

A TRIBUTE TO DR. J. DWIGHT PENTECOST

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

*But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak and He will disclose to you **what is to come.***

—John 16:13

On April 28, 2014, just four days after his ninety-ninth birthday, one of the greatest contributors to our study of Bible prophecy died and went to be with his Lord and Saviour in heaven. Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost has passed from this earthly scene and is now rejoicing in the presence of Christ. Dr. Pentecost will be missed by the many he left behind. He began teaching in the 1930s and only ceased teaching a few months before his death in December of 2013. He taught for over sixty years primarily at Dallas Theological Seminary. He is best known as author of the large book entitled *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*.¹ He is also well known for another great tome *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*,² which is an excellent argument of all four Gospels. His contribution in aiding believers to understand the Bible, especially Bible prophecy, has had an immense impact within evangelicalism.

EARLY LIFE

Dr. Pentecost grew up in a Presbyterian Christian home in the Philadelphia area. He heard a speaker at his church one day who spoke without notes and he purposed to develop the same skill, which he did accomplish. Dr. Pentecost was known as one who could take an un-marked Bible and preach or teach from pretty much any passage from memory. He earned a B.A. from Hampden-Sydney College in 1937, a Presbyterian school in Virginia. He met his future wife, Dorothy from Virginia, at college and they were later married.

Upon graduation from college, Pentecost was planning on attending Princeton Seminary, but was influenced by a lady from his church to consider a relatively new school in Dallas, Texas—Dallas Theological Seminary. Since he was impressed with Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, Pentecost made a last minute decision and enrolled in the fall of 1937 at Dallas. After receiving the Master of Theology degree from Dallas in 1941, Pentecost became pastor of Cambridge Springs Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania from 1941 to 1946. His second pastorate was at Saint John's Presbyterian Church in Devon, Pennsylvania from 1946 to 1951. It was during these early pastorates that Pentecost was able to engage in deep study of God's Word that laid a foundation for his ministry in later years.

In the early 50s, Pentecost returned to Dallas Seminary and received the Doctor of Theology in 1956, writing what would become *Things to Come* for his dissertation. In fact, I am told, Pentecost's dissertation was so voluminous that it was because of him that the Seminary imposed a limit on the maximum length for all future doctor's dissertations. Pentecost taught at Philadelphia College of Bible from 1948 until 1955. He then began teaching at Dallas Seminary in 1955 until December 2013. In addition to teaching at Dallas, he was for nineteen years the teaching pastor at Grace Bible Church in Dallas from 1958 until 1976. During this time he was pastor of Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry.

HIS IMPACT

I always used to describe Dr. Pentecost as someone who knew the Bible so well that you could wake him up at 3:00 a.m. and ask him about some obscure Old Testament passage and he could tell you what it meant in its context. I really have not know anyone who knew the Bible so well as Dr. Pentecost. Pentecost was renowned in the area of Bible prophecy. I have said for years that to get a really good grasp of Bible prophecy, all one has to do is know the whole Bible, because understanding prophecy starts with knowing the facts of Scripture. This is why *Things to Come* was such a great work, because Dr. Pentecost dealt with the totality of the Bible when he summarized all the aspects of Bible prophecy in that book. *Things to Come* was the first academic book I ever purchased for my library back in the early 70s. It very well could be the most extensive book ever produced in the English language on Bible prophecy from a dispensational, premillennial perspective next to George N. H. Peter's three-volume work *The Theocratic Kingdom*.³

I once ask Hal Lindsey what motivated him to write *The Late Great Planet Earth*.⁴ He said, in the late sixties he worked for Campus Crusade for Christ on the UCLA campus and would often speak on Bible prophecy, because he thought it was the best way to get your foot in the door to win people to Christ. Often after he spoke on prophecy people would ask him if he could recommend a book where they could learn more. He always recommended Pentecost's *Things to Come*. Later many would get back with him and want something less academic and shorter, which is why he decided to write *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Pentecost was the standard in those days for those who wanted to learn more about what the Bible teaches concerning almost every area of Bible prophecy and it is still the standard fifty years later.

Dr. Pentecost is one of the reasons why I wanted to go to Dallas Seminary and when I took him for a class he never disappointed. Even though he was on the shy side in his personality, he always showed an interest in his students that he taught. One day when I was a student at Dallas in the late 70s, I was working for the Seminary shop. That day I was taking up the old carpet in an elevator and putting down some new. Dr. Pentecost happened to walk by and he spent about forty-five minutes just talking to me. Of course, I took hold of the opportunity to ask him many different Bible and theological questions, in addition to some of the personal talk we engaged in. I do not ever recall any other professor at the Seminary taking time to talk with me like Dr. Pentecost did.

One of my fondest memories was a class I took with Dr. Pentecost entitled "Dispensational Problems in Matthew." There were only about five of us in that class. We had a wonderful time going through Matthew and dealing with theological issues relating to dispensationalism. In those days, Dallas students were required to wear a coat and tie to class. The Seminary had a second-hand clothing shop called "New-to-You" for students, (an all male student body in those days), who could not afford new suits. My wife oversaw this ministry where people would donate used clothing and suits. One day she brought home a nearly new pink suit that fit me perfectly. I had a pink shirt and tie and wore it to school. I thought I would never hear the last of it when Dr. Pentecost saw me in it and accused me of being a Southern Baptist Evangelist. I told him that I still needed some white shoes and it would be perfect. He loved to joust with his students in this way.

HIS CONTRIBUTION

For Dr. Pentecost the entire Bible fit together into a wonderful story about God's view of His purpose for history. Much of that story includes *things to come*, which he had mastered. It all fit together into a single plan with different threads woven into a common thread that made sense. Pentecost could explain where each part fit and its purpose in relation to the whole. In the preface to *Things to Come* Dr. Pentecost said the following:

God, the architect of the ages, has seen fit to take us into His confidence concerning His plan for the future and has revealed His purpose and program in detail in the Word. A greater body of Scripture is given to prophecy than any other one subject, for approximately one-fourth of the Bible was prophetic at the time it was written. That portion is devoted to the unfolding of God's program. Because of its prominence in Scripture it is only natural that much should have been written on the subject, . . . However, the treatment of prophecy has generally been either apologetic or expository, and the themes have been developed individually apart from their relation to the whole revealed program so that much of our knowledge has been fragmentary and unrelated. There has been little attempt to synthesize the whole field of prophecy into a unified Biblical doctrine and there is a great need for a synthetic study and presentation of Biblical prophecy.⁵

Dr. Pentecost was a successful pioneer in bringing the parts of Bible prophecy together into a common theme. The reason he achieved such success as a teacher of God's Word is because he believed it to be what it says it is—The very Word of God. Therefore, he treated it as such. He is a model for those of us who wish to follow in his footsteps of what diligent, persistent study of God's Word can do for a Bible teacher. We need more like him, more who will follow that path.

CONCLUSION

Pentecost personally taught thousands of students at Dallas Seminary for almost three generations, who in turn taught tens of thousands throughout America and the world. This does not include the hundreds of thousands who have read his nineteen books like *Things to Come*. God has greatly used this stalwart to further His Word throughout the world. I pray that his torch will be passed to a new generation who will pursue his passion of learning and understanding God's Word and how the parts fit together into a common whole. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958).

² J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

³ George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3 vols (Grand Rapid: Kregel, [1897] 1952).

⁴ Hal Lindsey with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

⁵ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. vii–viii.