

Christian Unity? The Opportunities and Challenges Raised by the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements

Christian unity is a theme that will always recur, whatever one's attitude towards the official ecumenical movement. I begin this paper by noting two major paradoxes concerning the Pentecostal and charismatic movements in relation to Christian unity. The first flows from the character of revival movements. On the one hand, they induce a sense of believers being profoundly united by and in the Lord. Those who have experienced the same transforming grace feel a deep spiritual affinity with one another. This experienced unity "in the Spirit" has no doubt played a role in the emergence of the widespread Evangelical view of the invisible Church. On the other hand, revival movements have constantly given birth to new divisions. The Pentecostal movement illustrates this dynamic very clearly. It has even been suggested that dividing and forming new bodies is an effective form of promoting church growth. So the paradox is this combination of new levels of spiritual affinity and connectedness and at the same time of a multiplication of divisions.

A second paradox is that it has taken so long for the ecumenical movement on the one hand and the Pentecostal and charismatic movements on the other hand to take notice of each other and to recognize in the other another important work and dynamic of the Holy Spirit. The reasons for this mutual indifference and lack of sympathy are quite different for the two sides. The older Churches were largely unaware of the Pentecostal beginnings and where they were aware dismissed it as a marginal sectarian phenomenon. The first Pentecostals experienced rejection at the hands of almost all the groupings from which they came, being derisively dismissed as "holy rollers" and possibly deranged fanatics. By the time the Churches open to ecumenism heard about the Pentecostals, they had become organized into a plethora of rather introverted denominations. This history makes the more remarkable the sympathetic response of Lesslie Newbigin when he encountered the Pentecostal movement in India. The charismatic movement that developed from the 1960s within the ecumenical churches might have changed these perceptions, but this took a long time to happen. The charismatics often saw the Pentecostals as more of an embarrassment than an asset, and the Pentecostals where welcoming often remained chary of the charismatic differences from themselves. The theologians who began to write about the charismatic movement, mostly Catholic scholars, were mostly read by the charismatics, and the ecumenists tended to dismiss charismatic forms of coming together as emotional and subjective, without great significance for the ecumenical movement.

There are several ironies here. A major reproach of Evangelical Christians to the ecumenical movement, and especially to the World Council of Churches (WCC), was that it had replaced missionary work by inter-religious dialogue. But many Evangelicals today are unaware that the ecumenical movement issued out of a Protestant missionary conference (Edinburgh, 1910) at which there was a significant Evangelical presence. The Evangelical and Pentecostal suspicion that the ecumenical movement lacked a spiritual foundation and was just a human effort to merge denominations finds no support in the origins. The missionaries who gathered in Edinburgh in the summer of 1910 were convicted of the sinfulness of their rivalry on the mission field and were deeply struck by the prayer of Jesus in John 17 that "they may be one that the world might believe". However, the Edinburgh conference came at

a time of increasing polarization within the Evangelical movement, particularly in North America. New lines of demarcation were arising. On the one side, there were the Evangelicals who would embrace the label of “fundamentalist”, insisting on maximum biblical literalism and total inerrancy as a bulwark against “higher criticism”, and who were mostly attracted to the pre-millennial eschatological scenarios propagated through the Scofield Bible. On the other side, there were the more optimistic mission-oriented Evangelical groupings, for whom biblical orthodoxy remained important but who had some openness to new interpretations. For them, “the evangelization of the world in this generation” was the primary task. The latter tendency was strongly represented at Edinburgh, but the former not. In the latter category were most Evangelicals within historic Protestant churches, e.g. Evangelical Anglicans and Methodists.

In fact, it was as the ecumenical movement was accepted by the Churches and became a fixture on the ecumenical scene that the Evangelical opposition really developed. In the 1960s, the Roman Catholic attitudes to the ecumenical movement really changed, and the Catholic Church entered officially on to the ecumenical scene. This inevitably raised strong Evangelical suspicions, for fraternizing with Roman Catholics, if no longer always seen by the majority as flirting with the scarlet woman, was still seen as dangerous for the purity of Gospel faith and essentially involving compromise. But it was at the same time that the mainline Protestant churches had been becoming more liberal - the Second Vatican Council coincided with John Robinson’s *Honest to God* – and missionary work was tending to be eclipsed by inter-religious dialogue. The acceptance of ecumenism by the Protestant churches had led to a certain bureaucratization with the prophetic pioneers being replaced by ecumenical specialists. One result was that some radical voices less well received in their churches found more scope for the promotion of radically new positions within the ecumenical structures. However, the widespread Evangelical opposition to ecumenism was formed more out of gut spiritual instincts than from detailed and accurate knowledge of what had been developing through the ecumenical movement. The critics were constantly citing the more political activities of the WCC, more marked from the time of the Uppsala Church and Society meeting of 1966, than on the real theological advances being made in the Faith and Order sector. One can mention here the documents on Scripture and Tradition (Montreal, 1963) and on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Lima, 1982). As a result of the Evangelical opposition, the important gut Evangelical instincts were not heard within the ecumenical milieu and structures for the next thirty or more years. In this process, the opposition to ecumenism was being expressed by the Evangelicals, but the Pentecostals were in instinctive agreement with it.

How has the Spread of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements been Changing the Overall Situation?

First, the sheer size of these movements worldwide, especially beyond the shores of Europe and North America, can no longer be ignored by the historic churches that knew little of the Pentecostal movement and tended to dismiss it (and the charismatic movement) as fundamentalist or emotional fanaticism of no great importance for the long-term future of Christianity. Such an ostrich-like stance is becoming increasingly impossible as the

percentage of the world's Christians belonging to the "ecumenical" churches was steadily decreasing and those outside the ecumenical sector become steadily larger.

Secondly, all those associated with OCMS will be well aware of the increasing shift of the centre of gravity of the Christian world to the "global south", of which Philip Jenkins has made many people more aware. It is in Africa, Asia and Latin America that the influence of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements is much more marked, not only in the huge growth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, but also more recently in the "pentecostalization" of the old churches. I remember that at the conference on world evangelization held at Brighton in July 1991 and organized by what is now called the International Charismatic Consultation, there were about 35 Anglican bishops present, with one participant from England, about 7 from Asia and the rest from Africa, and approximately seven Roman Catholic bishops of whom almost all were from Africa. In Brazil, where there is a massive Catholic charismatic renewal, the Catholic hierarchy began from a great caution based on the fear that charismatic movement was a "half-way house" en route for the Pentecostal churches. But today, there is widespread recognition by the bishops that the charismatic renewal is one of the stronger protections against this leakage.

Thirdly, the surprisingly early welcome of the charismatic movement by the Popes is now being followed more strongly by the Catholic bishops. One major reason for this is the acceptance of Catholic charismatic renewal as one of what since the time of John Paul II are being called "the new ecclesial movements" strongly commended by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. While this classification has the disadvantage of somewhat obscuring the unique character of charismatic renewal, including its ecumenical significance, it has the advantage of creating a recognized place within Catholic life for Catholic charismatic renewal. As this process has been taking place, more Catholic bishops in Europe have been recognizing the potential of the charismatic groups to help reverse the steady decharistianization and secularization of European society. For example, the archbishops in Budapest, Hungary and Bratislava, Slovakia have given recognition and scope to lay charismatic communities in these cities because they saw that these communities with their strong evangelistic zeal and orientation were having an impact on young people that few other Catholics were having. The first European nation where the Catholic bishops recognized this potential was France, which was the first to suffer severe decharistianization and the nation where more new charismatic communities sprang up that were to have an international impact.

Positive Influences from the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements

There have been several positive developments in the historic churches that are in some way the fruit of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. First, there is greater awareness of the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian life than there was fifty or sixty years ago. The movements of the Spirit are not the only factor here – greater awareness of the Orthodox churches has also played a part – but some is due to Pentecostal – charismatic influence. This can be seen from the music sung in both Protestant and Catholic churches, where the songs of the renewal movement have reached far beyond the charismatic circles. Many traditional churches sing songs by new charismatic composers not knowing where they come from.

Secondly, along with a greater awareness of the Holy Spirit, more attention is being paid to spirituality, and this trend has also been affecting those active in the ecumenical movement. This trend was given a major boost by the remarkably creative encyclical letter of John Paul II *Ut Unum Sint* of 1995. This encyclical on Christian unity insisted on the importance of “spiritual ecumenism”, a focus that was central to the Vatican Two Decree on Ecumenism, and encapsulated in paras. 6 – 8 of that document. In fact, these paragraphs gave official church endorsement to the teaching of a major Catholic ecumenical pioneer, the Abbe Paul Couturier of Lyon, France (1881 – 1953). The Council took up Couturier’s emphasis that “spiritual ecumenism” rooted in prayer is the soul of all work for Christian unity. For Couturier, “spiritual ecumenism” was not a sub-section of ecumenism, a kind of tack-on to the essentials of theological dialogue and mutual collaboration, but the spirit shaping all work and activities for unity. Despite Vatican Two’s placing of “spiritual ecumenism” at the centre of all ecumenical work, the ecumenical patterns that dominated over the next thirty years hardly had spiritual ecumenism at the centre, a neglect that in fact contributed to Evangelical malaise, even though Evangelicals were largely unaware of Couturier’s totally Christocentric teaching and its endorsement by the Council. John Paul’s encyclical also made more explicit that the “conversion of heart” necessary for all ecumenism includes repentance for all sins against unity. It also introduced a completely new idea into ecumenical thinking and practice, namely the honouring of the martyrs of all Christian traditions and its importance for unity.

In fact, non-denominational charismatics have led the way in Christian confession of the sins of the past. Important here has been the ministry of John Dawson, a New Zealander whose ministry base is in California, and who is currently the international president of Youth with a Mission. Back in the 1980s, Dawson established the International Reconciliation Coalition so as to create a worldwide network of ministries of reconciliation. In Britain, Brian Mills, long with the Evangelical Alliance, worked for some years with Roger Mitchell on repentance initiatives, organizing several prayer journeys to places associated with highly divisive and bloody events. However, these initiatives were all evangelical and charismatic in planning and execution and focused on the divisions and strife between nations and people groups, and have not paid much attention to church divisions, which reflects the lesser Evangelical attention to ecclesiology. However, they did initiate prayer journeys to places like Northern Ireland, where community strife is closely related to church divisions. The focus of John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* was necessarily on divisions between Christians, calling for repentance for the sins against the unity of the body of Christ and “the purification of memories”, a focus that led in the Great Jubilee Year 2000 to a liturgy of repentance in St Peter’s Basilica, led by the Pope, and a celebration at the Colosseum honouring the martyrs of many Christian traditions. There is here an important challenge to Evangelicals and Pentecostals, as well as to the older churches, precisely because our divisions, our rivalries and our lack of love for one another have been major impediments to the work of evangelism, as was realized at the Edinburgh conference in 1910. The Gospel message is a message of reconciliation, that all the barriers resulting from human sin have been decisively overcome through the death of Jesus on the cross, so that Christian divisions are a counter-witness to the Gospel we all profess. Our divisions and the accompanying attitudes are saying to the unevangelized that we do not fully believe in the Gospel we bring.

Thirdly, the Pentecostal – charismatic impact in less secularized cultures, particularly in Africa, is at long last provoking serious re-thinking in the “mission churches”. The churches are waking up to the fact that the missionaries brought a diminished gospel, in which the non-rational and supernatural elements had been sidelined or even denied in favour of a rationalistic version of Christian faith resulting from assumptions and attitudes dominant in post-Enlightenment Europe. Many studies are showing that the African Christians often went to the mission churches on Sunday mornings, but they went to the African “independent” churches in the evenings and whenever they needed deliverance from evil spirits, witchcraft and curses. Not having the means to pay for the medicines brought from the “sending” countries, they went for healing to assemblies that pray for healing. Often this double involvement only lasted for a time after which many left the mission churches to join the new African groups. In general, this mass exodus from the mission churches has been hidden from the mission churches back home, both Protestant and Catholic. The missions only report good news, as bad news will not generate the necessary funds. But also the losses have been made up in many instances by the number of new converts, a fact that makes it easy to overlook or ignore the serious losses.

This growing awareness of the need for a more holistic practice and presentation of Christian faith has also been helped by other factors, such as greater understanding in the medical world of psycho-somatic connections and the unity of the human person. In line with this, the charismatic movement has contributed to a big increase in the practice of prayer for healing by the laying-on of hands, that is increasingly found in churches not acknowledging any charismatic level or influence.

Fourthly, as is well-known in OCMS, there is today the “reverse flow” of missionaries coming from the Two-Thirds world to serve in the dechristianized nations of the West. These missionaries are nearly all Pentecostal or charismatic, with the biggest sending nation percentage-wise being Korea. This reverse flow follows on in some way from the growing presence of African, Asian and Caribbean churches in Europe. These developments make more visible and audible the challenge to the older churches of Europe presented by the newcomers.

Fifthly, the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have led to a new prominence of praise and celebration in Christian worship. This is an aspect of holistic trends contributing to a more holistic worship. It is true that this emphasis can be subject to trivialization so that worship degenerates into entertainment. But the basic trend is totally in line with the biblical pattern, especially as found in the celebration of the feasts of Israel. Protestant patterns of worship had been much affected by the focus on the rational and on maximum understanding, resulting from the ministry of the Word being almost the sole focus. The new emphases have produced new forms of ministry, with the worship leader becoming a major shaper and not only the preacher. The lay-outs in church buildings have also changed, so that the new Evangelical-charismatic church interior looks very different to the traditional pattern, where the pulpit dominated and the congregation sat in fixed pews. Today there is a healthy recognition among many that the Spirit and the Word belong together and that the new life born of the Word needs to find expression in full-bodied worship.