PENTECOSTALISM: A CHRISTIAN REVIVAL SWEEPING THE DEVELOPING WORLD

David Martin

What is Pentecostalism?

Pentecostalism mostly sees itself as a unique return to the Primitive Church, though its more knowledgeable representatives have been well aware of similar attempts to recover the pristine rapture presumed to inspire the first Christians. Perhaps the most important of such attempts is the Lutheran appeal ad fontes, from which, as I shall suggest, many of the emphases of Pentecostalism ultimately derive. Above all Pentecostalism looks back to the outpouring of the Spirit ‘on all flesh’ dramatised in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. In the later liturgy of mainstream Christianity, and still today, Pentecost is celebrated as the third most important feast in the calendar and regarded as the manifestation of the Holy Spirit that gave birth to the Church. However, insofar as this implies a major discontinuity in the action of the Spirit it is problematic, even in Christian terms, because a wider understanding locates many earlier manifestations of the Spirit, not only at the birth and baptism of Jesus, but as ruah or the power of the wind of the Spirit present throughout salvation history, above all in the creation of the world and in the coming of the Law on Sinai.

Within salvation history as recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures/the Old Testament, a Christian hermeneutic understands the story in the Acts by referring back to the story of the confounding of a common language following the attempt to build the Tower of Babel, as well as to the outpouring of the Spirit promised both to men and to women by the prophet Joel. Pentecostals in particular stress the coming of ‘the latter rain’ (Joel chapter 2, v.23, and elsewhere) seen as a premonition of the divine goal of history. The promised outpouring of the Spirit realised at Pentecost looks forward to that final goal, and finds it anticipated by the reversal of the linguistic confusion of Babel. Humankind once more enjoys a shared understanding conferred through the gift
of tongues, which for Pentecostals is linked to a new personal and life-changing baptism in the Spirit manifest, for example, by dancing in the Spirit. Of course, the Christian Pentecost, placed fifty days after the Paschal season, also refers back to the Jewish Pentecost or Shavuot, celebrated fifty days after Passover to mark the ingathering of the harvest. This spiritualisation of material goods, such as the harvest, is just one of many other spiritualised metaphors of universality, such as the temple and the city ‘which is above and the mother of us all’. Pentecostalism expects a universal heavenly harvest marked by miracles, deliverance from daemonic possession, spirit baptism and the gift of tongues.

One can understand the first century Pentecost as a response to the universal oekumene created among the peoples of the Roman Empire. Similarly, the twentieth century Pentecost can be seen as a response to modern global communications and accelerated transnational movement, above all in the multicultural and multicoloured tumult of the United States. From the moment of its inception, in the USA and in places as far apart as Wales and India, Pentecostalism spread like a star-burst along global trails laid down by Evangelical mission, much of it Anglo-American, such as the Holy Ghost Empowerment movement founded in England at Keswick in 1875 and the China Inland Mission. Thereafter Pentecostalism was increasingly carried by people on the move around the world, and appropriated by the imagined communities created by modern media (Meyer 2005).

As in mainstream missions the primary carriers were indigenous, though that could mean a partial reversion from the transnational to nation making under Christian auspices, especially where marginal peoples as well as marginal people were attracted (Peel 2000).

Pentecostalism was pre-adapted, therefore, to multicultural and migrant situations. It was also pre-adapted to non-Western contexts, especially Africa, through its fusion of black and white revivalism. It fused technological modernity with a lively sense of the inspired world and the daemonic, and this carried it across cultural barriers hitherto blocking the advance of mainstream Christianity, in India, China and Latin America as well as Africa. The main resistances come from secular Europe and Islam, the former because it represents a territorial and clerical Christianity under severe strain, and the latter because it represents a revived sense of a common religious universe organically related to politics, power and territory. Pentecostalism, by contrast, promotes a decentralised and fissile form of lay voluntary