

CHAPTER 7

The Development of a Transdenominational Pentecostal Ecclesiology

7.1 Lewi Pethrus’ Contribution toward a Transdenominational Pentecostal Ecclesiology

Roger Haight bases his transdenominational ecclesiology on the successful achievements of the ecumenical movement to engage in meaningful and profitable discussion despite overwhelming differences. He argues that its achievements are only possible since the diverse members of the ecumenical movement share ‘a common ecclesial existence.’¹ It is my contention that global Pentecostalism, which is perhaps even more diverse than the ecumenical movement, also shares a similar underlying identity, which is expressed in a mutual concern for a Pentecostal form of spirituality. In fact, I propose that the inner logic of Pethrus’ ‘Pentecostal’ ecclesiology may serve as a helpful microcosmic model for discussing a macrocosmic, transdenominational Pentecostal ecclesiology.

A transdenominational ecclesiology is essentially a method of correlation that presupposes the existence of multiple concrete ecclesiological investigations that analyse ‘the unity in diversity’ of each study. My investigation into Pethrus’ Pentecostal ecclesiology is one such study. Once such investigations are in place, the subsequent work is to ‘weigh a considerable amount of diverse evidence arising from the various churches.’² The next two steps in the methodology are to employ a normative analysis of the findings and give ‘an apology (self-explanation) for the position taken.’³ Regrettably, since the number of concrete ecclesiological studies of the Pentecostal movement is currently too small for constructing a transdenominational Pentecostal ecclesiology, and the task too vast for a single individual to undertake, the first transdenominational Pentecostal ecclesiology must wait a future time. Even if it can only be conceptualised now, however, because of the movement’s nature as a global phenomenon, any discussion regarding Pentecostal ecclesiology must be, in essence, transdenominational.

As seen above, the value Pethrus placed on Pentecostal spirituality is that which gives his ecclesiology its essential unity. Understanding Pentecostal

¹ Haight, vol. 3, 11.
identity in terms of its particular form of spirituality is a contested concept among Pentecostal scholars. However, the notion is receiving increasing acceptance. In a recent presidential address to the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Kimberly Alexander has advocated, similarly to Pethrus, that Pentecostalism is primarily a form of spirituality that has travelled across the globe and adapted itself to various cultural contexts. She further notes, “To remain authentic, Pentecostalism must also reflect its original spiritual witness. That witness, that familiarity or communitas cannot be reduced to “text and texture,” “style and substance,” or even “doctrinal distinctives.” It is, rather, a living faith, one that is experienced in community. Here I am in essential agreement with Alexander, yet I would emphasise that it is not the practice or experience of ‘a living faith’ that constitutes Pentecostal identity, but the value Pentecostals place on it. The simple reason for this is that Pentecostals do not always practice or experience their spirituality but consistently value it. Nevertheless, practice and experience cannot be absent altogether since that would bring into question the existence of values in the first place.

The emphasis on shared religious values has two important implications for a transdenominational Pentecostal ecclesiology. First, the emphasis on shared values delineates the investigation. Only churches and denominations that manifest a value on a Pentecostal form of spirituality would be considered in the research. Second, understanding the manner in which underlying values shape ecclesiological expressions becomes the foundation for the entire transdenominational project. As noted above, this presupposes a thorough knowledge of the formative contexts that create the ‘diversity’ in local Pentecostal ecclesiologies, yet the basis of the methodology is to look beyond such diversity to the religious values that form the unity behind the diversity. Thus, only after

5 Although Alexander does not address Pentecostal ecclesiology per se, her insights, I believe, support the notion that any discussion regarding Pentecostal ecclesiology must recognise Pentecostalism as a spiritual renewal movement that is shaped by formative contexts. Following Hollenweger, she also notes that Pentecostalism is a particular form of spirituality that emphasises ‘orality, narrative, embodied manifestations, communitas, dreams and visions,’ thus making it inclusive yet exclusive enough not to lose Pentecostalism’s historical distinctiveness. Alexander, ‘Standing at the Crossroads,’ 336–337.