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Theological Tasks for Spirit-Empowered Mission in Asia

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Abstract

This chapter identifies five priority topics for Asian Pentecostal churches and believers to fulfil their theological and missional call for faithful witness of Christ's good news. The first two are unique theological gifts: (1) Spirit baptism for Spirit-empowered life and witness, and (2) prophethood of all believers: theology of empowerment. The next three are contextual and missiological priorities: (3) signs and wonders, and healing in witnessing, (4) Spirit-empowered engagement with religions, and (5) Spirit-empowered witness amidst human suffering and poverty.

Key Words: Asian religions, Pentecostal theology, prophethood of all believers, social engagement, Spirit baptism, Spirit-empowered witness

Introduction

This chapter aims to identify key theological areas for Asian Pentecostals to develop and strengthen their Spirit-empowered witness to fellow Asians. This exploration assumes two specific objectives of Spirit-empowered scholarship: (1) to strengthen the movement and (2) to enhance Spirit-empowered witness in Asia. Today, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is so diverse that there is no consensus on its definition. This complexity has been accentuated as the movement has spread globally, actively interacting with local social and religious cultures. As a result, for example, a rural African-initiated church (AIC)¹ operates quite differently from a North American Pentecostal congregation, both in their beliefs and expectations. Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo, leaders of the Center for Studies of Global Christianity, offer "family resemblance" to qualify their working definition; the resemblance consists of

¹ Note: AIC often covers the terms "African-initiated churches," "African independent churches," "African indigenous churches," and "African-instituted churches." See Philomena Njeri Mwaura (2005), "African Instituted Churches in East Africa," *Studies in World Christianity* 10, no. 2 (2004): 160-84, doi:10.3366/swc.2004.10.2.160.

baptism of the Spirit, speaking in tongues, and gifts of the Spirit.² Identifying commonly held belief among various expressions of Spirit-empowered faith, therefore, remains essential for efforts to strengthen the movement.³

Communicating God's good news is a mandate and *raison d'être* for every believer and believing community. It also comes with an urgency. According to Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo's statistics in their *World Christian Encyclopedia*, a mere 8.2 percent of the vast population of Asia (4.6 billion in 2020) were Christian; compared to the 32.3 percent of the world in 2020, Asia achieved approximately a quarter of the world's evangelisation rate.⁴ For the 2050 projection, Christians are expected to increase to 10.9 percent of the Asian continent: an encouraging prospect.⁵

Why, then, should Pentecostals engage in the task of evangelisation? The most convincing reason is Pentecostalism's growth record for the past century or so. For instance, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity throughout the world grew annually by 6.30 percent in the twentieth century while, overall, Christianity grew by 1.28 percent. This Pentecostal growth rate is five times that of the latter.⁶ In East Asia and Southeast Asia, the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement increased annually by 6.14 percent between 1970 and 2020, the highest among Christian traditions and all religions.⁷ The crux of this exponential growth involves distinct Pentecostal beliefs/theology. This chapter explores five of these beliefs, particularly in Asian socio-religio-cultural contexts, necessary for Asian Pentecostals to fulfil this global task of evangelisation.

In this chapter, "Spirit-empowered Christianity/movement" is used as an umbrella term for the full spectrum of charismatic Christianity, encompassing classical Pentecostal, charismatic, and neo-charismatic segments. Historically, various expressions have been used since the advent of the Charismatic Movement in the 1960s, including Pentecostal, Pentecostal-Charismatic, full gospel, apostolic, renewal, and Spirit-filled. With the addition of the third component, any hyphenated expressions are increasingly untenable. Since the centenary celebration of the Azusa Street Mission in 2006, "Spirit-empowered" has gained acceptance, especially through the activities of Empowered21.⁸

² Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *Introducing Spirit-Empowered Christianity: The Global Pentecostal & Charismatic Movement in the 21st Century* (ORU Press, 2023), 18-32.

³ E.g., William M. Wilson, "The Task of Spirit-Empowered Scholarship in Reaching EveryONE for Christ," in *Everyone Reaching EveryONE: Portraits of Spirit-Empowered Evangelists*, ed. Wonsuk Ma et al. (ORU Press, 2026), 7-12.

⁴ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 10. WCE henceforth.

⁵ Johnson and Zurlo, *WCE*, 10.

⁶ Johnson and Zurlo, *WCE*, 6.

⁷ Wonsuk Ma, "Asian Pentecostalism as a Growth Engine for Global Christianity: Potentials and Challenges," in *The Holy Spirit, Spirituality and Leadership: Essays in Honour of Younghoon Lee*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (Regnum Books, 2024), 260.

⁸ For example, Johnson and Zurlo, *Introducing Spirit-Empowered Christianity*, esp. 18.

The scope of this study is East and Southeast Asia, for several reasons. First, in the vast diversity in culture, religion, and social conditions of Asia, this region shares reasonable commonalities, including, among others: Chinese cultural influence, Buddhist presence, colonial history, and a pervasive animistic mindset. Second, the presence and influence of Islam in this region differs from the rest of Asia (South, Central, and West Asia). Islam here tends to adopt local animistic religious practices, like in other religions, and is consequently less fundamentalistic and militant. Indeed, Islam has a minimal presence in East Asia. In this region, Christianity is larger than Islam, and the former grew more quickly than the latter. Third, Christianity in this region is very missional; three of the world's top ten missionary-sending nations are here: South Korea (ranked number 3 with 30,000 intercultural missionaries), the Philippines (number 4 with 25,000), and China (number 6 with 15,000).⁹ Fourth, the evangelism rate of the religion is more than triple (at 12.2 percent in 2020) of the rest of Asia (less than 4 percent), while they share about the same population size.¹⁰

This chapter takes five relevant topics necessary to strengthen the missional theological assets of Asian Pentecostalism and translates them into practice to continue fuelling its growth. We explore each topic in three aspects: the distinct Pentecostal theology, its contextual relevance to Asia, and theological and practical suggestions to enhance and strengthen the theological and practical distinctives to fuel the growth. The last discussion includes potential or realistic challenges and practical recommendations.

Spirit Baptism for Spirit-Empowered Life and Witness

The most prominent belief and practice in modern Spirit-empowered Christianity is baptism in the Holy Spirit, often accompanied by signs, particularly speaking in tongues. Almost all the classical Pentecostal denominations consider it to occur after regeneration as a distinct and separate experience.¹¹ This belief is also enshrined as “Jesus as the Baptiser” (referring to baptism in the Spirit) in the Pentecostal fourfold or fivefold “gospel.” Pentecostals argue that this promise was given to Jesus’s disciples, hence believers: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4-5).¹² At the turn of the twentieth century, believers prayed for the restoration of this “apostolic” experience. When revivals broke out in various parts of the world, many who had radical spiritual encounters with God’s power identified their experiences with that of the Early Church. The first issue (September 1906) of *The Apostolic*

⁹ The number is 2020’s. Johnson and Zurlo, *WCE*, 32.

¹⁰ For more discussion, see Ma, “Asian Pentecostalism as a Growth Engine,” 257-58.

¹¹ US Assemblies of God defines this experience, for example, as “distinct from and subsequent to ... the new birth.” See Assemblies of God USA, “Statement of Fundamental Truths, 07,” accessed August 6, 2025, <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths>.

¹² All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

Faith, the newspaper of the Azusa Street Mission, declared that “Pentecost Has Come,” and its subheading read, “Los Angeles Being Visited by a Revival of Bible Salvation and Pentecost as Recorded in the Book of Acts.”¹³ Throughout the history of what was later called the “Pentecostal Movement,” this belief and experience have remained its hallmark.¹⁴ With the advent of other “waves,” the movement witnessed changes in expression and emphasis, but its fundamental importance has remained constant.

The experience of Spirit baptism is radical in religious life. There is no reported case of “gradual” Spirit baptism; it is an event that one can remember with a definite time and location. It also accompanies tangible and supernatural signs – including healing, vision, hearing God’s voice, and overwhelming sensations – but the most common is speaking in tongues. This emphasis on an encounter with God’s reality with tangible experience has made Pentecostalism highly relevant to Asian religious minds. As much as the continent is crowded with religions, Asia’s worldview acknowledges a myriad of spiritual beings and their close interface with everyday life. Therefore, unlike Christianity in the secularising West, religious practices in Asia have existential relevance. The pervasive influence of animistic beliefs, found in every religion, has heightened the consciousness of the spiritual world, closely overlapping with almost every aspect of human life. In this rich and “thick” spiritual world, Pentecostalism has distinguished itself by emphasising encounters with God through religious experiences. Evan Liu contends that the Pentecostal teaching of immediacy of the divine aligns well with Daoism and folk religions in China.¹⁵ It has also offered (often supernatural) solutions to life’s challenges, while other Christian traditions engendered “split Christianity.”¹⁶ Pentecostalism thus emerged as a form of Christianity that offers answers both to the eternal (or higher) concerns (such as sin, forgiveness, and the afterlife), as well as the temporal (or lower) concerns (such as sickness, poverty, relational issues, etc.). In Asia, as in Africa and Latin America, people from lower social strata struggling for their daily survival consider Pentecostalism their most favourable religion. More importantly, the Pentecostal theology of divine encounter is a highly prized experience in Asia, for such is exclusively reserved for religious specialists, such as priests or clergy. One with a divine S/spirit is considered sacred.

Then how can Pentecostal churches in Asia strengthen this unique theological foundation? They can do so first by a concerted emphasis on Spirit baptism in teaching, preaching, and practices. Classical Pentecostals have the most

¹³ “Pentecost Has Come,” *The Apostolic Faith* 1, no. 1 (September 1906), 1, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5e17afe412fc21ddcb6e961c/5e31ae7419d810ece991c296_Azusa-Paper-Original-01.pdf.

¹⁴ See Frank D. Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Zondervan, 2006), 17, taking Spirit baptism as “an organizing principle of a Pentecostal theology.”

¹⁵ Evan Liu, “Impacts of Pentecostalism on Modern China’s Christianity,” *Journal of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity* 45, no. 1 (2025): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/27691616.2025.2536642>.

¹⁶ See the seminal work by Jaime C. Bulatao, *Split-Level Christianity* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1966).

intentional emphasis on this belief, enshrined in their doctrinal statements. As seen in the Alpha Course, originally designed and popularised by a British charismatic church, a typical session deals with fifteen questions of life. Three of them are on the Holy Spirit:

- Session 8: Who Is the Holy Spirit?
- Session 9: What Does the Holy Spirit Do?
- Session 10: How Can I Be Filled with the Holy Spirit?¹⁷

Thus, Pentecostal congregations must organise programmes to prepare parishioners for Spirit baptism, and leaders should invite those who desire Spirit baptism to come for prayer at every prayer time.

Pentecostal churches can strengthen this foundation, second, by fostering prayer in tongues. As tongue-speaking is generally considered the mark of Spirit-baptised believers, this would indirectly reinforce the critical importance of Spirit baptism. In a 2016 report, about one-third of Pentecostals in the United States spoke in tongues weekly or more often.¹⁸ However, a steadily declining trend in Spirit baptism is observed in the West, and this may spread globally.

The third step Pentecostal churches can take to strengthen their unique theological foundation is the development of robust discipleship programmes. One area of weakness among Pentecostals is discipleship, as researchers realised the scarcity of Pentecostal resources for disciple-making.¹⁹ What does discipleship have to do with Spirit baptism? While baptism in the Spirit is a distinctly time-specific, one-off experience, the state of “fullness of the Spirit” is a repeated, ongoing, and lifelong gradual process. Inadvertently, Pentecostals have developed an instantaneous-solution mentality and are consequently impatient about long-term matters. This requires intentional disciple-making programmes, wisely taking Asia Williamson’s and Joseph Handley’s suggestion to incorporate the experiential dimension into Pentecostal spiritual formation. They suggest a discipleship process to “ask how Pentecostals encounter reality, interpret it, and are transformed by it.”²⁰ Holiness-Pentecostal traditions can significantly contribute to this with “Christ the Sanctifier” in their belief.

The fourth step involves the reenactment of Spirit baptism through active testimony-sharing, a prominent part of Pentecostal worship that brilliantly demonstrates the grassroots theology-making process. This “storytelling” tradition extends to evangelism by sharing one’s spiritual experience, and the life-changing impact of Spirit baptism can be at the top of the list. It will, in turn, feed into the Pentecostal discipleship cycle, mentioned above.

¹⁷ Alpha, *Alpha Guide: Is This It? Why Am I Here? Is There More to Life Than This?* (Alpha International, 2016), <https://uploads.weconnect.com/mce/ff33a8f10515011cba0d191ae58f7f9a4dd7a3e1/Guest%20Week-by-Week%20Handbook.pdf>.

¹⁸ Pew Research Center, “Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals,” October 5, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power/>.

¹⁹ Asia E. Williamson and Joseph W. Handley, “Deep Rivers: A Pentecostal Approach to Disciple-Making,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2024): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393231181893>.

²⁰ Williamson and Handley, “Deep Rivers,” 118-20.

Prophethood of All Believers: Theology of Empowerment

The rapid growth of Spirit-empowered Christianity primarily owes to the grassroots mobilisation of highly motivated lay evangelists. The link between Spirit baptism and being empowered for witness is based on Christ's promise in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This theological connection resulted in what is called the "prophethood of all believers," one theological step forward from the traditional "priesthood of all believers."²¹ It makes every believer baptised in the Spirit potentially a motivated evangelist. Empirically, the 2016 survey by the Pew Research Center observed that Pentecostals, who exhibited a higher intensity of belief, are more frequently evangelising than non-Pentecostal Christians.²² In the real-life setting, a Pentecostal believer has a personal encounter with God's reality, often experiencing a profound, life-changing experience. Theologically, this is understood to be empowerment to share God's good news. Telling one's story is prevalent among Pentecostals, as seen in the testimony tradition.²³ At the same time, the empowerment is understood as more than telling stories; it includes believers mediating or performing God's miraculous work.²⁴ These observations and beliefs all amount to powerful ingredients for unprecedented evangelism success, and the growth trajectory of the movement partly proves it. At the same time, whether each Pentecostal believer or each congregation fully live out their unique potential is another matter.

In Asia, this revolutionary belief has fuelled church growth as it manoeuvres through, around, and sometimes against its hierarchical culture. This belief is particularly relevant in two areas. The first is evangelism. Given the wide gap between the evangelisation rates of Asia and the world, the mobilisation of every believer – both women and men – for the spread of the gospel promises unique potential for this urgent task. At the evangelistic front, the well-known cell-group system of Yoido Full Gospel Church (Seoul, Korea), often with female leaders, vividly demonstrates this belief. In the Korean social context, this groundbreaking experimentation endowed the lay cell leaders with the "apostolic" function. Younghoon Lee, the church's senior pastor, elaborates this characterisation by their work: (1) to nurture their members through biblical

²¹ See the seminal work on the subject: Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). Also, Wonsuk Ma, "Pentecostal Theological Formation and Education for Tomorrow (Sec 1)," *Pentecostal Education* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 269-73.

²² Pew Research Center, "Spirit and Power."

²³ For instance, Myung Soo Park, "Korean Pentecostal Spirituality as Manifested in the Testimonies of Members of Yoido Full Gospel Church," in *David Yonggi Cho: A Close Look at His Theology and Ministry*, ed. Wonsuk Ma et al. (APTS Press, 2004), 43-67.

²⁴ Thus, Pentecostals developed pneumatological missiology. Similarly, Pentecostalism contributes to a missional ecclesiology, bringing evangelism to the centre of church life and call. See Wonsuk Ma, "Two Tales of Emerging Ecclesiology in Asia: An Inquiry into Theological Shaping," in *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue: Ecclesiology in the Majority World*, ed. Gene L. Green, Stephen Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, Majority World Theology Series, vol. 5 (Langham Literature, 2018), 53-73.

teachings, (2) to care for the members with love, (3) to pray for them, (4) to prepare the members for evangelism, and (5) to link the members to the church system for pastoral care.²⁵ This lay mobilisation has directly contributed to the exponential growth of Yoido Church. In a significant way, the cell-group system has challenged the clergy–laity divide by democratising ministries.

Similarly, many transnational Christian labourers are actively doing the work of ministry. Although it is impossible to verify, one Filipino Christian leader claimed that Christian converts through international workers in the Middle East may outnumber those who became Christian through missionaries.²⁶ Equally intriguing is the presence of African Pentecostal believers in China, although their direct and indirect impact on Chinese Christianity is difficult to assess.²⁷ Presenting a new model of Christian mission, although not exclusively Pentecostal, these cases demonstrate the “liberation of ministry” from traditional clergy dominance.

Also, the “prophethood” belief challenges Asian socio-cultural norms that privilege males. This gender inequality is deeply rooted in Asian traditions, especially in religions. For example, in China, women serve as pastors, evangelists, and missionaries in many Pentecostal churches, and this is in stark contrast to both other Christian traditions and to Chinese culture. The empowerment of women is considered a major factor in the growth of Pentecostalism in China, particularly in rural areas. This trend continues in new urban churches that minister to immigrants from rural provinces.²⁸

Despite the encouraging impact of the “prophethood” doctrine in Asia, there are challenges to its full realisation. A plain maxim applies to this: knowledge does not always change behaviour. Several probing questions can reveal the current state, such as, “What percentage of Pentecostal believers are aware of or believe in the ‘everyone’s a prophet’ doctrine?” “If they believe, are they actively evangelising people?” In the same vein, “Why are not all Spirit-empowered churches doing mission?” While the growth rate of Spirit-empowered Christianity is higher than other Christian traditions in Asia, most believers and local churches do not live up to this treasured belief. To translate knowing into doing, discipleship is the key, and the Spirit-empowered world is called to take it seriously.

When it comes to the social impact of the all-prophet doctrine, a worrying trend is observed in China. Among urban Pentecostal house churches, Liu

²⁵ Younghoon Lee, “Female Cell Leaders as Spirit-Empowered Ground-Level Evangelists: A Case Study of Yoido Full Gospel Church,” in *Everyone Reaching EveryONE: Portraits of Spirit-Empowered Evangelists*, ed. Wonsuk Ma et al. (ORU Press, 2026).

²⁶ This statement was made in a private conversation. Close to the statement is the effective mission work by fast-growing overseas Filipino workers. See Melba Maggay, “Early Protestant Missionary Efforts in the Philippines,” in *Asian Church and God’s Mission*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma (OMF Lit., 2003), 39.

²⁷ Heidi Østbø Haugen, “African Pentecostal Migrants in China: Marginalization and the Alternative Geography of a Mission Theology,” *African Studies Review* 56, no. 1 (April 2013): 81–102.

²⁸ Liu, “Impacts of Pentecostalism,” 9–10.

argues, female leadership is almost marginalised, giving preference to male leadership. He attributes this to the institutionalisation and cerebral (or “text-based”) spirituality among better-educated urban believers.²⁹ This is in contrast with rural Pentecostal churches, where female leadership flourishes with the affective and experiential traits of these leaders.

Elsewhere, I (Wonsuk) also raised a question, “How real is the ‘prophethood of all believers’?”³⁰ This is based on glass ceilings that the laity (and women) experience in the church. For example, the Foursquare Church International, founded by a woman (Aimee Semple McPherson), has not had a woman to lead the denomination since.³¹ Only recently, the (US) Assemblies of God has had a woman, Donna Barrett, in the executive leadership circle. Asian Pentecostalism has much to do to catch up, while overcoming its male-dominant culture. It is time to circle back to the belief in the prophethood of all believers to assess the present state of Spirit-empowered churches and believers. Then the broader Spirit-empowered movement should plan a programme of spiritual formation and discipleship, intentionally incorporating the two unique Pentecostal beliefs, Spirit baptism and the “prophethood of all believers.”

Signs and Wonders and Healing in Witnessing

One’s theological viewpoint on spiritual gifts often leads an individual to connect the concept of baptism in the Holy Spirit with mission. Stanley M. Horton notes that “Pentecostals use the term ‘baptism in the Spirit’ to refer to the initial filling of the believer with the Spirit and take it to be the same empowering experience that was accompanied by the speaking in tongues on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4).”³²

Closely connected to Spirit baptism and its effect of empowerment is the Pentecostal belief in the manifestation of various spiritual gifts (*charismata*). What sets Pentecostals apart from the rest of Christianity is their conviction that supernatural gifts, such as prophecy, miracles, healing, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues, are available today. This belief, anticipation, and experience of God’s supernatural work is closely connected with baptism in the Holy Spirit. With insistence on speaking in tongues as “the initial physical sign” by most classical Pentecostals,³³ Spirit baptism inducts believers into the world of supernatural experiences, which includes the reception of spiritual gifts. As

²⁹ Liu, “Impacts of Pentecostalism,” 9-10.

³⁰ Wonsuk Ma, “East Asian Pentecostalism Engaging with the World: A Theological and Practical Inquiry” (a study presented at the East Asia Christianity Conference, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA, April 2025).

³¹ See Angelia Waite, *Diverse Leadership in The Foursquare Church: What Would Aimee Say?* (AWM Publishing, 2023).

³² Stanley M. Horton, “Holy Spirit, Doctrine of the,” in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee (Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 415.

³³ For example, see Assemblies of God USA, “Statement of Fundamental Truths 08: The Initial Physical Evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit,” accessed September 12, 2025, <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths>.

Christ promises, the coming of the Spirit is for the empowerment of his followers for witness (Acts 1:8).³⁴

Frank Macchia, using Jürgen Moltmann's analogy, presents a dual function of Spirit baptism: "... divine inhale that draws people together in communion and praise and the exhale of the divine Spirit that drives on vocationally and charismatically into the world."³⁵ The Book of Acts illustrates well how Spirit-baptised disciples performed extraordinary works, while the new believing community grew in number and solidarity: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the *many wonders and signs performed by the apostles*" (Acts 2:42-43, emphasis added). Pentecostal evangelists and missionaries have attracted a crowd with physical, emotional, relational, and financial needs, and with the promise that Christ can heal and perform miracles. The growth of Pentecostalism, therefore, is attributed to this unique belief and claim of God's miracle.

Naturally, Pentecostals emphasise the experiential dimension of religious life, particularly through miraculous encounters with God, such as healing, visions, and speaking in tongues. Keith Warrington observes that with claims of "hearing" from God, "touching" him, and "encountering God's presence," their theology centres on contact with God.³⁶ As a result, Pentecostals have formed a dynamic worldview, anticipating the active presence of both the Holy Spirit and demonic spirits in their environment. This worldview differs significantly from the traditional, rationalistic, and static Western Christian perspective. With such a strong awareness of the spiritual realm, Pentecostals consider the spiritual gifts not just as a nice extra, but as an essential qualification for living victoriously and witnessing convincingly. Like the believers of the Early Church, the modern-day "Apostolic" believers are now empowered with spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit. In Pentecostal missions, "signs and wonders" have served as the primary evidence for the authenticity of the Christian message.³⁷

In Asian worldview and religiosity, followers of any religion expect the divine to "act" according to their devotion and petition. As discussed in more detail below, animism is the foundational layer of all religions, both organised and unorganised. The immediate goal of those who practice animism is to secure prosperity, safety, or good health through the help of spirits. Pentecostalism has provided an answer to Asian religious demands, both in spiritual and non-spiritual ways. For example, Liu highlights how rural Pentecostal churches in China preach and practise divine healing, which fuelled unprecedented growth in the 1970s and 80s after the Cultural Revolution. Chinese Pentecostal churches

³⁴ Wonsuk Ma, *Mission in the Spirit: Formation, Theology, and Praxis* (Regnum Books International, 2023), 97.

³⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 45, quoted in Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*, 76-77.

³⁶ Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter* (T&T Clark, 2008), 89.

³⁷ Julie C. Ma and Wonsuk Ma, *Mission in the Spirit: Towards a Pentecostal/Charismatic Missiology*, Regnum Studies in Mission (Regnum Books, 2010), 59-71.

have also provided medical care, disaster relief, and educational services, where public services are limited in rural communities.³⁸

Asian Pentecostals should reflect on this highly impactful evangelistic gift of Spirit baptism in at least two areas. The first area involves going beyond experiencing God's power. Many studies have explored the powerful evangelistic potential of the testimonies of God's healing and miracles.³⁹ How do we prepare every believer to be agents of God's power? In Asia, certain cultural and religious forces resist this empowered egalitarianism. Asian religious traditions set religious specialists, e.g., priests, monks, shamans, etc., at a great social distance from religious consumers. Pentecostal ministers often must convince the laity of God's call, empowerment, and endowed gifts on them to be true to the belief in the prophethood of all believers.

Also, the hierarchical social order in Asia causes hesitation in the laity "encroaching" the religious specialists' prerogatives. Even in the celebrated cell-group System of Yoido Full Gospel Church (in Seoul, Korea), a "glass ceiling" is detected in the role of female cell leaders. In the Asian context, social division could result from differences in position, seniority, or gender. The call of Pentecostal leaders is to equip every believer for God's work: "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service" (Eph 4:11-12). This preparation includes healing, signs, and wonders to strengthen the church and proclaim the good news of God to the world.

Another issue is the stewardship of power, as Pentecostal theology claims Spirit-empowerment. Unfortunately, highly publicised moral failures of charismatically gifted leaders have been part of the modern Pentecostal history. Spiritual power also comes with recognition power, which can be a formidable tool for social transformation, if used properly. The same can also become a destructive force if one fails in godly stewardship. Stephen Fogarty warns of the dark side of charismatic leadership, when the leader places personal interests over the organisation's.⁴⁰ It is also the leader's role to radically expand the notion of empowerment beyond the dazzling display of miracles and healing. Frank Macchia reminds us that, through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus bore his cross (Heb 9:14).⁴¹ In this respect, a recent study from Cambodia is refreshing. In this majority-Buddhist country, most extraordinary healings are attributed to black magic. P. Vachna, a Christian pastor, lost his young daughter, and many in his community viewed his continuing faithfulness to the family and ministry as the highest form of his authentic faith and godly empowerment.⁴²

³⁸ Liu, "Impact of Pentecostalism," 3-4.

³⁹ Park, "Korean Pentecostal Spirituality," 43-67.

⁴⁰ Stephen G. Fogarty, "02 The Dark Side of Charismatic Leadership," *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 13 (December 2010), <https://aps-journal.com/index.php/APS/article/view/104>.

⁴¹ Frank D. Macchia, *Jesus the Spirit Baptizer: Christology in Light of Pentecost* (Eerdmans, 2018), 156.

⁴² Robert Oh and P. Vachna, "Spirit-Empowered Living and Witnessing in the Buddhist Context of Cambodia" (a study presented at the Scholars Consultation of the Global Network of Spirit-Empowered Scholars, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 2024).

Christ's *kenosis* as described in Philippians 2 lays the foundation for the stewardship of power:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Phil 2:3-8).

Having addressed (1) Spirit baptism for Spirit-empowered life and witness, (2) the prophethood of all believers: theology of empowerment, and (3) signs and wonders and healing in witnessing, the following section addresses the fourth priority topic for Asian Pentecostal churches in fulfilling their theological and missional call for faithful witness of Christ's good news.

Spirit-Empowered Engagement with Religions

First, we would like to initiate a theological discussion regarding the title of this section. Diverse religions exist in Asian countries, which we address later. Animism is a prevalent belief system that has influenced other religions in Asia. The term *Animism* originated from the Latin word *Anima*, meaning spirit, breath, and soul.⁴³

The New Testament frequently references God's power, primarily using the Greek word *dunamis*, which means inherent power, strength, or ability; this word is the root of the English words *dynamite* and *dynamic*. This power is manifested in three main areas: in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and in the gospel message itself.

The Holy Spirit is the active agent distributing God's power to believers for ministry, witnessing, and daily living. Acts 1:8 says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (The promise of this text is dynamic for global mission.) Another passage, 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, notes that faith is meant to be grounded in God's evident power, not in human rhetoric: "And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."

The modern Pentecostal Movement did not originate in the context of religious pluralism. Even in the Mukti Mission of Pandita Ramabai, her immediate concern was the plight of orphans and widows, not the Hindu religion. In the Pyongyang Revival of Korea (1907), where Christianity was a small fraction (0.5 percent in 1900),⁴⁴ the single focus was repentance and renewal. Neither the Welsh Revival nor the Azusa Street Mission engaged with non-

⁴³ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Research into the Development of Mythology* (S. N. Book World, 2025), 417.

⁴⁴ Johnson and Zurlo, *WCE*, 738.

Christian faiths. This topic gained significance as the movement spread globally, and Western Pentecostal missionaries reached many places where various religions were practised. Only recently have religions attracted growing attention through migration studies.⁴⁵ Generally speaking, Pentecostals acknowledge the presence of different religions (religious plurality) but reject the other religions' validity for salvation (religious pluralism). Pentecostals exhibit varying views of other religions, ranging from simple dismissal to openness to certain aspects and values within them.⁴⁶ Ivan Satyavrata, reflecting on his Hindu environment, proposes two key principles for engaging with religions: to promote peaceful living and to live missionally, bearing witness to Christ.⁴⁷

Asia is the most "religious" continent, where many of the world's religions were born. Statistics from 2020 reveal that Christianity is the fifth-largest religion (at 8.2 percent), trailing behind Islam (27.4 percent), Hinduism (22.8 percent), Buddhism (11.6 percent), and Chinese Folk Religions (10.1 percent). A consultation may be found in the annual growth rate of Christianity at 1.52 percent (between 2000 and 2020), which is only next to Islam at 1.74 percent.⁴⁸ These convincing numbers indicate that Asian Christians, including Pentecostals, must engage with other religions. Religious plurality presents both formidable challenges and rare opportunities. The challenges are clear: that Asian Christians (Pentecostals included) cannot afford to stay away from engaging with people of different faiths. Indeed, Asia can help global Christians learn to live together in peace while bearing witness to Christ's gift of salvation through authentic lives, words, and deeds. A blanket dismissal of the religions as evil does not help, as Spirit-filled people work with other religious people every day. Pentecostals in Asia, therefore, should recognise that many fellow believers live and witness in religiously challenging circumstances.⁴⁹ Learning creative approaches to engaging with dominant religious communities for Spirit-empowered evangelism is encouraging. Finding solidarity with them and ways to empower them is everyone's call.

We would like to highlight one area where the Pentecostal mission has made significant progress in Asia. Animism is the mother of all religions in Asia due

⁴⁵ For example, Wonsuk Ma and Opoku Onyinah, eds., *Among Other Religions: Spirit-Empowered Engagement for Authentic Living and Witness* (ORU Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁶ For a helpful survey, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "'The Wind Blows Where It Wishes—or Does It?': The Pentecostal Approaches to Religions between Openness and Restrictivism," in *Among Other Religions*.

⁴⁷ Ivan Satyavrata, "The Voice of Truth in the Christian Encounter with World Religions," in *Voices Loud and Clear*, ed. Kong Hee, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Regnum Books, 2024), 59-76. See also Ivan Satyavrata, "What's So Special About Jesus? Responding to the Challenge of Pluralism," *Influence*, July 30, 2015, <https://influencemagazine.com/theory/whats-so-special-about-jesus-responding-to-the-challenge-of-religious-pluralism>.

⁴⁸ Johnson and Zurlo, *WCE*, 10.

⁴⁹ For example, see Rebecca Paul Rashid, "Spirit-Empowered Women in Ministry in Pakistan: Grade and Hurdles" and Karuna Sharma, "Role of Nepali Christian Women in Fulfilling the Great Commission in Nepali Context" (studies presented at the Scholars Consultation of the Global Network of Spirit-Empowered Scholars, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 2024).

to its pervasive presence in the religious psyche and its heavy influence on organised religions. The crux of the Pentecostal success among animists, such as tribal groups, lies in the surprising similarities of the two worldviews. The animistic worldview is crowded with spirits, ancestors, and gods for healing, miracles, and warding off misfortunes. Most of these religious categories fully align with the Pentecostal worldview, thereby meeting people's religious and existential needs. With an emphasis on deliverance, healing, and prophecy, Pentecostal spirituality establishes a close connection with such worldviews and offers a Christ-centred alternative.⁵⁰ Pentecostals have found this energised and crowded animistic worldview fertile ground for the Pentecostal message of empowerment through signs and wonders. Enthusiastic Pentecostal worship, testimonies, preaching, and prayers provide numerous opportunities for animists to experience God's presence and work. This animistic religious layer is not limited to tribal groups. Simon Chan observes that highly urbanised and educated Singaporeans continued to practise their animistic beliefs and that Chinese Christian converts wrestle with issues such as illness and fear, as their (non-Pentecostal) churches do not address spiritual concerns related to their primary worldview.⁵¹

Another approach to religions, including animism, is "power encounter." Although popularised by the Third Wave advocates, Pentecostals have challenged spiritual power, especially through exorcism. Asian Pentecostalism can learn from African experiences of dealing with witchcraft and demons.⁵² Often related to religious beliefs in Asia is the practice of ancestor veneration. The belief in ancestral spirits influencing the affairs of the living is a common theme in many religions, including animism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Its issues range from supernatural power accorded to ancestor spirits to familial piety and ethical practice. Christianity has always struggled to provide an affirmative response to the fate of deceased ancestors who did not have a chance to believe. Noriyuki Miyake contends that the ancestor issue is the biggest challenge to Christian mission in Japan.⁵³ A healthy discussion on the subject requires pan-Christian efforts, and this will be another important contribution to global Christian theology.

Evangelisation in Asia will have to deal with religions, and Pentecostals are called to develop their theological and practical approach to people of other faiths. Also, religious categories constantly evolve to include "nones" (non-religious), New Age, occults, and new religions. Pentecostals also need to watch

⁵⁰ See, for example, Julie C. Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits: Pentecostal Ministry among the Kankana-Ey Tribe in the Philippines*, 2nd rev. ed., Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity (Peter Lang, 2001), esp. ch. 8, "A Comparative Theological Analysis of Traditional Kankana-ey and Pentecostal Practices."

⁵¹ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (IVP Academic, 2014).

⁵² Opoku Onyinah, "Spiritual Warfare: The Cosmic Conflict between Good and Evil," in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (Routledge, 2020), 321-31.

⁵³ Noriyuki Miyake, "Second Chance Theory in Japanese Mission," *Pentecostal Education* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2025): 223-37.

the slippery boundaries of certain “power encounter” assumptions and practices, such as territorial spirits, intergenerational curses, spirits attached to certain objects, inner healing involving inner child theory, etc.⁵⁴ As each faith is closely integrated into the ethnic identity and culture of adherents, Christian social scientists can also help.

Engaging with people of other faiths requires diligent learning, love for neighbours, commitment to peaceful coexistence, and a Christian call to witness to them through the power of the Holy Spirit. To achieve this goal, Satyavrata proposes four features of Pentecostal spirituality as “rules of Spirit-empowered engagement with religions” – a spirituality that “Connects Deeply with the Culture ... Challenges the Powers of Evil ... Meets the Real Needs of the Powerless ... [and that is] Firmly Christocentric.”⁵⁵ By weaving these elements together, Satyavrata outlines a missiological framework that is both culturally sensitive and uncompromising in its theological convictions.

Spirit-Empowered Witness amidst Human Suffering and Poverty

Whether Pentecostal mission should include *diakonia* or compassion ministry is no longer a question, for several reasons. Even during the early years of the Azusa Street Mission (1906-1909), with prominent eschatological urgency, serving the destitute was an integral part of evangelism. Lillian Trasher (1887-1961), a single female missionary who began her care ministry in Egypt in 1910, is a fine example. Known for her passionate ministry among orphans and widows, her orphanage has cared for more than twenty-five thousand children. At her death, she earned the endearing title “Nile Mother.”⁵⁶ Despite the common notion that Pentecostal mission is singularly focused on evangelism, among frontline practitioners, proclamation and *diakonia* have been integral, thus maintaining a holistic view of mission.

Social scientists were quick to recognise the transformative potential of the Spirit-empowered faith. Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori published their multi-year field research, *Global Pentecostalism*, concluding that “progressive Pentecostals” actively engaged with social issues without external assistance, while their churches and ministries were growing.⁵⁷ *Called and Empowered*, the groundbreaking book on the theological foundation of Pentecostal mission, firmly established the kingdom of God as the main motivation.⁵⁸ In bringing God’s Kingdom to individuals and into communities, believers are called to

⁵⁴ Wonsuk Ma, “A ‘First Waver’ Looks at the ‘Third Wave’: A Pentecostal Reflection on Charles Kraft’s Power Encounter Terminology,” *Pneuma* 19, no. 2 (1997): 189-206.

⁵⁵ Satyavrata, “Voice of Truth,” 66-72.

⁵⁶ For example, see Lucinda Yang, “Nile Mother: The Story of Lillian Trasher,” *Mutuality* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/story-lillian-trasher/>.

⁵⁷ Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (University of California Press, 2007).

⁵⁸ E.g., Gordon D. Fee, “The Kingdom of God and the Church’s Global Mission,” in *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, ed. Murray W. Dempster et al. (Hendrickson, 1991), 7-21.

speak the good news and demonstrate Kingdom life through compassionate action.⁵⁹ The 2009 addition of “compassion” to the fundamental purposes of the US Assemblies of God, therefore, is a reflection of mission reality rather than a prescriptive.⁶⁰

As in other parts of the Global South, Asians live with varying socio-cultural challenges. Connie Au helpfully categorises Asian nations into two, despite the oversimplification: (1) relatively free with democracy and liberty, and economically advanced, and (2) less free countries, often with totalitarian regimes and a struggling economy.⁶¹ In this region, the human development index has steadily declined in all three areas: healthcare, education, and economy.⁶² With the lowest evangelism rate among the continents, Asian Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, has much work to do.⁶³ Existing research has indicated that Asian Pentecostals have a promising prospect to serve the suffering as Christ’s light to the world.⁶⁴

We would like to suggest a theological topic as a firm conceptual ground for Pentecostal social engagement and propose a conceptual lead for the ongoing debate on the primacy of Pentecostal mission between evangelism and *diakonia*. First, the theological topic. The life-giving work of God’s Spirit is prominent in the Old Testament, which also includes life-sustaining and life-rejuvenating functions.⁶⁵ Often overshadowed by the charismatic nature of the Spirit, especially in the New Testament, Isaiah 61 best affirms God’s unwavering plan to restore broken lives, e.g., “to proclaim good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the captives” (Isa 61:1). This return of God’s Jubilee is proclaimed

⁵⁹ Also see Murray W. Dempster, “Evangelism, Social Concern, and the Kingdom of God,” in *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, ed. Murray W. Dempster et al. (Hendrickson, 1991), 22–43.

⁶⁰ See George O. Wood with George Paul Wood, “Compassionate Christ, Compassionate Church,” *Enrichment* 17, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 26–31, <https://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/Issues/2012/Winter-2012/Compassionate-Christ-Compassionate-Church>. The entire issue of the magazine is devoted to “Compassion.”

⁶¹ Connie Au, “Globalization and Asian Pentecostalism in the Twenty-First Century,” *Pneuma* 42, no. 3–4 (2020): 502–503, https://brill.com/view/journals/pneu/42/3-4/article-p500_9.xml?language=en&srsltid=AfmBOop0lirHU0OX7M9ujFpj17OAdaM70QITvFT1z-G5C_3GCPd0Dund&ebody=full%20html-copy1.

⁶² United Nations Development Programme, “2024 Regional Human Development Report: Making Our Future: New Directions for Human Development in Asia and the Pacific,” UNDP, November 6, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/making-our-future-new-directions-human-development-asia-and-pacific>.

⁶³ For more elaborate discussion, see Wonsuk Ma, *Pentecostalism in Asia: Its Theology and Mandates* (APTS Press, 2025), 179–200, ch. 9 “Serving the world: Mission in the Spirit.”

⁶⁴ Akinwumi Ambrose Akindolie, “Social Engagement of Pentecostal Churches: An International Comparative Survey,” *The Journal of World Christianity* 15, no. 2 (2025): 112–28 for a helpful survey.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Wonsuk Ma, “Pentecostal Social Engagement: The Genesis Foundation,” in *Pentecost, Pentecostalism, and the Making of World Christianity: Essays in Honor of Allan H. Anderson*, ed. Tim Welch (E. J. Brill, forthcoming).

and executed by the Spirit-empowered servant: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me” (Isa 61:1).⁶⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that Jesus declared his earthly mission by identifying the Spirit-empowered servant and its task by reciting this passage (Luke 4:16-21). The Apostle Peter’s summary of Jesus’s work reflects this well: “[You know] how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

Pentecostals need to explore deeper this life-giving work of the Spirit. For example, the Pentecostal theology of healing seldom involves the life-restoring work of the Spirit. Johannine pneumatology is full of life-strengthening and the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit, such as the *paracletos* teaching in John 14. The whole Gospel of John is framed in the “sentness” of Christ’s disciples with the Spirit’s presence and help (e.g., John 20:21-22). Pentecostals will build a solid biblical and theological ground for *diakonia* mission by bringing God’s commitment to restoration (exemplified in the Jubilee ordinance) and the life-flourishing work of the Spirit.

Second, on the primacy of Pentecostal mission, especially between proclamation and social service,⁶⁷ this debate is not new, as the Lausanne Movement has gone through the same debate. When the US Assemblies of God added social service to its Constitution and Bylaws, concerns were expressed as to whether evangelism would be sidestepped. This concern is valid with historical cases where well-meaning compassion ministries moved into “social gospel.” However, testimonies of Pentecostal mission reveal an integral holism between the two but with the ultimate goal of evangelisation. For example, the *Bhojpuri Breakthrough* teaches us that evangelism, *diakonia*, and even justice mission (such as crossing the caste divides) take place all at the same time.⁶⁸ It may be the academic circles where dualism is pronounced. Elsewhere, I (Wonsuk) propose the lordship of Christ as the *telos* of Pentecostal mission, with all the aspects of mission (such as justice mission, *diakonia*, and evangelism) contributing to the realisation of Christ’s lordship as Saviour. Then, the empowerment of the Spirit serves as the main impetus or energy (the “engine room”) of Pentecostal mission. This empowerment compels believers to evangelism, *diakonia*, and justice mission.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ For a helpful study of the passage, see William L. Lyons, “Anointing by the Spirit and Ministry to the Poor,” in *Good News to the Poor: Spirit-Empowered Responses to Poverty*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Opoku Onyinah (ORU Press, 2022), 11-26.

⁶⁷ For example, Jerry M. Ireland, *The Missionary Spirit: Evangelism and Social Action in Pentecostal Missiology* (Orbis, 2021).

⁶⁸ Victor John and Dave Cole, *Bhojpuri Breakthrough: A Movement That Keeps Multiplying* (WIGTake Resources, 2019).

⁶⁹ Wonsuk Ma, “Pentecostal Holistic Mission: Looking Back and Looking Forward,” in *Missionary Statesman, Strategist, and Servant: A Festschrift for Tetsunao (Ted) Yamamori*, ed. Sadri Joy Tira and Laurie Nichols (Langham Global Library, 2023), 135-40.

Conclusion

This chapter identified five critical areas for Asian Pentecostalism to pay close attention to and develop further in order to fulfil its urgent task of evangelisation, of empowering the whole of Christianity in this effort, and of positively engaging with contextual challenges. We selected the five subjects based on our long-time mission work in Asia and research in Asian Pentecostalism.

To ascertain the choices and to map the ground, we asked AI to identify ten priority tasks for Asian Pentecostals, and its response was illustrative: (1) contextualise the gospel, (2) empower Spirit-led leadership, (3) engage urban centres, (4) mobilise the laity, (5) address spiritual worldviews, (6) invest in theological education, (7) foster unity across denominations, (8) prioritise youth and next-gen ministries, (9) champion holistic mission, and (10) keep the Great Commission central.⁷⁰ We conclude that the chosen five topics reasonably address this expanded list. At the same time, the longer list suggests other areas where further research is needed, such as contextualisation, leadership, unity, next generation, etc. We were pleased to see that the AI response included the priority of the Great Commission. When we further probed the role of Pentecostalism, its summary statement was enlightening: “In short, the Great Commission isn’t just a task – it’s the theological and spiritual engine of Asian Pentecostalism. It shapes their identity, fuels their growth, and defines their global mandate.”⁷¹ May we put our hands to the plough for all these theological tasks for Spirit-empowered mission in Asia.

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⁷⁰ Microsoft Copilot, response to “What are ten priority tasks for Asian Pentecostals to lead the church to growth while fulfilling God’s mission in the Asian setting?” Microsoft, September 10, 2025.

⁷¹ Microsoft Copilot, response to “Why is prioritizing the Great Commission critical for Asian Pentecostalism to fulfill its role and mandate?” Microsoft, September 10, 2025.

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Theological and Missiological Challenges Facing the Spirit-Empowered Church in Asia

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It is a special privilege for me to respond to the well-researched and insightful presentation of my colleagues and friends, Drs. Julie and Wonsuk Ma. No one who has even a superficial familiarity with Pentecostal scholarship in Asia will fail to recognise the names Julie and Wonsuk Ma. They have for several decades been the “Aquila and Priscilla” of mission theology in Asia and have between them written or edited innumerable books and scholarly articles. I cannot think of anyone more qualified to address the topic “Theological Tasks for Spirit-Empowered Mission in Asia,” in which they seek to identify the pressing theological priorities facing “Spirit-empowered Christianity” (their preferred term) within Asia’s rapidly changing religious and social landscape.

This topic is of burning importance for several reasons, not the least being that there appears to be widespread and growing recognition of the value of the Pentecostal Movement’s contribution to the future of the broader church-in-mission. This is best illustrated by the following by Alex Mayfield:

One of the biggest stories in 20th-century religious history is the rapid rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity around the world ... almost 1 in 3 Christians around the world can be identified as Pentecostal or Charismatic ... [citing Joel Cabrita and David Maxwell, *Relocating World Christianity*] ... *the birth of world Christianity is intimately intertwined with the spread of this fervent form of faith*. Today, Pentecostal and Charismatic groups have a world fellowship, participate in ecumenical bodies, and show continued growth rates around the world.¹ (emphasis mine)

Thus, for Ma and Ma, identifying and addressing the pressing theological tasks of Spirit-empowered Christianity is essential not just for the growth of the tradition itself but for the future ongoing impact of the Christian Movement.

Ma and Ma begin by noting the extraordinary growth and diversity of global Pentecostalism, highlighting its significant evangelistic impact in Asia despite the continent’s religious plurality and cultural complexity. In Asia, Pentecostalism intersects with deeply rooted religious traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, folk practices) and socio-political challenges (poverty, pluralism, persecution). This context requires theological reflection that is both

¹ Alex Mayfield, “Why Is It So Hard to Do Pentecostal History?” *Patheos*, September 18, 2025, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2025/09/why-is-it-so-hard-to-do-pentecostal-history/>.

biblically grounded and culturally sensitive and that results in local adaptations possessing vitality and cultural relevance. This feature of Pentecostalism was the controlling theme of the landmark symposium, anchored by Drs. Murray Dempster, Byron Klaus, and Doug Petersen over twenty-five years ago, published as *Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*.²

After defining key terms used and clarifying the rationale for limiting the scope of the study to East and Southeast Asia, Ma and Ma go on to identify five critical theological themes that both undergird Asian Pentecostalism's exponential growth and indicate its mission task in the Asian context. They discuss each of these in relation to the theme's Pentecostal distinctiveness and its contextual relevance to Asia, along with a brief constructive critique and practical recommendations.

Spirit Baptism for Empowered Life and Witness

The authors highlight how the Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit baptism resonates deeply with Asian religious sensibilities, attuned to supernatural realities amidst widespread animistic beliefs. They call for renewed emphasis on teaching, fostering prayer in tongues, discipleship programmes that incorporate experiential spirituality, and the reenactment of Spirit baptism through public testimony to strengthen this foundation in Asian Pentecostal churches.

Prophethood of All Believers: Theology of Empowerment

This emphasis is a corollary of the Pentecostal experience: access to Spirit baptism of every member of the body of Christ empowers all believers to be evangelists and witnesses, eliminating the traditional clergy–laity divide. This may be observed in many Asian Pentecostal contexts, notably the Korean cell-group system with its lay leadership and the significant role of female pastors and evangelists. Challenges, however, persist due to entrenched hierarchical and gender norms; hence, the need exists for intentional discipleship to translate belief into active mission.

Signs, Wonders, and Healing in Witnessing

Power-encounters are a powerful evangelistic tool. Pentecostal conviction regarding access to spiritual gifts by all the people of God and belief in miracles aligns well with Asian worldview expectations for divine intervention. However, within the hierarchical social order in Asia there are cultural and religious forces that resist such empowered egalitarianism that permits lay people to drift into the domain of the religious specialists. Ma and Ma commend the responsible stewardship of spiritual gifts, while at the same time registering a word of caution: power can be a formidable tool for social transformation, but it can have destructive impact if misused. Nevertheless, equipping and releasing all the

² Murray Dempster et al., *Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Regnum, 1999).

people of God to minister in the spiritual gifts must be an important priority for every Spirit-empowered church.

Spirit-Empowered Engagement with Religions

Ma and Ma emphasise the importance and urgency for Pentecostals to engage the religiously diverse cultures of Asia meaningfully and creatively. The Pentecostal rejection of religious pluralism must be complemented by strategies for Spirit-empowered engagement with other faiths that promote peaceful coexistence alongside sensitive and effective witness. They rightly observe that Christians across the globe can benefit much from the experience of their sisters and brothers in Asia in learning to live in harmony with neighbours of other faiths, even while bearing witness to Christ authentically in life, word, and deed.

While the Pentecostal emphasis on healing, prophecy, and deliverance from demonic powers connects deeply with worldviews within tribal and folk religious contexts, there remain potential syncretistic pitfalls to guard against. Furthermore, the persistent hold of ancestor veneration in many East Asian cultures remains an ongoing challenge that needs theological attention and thoughtful, creative missional engagement.

Spirit-Empowered Witness amidst Human Suffering and Poverty

The authors see a solid theological basis for *diakonic* mission in a biblical pneumatology that emphasises the life-giving and restorative role of the Spirit. They rightly observe that there is today adequate empirical evidence to validate Pentecostal commitment to social transformation and justice alongside verbal witness. The debate might persist in some academic circles, but the mission praxis of Pentecostals clearly demonstrates their commitment to holistic mission and the ability to naturally blend evangelism with compassionate service.

Summary Evaluation

Ma's and Ma's chapter presents a compelling invitation and call to Spirit-empowered theologians to help equip Pentecostalism in Asia to engage creatively with the opportunities and challenges facing the Christian witness amidst Asia's diverse cultures. It succeeds in its objective as an agenda-setting manifesto, largely descriptive, with little in-depth analysis of the urgent theological tasks it identifies. Hence, it does not attempt to wrestle seriously with any of the burning issues confronting the Pentecostal witness that it identifies nor offer specific recommendations for taking forward reflection on issues such as engagement with religious pluralism, the clergy–laity divide, ancestor worship, and power abuse in Pentecostal circles.

The theological contribution of this study must be evaluated in the context of its pointed challenge to Pentecostals to address pressing issues of significant relevance and value to the life of the church and its mission. It highlights the need to balance the Pentecostal emphasis on healing and prosperity with a biblical theology of suffering and endurance that takes seriously the poverty and

persecution of Asia. It further calls for a theology of power that balances Pentecostal emphasis on Spirit-empowerment with an honest and rigorous critique of the abuses of authority and other excesses within the Pentecostal Movement in Asia. The chapter implicitly highlights the need for a mission engagement that takes the multicultural, religiously plural context of Asia seriously.

The greatest strength of the chapter Ma and Ma have provided lies in the rich wealth of research and diversity of sources from which the authors draw in their theological and missiological reflection. Its contextual rootedness and its attention to Asia's lived realities, such as the focus on suffering, interfaith engagement, and spiritual power dynamics resonates strongly with the socio-religious struggles of Asian Christians. Most refreshing is the constructive vision that undergirds the chapter: the authors do not merely criticise weaknesses but indicate areas where Spirit-empowered theology could contribute meaningfully to mission in Asia. They thus effectively raise several pertinent and urgent issues towards a theological and missiological agenda for young, emerging Asian Pentecostal theologians to explore further and take forward for the benefit of the church's witness in Asia.

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