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THE BALANCE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRAXIS IN SOUTH AFRICAN PENTECOSTALISM: PATMOS BIBLE SCHOOL AS A MODEL

ABSTRACT

Recent developments within South African Pentecostalism reveal that a number of pastors in new Prophetic Churches abuse religion and women and engage in other extreme practices of religion. The vast majority of scholars have linked these recent developments with the gap that exists between theory and praxis in South African Pentecostalism. This article bridges the gap by using Patmos, a Bible School started by Elias Letwaba, one of the first Black workers in the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of South Africa, as a model. Patmos Bible School was an African institution located in Africa for African people. The Bible School offers relevant content to its students, provides specific training for lay preachers and community service, in addition to academic responsibilities. Patmos Bible School thus serves as a model for synergy between theory and praxis in South African Pentecostalism because of its relevant theological curriculum, embracement of African identity, and African indigenous knowledge.



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1. INTRODUCTION

There is a new development in South African Pentecostalism,¹ where pastors abuse religion, with some of them abusing women in the name of God (Resane 2017; Kobo 2019; Kgatle 2019; Ramantswana 2019; Tsekpoe 2019; Mashau & Kgatle 2019; Banda 2020; Dube 2020; Kgatle & Anderson 2020). Resane (2017) has linked these new developments with the gap that exists between theory and praxis, while Masenya and Masenya (2018) have called for theological education among pastors of Pentecostal churches. While this article is in agreement of a need to train pastors in preparation for the work of ministry, the big question is: What kind of training is suitable for Pentecostal ministers or pastors? This article suggests Patmos Bible School as a model suitable for bridging the gap between theory and praxis in Pentecostalism. It highlights recent developments in South African Pentecostalism and shows how such developments are linked to a lack of theological education. There is also a need to briefly introduce the Patmos Bible School, in order to show that the school is a model for the training of pastors. The article highlights the qualities of the Patmos Bible School, with the aim of illustrating how theological education can be contextual and relevant in South Africa.

South African Pentecostalism should be understood in the context of three main sub-traditions, namely classical Pentecostal Churches, African Independent Churches (AICs), and Independent Charismatics (Mashau 2013). Classical Pentecostal Churches refers to churches that embrace the fundamental teachings of Pentecostalism such as the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues. The vast majority of pastors in this stream are well trained in running a church (Burgess 2011:305). Some of these churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa have a link with early-20th-century Pentecostalism in Los Angeles, USA.

AICs refers to churches that were initiated in Africa by Africans, with some of them maintaining the teachings of classical Pentecostalism. These are churches such as St John Apostolic Faith Mission of Christina Nku, International Pentecostal Holiness Church (Africa) of Frederick Modise and Zion Christian Churches (ZCC) of Lekganyane (Anderson 2005:66). These churches still need to develop a proper theology and most of the leaders need training.

1 South African Pentecostalism covers three streams: classical Pentecostalism, African Independent Churches and charismatics. However, lately there is a growing interest in a fourth stream, "new prophetic churches".

Independent charismatics, also known as neo-Pentecostals in South Africa, refers to churches that have left main denominations with signs of Pentecostalism in their approach. These are churches such as the Grace Bible Church of Bishop Musa Sono in Soweto and many other charismatic churches in the urban and rural areas, with some of their pastors being well-trained ministers (Anderson 2000:37).

However, there is a fourth and new stream of South African Pentecostalism that requires attention in terms of the training of pastors (Kgatle 2019). This brings us to the next section, recent developments in South African Pentecostalism.

Since 2014, a series of events have marked the abuse of religion, mostly performed by some prophets within new Prophetic Churches.² Pastors such as Daniel Lesego of Rabboni ministries, Lethebo Rabalago of Mount Zion General Assembly, and Penuel Mnguni, also known as “snake pastor”, of End Times Disciples Ministries have been accused of feeding people with snakes, drinking petrol, and spraying insecticide on the congregants (Resane 2017). A famous prophet Shepherd Bushiri of Enlightened Christian Gathering has been accused of milking the congregants through one-on-one consultations with members, at a charge of R7,000. It is also alleged that Bushiri collected these monies and transferred these in sums of R15 million to his home country, Malawi, on a weekly basis (Ramantswana 2019:6). Meanwhile Pastor Alph Lukau of Alleluia Ministries has been accused of faking a resurrection miracle, where a man appeared in his church claiming that he was dead, while he was still alive (Dube 2020:5). The last very sensitive matter is the alleged abuse of women by Timothy Omotoso of Jesus Dominion International who is currently standing trial at the Port Elizabeth High Court (Kobo 2019:2).

2. THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN LIGHT OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Over 20 years ago, Kretschmar (1997:312) pointed to a similar gap that exists between what is being preached and what is being practised, linking this with a gap between belief and action. Resane (2017:13), for example, mentions that these practices are fuelled by the leaders within Pentecostalism who do not perceive a need for intellectual engagement in the church, thus separating the acts of the spirit with knowledge.

2 New Prophetic Churches are a stream of Pentecostalism in South Africa that are known for four main characteristics: one-on-one prophecy, prophetic titles, miracle money, and prophetic miracles.

Resane (2017:14) continues, stating that most of the Pentecostal pastors have lost their sanity and become anti-intellectual in their practices within their churches. However, according to Nel (2016a:3), this is not new in Pentecostalism, as early Pentecostals also preferred to be filled rather than to engage in theological education. Some of the early Pentecostals viewed theological education as the suppressor of the acts and moves of the Holy Spirit. The challenge is that, recently, the spirit of anti-theological education is perpetuating the abuse of religion, with some pastors becoming so extreme in the name of the Holy Spirit. This challenge calls for a reconsideration of a theological curriculum that will encourage pastors to enrol for theological training that will ultimately address the abuse of religion. In order to put forward a theological education that will work for Africans, there is a need to explore what has worked in the past, especially as it attracted many lay preachers and evangelists.

3. PATMOS BIBLE SCHOOL

Patmos Bible School was started by Elias Letwaba at Potgietersrus (now Mokopane), in the north of South Africa, in 1924 and closed in 1935 (Nel 2014; Nel & Van Rensburg 2016; Morton 2017:11; Kgatie 2017). Letwaba³ is one of the first Black generation of the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM)⁴ of South Africa who was gifted in areas of healing and miracles. The leadership of the AFM saw the potential in Letwaba and made him an overseer in the northern region⁵ (De Wet 1989:65). As the work of the AFM grew in that region, Letwaba identified a need to train lay preachers and evangelists to assist him in his work. He realised that many of his followers did not have the basic understanding of scriptures. This could lead to heresies among the believers. He thus decided to start the Patmos Bible School, with the aim of addressing the need of increasing biblical knowledge among his followers (De Wet 1989:65). The Patmos Bible School's aim was to impart knowledge of the Bible so that the students are well equipped after graduation. This was done by clearly explaining every chapter in the Bible to the students and providing a full picture of every biblical book. This kind of study enabled students to understand the doctrine of the word of God and the fundamental teachings of the Bible

3 Scholars regard Letwaba as one of the greatest pioneers of the AFM, as the founder of the first bible school in the church, and as man who moved in great signs and wonders during his ministry.

4 The Apostolic Faith Mission, with a membership of over one million, is the largest Pentecostal church in South Africa, with branches in the diaspora in regions such as the United Kingdom and the USA.

5 The AFM was divided into various regions according to the provinces in South Africa. The northern region was located in the Northern province, now the Limpopo province.

such as salvation, sanctification, giving, holiness, baptism of the Holy Spirit, and others (Burton 1934:95).

The building was completed in 1924 through fundraising by the believers without any financial assistance from banks or any other financial institutions in South Africa. The building included residences for students who came from as far as Kwazulu-Natal to enrol in the Bible School, as this was the only bible school at that time. In addition to the Bible School, there was also a primary school that enrolled over 150 children whose parents were members of the church. The Bible School students were adequately equipped to serve as teachers of learners in the primary school, thus also enhancing their own knowledge (Erasmus 1996:25). By the 1930s, the Bible School had thousands of students, with most of them graduating (Morton 2017:13). The graduation ceremonies were well attended, even by leaders of the AFM (Morton 2017:13). The Bible School's curriculum covered contextual bible study and practical ministry over a period of three years, after which students were ready for ministry. In addition to biblical knowledge, students were afforded an opportunity to learn languages such as English, among others, as Letwaba was multilingual. Students were also taught entrepreneurial skills such as how to work on the farm and produce products to make one's ministry self-supportive. Consequently, the farm at the Bible School was able to cater for the residential students, as many of them did not have pocket money and needed support (Erasmus 1996:42). In addition to being taught by Letwaba, students had an opportunity to meet and be inspired by practitioners of faith, including well-known faith healers such as "Cyrus Fockler, who visited the school in 1927" (Morton 2017:14). After graduation, the students were motivated to conduct crusades and healing revivals, where they could also practise what they were taught at the Bible School.

The Bible School had mainly Black students of the AFM, while their White counterparts could not attend the school. It was not the aim of the Bible School's founder to exclude other races, but the racial segregation policies at that time determined that Blacks and Whites could not attend the same school. The AFM supported such a policy at that time, and it was divided according to race such as Black, White, Indian and mixed race (Nel 2014:112). Nonetheless, this school enabled the development of Pentecostal theological education in South Africa, specifically the AFM. Hence, Letwaba can be regarded as the pioneer of the Black Pentecostal Bible School in Africa and the first principal of a theological education institution. The Patmos Bible School was more than a bible school for Blacks in the AFM and it should be recognised as the mother bible school in the AFM for both Blacks and Whites (Synan 2001:90). The reason for this

argument is that there was no other bible school in the AFM. Thus, both Blacks and Whites depended on the Patmos Bible School for establishing theological education in the AFM (Erasmus 1996:42).

The college continued to prosper regardless of the economic recession and the political instabilities in South Africa at that time. It must be reiterated that Letwaba was able to do this without any financial support from financial institutions, making the Bible School independent of external influences (Burger & Nel 2008:286). According to Morton (2017:12), Letwaba did not even receive support from his own church. On the contrary, the AFM was raising funds to start a Whites only bible school. Consequently, the Patmos Bible School became a non-accredited institution of higher learning for a long time; it continued to train preachers and evangelists for the proclamation of the gospel. In 1935, the Patmos Bible School finally closed after 11 years of uninterrupted service. The AFM started another college to meet the gap created by the closure of the Patmos Bible School (Morton 2017:14). Scholars provide many reasons that led to the closure of the Patmos Bible School in 1935. Erasmus (1996:59) opines that, because of the economic depression (1930-1934), it made sense to close the Bible School in 1935. This is surprising, because the college proved to be successful even during that time, as stated in previous sections. What is even more astounding is that the decision to close the Bible School was not well communicated to Letwaba. Therefore, the Bible School might have been closed, because the AFM leadership wanted their own Whites-led bible school.

4. PATMOS AS A MODEL TO BRIDGE THEORY AND PRACTICE

Patmos was a theological school located in Africa, whose curriculum was designed to meet the educational needs of Africans. In South Africa, one needs to ask a bold question: Are South African universities real African universities? Or are they Western universities located in Africa? A story is told of a young man who moved from Europe to South Africa to further his studies. Upon his arrival, he was surprised that his diasporic university is similar to the one he left at home. The story is a reality for many South African universities. Therefore, there is a need to de-Westernise these institutions to become real African universities. There is a need to answer the call made by Mashau of an African theology on African soil. Such a theology, according to Mashau and Fredericks (2008:109), should be based on the “identity of African people, using African concepts of thought and speaking to the African context”. There is a need to note that theologians

do not continue to Christianise Africa, but rather to Africanise Christianity. Tshaka (2007:533) suggests that both African scholars and Christians need to be proud of, and uphold their Africanity, thus challenging us to be relevant to the African context.

By offering relevant content such as bible study, understanding doctrinal issues, practical sessions on ministry and others, Patmos attracted a large number of students. In the words of Burton (1934:95):

Indian Christians as far as Durban, were eager to enter Patmos Bible School, and if necessary, to walk the intervening four hundred and fifty miles to get there.

In other words, relevant content contributed to the number of students at Patmos. Sometimes, Pentecostal pastors do not enrol in theological studies, not because they are anti-intellectual, but because, in many South African universities, the theological education curriculum is irrelevant to the Pentecostal tradition (Kgatle 2018). Instead of speaking to Africans, the content will speak to other people in other parts of the world. If one observes Patmos closely, one realises that Letwaba started with the needs of the students before he produced the content. By the time the Bible School started, a market of evangelists and preachers were ready to enrol in the school. The decline in numbers of theologically educated students at the University of South Africa, for example, does not mean that there is no need for theology. It is a question of what type of theology the students need in their churches.

Patmos provided training for evangelists and lay preachers, instead of simply producing theologians. Unlike other professions, most of the students do not enrol at theological education institutions to become theologians. Rather, they have heeded God's call to become evangelists and lay preachers of the gospel. These students do not fully grasp theological terminologies and some of them can only excel in Short Learning Programmes. Others have qualifications in other disciplines, but need a qualification in theology such as a postgraduate diploma, as they cannot start from the beginning.

It is therefore incumbent upon institutions engaged in pastoral training to design programmes that will help produce well-trained graduates to counter below par training, to improve leadership in churches and to advance communities (Masenya & Masenya (2018:645).

Masenya and Masenya (2018:646) also state that the aim of such programmes should be to produce leaders who will be ready to change

their society rather than to be caught up in selfish actions. Such leaders will devote their time to addressing the social ills of the country, instead of being involved in outrageous acts that embarrass Christians.

Letwaba practised the same theology that he taught. Simply put, he practised what he preached and modelled ministry to upcoming evangelists and lay preachers. He thus bridged the gap between theory and praxis, because in Letwaba there is a connection between the teacher and the student; between theologians and practitioners of religion. Therefore, the gap between theory and praxis can be bridged by means of a dialogue between theologians and those who are active on the ground. Only then will a theology be able to help the likes of Lesego Daniel, Lethebo Rabalago, Penuel Mnguni, Alph Lukau, Shepherd Bushiri, and Tim Omotoso. Nowadays, Pentecostal pastors in South Africa need not only theological training, but also mentors who will model what they want to achieve in a proper way. Currently, the vast majority of pastors lack skills, guidance and proper direction in their ministry. All they have is good apparel, eloquence and the ability to administrate well. According to Resane (2017:12), lack of mentorship produces spiritual fatherless leaders who, although in positions of power, lack the proper skills to lead their followers into the right direction. For this reason, pastors in South African Pentecostalism need bible schools such as Patmos to model what they need to achieve in life.

Patmos provided a community service by starting a farm that catered for the students and a primary school that served the children. Theology must not turn scholars into being out of touch with the community; rather it must help them reach out to the community. In this instance, one not only talks about a scholarship of engagement, with, at the end of the day, a benefit in terms of research outputs. One is referring to theologians not standing at the high tower and conducting desktop research, but rather coming down the tower in order to serve their own communities. After all, the pastors and the churches discussed earlier do not operate in a vacuum, but in communities, thus making them the centre where both theorists and practitioners meet.

Fundamental beliefs and what is regarded as truth by a community will determine the kind of curricula the community designs for schools and other institutions of learning. This is so because the philosophy of a particular community or group of people or organisation should largely determine the group's decisions, choices and alternatives in educating its members (Masenya & Masenya 2018:647).

Therefore, communities are important, in order to connect theologians and pastors and to ensure that what is practised does not harm the people (Masenya & Masenya 2018:634).

5. TOWARDS A RELEVANT PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Patmos Bible School is calling theologians to move towards a relevant Pentecostal theological education in South Africa. The first step to do so is to revise the curriculum. Concepts such as Africanisation and decolonisation cannot be dealt with without addressing the issue of the curriculum, as most of the content in theology needs to be revised to make it relevant to Africans. African scholars have agreed that the approach to theological education has, for many years, been Western, which, on its own, rejects Pentecostal pastors (Sakupapa 2018:417). In order for this to happen, there is a need not only to add African voices to the curriculum but also to change pedagogy from its roots (Sakupapa 2018:419). According to Magezi and Banda (2017:8), a transformed curriculum will enable ministers of the gospel to address the socio-economic and political challenges facing African nations. Instead of abusing people, ministers of the gospel will be able to act as transformation agents in the communities where they operate and not only in their churches. The main issue is that the curriculum should not remain an abstract or a theory; it must be able to address contextual issues such as, among others, poverty, HIV/AIDS, illness, unemployment, and inequality in Africa.

The Patmos Bible School is a call for the Africanisation of Pentecostal theology that will recognise the African identity, culture and indigenous knowledge. Africanisation or, what other scholars call, indigenisation, according to Anderson (2017:5),

assumes that the gospel message and Christian theology is the same in all cultures and contexts, and so it tries to relate this 'constant' Christian message to so-called 'traditional' cultures.

Africanisation, according to Mashabela (2017:1), is the liberation of the people from their challenges of poverty, illnesses and other social ills through the same message of the gospel. As the Patmos Bible School did, the Africans' hope to receive quality education to improve their lives is realised in Africa. In the context of theological education, Africanisation is the encounter of the gospel, with the aim of using an African agenda to address African problems (Mashabela 2017:3).

In the words of Anderson (2017:5), contextualisation

assumes that every theology and form of church is shaped by its particular context and must be so to be relevant and meaningful. It relates the Christian message to all social contexts and cultures, especially including those undergoing rapid change. In other words, contextualization is dynamic and not static, because it allows for constant change.

The process of contextualisation of Pentecostal theology is important when people are tired of the old tradition and are seeking something that will address their needs and concerns (White 2017:3). This means that theology, the Bible and the interpretation thereof should be able to relate to the people's context, wherein it is applied, for relevance. Contextualisation will bring balance between the culture of the people and the gospel, without compromising the message of the Bible. In this way, Pentecostalism in Africa becomes a tool in the hands of Africans to dismantle the old traditions of doing church and theology (White 2017:3).

A number of contextual issues require attention in South African Pentecostalism, particularly in the new Prophetic Churches: abuse of religion, including sexual abuse of women; abuses of people's belief systems; commercialisation and commodification of religion; deliverance and healing ministries; mission and practice of prophetic ministry; theology of prophetic ministry; popularity of prophets; socio-economic challenges and the prophetic ministry; prophetic ministry and sustainable development; gullibility of prophetic ministry followers, and the role of government in the regulation of prophetic ministry. Addressing these contextual issues is not an anti-Western theology endeavour, but a quest to Africanise and decolonise theological education in Africa.

Lastly, African oral structures in Pentecostalism should be recognised. There is a way in which African people conduct their liturgy, as opposed to the Western way of doing so:

Black Africans are noted to be people of singing, drumming and dancing. A lot of African music and songs deal with religious ideas and practices. Music gives them an outlet for their emotional expression and religious life. Contrary to this vibrant way of expression of black Africa, the Western missionaries' liturgy of hymns did not make room for many black Africans who became Christians to really express their joyous worship according to their worldview (White 2017:6).

There is evidence for the reason why Pentecostalism has grown to greater heights in Africa: it has found resonance with the local cultures (Akanbi & Beyers 2017:2; Anderson 2004:162). Pentecostalism in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa is known for its oral nature, because it abounds in lively worship, where believers clap their hands and dance in the presence of God (Akanbi & Beyers 2017:2). Whenever Pentecostals gather, there is a strong sense of enthusiasm and participation of all believers that has the ability to produce a living liturgy.

Oral structures in South African Pentecostalism, as shared by Pentecostal scholars (Kärkkäinen 2009; Nel 2016b:1-8; Anderson 2018:202), can be summarised as follows: oral liturgy: music, participation of every believer; narrative theology and witness: sermons and testimonies; reconciliatory and participatory community; visions and dreams, as well as healing and deliverance.

6. A PATMOS EQUIVALENT CURRICULUM

I suggest a Patmos equivalent curriculum. Masenya and Masenya (2018:651) have already suggested some of the themes such as leadership and counselling. The Patmos equivalent curriculum should also include Christian ethics (Kretschmar 2005).

- African Pentecostal history.
- Training in biblical studies and/or interpretation.
- Entrepreneurship.
- Contextual African theology.
- Homiletics (preaching).
- Ethical leadership.
- Pastoral responsibilities such as counselling.
- Church as an organisation.
- Doing ministry (healing, deliverance, and so forth).

Furthermore, one must take cognisance of what Resane (2018) calls the “hidden curriculum”, which basically means learning through life experiences. In this context, it means that theological education needs to be informed by what is taking place in churches within the Pentecostal tradition.

7. CONCLUSION

Recent developments in South African Pentecostalism have raised an alarm signalling the abuse of religion that has taken practitioners of faith and scholars by storm. Scholars have recognised the gap that exists between theory and praxis as one of the reasons for the continuation of these practices, with some calling for theological training among pastors. This article used the Patmos Bible School as a model to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. There is a need to create an African theological education that will be relevant to Africans, by embracing our identity, telling our own stories, and doing contextual theology. While it is important to strive for quality rather than quantity, there is a need to be mindful of those students who want to enter ministry without any theological background. Pentecostal theological education should be relevant for such students. In Africa, one cannot speak of universal statements on Pentecostal theology; one also needs to speak of contextual spiritualities. One needs to recognise the oral structures that exist in Africa, where theology should be informed by the way in which people conduct their liturgy, as opposed to the Western way of doing so. This is the way the Early Church theologised: worship as “theologia prima” and “orthodoxy” as the right way of praising.

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