

## Rethinking Ecumenism in the Light of Pentecostalism

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

It is an obvious fact that the Pentecostal churches create an unprecedented situation for ecumenism as we have known it for the past hundred years. Pentecostalism is only just as old as the ecumenical movement itself, has seen severe doctrinal schisms over the doctrine of the Trinity and sanctification yet does not operate according to doctrinal standards so much as to similarity of practice, and has split into something like 30,000 denominations, though many of these remain on friendly terms with one another. The plain fact is that the usual way of doing ecumenism – between members of “confessional families” more or less organized into trans-national fellowships or hierarchical bodies with a clearly recognized and authorized set of doctrinal standards – just won’t work here. The failure of “confessionalist schemes”<sup>1</sup> is further reinforced by the fact of the charismatic renewal in nearly all the “historic” churches: an estimated 11% of Roman Catholics are charismatics, which means there are more charismatic Catholics in the world than members of the worldwide Assemblies of God, one of the largest Pentecostal denominations! And only a fraction of Pentecostals belong to the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the closest analogue we have to the other Christian world communions.

It has been fairly easy to ignore the challenge of Pentecostalism to ecumenism until quite recently, since Pentecostals have not been terribly interested in mainline ecumenism of the sort represented by the World Council of Churches, Faith and Order, or bilateral dialogues, and in some cases they have been severe critics of it. Now, however, with anywhere from 200 million to 500 million Pentecostals in the world, some of whom are at least beginning to be interested in the rest of the Christian family, the time has come for facing the challenge head-on. Considering the case of Pentecostals raises the whole question of ecumenism with non-denominational churches, but in order to keep an already enormous field a little smaller and easier to handle, I will restrict myself to a discussion only of Pentecostalism here.

While Pentecostals have tended not to be involved in the “official” ecumenical instruments like the WCC, it doesn’t mean they have never had any ecumenical impulses at all. In fact, if anything, the earliest Pentecostals considered it an essential part of their message *not* to become a new denomination or call their developing reality a “church.” They were strictly a “movement.” “Pentecostalism started in most places as an ecumenical renewal movement,” as Wolfgang Vondey says.<sup>2</sup> As a movement, the earliest Pentecostals spoke to and attracted people from across the Christian spectrum, even though their first main audience was Christians of the Holiness tradition. Sharing the “baptism in the Holy Spirit” and exhibiting such spiritual gifts as speaking in tongues is what truly united them across structural divisions. Amos Yong argues that “the universality of the Pentecostal community is due in part to the fact that Pentecostalism is first and foremost an

---

<sup>1</sup> “Preface,” in *Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge*, eds. Jürgen Moltmann and Karl-Josef Kuschel (London: SCM, 1996), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Vondey, “Pentecostals and Ecumenism: Becoming the Church as a Pursuit of Christian Unity,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11/4 (2011): 319.

ecumenical experience and spirituality rather than an organized network of institutions. The ties that bind Pentecostals together around the world are their experiences of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. It is not that Pentecostals are not concerned about Christian unity. Rather, Pentecostals experience Christian unity precisely through the universality of the Spirit's presence and activity, which enable the confession of Jesus' lordship amidst the peculiarly Pentecostal congregations and liturgy."<sup>3</sup>

Still, there was always an implicit critique of other Christians even in this early ecumenicism. Three samples of early Pentecostal statements will demonstrate this. First of all, in the very first issue of *The Apostolic Faith* in 1906, the newspaper published by the Azusa Street Mission where most scholars consider Pentecostalism to have started, their vision is described: "Stands for the restoration of the faith once delivered unto the saints – the old time religion, camp meetings, revivals, missions, street and prison work and Christian Unity everywhere... We are not fighting men or churches, but seeking to displace dead forms and creeds of wild fanaticisms with living, practical Christianity. 'Love, Faith, Unity' is our watchword."<sup>4</sup> Another early Pentecostal statement, from 1912, explains that "this is only a 'reform movement,' not a church, not the church, not the churches of God. As many churches as like can belong to this reform movement, as many do; but it is not a church, the church nor the churches; and it is a mistake we ought to get out of to call a Bible congregation of believers set in divine order by any sort of sector nickname."<sup>5</sup> A few years later, a "prophecy" circulated among Pentecostals that attracted a great deal of attention and agreement. Speaking in the voice of God, it said: "I am seeking to draw my people together unto me. My people are scattered and are following many leaders. I am not pleased with that. Lo! I am the leader, and I want my people to follow me and not to be divided into sects."<sup>6</sup> The enemies of the Christian faith are "dead forms and creeds of wild fanaticisms," which give rise to "sector nicknames" and "sects" arrogantly claiming the name of "church" for themselves alone. While no new *church* was envisioned by Pentecostals at the outset, it is clear enough that many, if not most, of the bodies calling themselves *church* didn't actually qualify, by Pentecostal standards.

This is hardly a new opinion in the American religious scene. The nineteenth century had been characterized by revivals among Protestants from the Wesleyan-Arminian extreme right across to the Calvinist-predestinarian extreme. The common assumption among all kinds of revivalists is that most of what passes for "Christian" is mere laxity and cultural accommodation, with no real faith or fervor or personal experience of God. The revival is necessary to awaken those whose faith is asleep

---

<sup>3</sup> Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 144-5.

<sup>4</sup> Cecil M. Robeck Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 2006), 120.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 151.

<sup>6</sup> Cecil M. Robeck Jr., "The Challenge Pentecostalism Poses to the Quest for Ecclesial Unity," in *Kirche in ökumenischer Perspektive*, eds. Peter Walter, Klaus Krämer, and George Augustin (Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 316.

before it is too late and they face an eternity of hellfire. Of course, this large-scale critique of the indifferent religion of Christendom predates American revivalism: in its own distinct ways, it is found in European Pietism, in the Reformations of Protestants and Catholics alike, and back into various reforming orders of the Middle Ages. Against the constant temptation to treat Christian faith as something inherited, leaders of the church have continually tried to make it a reality of the heart and mind, a matter of faith believed and put into action in deeds.

Early Pentecostalism, however, was marked by a particular understanding of church history that deeply affected its ecumenical relation to other Christian bodies, best called "restorationism." Again, this is not absolutely unique with Pentecostalism. The early 1800s saw various smaller and less influential movements, especially in Britain, that tried to read a scheme for all of church history out of the Bible and apply it to the contemporary situation (there are medieval precedents here as well). This "dispensationalism" declared that different eras of time had different religious rules at work, though the general assumption was that there had been better times in the past, continuous decline since then, and a dire situation in the present. Pentecostals picked up this general approach to church history with a theory that the early church, especially during the lifetime of the apostles, was the ideal; that there was a gradual falling away from apostolicity culminating in the Constantinian establishment of the church as the state religion; and a total darkness and lack of true faith for the next thousand years or so. Only with Martin Luther did God start to "restore" the lost apostolic faith to the church. Luther recovered the doctrine of justification; John Wesley recovered the doctrine of sanctification; and now, with the awakening of Azusa Street, a new recovery had taken place, this time of the charismatic gifts, especially speaking in tongues and healing. The timing was important: these gifts were given to spur world mission in preparation for the imminent return of Christ to earth. This view of church history was simply asserted, not researched or proven. "Despite the broad appeal to the apostolic faith community, Pentecostals made no serious effort to trace and develop a historical connection with the primitive church. The reason for this neglect was rooted in the conviction that any bonds of apostolic succession had been severed by the organizational efforts of the Constantinian church to prescribe its faith and praxis in the form of creeds."<sup>7</sup> The very low estimation of Catholicism is clear in this historical scheme: but there was plenty of disapproval reserved for other Protestants too, who had failed to accept Wesley on sanctification and the Pentecostals themselves on baptism in the Spirit, or who were generally content with "dead forms."

Such a distinct theory of church history manifests itself in a working ecclesiology, even if it is not carefully or explicitly thought out. It means, for one thing, that lots of people who would be considered Christian by themselves or the churches they belong to have not been considered Christian at all by Pentecostals, and thus were taken to be legitimate objects of mission, in this case better called proselytism.<sup>8</sup> Further, "Pentecostals believe that there is only one Church, and by extension they believe in the unity of that one Church."<sup>9</sup> Notably, of course, this

---

<sup>7</sup> Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism*, 153.

<sup>8</sup> Yong, 123-4.

<sup>9</sup> Robeck, "The Challenge Pentecostalism Poses," 308-9.

conviction means that the true Church, whatever else it is, is definitely not a single identifiable institutional structure or organization. It is defined by living faith, public commitment, and holiness of life. And this brings us back to the difficulty of the usual method of ecumenism: as far as Pentecostals are concerned, institutions are mere tools that are easily corrupted, and true Christianity can only be evaluated by individual assessment of the quality of faith, never by structural features or rituals like baptism. Accordingly, it is not structural or doctrinal agreement but the lived and felt *koinonia* of truly believing Christians that comprises the true unity of the one church.<sup>10</sup>

While this account of Christian unity certainly complicates the received ideals of the ecumenical movement, it is hard to avoid feeling some sympathy for the Pentecostal view. Historic churches are confronted with the reality that so-called Christian nations are hardly Christian anymore; that people can be baptized and claim the name “Lutheran” or “Catholic” for themselves while professing to be atheists; that there is staggering ignorance of the faith among the “faithful”; and that Christendom is drawing to a close. There is a profound irony in bilateral dialogues, in which theologians work out their differences on behalf of millions of so-called believers who don’t know what they’re talking about and, more seriously, don’t care. Christianity functions more like heritage than living faith for huge numbers of church members. The leadership of churches carefully guards the boundaries of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the ministry against members of *other* churches – while their *own* members are the greatest traitors! It is common knowledge that ecumenism’s roots are in the mission movement, but it is clear that ecumenism and mission have gone their separate ways, and ecumenism never took seriously the urgent task of mission *to the Christians*. In this respect, the Pentecostal challenge to ecclesiology and ecumenism is timely and must be heard.

At the same time, Pentecostal ecclesiology is not without its own ironies. A “movement” that committed itself to “love, faith, unity” has proved to be incredibly prone to division. Despite its rejection of the apostolic succession claims of Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans, it has a “persistent ‘episcopal’ instinct which surfaces repeatedly in Pentecostal history in the West but is even more pronounced in Pentecostalism in the Global South”<sup>11</sup> – which often lacks the checks on power that have been put in place by the older churches. Many contemporary Pentecostal theologians regret this development as well as the formation of Pentecostal denominations, charged to the account of “human fallibility and sinfulness”<sup>12</sup> or doctrinal disputes that forced a change in the early Pentecostal account of ecclesiality, allowing for “churches” after all.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it can seem like the main problem with Pentecostalism was its own success! Wolfgang Vondey attributes the institutionalization of the movement to “the numerical and geographical expansion of Pentecostalism, the occurrence of internal divisions, the demands of global missionary activity, and an increasing ecumenical exposure of the Pentecostal

---

<sup>10</sup> Robeck, “The Challenge Pentecostalism Poses,” 311.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Chan, “The Use of Prosper’s Rule in the Development of Pentecostal Ecclesiology,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11/4 (2011): 314.

<sup>12</sup> Yong, 138.

<sup>13</sup> Vondey, “Pentecostals and Ecumenism,” 321.

movement worldwide.”<sup>14</sup> This dulled the eschatological fervor of the initial revival, led to a desire for stability, and made the Pentecostals draw on whatever models of church they had at hand – which meant that, “mimicking the ecclesiological patterns of Christendom, the title ‘church’ moved from the local assembly to the group of assemblies that associated one another with like doctrine, personalities, politics, and spiritual life.”<sup>15</sup> In the end, “The establishment of missionary structures therefore represented the primary catalyst for the institutionalization of classical Pentecostalism... Missionary activity became an ecclesial rather than eschatological endeavor. The movement no longer journeyed *toward* its full realization as the church of God; the church was now located *within* the Pentecostal movement.”<sup>16</sup> In a sense, doing its job effectively is seen to have undermined the very roots of Pentecostalism. And, to crown all these ironies, Pentecostal ecumenist Mel Robeck argues that “it has become increasingly clear that there is a developing role for Tradition within Pentecostalism, even of a teaching magisterium, though these things are not currently well understood by Pentecostal leaders, and in most cases their very existence would still be denied. Unfortunately, the teaching magisterium that is emerging is composed of ecclesiastical leaders who themselves are often little more than lay theologians, while their trained theologians are not trusted to play any ongoing role in such a magisterium.”<sup>17</sup>

What has happened ecclesiastically in the hundred years of Pentecostal history is, of course, *exactly what happened in the early church!* Doctrinal disputes, missions, money, sin, and the realization that the Lord was probably not coming back immediately all prompted the growth of certain structures and understandings of the nature of the church – long before Constantine got his hooks into it. While it is fair to regret the domestication of spiritual fervor, it is foolish and faithless to assume that institutional formation spells the death of every good thing. It would be wiser for Pentecostals to recognize in their own churches a basis for the legitimacy of what happened in the early church – however much both might benefit from reform and renewal. But it will also require a relinquishment of the myth of decline and restoration in the Pentecostal account of church history.

Further, there is no reason to think that Pentecostals – or any other Christians – should be particularly immune to the influences of worldly models in their construction of church. It is a truism that Catholicism absorbed the model of the Roman empire, Orthodoxy the tight state-church alliance in caesaropapism, Protestants the prince-bishop arrangement, and so forth. Pentecostals do much the same thing now with twentieth- and twenty-first-century models close at hand. What is their infinite division and subdivision but the capitalist market providing a product for every taste? What is the proposal for a Pentecostal ecclesiology of a “relationship-based network working together in mission across the world that engages with local contexts”<sup>18</sup> but a mirror of the internet? What is the insistence on

---

<sup>14</sup> Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism*, 155.

<sup>15</sup> Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism*, 157.

<sup>16</sup> Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> Robeck, “The Challenge Pentecostalism Poses,” 314.

<sup>18</sup> Andy Lord, “Mission-Driven Pentecostal Ecclesiology,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11/4 (2011): 285.

the right of “migrations within and among ecclesial communities”<sup>19</sup> but a reflection of a migratory economy and volunteer society based on individual needs and preferences? This isn’t to say that any of these are wrong. But they are clearly ecclesiological responses to the vagaries of contemporary (and in particular Western industrial) society, and so they are like in kind and in source to earlier ecclesiological models. The only disagreement now is whether the older models work in current circumstances or the newer ones capitulate too much to them – but not whether either somehow managed to “rise above” the world to produce the one ideal church structure.

While Pentecostal critiques of established church structures may be weaker than they assume, their positive vision of the nature of the church – and how that might affect both structure and ecumenical relationships – has much to recommend it. Chiefly, it reconnects church with mission, overcoming the longstanding divide that sees mission as a task of the church rather than its very nature. As one Latin American theologian puts it, “For Pentecostals, the church is the community that in the name of its Lord *invites, welcomes, and sends out*. Through its invitation and sending out, the church as the community of the Spirit shows its missionary dimension, which is inseparable from its identity.”<sup>20</sup> Amos Yong builds on this missionary identity with specific attention to the Holy Spirit: “Pentecostal ecclesiology is inherently pneumatological; the church is founded by the Spirit, nurtured as a fellowship of and in the Spirit, and empowered by the Spirit to spread the gospel.”<sup>21</sup> The church does not carry on by its own institutional weight, endowment, inertia, or history: it always receives its power to be what it is through the living presence of the Holy Spirit. The temptation of historic churches to rely on their own history is constant: the nature of Pentecostal worship builds into its very life a refusal to accept that temptation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the Pentecostal conviction that “the life of the church is participatory,” such that Christians live out “the active priesthood of all believers, a priesthood which they originally understood not only soteriologically but also ecclesologically.”<sup>22</sup> In the words of the prominent Pentecostal theologian Miroslav Volf, “the ecclesiological omission of the role of the laity in constituting the church is one of the most important theological reasons for their passiveness. If they are constituted as the church by receiving the sacraments and/or hearing the word that is preached, then active participation in the communication of the faith is external to their ecclesial being: they are the church in their passiveness; their activity is – or is not – additional to their being the church. By contrast, if the church is constituted by all its members, then the communication of faith is a dimension of their ecclesial being: they are the church in their activity of communicating the faith (though this is merely the other side of their receptive

---

<sup>19</sup> Vondey, “Pentecostals and Ecumenism,” 327.

<sup>20</sup> Juan Sepúlveda, “A Pentecostal Perspective,” in *Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge*, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Yong, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Miroslav Volf, “A Protestant Response,” in *Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge*, 37.

passiveness and is first made possible by this passiveness)."<sup>23</sup> It is easy to hear in this observation a potent critique of historic churches whose existence, whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant, has been premised on a division between "those who serve the community and those who allow themselves to be served."<sup>24</sup> If enormous numbers of our churches' laity have lost interest and drifted away, this can hardly come as a surprise anymore: everything interesting and meaningful about the Christian life has been removed from their hands, and their passivity has bored them right out of the faith.

Does this perhaps also suggest why the fire of ecumenism has cooled in past decades? It has been safely stowed in the hands of the bishops and theologians, who can be trusted to understand fully and act properly. But it has also sent the strong message that the consent, interest, and involvement of the laity are of secondary importance. They can do the praying, the service projects, and the "spiritual ecumenism," but all the matters of actual consequence are left to the experts. If, after a hundred years of this, they no longer care, who can blame them? Whatever difficulties Pentecostalism may pose for the hitherto accepted ecumenical models, their reinvolvement of the laity may well prove to be the gift that a failing ecumenical movement desperately needs.

---

<sup>23</sup> Volf, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Volf, 40.