

Study Theme Eight: Mission and Unity: Ecclesiology and Mission

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First Presentation: Key Issues

The global growth of the Pentecostal movement within the past 100 years raises questions as to why it has been so successful. At the same time, weaknesses can be seen that seem to have their origin in the same area as where their strengths lie, as if the two were flip sides of the same coin.

Addressing these strengths and weaknesses have a direct bearing on ecclesiology and missions. The presentation will focus on spirituality (the church as a Spirit-filled body of believers), pragmatism (the church as a business enterprise) and on theology (the church as God's instrument of reconciliation).

Spirituality

The Pentecostal movement has experienced a tremendous growth, especially in the urban areas of the Global South. We will be able to locate key issues in view of the Pentecostal understanding of the church: its nature, its mission and the implications for Christian unity, if we can recognize what factors contributed to this development.

Pentecostalism started as a renewal movement. Like other churches at that time, early Pentecostals were taken by the idea of **restorationism**, which basically claims that the church, in order to present herself as the bride before the second coming of Jesus Christ, had to renew herself through repentance and sanctification, so that it would again attain the character of the apostolic church as illustrated, for instance, in the Book of Acts. It was in this context, that **the work of the Holy Spirit** was rediscovered and appreciated. The charismatic nature of this revival led to a focus on the laity. First, the gifting by the Holy Spirit meant that the division between the clergy and lay persons became less pronounced. Second, "if two or three are gathered in my name" meant, in a truly Reformed fashion, that believers were released to study the Word of God on their own and were free to share the Gospel without strings attached.

Furthermore, restorationism also meant **that the final days were near**; that Jesus could come any time now and that the world had to be evangelized as much as

possible before the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings would be coming in judgment and glory. This eschatological sense of urgency coupled with an awareness of the Holy Spirit's power propelled the missionary drive into all corners of the earth.

Pentecostals were truly experiencing empowerment, especially by the charismatic gifts of healing and prophecy as well as the ability to pray in an unknown language. They shared this experience with the people they met. Two things were particularly important, they shared their experiences through **testimonies** and they **prayed** for whatever need the other person had, expecting God to graciously intervene. As a consequence people from other cultures, regardless of their cultural or educational background, could understand them. In addition they experienced salvation as something that related to their whole existence and not just to their intellectual convictions. Jesus was real. Soon the converts would join in, with the same eschatological fervour.

One of the characteristics of Pentecostals is that they developed their convictions after they had acquired an understanding of the spiritual side of their faith. As a result their **faith is not primarily analytical, but relational**. This has great potential for the ecumenical mandate of the Church.

Pragmatism

Another aspect that will inform our discussion on the mission and unity of the church relates to the **pragmatic nature of Pentecostal missions work**. As children of the early 20th century, western Pentecostals were enamoured with a pragmatic attitude. "If it works and does not stand against biblical teaching, do it." To that they would add the desire to be led by the Holy Spirit.

This attitude brought about a number of consequences. First, **it allowed for innovation**, it could cut through much red tape of more structured missionary agencies.

Secondly, it promoted the idea that any church had to be **self-sustaining, self-governing and self-propagating**. Consequently, churches will also be self-educating. It follows that they deserve full respect.

Third, it also created a **plurality** of independent ecclesial bodies. The intention was to spread the Gospel as best as *one* could. This brought about an interpretation of New Testament ecclesiology that emphasized diversity rather than unity.

Furthermore, many Pentecostals recognized the Charismatic renewal as move of God because of their pragmatic approach. If others shared the same experiences, then it must be the same Spirit that moves them, regardless of their church affiliation. In a similar vein, women were admitted to the ministry because there was evidence

of blessing. They prayed for the sick and miraculous healings were reported, their preaching brought about a revival of the church etc.

Later on, a fifth aspect began to influence Pentecostals due to pragmatic points of view. As the **eschatological urgency** to spread the Gospel waned, especially in the more affluent parts of the West, the vitality of the church began to be measured by numbers. **Church growth** was the issue and some churches began to run like business enterprises. Unfortunately, that meant in some cases that a sense of competition crept in that was not all positive.

Theology

Before we will look at key issues that need to be addressed allow me to add a theological reflection. For Pentecostals, evangelism is a priority. In fact, one could say that for them the church equals missions, which equals evangelism. To that one could add: which equals **reconciliation**. Countless are the testimonies of people having found peace with God, of animosity overcome and of families having been brought together. As Pentecostals can personally relate to reconciliation and as they want to walk in step with the work God's Spirit, they should be predisposed to understand that the church, in all its diversity, is one before God and should be one before mankind. After all, should we not all be keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3)?

Issues

Based on reflections on spirituality, pragmatism and theology I would like to respond to the key issues mentioned by the commission.

1. Based on their desire to be attentive to the move of the Holy Spirit and their pragmatic attitude, Pentecostals are not afraid of **innovative mission and new theological insights**. It is important to remember that they hold to the principle that every new insight and ever action has to be in line with the fundamental teachings of the Bible. It is not enough to feel the Spirit move.
2. From a classical point of view, apostolicity, the practice of baptism and especially the celebration of the Eucharist have been corner points of Christian **ecclesiality**. For historical reasons this is a typically Western understanding of the Church. Pentecostals and many churches of the Global South may wish to add another point of view, namely that it is the Holy Spirit that initiates, invigorates and unites the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ and the House of God. Again, the work of the Holy Spirit would always have to be discerned and interpreted in accordance with the Bible. And, this also needs to be mentioned, Pentecostals are encouraged to reflect on the value of traditional understandings of what makes the church in general and the role of the Eucharist in particular.

3. Pentecostals have oftentimes been concerned about the unity of the church when it related to their own ranks. The unity of the global Church was primarily seen as a spiritual unity. The coming of the charismatic renewal has brought a new dimension to the understanding of **visible unity**. The rise of independent churches creates a need for Pentecostals to develop an ecclesiology that can be called ecumenical, which at the same time honours their Pentecostal identity.
4. The unity of the church has often been defended by Episcopal models and safeguarded by institutional structures. Christians vitalized by the Spirit of God have experienced the gifts of the Holy Spirit that emphasizes responsible partnership and a sharing of power. The tension between **institution and charisma** is an issue that Christians have to live with. It is a fruitful tension between order and freedom and a way of keeping the institutions from petrifying and charismatic expressions from losing relevance.
5. Due to the multi-cultural face of Pentecostalism and the fact that most Christians live in the Global South, any form of **mission** activity has the potential to become more and more **participatory in nature**. The pragmatic strain and optimism with regard to the work of the Spirit within Pentecostalism may also lead to an increased participation in inter-church relief and government assisted development projects.

Second Presentation: Key Priorities

Pentecostalism is a relatively recent phenomenon on the ecclesiastical sky of Christianity. Thus its churches and denominations experience the birth pains that are typical on any new religious movement. Many Pentecostal leaders feel the tension between assuming their proper identity and relating to other Christian churches. The fundamental challenge is that of fulfilling the Christian mandate to proclaim the Good News on one hand for the benefit of others, and on the other hand to relate to the global Body of Christ and thus responding to the prayer of Jesus (Jn. 17:20-23) and the admonition of Paul towards unity (Eph. 4:3-6). How can one navigate in such a dilemma? The following priorities can be identified.

1. The mistrust displayed by and towards historic churches and the animosity experienced by many Pentecostals, have created tensions that often times revealed themselves in the context of evangelism and mission. The issue of **proselytism** is a key priority that needs our attention.

- a. First there is an urgent need to live by of a code of **ministerial ethics**
 - i. No illicit means for winning people to faith like the misrepresentation of others, dishonesty, coercion, intimidation, bribery etc. are acceptable.
 - ii. Evangelism in terms of proclaiming the Good News is not to be questioned; it belongs to the essence of every church. Rather, guidelines as to the integration of the person that has come to a living faith must be observed. These guidelines are to lead ministers to display a sensitivity to the unity of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12) and the love God has poured into the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5).
 - b. Proselytism is challenged by **ministerial communication** on a local level. It could be communication that provides information pertaining to people who have considered changing church affiliation. But it could also be about the ministers own spiritual journeys. The events surrounding Acts 15 can serve as a paradigm on how to discuss issues between different ecclesial groups.
 - c. The proclamation of the Word is to be **Bible focused** and is not to use disrespectful, deceptive or uncharitable remarks about others.
2. A second priority is to teach our communities to understand that God heals the person to come into the family of God. In other words, there needs to be a **shift from the individual to the communal**. Pentecostals often emphasize personal salvation, value baptism as a personal decision, strive for personal sanctification and seek individual blessings. Although God heals the individual and equips every person with gifts, the goal is to be part of the community of Christ, which is a local, regional and global reality.
 3. As a third priority, expressions of Christian unity are to be fostered at the **grassroots** level.
 - a. By prayer for and with one another across denominational lines.
 - b. By sharing testimonies of faith.
 - c. By expecting the Holy Spirit to guide the household of God.
 - d. By engaging in works of love for the benefit of the larger community.
 4. A fourth priority should focus on **mission spirituality**
 - a. Classical missionary activity often meant that the convert had to repent from idols. Today missionaries have to repent from their own idols such as religious values that reflect their own culture but are not related to the essence of the Gospel.
 - b. Mission workers are to repent from prejudice and disrespect towards other workers in the vineyard of God. (Luke 9:49-50)

- c. Being aware that God has entrusted his people with the ministry of reconciliation of the world in Christ; reconciliation among Christians is to be a visible witness of God's grace. (2 Cor. 5:18-20)
 - d. A true mission spirituality not only has to be God-honouring and Christ-centred, but also Spirit-filled, in the sense that it is the Spirit of God who is the missionary in us, the one who empowers, the one who guides and the one who reveals Christ to the glory of God and the salvation of humankind and all creation. (John 20, Acts 1+2, Rom. 8)
5. A fifth priority relates the experiences of unity with regard to **global bodies**. The traditional structures of ecumenical organisations usually emphasized doctrinal statements and analysis. In view of the fact that most Christians are at home in predominantly oral cultures, global bodies are invited to **include narrative aspects of the Christian faith**. Therefore meetings like the Global Christian Forum should be encouraged in order to allow all Christians to voice their joys and concerns in a way that is familiar to them. The inclusion of narrative communication such as testimonies and worship can also revitalize the more formal nature of many ecumenical bodies.
6. Issues that relate to mission and unity should be protected from drifting into manmade schemes and intellectual manoeuvrings. All our efforts are at best of penultimate value. In order to keep a sense of humility before God and humankind it is necessary to maintain an **eschatological outlook**. This outlook includes a sense of urgency to communicate the Gospel, but also that the church is on its way and that its mission will only be fulfilled in Christ at his return (Mat 28:20; Eph.1:7-14; Rev. 22). Finally, eschatology also relates to God's creation as a whole, when God's creative intent will find its fulfilment in a new heaven and a new earth. Christians, as those who have been touched by God's grace, are challenged to unite in witnessing to the hope they have and to speak prophetically wherever nature is selfishly exploited and people are taken advantage of.

In essence mission and unity fall together whenever a person finds peace with God and can express it in a communal context.