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What Meaneth This? Edinburgh, Stone Church, and Doctors of the Church!*

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Today we celebrate the largest group of doctoral candidates in the history of AGTS. The location we are celebrating in is the William Seymour Chapel. Even with the sensitivity to the Spirit that Brother Seymour demonstrated throughout his life and in his leadership at Azusa Street, I'd venture a scene like this was not on his radar screen. This largest of doctoral classes also occurs during our Assemblies of God Centennial celebration. Centennials are once in a lifetime experiences for most of us. They are events that celebrate the past with great exuberance, while simultaneously snapping our heads around and asking us abruptly, "So what now? What about the next century? How will you be stewards of this next gift of time?"

I would like to take some cues from a recent Centennial that recognized the historic World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland that occurred in the summer of 1910. Scholars of twentieth century Protestant missions have almost uniformly suggested that the delegates to this great gathering of mission leaders misread the signs of the future of Christianity. Respected voices, like that of mission historian Andrew Walls, observe that during the subsequent 100 years, between 1910 and 2010, one by one all of their assumptions about how evangelization of the world would be impacted and, in effect, "crumble away." Christianity was indeed transformed during the twentieth century, but not in the ways nor through the mechanisms anyone might have imagined. Another respected historian, Brian Stanley, suggests that this transformation of Christianity during the twentieth century was most clearly brought about by those **not** present in the hallowed halls in Edinburgh. Rather, Stanley argues, it was a "miscellany of indigenous pastors, prophets, catechists and evangelists, men and women who professed instead to rely on the simple transforming power of the Spirit and Word.

During the time of the Edinburgh Centennial celebration (several years ago), Tufts University professor, Heather Curtis, published some stunning research about a little known Pentecostal conference that occurred just previous to Edinburgh in May 1910 at Stone Church in Chicago. She juxtaposed the triumphalist celebration at Edinburgh with the meeting in Chicago that advertised itself as a "Glorious Celebration" where the only sure thing was the definite date we have fixed upon as the opening day. The uniform voice at Edinburgh was one of boundless

* The following represents the reflection I offered to the largest group of doctoral candidates (30) in the history of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (AGTS). This doctoral celebration occurred during the activities related to the 41st commencement held May 1-3, 2014. This event was a testimony to the reliance on the Holy Spirit that need not shun sturdy research, in the service of the continuing redemptive mission of the Jesus Christ.

optimism and unsullied confidence in the ideological and financial power of western Christendom. The voices at Chicago suggested a sharply contrasting perspective. William Piper, the pastor of Stone Church, contended that the Baptism of the Spirit was not only drawing together believers of many nations, but uniting Christians across doctrinal and class lines. He said that the Pentecostal sweep of the earth was God reaching down into every denomination and baptizing His disciples! “What else,” queried Piper, “could break down 'bigots' than the fact that God is bigger than our denominational differences? There is little or no room for one set of people to exalt themselves over another.” That message, so powerfully declared by William Piper, was actually voiced at Edinburgh conference several months later by British missionary Alice Luce, who would, shortly, have such a profound influence on early Assemblies of God evangelism and church planting strategy in the U.S. Luce actually testified to the Edinburgh conference of her experiences in the Pentecostal revival in India at the Mukti Mission. She told of how she had seen the poor and illiterate transformed through the love of Jesus and the power of Spirit. In response to Edinburgh’s meticulous analysis of mission efforts to date and strategies for the future, Luce declared the one all-important need was a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Christian Church in every land.¹

One can easily set up straw men and women for rhetorical purposes during Centennial celebration events. The juxtaposing of Edinburgh and Stone Church provides plenty of preaching material to launch a whole sermon series geared to the “Pentecostal rooting section.” However, I do not want this moment to be the opportunity for pompous positioning of the fact we’ve come a long way in 100 years from the unplanned, but spiritual meetings at Stone Church or Hot Springs to this moment: where we are now Pentecostals in medieval finery that somehow demonstrates our arrival at the throne of acceptance, like so many of the older traditions in the Christian family. I think we need to take another pathway.



I want you to consider an image: Look at it closely.

This is the *LIFE Magazine* cover dated April 21, 1941. This issue featured a symbol of U.S. military might: the U.S. cavalry. So what is wrong with this picture? How is it that a magazine would feature the U.S. cavalry as the paragon of U.S. military prowess? This issue of *LIFE Magazine* was published eight months before Pearl Harbor and the war had

- 1 Heather Curtis’ research has appeared in at least three forms: (1) An address to the Institute for the Study of Evangelicals entitled, “Baptism in the Holy Ghost Should Make Us World-wide: Pentecostal Missions and the Changing Character of Global Christianity,” *International Journal of Pentecostal Missiology* 2 (2014); (2) “Pentecostal Missions and the Changing Character of Global Christianity,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 36, no. 3 (July 2012); (3) “Pentecostal Missions and the Changing Character of Global Christianity,” *Heritage Magazine* (2013).

already raged in Europe for nearly two years. The Pacific Rim had also seen the prowess of the Japanese army in the brutal conquest of parts of China. “Irony” would be one word to describe the photo, maybe “naïve” or maybe even “clueless.”

This photo certainly reminds us that we all have blind spots. At milestones in our lives, such as the achievement of a doctoral degree, as part of the largest doctoral class in the history of AGTS in this Centennial year, we must celebrate the achievement of the moment while asking the consummate Pentecostal question:

“What Meaneth This?”

Should the Lord delay His return: Will the folks evaluating this event fifty or 100 years from now look at us and compare us to Edinburgh or Stone Church, Chicago? Or, is that too shallow a comparison? Does such a comparison actually miss a proverbial Hegelian moment where two streams of thoughts flow together and the resulting convergence yields a synthesis stronger than either?



Knowledge on Fire is an image that reflects part of the AGTS identity. It is the belief that passionate hearts and strong minds belong together. While history teaches us that passionate hearts can be shallow and strong minds can certainly be obtuse, I want to suggest a way in which the second century of Pentecostalism can forge a powerful and substantive future.



Thirteen years ago, in this chapel, we held the first doctoral symposium as a way of recognizing the first ever doctoral degrees granted by a Pentecostal seminary here in the U.S. I suggested that such an occasion signaled a new possibility in our tradition that championed *educational thoroughness*. Such a dawning reality was made possible because we were champions of *Knowledge on Fire*. The first doctoral degrees (at that time) were a visible demonstration of what *Knowledge on Fire* meant. Strong minds meeting passionate hearts yielded thoroughness in building the foundations that could propel us into the second century equipped to meet its daunting challenges. I also observed that Brother Seymour had pioneered such a legacy of thoroughness in some observations he made that offered wisdom from his attempts 100 years ago to handle the spiritual thrill seekers of his day who were in no way committed to thoroughness in anything. Seymour observed: “We are

measuring everything by the Word; every experience must measure up with the Bible. Some say

we are going too far, but if we have lived too close to the Word, we will settle that with the Lord when we meet him in the air.”



I would add another image today to the image of thoroughness—the picture of a Doctor of the Church. This is not a new idea; it was something I have reshaped for my own purposes from the writings of my own doctoral advisor, the late Ray S. Anderson at Fuller Seminary, who shaped his thoughts from a concept that has been around for a long time.

A Doctor of the Church: That lofty designation carries an imagery of preeminent learning and the proclamation of the Gospel clearly and openly in the public marketplace. For example, two of the first four people ever called “Doctor of the Church” were Ambrose of Milan, the great preacher apologist/evangelist whose most famous convert was the rogue scholar and Doctor of the Church, Augustine. All those historically named as doctors of the Church exemplified knowledge and inspiration, certainly the root of our commitment to *Knowledge on Fire*. Ray Anderson further developed this concept by painting the picture of leaders in the Church who saw themselves as more than motivators of people, a pastor to the broken, or even the CEO of a corporation, but a public voice calling God’s people to consider that God’s Kingdom rule was pervasive in every nook and cranny of created order.



This imagery, that I propose you consider today, is the picture of a public figure who challenges people to consider the world in reference to God. In the current cacophony of attempts to narrate the world, a “Doctor of the Church” offers a picture of the world where these public figures actually point people to clear and not so clear ways that Jesus is truly Lord of all created order. Doctors of the Church speak for God in public places with Spirit-empowered words and discerning images that frame a world that actually

acknowledges there is more to this life than the eye can see.

We want to honor you as a Doctor of the Church. We also want to do so in the context of this Centennial year. This event may occur annually, but it will never quite be like 2014.

You stand on the dawn of a second century of the Assemblies of God. Your name is going to be called and you will step to a place where Rev. David Flower, whose family is notable in the first

Pentecostal century, will give you a medallion. As you receive that medallion from the hands of Brother Flower, you will be literally touching the first century of the Pentecostal tradition. You will be receiving a symbolic and real expression of the first century of Pentecost. As he places the medallion around your neck, you will be reminded that you will always carry a piece of this past, not to idolize nor to replicate, but as a reminder that you are rooted in the transforming power of Pentecost with its guarantee that, by the power of the Spirit, Jesus is still doing today exactly what He was doing 2000 years ago. Later you will receive a miniature of the bronze “Divine Servant” sculpture that sits in the Great Hall. Allow this to be a reminder to you that you are a steward of the second century of Pentecost and your witness will be to the legacy of thoroughness as a Pentecostal doctor of the church with “Knowledge on Fire” as an image and commitment seared into your very being!

Doctoral Covenant (A Public Commitment by the Doctoral Candidates)



Over the last century, the Lord of the Harvest has demonstrated grace to ordinary people who were committed to extraordinary vision empowered by the Spirit. In this time of centennial reflection and commencement activities, as servant-leaders and Doctors of the Church, will you take the medallion in your left hand, and raise your right hand, and pledge this covenant?

- Will you re-commit yourself today to the Kingdom call God has placed on your life?
- Will you use your scholarship in service to the Church to better equip God’s people for ministry?
- Will you yield yourself to a new infusion of the Holy Spirit?
- Will you pledge this prayer?

Let me meet the cynic with wisdom to speak with clarity and persuasion

Let me lift the marginalized with compassion, to act with justice and mercy

Let me welcome the broken with healing that points them to wholeness

Let me seek the lost with the Gospel of salvation so they may experience the power of the Cross.

Following a century-long tradition of **global impact**, I pledge my life to “the greatest evangelism effort the world has ever know.”

I pledge to respond to real-world challenges with **biblical answers**.

I pledge to yield my leadership to **Spirit-empowered ministry**.

Father, in anticipation of your soon return, I pledge to be a servant-leader, who models *knowledge on fire*, as a Spirit-empowered Doctor of the Church.