

# A Professor With Spirit

Considered the first Bible scholar of the modern Pentecostal movement, Gordon Fee has spent the last 40 years proving that the Holy Spirit and biblical scholarship can peacefully coexist.

Gordon Fee knows how it feels to be a lone ranger. Regarded as the first Bible scholar of the modern Pentecostal movement, Fee is a maverick. For 40 years he has fought an uphill battle in Pentecostal circles, within a movement that has been traditionally wary of theological endeavors and has placed far stronger emphasis on spiritual experience.

When dealing with such quarrelsome topics as the role of women in the church, speaking in tongues and prosperity theology, the sparks inevitably fly. "I've put up with a lot of balderdash," he says.

Yet his insights into the apostle Paul's teachings have influenced thousands of believers. And his writings have opened up the New Testament for Christians across the theological span.

Now, at the age of 76, Fee looks back on a life dedicated to the unveiling of scriptural truths—and insists there is room for both the Holy Spirit and biblical scholarship in the Pentecostal tradition of the 21st century.

The son of an Assemblies of God (AG) pastor, Fee grew up in northern Washington state. He describes himself as "a pretty miserable kid" who took out his anger on the basketball court. During high school, he placed his life in God's hands and experienced the baptism of the Spirit at a Pentecostal camp meeting.

"I changed so completely that people didn't know how to handle it," he recalls.

At the age of 20, while a student at Seattle Pacific University, Fee preached his first sermon. He was ordained in the denomination after college and followed his father into the pastorate. But when he accepted an invitation to teach at the Seattle university, Fee was captivated by a whole new world—the arena of musty manuscripts and scholarly study. “It was as if all the lights came on,” he recalls.

Fee and his wife, Maudine—who thought they would head to the mission field—felt the Holy Spirit’s nudge in a different direction. Maudine worked nights so her husband could juggle his Ph.D. studies and look after their four young children. Poring over endless manuscripts put Fee under enormous pressure, but in 1966 he became the first scholar from a Pentecostal background to earn a doctorate in biblical studies.

As he pursued opportunities to teach and write, his reputation as an independent thinker and New Testament scholar grew quickly. Many Bible scholars, Fee says, write books to fit their theology. He strives to plumb the Scriptures without a preconceived Pentecostal bent, an approach known as *exegesis* in scholarly terms.

“I don’t think of myself as a Pentecostal scholar,” says Fee, who today holds a dual citizenship and lives in Vancouver, Canada. “I think of myself as a scholar who happens to be a lifelong Pentecostal.”

The AG hierarchy has always held him at arm’s length, unsure how to deal with one of their own who took the unprecedented leap into the world of biblical scholars. Fee’s exposition of the New Testament, especially some difficult passages, has raised eyebrows in his denomination, and his reluctance to automatically toe the theological line has caused some frustration at AG headquarters.

Today Fee is professor emeritus of New Testament Studies at

Regent College, an interdenominational theological school in Vancouver. His willingness to stick his neck out on theological issues has emboldened a new generation of scholars who hold to Pentecostal and charismatic convictions.

Since Fee took his pioneering steps, other Pentecostals have earned recognition as Bible scholars, and many of them cite him as their inspiration. The Society for Pentecostal Studies in Cleveland, Tenn., is a forum for more than 600 Pentecostal and charismatic scholars. Director David Roebuck says of Fee: "His biblical studies have been very influential on the majority of our members."

For the most part, though, Pentecostals remain resistant to—or indifferent toward—theology and scholarship. After all, modern Pentecostalism was birthed in spiritual experience, not intellectualism. As the movement spread, Pentecostals simply didn't see a need for theological pursuits. "We don't need scholars; we just need the Holy Spirit!" has been the mainstream Pentecostal cry for the last 100 years.

Among evangelicals, few have looked to Pentecostals for in-depth biblical teaching. A commonly held view has been: "Pentecostal theology? What's that?"

Says Fee: "In defense of my Pentecostal tradition, we grew up with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that swept the world like a storm. For many Christians, it was 'Father, Son and Holy *Book*.' They would say, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit,' but that was it. The Pentecostal movement brought people into a direct encounter with the living God."

So, do Pentecostals need Bible scholars?

"The question is not do we *need* Bible scholars, but are we willing to embrace them?" Fee responds. "If we are willing to embrace someone with a Ph.D. in history, why not embrace someone with a Ph.D. in New Testament studies, which, after all, is a branch of history?"

Fee adds: "Having a Ph.D. has not stopped me from being Spirit-filled."

Fee is a sought-after author, and many Christian publishing houses want the rights to his books that help readers delve deeper into the Word. His most popular, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (co-authored with Douglas Stuart), is in its third edition and has sold more than 1 million copies. Perhaps the reason for its runaway success is Fee's simplistic approach. "The worst enemy of Scripture is the numbers and verses," Fee says. "Get rid of the numbers, and you can read the Scriptures."

Fee admits to being amazed that no Pentecostal had theological books published before him. Students would listen to his lectures and ask, "Where can I find this published?" Realizing such a book did not exist, Fee decided he would fill the gap. Since the 1970s, he has written numerous books examining the New Testament and, in particular, the apostle Paul's teachings.

Outside Pentecostalism, Fee has been rebuffed by some evangelical critics who view "Pentecostal Bible scholar" as an oxymoron. He's been excluded from speaking in certain evangelical colleges because of his Pentecostal roots.

"You need to know that I am a committed Pentecostal," Fee explained to a peer at one college where he was invited to teach. "There was a silence on the other end of the line. They said, 'Thank you,' and that was the end of the conversation. They wouldn't touch me with a 10-foot pole."

In another instance, a group of scholars on an interdenominational study panel opposed every one of Fee's proposals. But not all non-Pentecostals clash with Fee. Many respect his deep understanding of the Scriptures and the insights he offers, even if they disagree with him on some points. "Our young people need the affirmation that it's all

right to be an intellectual, to be a scholar *and* to be a Pentecostal," he says.

Yet the arena of biblical interpretation, or "textual criticism" as it's known in scholarly circles, can be a minefield of controversy. Fee has found himself repeatedly and unwittingly in the center of the debate over the role of women in ministry. After years of battling the issue, Fee is weary of confronting it. But he is adamant: God *does* gift women for ministry.

"It's a given," he says. "The real question is, Which comes first, gender or gifting? What [opponents of women in ministry] are trying to tell me is that gender comes above gifting. How can that be? The Spirit gives the gifting. If a woman stands and prophesies by the Spirit, and men are present, does the Spirit not speak to them? Come on! How dumb can you get?"

His advocacy, Fee says, is on behalf of the Holy Spirit rather than women. "The Spirit is gifting women," he says, "but many evangelicals are not prepared to adjust because of the 'box' they're in.

"I've been blacklisted over this issue," he adds. "People have said, 'We can't have Fee speak because he's pro-women.' I am pro-Holy Spirit! I just can't get over that some people think gender comes before gifting."

Another area of contention for Fee is the prosperity gospel, or what he calls "health and wealth" teachings. His book *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* is a blistering rebuke of prosperity and perfect health teachings, which he claims have no basis in Scripture. What he describes as the "false gospel" of health and wealth has caused "immense damage" to the charismatic movement, he says.

"Fight over tongues and prophecy if you have to, but don't fight over something as unbiblical as [health and wealth

theology],” he observes. Fee notes in the book that the theology of this gospel seems far more to fit the American dream than the teaching of Him who had “nowhere to lay His head.”

“We shouldn’t reconstruct the Christian faith into an advancement of the American way of life, which I feel is the great sin of the American church today,” he says.

The problem with health and wealth teaching, Fee says, is one of hermeneutics, or “interpretation of Scripture.” He believes much of the prosperity teaching is dressed “in biblical garb” but “flies full in the face of the whole New Testament.”

Twisting certain scriptural passages to fit their theology, proponents of health and wealth are “guilty of selectivity,” Fee says, and then they “avoid ... texts that stand squarely in opposition to their teaching.”

He highlights 3 John 2 as a key example: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (KJV). Fee says prosperity teachers interpret this verse as saying, in effect: “We *should* prosper and be in good health.”

He contends, however, that the Greek word translated as “prosper” in the King James Version means “to go well with someone.” The equivalent of it today would be if someone wrote: “I pray this letter finds you all well.”

He concludes: “The combination of wishing for ‘things to go well’ and for the recipient’s ‘good health’ was the standard form of greeting in a personal letter. To extend [John’s greeting] to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is totally foreign to the text.”

Fee also questions the prosperity movement’s interpretation of the term “abundant life” in John 10:10. The meaning has nothing to do with material abundance, he says, adding that

“life” literally means the “life of the Age to come.” The Greek word *perrison*, translated “more abundantly” in the KJV, means “simply that believers are to enjoy this gift of life to the full,” he says. “Material abundance is not implied either in the word ‘life’ or ‘to the full.’”

The teaching of perfect health is a distortion of the Bible’s teaching on healing, he claims: “Gifts of healing belong in the church, but [perfect health theology] has created ... neurotic believers, because they don’t seem to be able to muster up ‘enough faith’ [to be healed].” Again, proponents of perfect health theology “simply fail to do adequate exegesis, which has to do with determining the meaning of a text in its original context,” he says.

He cites Galatians 3:13, a favorite verse of perfect health advocates, in which Paul states that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law” (NIV). Proponents link this verse with Deuteronomy 28:21-22, he says, in which disease is named as one of the curses of disobedience to the law.

“There is not even the remotest possibility that Paul was referring to the curses of Deuteronomy 28 when he spoke of the ‘curse of the law,’” Fee states. “And ‘redemption’ in Galatians has to do with one thing only—how does one have right standing with God.”

The real issue, Fee says, is not how to get the biblical text “to work for us” but how to understand the text in the light of the full biblical revelation. He acknowledges that his sympathies lie with those who want to see God perform miracles of healing.

“One must ruefully admit that evangelical Christianity by and large does not expect much from God,” he notes. “Most Christians’ expectation level when it comes to the miraculous is somewhere between zero and minus five. Even though evangelicals often pray, ‘If it be Thy will, please heal so-

and-so,' they would probably ... faint if God actually answered."

Clearly Fee loves the Word, noting that heresies are creeping into the church because of lack of theological understanding and misinterpretation of Scripture. What's needed, he emphasizes, is Spirit-filled living and sound scriptural interpretation. "If I could say one thing to the American church," he cautions, "it would be this: Keep integrity with Scripture and spiritual experience."

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**Visit to watch Fee discuss how Christians miss the mark when studying the Bible**