological vitality. That is, when PAOC credential holders are surprised by what other credential holders believe, it probably indicates that PAOC credential holders need to have more theological conversations so that they are less surprised by each other’s beliefs. The extent to which such conversations can take place in an honest and open manner will influence the extent to which theological vitality flourishes within the Fellowship.

II. CONVERGENCE OF BELIEF

An overall decline in commitment to many earlier PAOC beliefs among credential holders is only part of what the survey revealed. When we separately analyze the responses of those credential holders who have completed a diploma or an *undergraduate* degree at a PAOC college (and no further degrees in theology) and those who have completed a master’s degree (or beyond) in a religious area of study, some interesting trends emerge. More specifically, we see that overall the undergraduate group has declined in their commitment to earlier PAOC beliefs at a greater rate than has the master’s group. For example, in 1985/86, when responding to the statement, “The rapture of the church will take place before the seven-year period known traditionally as the tribulation,” 85 per cent of the college group agreed with this statement, whereas in 2014, only 64 per cent indicated agreement. This was a drop in agreement of *21 per cent*. By contrast, between 1985/86 and 2014, the master’s group dropped in agreement by only *4 per cent* (from 56 per cent agreement in 1985/86 to 52 per cent in 2014).



What is perhaps most interesting about the differing degrees of decline between the two groups is that it has resulted in a convergence of belief among the two groups of credential holders. In other words, while the undergraduate group might have declined more rapidly in their commitment to most earlier Pentecostal beliefs, the more modest declines of the master's group means that the two groups are much closer together in theological opinion than they were in 1985/86. In 1985/86, for instance, the two groups differed by 25 per cent when indicating agreement with the statement, "Hell consists of literal fire." By contrast, the difference in agreement between the college group and the master's group had decreased to only 11 per cent by 2014.³ In some cases, the convergence in belief between the two groups was even more dramatic. For example, in 1985/86, the two groups differed in agreement by 21 per cent when responding to the statement, "No individual has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit who has not spoken with tongues." By 2014, this difference had been reduced to just three per cent.⁴ Similar convergence has occurred between the two groups regarding other beliefs such as healing and the atonement, the rapture, women in ministry, homosexuality, and divorce and remarriage.

In 1987, Carl Verge noted significant differences in theological belief between those who had an undergraduate education from a PAOC college (and no further degrees in theology) and those who had completed a master's degree (or beyond) in a religious area of study.⁵ Since that time, the theological opinions of these two groups have, in most respects, converged, the result being that, today, they are largely aligned on the vast majority of theological issues.⁶

It would be easy for the casual observer to interpret the overall decline in commitment to earlier PAOC beliefs (regardless of education level) as a negative development—that is, as a loss of theological vitality. It

is also possible, however, that the convergence of theological belief between the two groups of credential holders represents an emerging consensus within Canadian Pentecostal theology that has been built through decades of learning, sharing, and reflection, which is at the core of theological vitality.

CONCLUSION

Although PAOC credential holders have changed their commitment to some beliefs, there is nothing in the results of the 2014 survey to indicate that credential holders have abandoned "sound doctrine" (2 Tim 4:3, NIV) and embraced any heresies. The increasing consensus among credential holders regarding a wide variety of theological beliefs, in fact, indicates some level of theological vitality within the PAOC today.

We hesitate to conclude, however, that the current state of theological reflection among credential holders is entirely positive, because to know exactly how strong theological vitality is in the PAOC, further questions would need to be answered, such as: How often are PAOC credential holders reflecting on theological issues, and on what level? What hermeneutics do credential holders prefer when reading Scripture and which hermeneutics would count as indicating theological vitality? How safe do credential holders feel to discuss and ask questions about different theological issues? And, not to mention, how have beliefs changed or remained consistent among the laity, as surely it is not only credential holders who represent the theological direction of the Fellowship?

Another issue that needs to be discussed is this: Will a decline in commitment to earlier held beliefs result in higher levels of membership within congregations, or could it have the opposite effect? Likewise, how might changes in theological beliefs affect clergy

retention or departure? More work and greater collaboration among laity, credential holders, denominational leadership, and scholars needs to be done in order to properly answer these and many other important questions.
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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Adam Stewart, Ph.D., is an archivist at Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie, ON, and an adjunct professor at Master's College and Seminary in Peterborough, ON.

Andrew Gabriel, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of theology at Horizon College and Seminary in Saskatoon, SK.

ENDNOTES

1. More information about the survey, as well as a report outlining the initial findings, can be found at <http://paocbeliefs.weebly.com/>.

2. To determine a "total" for the 1985/86 data set, we calculated a weighted average for the two groups that Carl Verge surveyed. We wish to thank Kevin Shanahan from Environics Research Group for providing these calculations.

3. In 1985/86, the college group was 70 per cent in agreement with the statement "Hell consists of literal fire," whereas the master's group was 45 per cent in agreement. In 2014, the college group was 58 per cent in agreement with the same statement, whereas the master's group was 47 per cent in agreement.

4. In 1985/86, the college group was 86 per cent in agreement with the statement, "No individual has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit who has not spoken with tongues," whereas the master's group was 65 per cent in agreement. In 2014, the college group was 47 per cent in agreement with the same statement, whereas the master's group was 44 per cent in agreement.

5. Carl Verge, "A Comparison of the Beliefs and Practices of Two Groups of Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada Ministers: Those with a Master's Degree and Those with Only Three Years of Bible College Training" (PhD diss., New York University, 1987), 184.

6. There is some ambiguity regarding how much convergence has occurred when considering questions that pertain to biblical literalism—one question indicated convergence, while two questions indicated minor divergence.

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