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by Rebecca G. S.  
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# Higher Education For Pentecostals

**May Christians not lose their faith at institutes of higher learning?**

**R**ecently I was asked questions which have been posed a number of times before: "How can I as a Pentecostal Christian be engaged in the study of the Bible at a higher academic university level? Is it not a dangerous activity and might I not lose my faith? How does academic study fit with my Pentecostal experience and perspective?"

## **Reflections of a Student**

These are some of the questions people ask when they learn that I am a doctoral student in Biblical studies. They are also questions which I have often asked myself in times of self-evaluation and reflection, trying to discern the Lord's will for my life.

Historically, our Pentecostal movement has not actively encouraged its members to pursue higher education. By higher education, I mean study

beyond the undergraduate level of university education. Since the PAOC does not have a seminary, its ministers do not need further education beyond Bible college in order to minister in the church, unlike, for example, our Christian brothers and sisters in the Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist and certain Baptist churches. A possible explanation for this lack of emphasis on higher education may be the fact that the Pentecostal movement began among

lower-middle class people for whom education was not so important at the time. Another factor is that some Pentecostals have had a fear of education; it has been seen as a threat to one's faith.

However, things are starting to change. More and more people in our churches are pursuing higher education in many different fields and disciplines. Our Bible colleges are becoming affiliated with the universities and they are looking for teachers who have masters and doctoral degrees for their faculties. And those of us who decided to attend seminary (of another church denomination) discovered other Pentecostal students there.

## **Latent Suspicions**

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Pentecostal circles toward higher education. Sometimes those who have pursued this calling have felt somewhat isolated or not fully accepted; they did not really fit back in the Pentecostal community. I remember when I first started my doctoral studies, I was hesitant, even embarrassed to tell people at my home Pentecostal church what I was doing. I was afraid of intimidating people and putting up barriers before they had an opportunity to get to know me. I did not want them to think that we could not have anything in common to talk about just because I had studied more than they.

But I realized that this was wrong. If God has called me to this, I must be able to share it. We must understand that a more educated person is just as human and normal as everyone else. As a fellowship we must make an effort to make everyone welcome and feel a part of the church. I know Pentecostal graduates who have left the fellowship because they have not felt fully accepted or a part of the church. They have gone to other denominations where education is much more accepted and encouraged. This is a sad reflection upon our churches. As a body of believers, we must learn to accept and accommodate everyone.

To pursue a higher education is a challenge; it is not an easy path to travel. It is a lonely road since few travel on it. It is not easy as a Pentecostal and it is even more difficult as a single woman. There are not many women in the field since we have not generally been encouraged to pursue it. But although it is a challenge, it is

also rewarding if it is God's call for a person. Since I have personally faced the challenge of higher education and pondered the implications and the difficulties it creates for a Christian, and since there may be

challenging and may even be dangerous to study and think deeply about important issues, but this does not mean that we should not do it! In fact, as Christians we must think and reflect on what we believe and why we believe it. Paul instructed Timothy about the importance of study and of being thoroughly equipped, able to handle the Word of Truth correctly (2 Timothy 2:15; 3:14-17).

And Peter tells us that we must "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). How can we share our faith effectively and give an answer to our unbelieving friends if we have not thought about it thoroughly? People do not like pat answers where there has not been any serious thought given to the question before answering. We must be thoughtful, reflective Christians who at least try to understand our faith and the questions of life. This does not mean that we will always have all the answers but we should at least make an attempt at understanding even if only partially.

The Bible does warn us to be aware of false teachings and deceptive philosophies (Colossians 2:8) and it can be dangerous to study if we simply accept what is taught unquestioned. We must learn to think and challenge these ideas but we must not be afraid of being challenged. These challenges shape and change us as persons and help us to grow and develop. This can be a very

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*"Higher education is not an easy path to travel."*

other Pentecostals thinking of taking up the same challenge, I thought I would share some of my thoughts on the subject.

### **1. Dangers of Too Much Study**

I have been warned about pursuing higher education because it is **dangerous** to study too much. But if it is dangerous to study, then it is also dangerous to **think!** Of course it is

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positive and healthy thing. As a student, I have often encountered ideas and attitudes which I have not agreed with; it has not always been easy to know how to respond appropriately. I am learning that it is important to listen and try to understand the other perspective before attempting an intelligent response.

To encounter new and diverse views and opinions can be both threatening and challenging as well as refreshing. We may have to rethink and re-evaluate what we believe and what we have always accepted as the norm. This can be a scary experience because it may mean that we will change; it seems safer to remain the same and not change. But to change and broaden our perspective is not wrong but is part of the growing experience as a Christian; it is part of the challenge of maturing as a disciple. So even though it may seem to be dangerous to study and think we must be willing to take up the challenge.

## 2. Bible Teaches the Wisdom of Pursuit of Knowledge

The Bible teaches us to be wise people. In fact, the people who despise wisdom, knowledge and discipline are described as fools (Proverbs 1:7). One of the main themes of the book of Proverbs is the importance of the pursuit of wisdom (Proverbs 1; 2:1-12; 3; 4; 8; 9). The person who gains wisdom and knowledge, finds life because the Lord is the source of wisdom and of life. In Hebrew society, God's people valued education very highly. In fact,

the law commanded that they instruct their children thoroughly in the commands of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20). Our whole life is an education and we must learn from its lessons. We must become wise people of God and education is part of the process of gaining wisdom; thus, we should not despise education.



## 3. Balance Between Books and the Holy Spirit

There is the need for balance in our Christian walk between the study of books and being led and taught by the Holy Spirit. There is a potential for some tension between academic study and intellectual pursuits and the seeking of guidance and insight from the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would guide us into all truth and would remind us of the Lord's teachings (John 14:26; 16:13, 14). But we must also study the Word in order that the Spirit can enlighten us to its truth. We must combine study with seeking the Spirit's enlightenment.

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ger that much study and education may lead to pride and lack of reliance on the Lord (1 Corinthians 8:1,2). We must remember that accumulating all the degrees in the world does not really matter in the Lord's sight (1 Corinthians 1:20-31). What matters is our hearts before Him. We must nurture our walk with God and be continually renewed by the Holy Spirit. We need this balance when we face the challenge of education.

## 4. To Pursue a Higher Education is a Calling

Those who have received this calling must be obedient to the Lord. This means that higher education is *not* for *everyone* and we must not attempt it if we are not called to follow this path. It is a long, demanding and difficult road and only those called will persevere. But if we are called we must be faithful to that call and not give up. There is a need for *skilled* men and women of God in our churches and in our society, in whatever field we may work. I encourage anyone who has been called to take up the *challenge* of pursuing higher education. It is not an easy challenge but God has great things in store for those who follow His will (1 Corinthians 2:9; Jeremiah 29:11). ■



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