

Pluscarden Pentecost Lectures for 2004

THE EVANGELICAL CHALLENGE: THREAT OR GRACE?

Talk 2: Wednesday 2nd June, 2004

An Initial Assessment and Evaluation

In my first lecture I attempted to describe the Evangelical phenomenon including its Pentecostal and charismatic offshoots, but without providing any theological or spiritual evaluation. The main aim of this second lecture is to move from description of what is happening on such a wide scale to start assessing its significance. It may be most helpful to begin with a framework of interpretation.

A Series of Revival Streams

The phrase “Revival Streams” captures well the character of what is being examined in these lectures, that is the phenomenon of Evangelicalism, issuing in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. They are not primarily a set of doctrinal convictions, as is evident from the fact that we are examining not the development of certain teachings, but the story of particular ways of living Christian faith. The term “revival” captures the focus on revitalized faith, while the term “stream” indicates the corporate and dynamic movement character of these trends¹.

In terms of the basic phenomenon with which we are dealing, there would seem to have been four identifiable revival streams that have arisen in the Protestant world: the Evangelical, the Holiness, the Pentecostal and the Charismatic. It is important to note that the earlier streams continued to flow after the rise of the newer streams. This is one reason why I dislike the use of the term “waves” to describe any of these phenomena, because with waves, each new wave takes the place of the old.

The Scottish historian, David Bebbington, locates the origins of Evangelicalism in the revival currents of the 1730s. Bebbington identifies the four enduring characteristics of the Evangelical movement as their focus on the Bible, on the cross, on conversion and on action². The earlier currents, of Puritanism in Britain and of Pietism on the continent, had prepared the way with their inner piety and their opposition to theological intellectualism and religious formalism. The spark for a more outward thrust was provided partly by the Moravians with their commitment to world mission from 1727 and partly by a new focus on revival, which was not unrelated to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution.

A key ingredient in Evangelical Christianity is the focus on the essential, on what has the power to convert the wayward and the inert to Christian zeal and dedication. The preaching of the Cross produced conversion and the reading of the Bible maintained the zeal. Its heart concern was first for conversion and revival. Whitefield and Wesley were the first clergymen to preach in the open air, an activity previously done only by sectarian preachers such as George Fox. Their non-sectarian preaching helped to make Evangelical Christianity “inter-denominational”. In this way, Evangelicalism contained a segment within the official churches, committed to their reinvigoration, but also gave rise to the formation of new expressions outside the “walls”. Whilst Evangelicals have always been concerned with the biblical truth underpinning life-giving preaching, its original focus was not doctrinal. When Evangelical fervour declines, there is a tendency to locate Evangelical identity in doctrinal formulae, a process at work in the origins of Fundamentalism. This means, I suggest, that we

¹ I prefer the term “stream” to “movement”, because “movement” is often used, especially by Catholics to refer to organized groupings within the Church, as in the term “new ecclesial movements”.

² D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

do not rightly understand these movements if we only examine their official doctrines and ignore their heart concerns.

The second identifiable revival stream is the Holiness movement, which sprang up in the middle decades of the 19th century, at first among Methodists and Wesleyans who were concerned that the “entire sanctification” teaching of John Wesley was being forgotten. Here the focus was not simply on the essential foundation in personal conversion, but on the overcoming of sin through deeper personal surrender to the Saviour. Once again, the revival stream is characterized by a sharp focus on certain essentials of the Christian faith. Once again, the stream is inter-denominational, developing a segment within historic Protestant denominations (as, for example, in the annual Keswick conventions begun in 1875) and with a segment later developing into new Holiness denominations, mostly rather small, though including some among the black population.

With the origins of the third revival stream, the Pentecostal movement, at the start of the 20th century, we can see a new focus on life and power in forms that appealed to the poorer strata of society, the “disinherited” in the terms of Robert Anderson’s study *The Vision of the Disinherited*³. It obviously represented a new attention to the Holy Spirit by comparison with the Evangelical movement and a renewed focus on the event of Pentecost. Its appeal to an identifiable “baptism” in/with or by the Holy Spirit was accompanied by something new in Protestant revivalism, the assertion of the ongoing availability of the spiritual gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12: verses 8 – 10, that include speaking in tongues, prophecy and gifts of healing. But unlike the Evangelical and Holiness movements, which always preserved a significant section within the churches, the Pentecostal movement rather quickly became a cluster of new denominations. The appearance of Pentecostal blessing within the older churches came fifty or more years later in a distinctive movement, which some initially called “neo-Pentecostal”, but which soon became known as the charismatic movement. The fact that the charismatic movement is not just “Pentecostalism in the historic Churches” is shown by the appearance of the “non-denominational” charismatics, who were clear that they were not Pentecostals. In fact, both the mainline and the non-denominational charismatics tended to come from social milieux higher up the scale of education and affluence than the Pentecostals.

These 20th century currents, both Pentecostal and charismatic, are significantly different from traditional Evangelicalism in several respects, all of which have something to do with their more rapid expansion. Let us look at these differences in turn:

1. the importance of the human body;
2. the centrality of praise in worship
3. the rediscovery of “spirit”: Holy Spirit, good spirits, evil spirits;
4. its egalitarianism.

The Importance of the Human Body

In my view, Evangelical Christianity has never had a good understanding of the human body. Their presentations of the resurrection of Jesus tend to focus on the demonstration of his divinity without reference to what the glorification of the body might signify. All this comes from its primary focus on the human heart, on the personal response of faith in conversion. Evangelicals tend to be suspicious of outward religion, on religious observances easily dismissed as “empty ritual”. In the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, we find an emerging richness of bodily expression in worship and in ministry: in worship with upraised hands, clapping, dancing and other physical movements; in ministry, with the laying on of hands, not simply in minimal ritual gestures but as integral human faith-responses to spiritual and physical need. While mainline charismatics are often more refined in their methods, some Pentecostals can be quite vigorous. I can remember seeing an elderly Pentecostal lady

³ New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979

in Birmingham thumping the back of a hardened male sinner to help expel the evil spirits lodged within.

However while Pentecostal and charismatic ministry and practice has obvious physical components, their theology and doctrine largely echo Evangelical teaching and show minimal reflection on the bodily dimension. The only points at which a Pentecostal distinctiveness enters are the majority Pentecostal teaching on speaking in tongues as the “initial evidence” of baptism in the Spirit, and in the widespread Pentecostal teaching that physical healing as well as the forgiveness of sins is included in the atoning work of Christ. However, this does not mean that Pentecostals and charismatics do not think about the bodily dimension: but that they do not think theologically about it. Their reflection is found in testimonies and in the “how to” literature of which there is no shortage.

The importance of the bodily component in Pentecostal and charismatic growth does not need much explanation. Especially in the Third World, where so many are desperately poor, suffering from many ailments and with minimum medical care and provision, the need for bodily relief is paramount. A Christianity that preaches salvation for the soul, but says nothing about physical healing, will have little appeal or relevance. In Africa, there has long been evidence that many Christians in the historic churches went to the mission church in the morning, but in the evening they went to the African churches offering healing and deliverance for their afflictions.

But the bodily expressiveness also appeals to something deep in human nature. One need only visit one of the black Pentecostal churches in Britain to discover how West Indians express their worship in a more full-blooded and physical way.

2. The Centrality of Praise in Worship

The charismatic movement has introduced an immense change into Evangelical worship, especially in the last twenty-five years when the charismatic features have permeated a huge part of the Evangelical world, even many that would shy away from charismatic terminology. This is most obvious in the patterns of worship, in which songs of praise have become central. There has been a fundamental shift, one could say even a paradigm shift, in relation to the role of the minister and in relation to the Word of God.

In the older Evangelical pattern, the minister held a very dominant role, though in a very different way to the role of the ministering priest in Catholic liturgy. The minister was talking for much of the service, whether in leading prayers, in preaching the Word – always the longest section – or in exhortations and announcements. In the Pentecostal-charismatic paradigm, there is a new level of God-directedness through the longer time and the greater emphasis given to praise. For the objective at least ideally is to give glory to God. Praise and worship become the highest expression. In fact, in this new kind of “liturgy”, a new kind of minister appears on the scene, the music director, and the interaction between the music director and the presiding minister becomes an important factor. These music ministers recognize the difference between rousing songs of praise to lead people into worship, and quieter more affective songs that accompany and deepen the corporate sense of the presence of the Lord. Though the ministry of the Word remains important in Pentecostal-charismatic worship services, it is now followed by an equally important time of ministry to individuals, which may well be accompanied and/or followed by more praise.

3. The Rediscovery of Spirit: Holy Spirit, good spirits, evil spirits

It is widely recognized today that Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, has long neglected the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and of the Church. The Melkite Patriarch of Antioch, Maximos IV, was one of the voices at Vatican Two calling for a greater attention to the Holy Spirit in Catholic teaching.

The experience of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements confirms what we find in the gospel narratives that the manifestation of the Holy Spirit quickly produces manifestations of other spirits. The descent of the Holy Spirit at the baptism of Jesus is followed directly by his temptations in the wilderness. A ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit necessarily involves forms of healing, as well as acts of deliverance and exorcism.

The place given to exorcism and deliverance in Pentecostal and charismatic practice is another major reason for the rapid growth of these movements in the continents, where many still have recourse to witch doctors (Africa) and to spirit-religions such as Umbanda and Candomblé (Brazil).

The rediscovery of the spiritual world also involves the rediscovery of the prophetic. In much historic church discourse, we have reduced the meaning of the prophetic to bold and courageous utterances of protest, whether against repressive regimes or conservative church leadership. In fact, the prophet is one who “speaks for God” to whom the word of the Lord comes. The Pentecostal and charismatic movements have restored the awareness that Christians can hear the voice of the Lord. And who hears the voice of the Lord can utter the word of the Lord.

Some of the fiercest opposition to the Pentecostal and charismatic movements came originally from Evangelicals, deeply worried that any appeal to contemporary prophecy would undermine the unique authority of Scripture. Catholics are already accustomed to visionaries whose claims need to be officially examined and discerned. In fact, the biggest danger in much of the charismatic movement is not so much false prophecy, but a trivialization of prophecy through a failure to pray about the major issues facing the Church and the world and a concentration instead on more domestic issues.

4. Egalitarianism

Another major factor in the appeal of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity is its egalitarianism, which is not quite the same as democracy. It means that in these movements, everyone is a potential recipient of the Holy Spirit, everyone is a potential recipient of spiritual gifts, everyone has a real part to play in the building of the church and the coming of the Kingdom.

While these movements have their fair share of authoritarian leadership, it nonetheless remains true in principle that there are meetings when each believer can speak up and contribute in the Spirit. This helps to explain why many gifted women are content to stay in churches that exclude women from leadership: for there are spheres where they can make a major contribution and exert a significant influence.

Another facet of egalitarianism is the potential for ministry that is not limited by professional education and formation. While it is true that many new ministries and assemblies are begun in the same way as business entrepreneurs launch a new business venture, this contrasts markedly with the difficulties faced by many lay people in the Catholic Church who want to be evangelists, preachers, pastors. Some years ago, I met a man in the United States, who had entered into the charismatic experience within the Catholic Church. He subsequently left the Church, and today has the title of “Overseeing Apostle” of Antioch Churches and Ministries, Inc. He told me his reasons for leaving the Catholic Church were not doctrinal, but practical. He said there was no scope in the Catholic Church for him to do what he believed he was called to do and what he wanted to do. In fact, it is in the new ecclesial movements and in the new charismatic communities that many Catholic lay people are finding such a place to minister. In the Church of England, where there are now many parishes with a distinctively charismatic dimension, there are many charismatic Anglicans coming forward as candidates for ordination. One consequence is that there is more significant lay leadership in the Catholic charismatic renewal than in the Anglican, though there are well-known exceptions such as the evangelist J. John and Martin Cavender, recently appointed to lead Re-Source, the new organization replacing Anglican Renewal Ministries.

Modernity and Globalization

The social scientists who have been the main students of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements in the Third World are generally agreed that their remarkable growth-rate is linked to their attunement to the worldwide process of globalization, with its opportunities, its dangers and its widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. In the face of the pressures of globalization (of economic and commercial power ruling all?), the Pentecostal-charismatic movements provide (1) an “autonomous space” in which people can escape “the oppressive logic of current power monopolies”, whether of corrupt political structures or of cultural requirements from clan and extended family; and (2) an “alternative world” to the consumer culture of greedy unhappy “haves” and desperate “have-nots”. For such people, becoming a Pentecostal or charismatic Christian gives entry to an international world of new possibilities and potential support. “Together with the other born-again and baptised brothers and sisters in Christ, they constitute a people which knows no geographical or ethnic frontiers and which does not define itself in territorial terms.”⁴

In much of the Third World, especially in Africa and Latin America, one finds now three layers of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity:

1. the oldest layer consists of Pentecostal mission churches like the Assemblies of God, drawn principally from the literate and the semi-literate poor; here the poor discover their dignity and find a world that is not out of control. “People find in these churches an equality and sense of worth outside the categories of material success or the hierarchy of age and wealth, and also a rudimentary social security, a pooling of resources, and access to counselling on financial and marital matters.”⁵
2. the second consists of “a transdenominational charismatic movement, appealing particularly to the young and the mobile, and having a strong base in the universities”⁶; the second layer groups provide opportunities for enterprising and unemployed university graduates to forge new careers outside the realm of corruption and crime.
3. the third layer consists of groups like the IURD in Brazil; coming from the most desperate backgrounds of crime and drug culture, they have the radicality of those who have tasted the dregs and their entrepreneurial style reflects the street-smarts of the underworld rather than the skills of university graduates.

A key question in assessment is this: How much is counter-cultural, the Gospel challenging the culture? And how much is the Gospel being subverted and re-shaped by the *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the age)? With the prosperity gospel in the United States, it is not hard to see that there is an element of subordination of the gospel to the American dream.

Among the elements of the *Zeitgeist*, we can note: (1) a consumer-mentality among the believers with a focus first on me and my needs (but it is wrong to impute this mentality from the comfortable middle-class to the poorest of the poor). (2) an entrepreneurial style (and lifestyle) among leaders. (3) Merely quantifiable criteria for success. Contrary to the *Zeitgeist* and the spirit of Globalization would be: (1) the validation of and recourse to elements in the local culture and religious heritage, as against the tendency to McDonalization. (2) An assertion of indigenous leadership, not just local branch managers. (3) The mission back from the Third World to the First. (4) The promotion of a more genuine choice, and the refusal of a “merely standard religious product”.

⁴ C. Mayrargue, “The expansion of Pentecostalism in Benin” in Corten and Marshall-Fratani (ed.), p. 291.

⁵ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁶ David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*, p. 139.

The New Charismatic Churches

In treating the Evangelical phenomenon, I have come to use the language of “revival streams”⁷. I think this captures their essential character as works of the Spirit of God. The Catholic Church does not see Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations as “churches”, which may cause offence. However, I think this is not only theologically correct, but historically accurate. In their origins, they are movements of new life, often understood as movements of new life for the historic Protestant churches. We can recognize them as movements of the Holy Spirit insofar as they involve a clear preaching of the gospel of Christ, conversions from sin, a love for the Scriptures, the desire to evangelize. Insofar as they are tempted to preach a negative message, judgmental in spirit, against existing churches, they are not being led by the Holy Spirit. The formation of new denominations, even when it is a consequence of a forcible expulsion rather than a deliberate choice to leave, has more the character of a human work of organization than an imperative of the Holy Spirit.

I make these comments in introducing a reflection on the new charismatic churches for a deliberate reason. It is the thought that their determination not to become new denominations but to remain a movement may in fact reflect not sociological naiveté but an obedience to the Holy Spirit. What is also interesting is that the new charismatic churches generally think more about “the Church” than traditional Evangelicals and Pentecostals. This is related to their concern for the restoration of the ministries of apostle and prophet, which can only properly be understood within a theology of church. I see in the new churches a strong desire to be “Church” – they would say to be “New Testament Church” – but the desire is much stronger than the corporate reality. I do not think that as Catholics we should look down in any way on this “failure” or “difficulty”. On the contrary, there may be a “desire for Church” that is parallel to a “desire for God” and what is expressed in the Catholic theology of “baptism by desire”. It raises the question as to there being an ecclesial orientation in every work of the Holy Spirit. I will return to this point in a few minutes in connection with our Catholic sacramental and indeed eucharistic understanding of the Church.

A theological assessment of the new charismatics is not easy, because they do not have any systematic theology. As new movements, their formation patterns began with on the job training alongside the emerging leaders. Then after fifteen years small schools or colleges of formation are founded, generally at the outset providing one-year courses. The training is very practical: for example, teaching on Joshua, Gideon and David as examples of spiritual leaders; teaching on intercession, on evangelism, on discipling. While there is no Christology as such, there is study of the life and ministry of Jesus, albeit with a literalist exegesis and a very practical focus (How did Jesus train the twelve? How did he heal the sick? How did he deal with spiritual opposition?).

The adoption of “apostolic ministry” means in fact a rejection of congregationalism, such as is found in the Baptist Union. From one angle, the network leaders can be seen as exercising a new pattern of episcopal ministry. New church apostolic ministry certainly gives a major attention to pastoral oversight, but more of pastors than of their churches. It is highly personal, not institutional, in the patterns of relating. The new church leaders do not have geographical restrictions like bishops in traditional dioceses. Many new church leaders have an international ministry, not only in the sense of preaching, but in terms of church planting and pastoral oversight of churches. But the essence of apostleship is located more in dynamic expansion, particularly in church planting and the generation of new ministries. It is pastoral oversight, but essentially geared to growth and not to maintenance.

The real parallel to these developments in the Catholic Church is in the new ecclesial movements. Here we find a freedom to expand across territorial boundaries, to develop their own leadership structures and their own patterns of formation. An important dimension in the

⁷ I developed this terminology especially in my book, *The Strategy of the Spirit?* (Guildford: Eagle, 1996).

Catholic Church is the insistence on communion, and a refusal of isolationist superiority. But here at least in most of Europe, the new church leaders have quite a bit of fellowship with one another.

The new church charismatic networks are not as wacky in their teaching as Catholic upholders of law and order might fear. It is true that they lack the whole understanding of sacrament and mystery that is found in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but this is also missing in the older Evangelicalism. But they are highly inventive and creative – also reflecting a much younger average age – and they are highly attractive to many young couples seeking an environment of commitment and formation for their children. While there is no overall authority in Britain, except within the particular networks, there has in fact grown up a system of unofficial checks and balances, whereby obvious deviations and dangerous tendencies tend to be mutually corrected. This includes the participation of most networks in the Evangelical Alliance. But such a framework does not exist in most African countries, where there is much more scope for the bizarre and the extreme.

The Prosperity Teaching

A year or so ago, a book was published in England produced by a theological group within the Evangelical Alliance, and edited by Andrew Perriman with the title *Faith, Health and Prosperity*. It is an excellent example of the challenge of a new current being seriously considered and evaluated, in this instance the so-called Faith movement with its prosperity teaching. While this book makes some critical comments, the authors begin by asking what is valid in this teaching. What is lacking in our understanding of biblical revelation that is causing such a preaching to arise outside the existing Churches? While they acknowledge that the prosperity teaching does not do justice to the New Testament teaching on suffering and martyrdom, they do recognize that the Churches have not in general developed any teaching on how Christian faith helps people deal with debilitating poverty but have often given the impression that there is something suspect about wanting to succeed in the world.

Last week, I was reading 2 Corinthians 9, and I found a passage which it suddenly struck me sums up very well what many of the Faith church leaders are teaching: “The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work.” (2 Cor. 9: 6 – 8).

At best, the Faith or prosperity teaching seems to be recovering some lost emphases, while missing out on some important aspects of traditional Christian teaching. At its worst, it appears to be manipulation of the poor by self-enriching leaders. Just as the ministry of healing challenges received attitudes of submissiveness to all trials, including sickness, so the prosperity message contests the passiveness of the poor and the destitute, but in a quite different way from liberation theology.

In the teaching of Kenneth Hagin, the “father” of the Faith teaching, there is a dangerous doctrine that we are really saved by the “spiritual death” of Jesus in the underworld, not by his physical death on the cross. This is a typical hyper-spiritual teaching in its refusal to believe that anything spiritual can come about through physical means. However, not all Faith teachers follow Hagin in his Christology. So, in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, we find both a new degree of physical expression and some tendencies to a hyper-spiritual rejection of the physical realm. But even in the bizarre soteriology of Hagin, one can see the dangers of neglecting any elements of biblical revelation. For we have not really given any attention, at least until the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar, to the significance of Jesus’ descent into hell, which was considered significant enough to be included in the Nicene Creed. In von Balthasar, of course, you will not find any derogation

from the significance of Christ's death on the cross, but only a deeper penetration of the entire *kenosis* of the Lord⁸.

Word and Sacrament

I will focus on the challenge of these streams to the Catholic Church in the fourth lecture, but of course there is also a challenge from us to them: the challenge of the centuries-old heritage, of the "Tradition" mediated through the "traditions". The biggest challenge would seem to be the relationship between Word and Sacrament.

The revival streams are Word-driven and oriented, and tend to see liturgy and sacraments as a rival or obstacle to "the Word". The only exceptions would be where the revival streams have entered into historic liturgical churches, and also in the phenomenon of the new "Convergence movement", which asserts the necessity of holding together the evangelical, the charismatic and the sacramental. In the renewed Catholic theology of the liturgy, expressed so well in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the liturgy and the sacraments are grounded in the Word of God. The sacraments are, so to speak, the Word not just spoken, but enfleshed and enacted in our midst, a consequence of the Incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh. The Pentecostals and charismatics need to see the sacraments not as formalized ritual, nor just as ordinances commanded by the Lord, but as a necessary consequence of their understanding and their commitment to the Word of God and its proclamation.

The word-sacrament combination provides the structure for Christian faith between the first and the second comings of Jesus. As the Catechism notes in para. 1076, the sacramental economy characterizes the "age of the Church" between Pentecost and Parousia. This time is the age of sacraments, the age of signs. The sacramental signs, given meaning by the Word and brought into being through the Spirit, point back to the first coming and point forward to the second. In this way, they provide an incarnational-pneumatological-eschatological framework for all church life.

I will take up more directly the challenges to the Catholic Church arising from these developments in the fourth and last lecture on Thursday morning. While I will speak in particular of the challenges to the Catholic Church, these developments are of course equally challenging to all the Christian churches and communions, particularly in the West.

⁸ "In the Cross, as the consequence of the Incarnation, the 'journey to the dead' already lay implicit, as the burial of the body and the going of the dead soul to the other dead" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. VII "Theology: The New Covenant" [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], p. 229).