A Pilgrimage in the Spirit: Pentecostal Testimony in the Faith and Order Movement*

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Among the characteristics of the last century is the initiation of two movements impelled by the Holy Spirit to renew the Church and deepen reconciliation. The first of these, the Pentecostal revival, was inherently reconciling and renewing in its original intent, as Simon Chan notes: “It is in the light of the Spirit’s constituting the church as catholic that we can begin to appreciate the ecumenical impulse of the Pentecostal pioneer William Seymour at the Azusa Street Mission.”

The second is the modern ecumenical movement.

Ironically, Pentecostalism emerged as a reconciling movement of the Spirit but, for a variety of reasons, found itself marginal to fellow Christians. As it entered into ecumenical contact with other Christians, the classical Pentecostal churches identified with the evangelical subculture, dominated by the scars of the Fundamentalist-Modernist culture wars of the early twentieth century. The Pentecostal presence in ecumenical circles has been well documented.

* Dedicated to Kilian McDonnell on the occasion of his 80th birthday. A mentor to many, and catalyst for much of the theological reflection witnessed here.


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Pentecostal Reserve Toward Other Churches

This early identification with the evangelical subcultural side of American ecumenism has left many Pentecostals with classic reservations about ecumenical engagement: (1) preference for spiritual rather than visible unity; (2) ecumenical erosion of the gospel, especially doctrinally; and (3) the eschatological prophecies that see the unity of the church as a sign of the end of time and its apostasy from the gospel. Modern Pentecostal scholars have dealt with these objections in depth. In spite of tremendous cultural resistance, the pioneering work of such Pentecostals as David du Plessis and Jerry Sandidge stand as a testimony to the Holy Spirit’s ability to initiate reconciliation in face of tremendous cultural obstacles.

In this brief article, one stream of the ecumenical testimony of Pentecostals will be reviewed, the Faith and Order movement, which serves the reconciliation of the churches by doing the biblical and theological research enabling mutual understanding and deepening communion among Christians.

Unity and Faith

The Faith and Order movement, as a serious biblical approach to the truth of the gospel as it can be discerned together by scholars from the Christian churches, is in some ways the logical place for Pentecostal theologians to find their platform for testimony. As Chan notes, approaching the unity of the church is central to Christology and informed by the pneumatological impulses of the Scriptures:

The action of the Spirit not only constitutes the church dynamically, it also makes the church the place where truth exists dynamically. This means that connection between Christ the truth, the Head of the church, and the tradition of the church is far more profound than is usually acknowledged in Protestantism. Christ who is the truth is not just an individual, historical person, but is also the truth in relation to the church as his body. The church is therefore an extension of Christ the truth.

From this Pentecostal perspective, the search for common ground in Christian faith and the order of the church is the common search for the very truth of Christ for us.

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4 Chan, op. cit., 190.