FEEDBACK: PENTECOSTALS IN DIALOGUE

Ripe for Taking Risks?¹

Walter J. Hollenweger

If the Pentecostal movement is of the Spirit—which I truly believe—then it is also of the Spirit that the movement began with an open ecumenism in the black, oral Afro-American culture with all that implies; that women played a significant part in its formative years; that it integrated important elements of Catholic spirituality; that it was inspired by the social and political interpretation of holiness in the American Holiness Movement; that it developed critical tools in relation to dispensationalism, inspiration of Scripture, hermeneutics, social and political issues and modern theological scholarship; and, that it began as an ecumenical renewal movement for all churches. All these characteristics are part and parcel of the Pentecostal heritage. Take them away and what is then left of the work of the Spirit in Pentecostalism?

History can be suppressed but seldom wiped out as Frank Macchia shows in relation to German church history and the miserable failure of the German churches—including Pentecostalism—to recognize the destructive and sinful power of national-socialism’s racism.² And so the long forgotten Pentecostal history emerges again, knocks at the door of Pentecostal scholars and church leaders and asks: What about the roots of your movement? Do you think you can cut yourself off from your own heritage?

²Frank D. Macchia, “From Azusa to Memphis: Evaluating the Racial Reconciliation Dialogue among Pentecostals,” PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies 17 (Fall 1995): 203-216, in particular 210. The stupid and opportunist defense of Fascist racism by Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Liberals in Germany during the regime of the Third Reich makes for sobering reading. Their arguments were: As long as we can preach “the Gospel” we are not involved in the persecution of Jews and others. This is not our business. God is more interested in what happens in the bedrooms than what happens in the boardrooms of government. See on this my Bonhoeffer Requiem (Ch. 8963 Kindhausen, Switzerland: Metanoia Verlag, also in English).
A testimony to this rethinking of Pentecostal roots is found in the previous issue of PNEUMA (Fall 1995) which will be the focus of my comments in this article. It contains fascinating material in relation to the Catholic/Pentecostal dialogue, in relation to a dialogue of Pentecostals with the Faith and Order Commission USA, in relation to a dialogue between black and white Pentecostals, between black and Hispanic Pentecostals, and between men and women.

The discussion starts with a biblical introduction by Roger Stronstad who sees three paradigms for understanding the church: (1) the Protestant paradigm of the priesthood of all believers, (2) the body of Christ (Paul) and (3) the Community of Prophets (Luke). He pleads for a recovery of this Lukan paradigm, not in the trivial and commercialized sense of prophecy but in the biblical sense which measures the present with the yardstick of the early church. This necessitates first the identification of disagreement. It is part of our prophetic ministry to see the differences within Pentecostalism and between Pentecostalism and other churches. But since already the biblical message contains different emphases and paradigms this is part and parcel of a prophetic church. Paul certainly had his difficulties with the apostles in Jerusalem and their Church Growth program in Galatia. But he was also willing to collect money for his theological antagonists and brought it to Jerusalem, thus risking not only his credibility but his life.

The different reports from the dialogue’s document further that we do not yet measure up to the example of Paul. But there are beginnings.

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3 This aspect of the dialog issue of PNEUMA is reserved for a later article.
4 Gros, “Toward a Dialogue of Conversion.”
5 Macchia, “From Azusa to Memphis.”