

What Can the Mainline Learn from Pentecostals about Pentecost?

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Pentecostalism is a strange and sometimes frightening form of Christianity. In an age in which Protestant worship is characterized by order and reasoned discourse, Pentecostal worship seems to promote chaos. Persons seized by the Spirit may roll in the floor, cry uncontrollably, run in the aisles, speak in tongues, and fall into extended trances. Some are even known to handle snakes. Moreover, preaching in such a context seems to be all style and little substance.

Because of its strangeness and because Pentecostalism has been routinely dismissed as an escapist religion for the socially disenfranchised, it has been easy for those in the mainline tradition to ignore the movement. However, it is getting more and more difficult to do so. The charismatic renewal has brought much of the life and energy of Pentecostalism into the traditional churches. In addition, the sheer numerical scope of the movement, which is estimated at over 400 million, makes it difficult to ignore.

It is now somewhat acceptable to study Pentecostalism in order to glean those aspects which may enrich all of Christian worship. More and more there are "Pentecostal type" services found in mainline and Roman Catholic circles. While I don't want to negate the liturgical impact of praise choruses, healing services, testimony meetings, and spontaneous prayers, I believe that we all are missing the larger questions of the gifts and calling of Pentecostalism for the whole body of Christ.

It is my contention that the primary mission of Pentecostalism is to renew the meaning of Pentecost for the whole church. While it is not uncommon today to find references to Pentecost as a means of renewal of human community, redressing the curses of the present postmodern state of babel,¹ Pentecost remains a largely unexplored theological construct. For most Protestants, Pentecost is viewed as a static historical event with little ongoing meaning and significance other than its place within the liturgical year.

Paul Vallarie, in his creative and thought-provoking analysis of Pentecost attributes this lack of interest to the association of "Pentecostal themes" with fundamentalism, pietism, and anti-intellectualism. He points out that modern-day Pentecostalism is part of the church but not the whole, and it should not be put forward as the measure of Pentecostal religion. Vallarie defines Pentecostal religion as one which takes its stand not on the letter of the law but in the presence of the Spirit and in freedom. He calls for theological inquiry regarding the meaning of Pentecost for the whole *oikonomia*.²

I would concur with Vallarie's assessment and with his view that modern-day Pentecostalism is not the full measure of Pentecost for the church today. Pentecost belongs to the whole church and not to any particular group. All Christian churches are Pentecostal churches. However, I would also want to point out that Pentecostalism, in its attempt to redress the meaning of Pentecost offers clues as to its significance for today. There are "signs of Pentecost" inherent within the Pentecostal movement

which have dramatic implications for the church's ministry as we enter a new millennium. In this brief article I would like to focus on four of these signs: Pentecost as an ongoing festival, Pentecost as the epistemological key, Pentecost as a festival of deconstruction and reconstruction, and Pentecost as a marginal festival.

Pentecost As An Ongoing Festival

The Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2 was celebrated as part of the Feast of Weeks. Originally a Spring Harvest Festival, in later Jewish tradition it had come to commemorate the giving of the Law at Sinai. The theophany of God in the wilderness provided a reality and a way ahead for a people who were in a liminal state of "in-betweenness."

The coming of the Spirit in Jerusalem occurred among postresurrection believers who were also in a liminal state of "in-betweenness." Faced with the collapse of their meta-narrative and the absence of Christ, the disciples were waiting for a way ahead. The storm of God's presence which arrived with wind and fire, not only filled the vacuum left by the absence of Christ, but reordered the known world of the disciples, providing a renewed sense of identity and mission. In addition, the Acts events enlarged the boundaries of the household of faith to include "all flesh." The Spirit of Life, the Creator Spirit was being sent to renew the whole created order into the economy of God through Christ.

This power unleashed upon the world on the Day of Pentecost continues to burn as the ongoing life-giving fuel for the church. Pentecost is therefore an ongoing festival of fear, joy, and power.

To celebrate Pentecost is not to recall an event which is locked in time and space. Rather, it is to participate in a continuing festival which is ever more mysterious, frightening, and wonderful than we can dare imagine. Pentecost Festival brings to us the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is being sent to lead us into all truth. Pentecost Festival is thus our way ahead into an unknown future. It give us direction and a sense of mission and purpose.

Pentecost Festival is ever enlarging to include "all flesh." It celebrates the fulfillment of ancient prophecies that all people, from the least to the greatest can know God. To participate in Pentecost is to celebrate the longing and desires of God to redeem the whole created order.

To celebrate Pentecost is to celebrate and participate in the ecstasy of God toward us. It is a festival in which the work of Christ, making a way to God for us, is brought into fulfillment. Pentecost is thus a great celebration of the plan of redemption. It actualizes the longing and desires of God for the whole economy.

Pentecost Festival celebrates the power of the Holy Spirit to bring us into union and communion with God. Indeed, we are literally swept into the ecstatic embrace of the Trinity. The shining countenance of God is turned toward us and we are invited into the one Divine life. Pentecost is a celebration that we are not left orphaned (John 14:18), having to make our way alone.

Therefore, to celebrate Pentecost is more than acknowledging that in a certain point in time the Holy Spirit was sent. It is to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is continually being poured out upon humanity, ever renewing the face of the church. This ongoing festival continually calls us to participate in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost offers to the church a continual transformation of itself. It is ever

pushing forward into the realm of the unknown and ever surprising with its power. It infuses the church with the mission of Christ and empowers it to accomplish what seems to be the impossible. The festival of Pentecost offers continual amazement as we see with our own eyes the work of the Holy Spirit. We can indeed see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Pentecost As The Epistemological Key

A mainline friend once asked me why we Pentecostals emphasized the Feast of Pentecost. He pointed out that Pentecost is only one event of salvation history which the church celebrates. "Does not," he asked, "the emphasis upon Pentecost downplay the other feasts: the Birth, Death, Resurrection of Christ?" His question forced me to examine my tradition's apparent overemphasis on this Christian festival.

The Feast of Pentecost, rather than downplaying or overshadowing the importance of the other feasts, brings alive their meaning. It is through the power of Pentecost that we have knowledge of the depths and mysteries of salvation history. Pentecost is thus a portal or a doorway into a realm of knowing which may be characterized as face-to-face knowing.

In the Final Discourse Sayings (John 14-17), Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit who would become a "second Christ," teaching and leading the disciples into all truth.³ This form of knowing makes alive the presence of Christ. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our eyes are opened and we understand. We revisit salvation history. The Spirit, like a time machine, takes us back to Sinai, Bethlehem, and to Calvary.

The meaning of scripture is made known by the power of Pentecost. Because of the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit, the text of scripture, as written word, is alive and powerful. Spirit and word are fused together into a gestalt which reveals the mysteries of God. It is more than a revelation of meaning, it is a revelation of God whose presence is actualized by the Holy Spirit.

What is also revealed are the mysteries found in the depths of being human. Pentecost causes the Word of God to cut deep into the hidden recesses of the heart, convicting of sin and righteousness. This unveiling of reality, which supersedes any form of human critical reflection, makes known those things which are masked, repressed, and denied. The form of criticism emerging from Pentecost causes the so-called Enlightenment criticism to pale in comparison!

Pentecost As Festival of Deconstruction & Reconstruction

Inherent within Pentecostalism is the sign that Pentecost is a powerful gestalt of deconstruction and reconstruction with the ability to tear apart and dismantle as well as to unite and create order.

The deconstructive side of Pentecost is that which is most disturbing to the modern mind. It makes it difficult to "mainline." There are few theological constructs available to interpret its meaning. Even liberation theology with its voice for the poor and its challenges to the power interests of modern theology has left intact the human subject with its power to name the world.

But Pentecost refuses to leave the human subject intact. The festival of Pentecost exposes the fallacy of the human subject being grounded in its own self-presence. It mocks the pretentious claims that humans make their own history. Instead, it offers

a presence which interrupts the known world with both promise and judgment (recall Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost and his references to Joel 2:28).

In many ways Pentecost is an apocalypse of the self which calls for a relinquishing of the desire for control and totality. To participate in Pentecost is to desire God above all else. It is to surrender those things which we hold most dear. It is to surrender those myths which we believe to be true about ourselves: that we are able to live independently, that we are in need of nothing outside of ourselves. It is to enter into a frightening realm of the possibility of death of all we hold dear and understand.

In Pentecost, human subjects become "eschatological selves," whose place is transported into the eternal space of God's presence. Here human existence is grounded into the existence of God. We become one with God and God becomes one with us. In this sacred space we may experience tears and groaning, having been overwhelmed by the longing and the flow of the pathos of God. The Spirit, flowing through the self, groans, longing for the day of restoration of the whole cosmos. At other times, we may laugh hysterically, seemingly overcome by a continual flow of joy.

The reconstructive work of the Holy Spirit resurrects from deconstruction into a newly configured sense of identity. Grounded in Trinitarian fellowship, persons are no longer passive victims of destructive and manipulative forces. As reconstituted agents they are thrust upon mission. What is primary in this sense of mission is not praxis (critical reflection and action) but rather participation, "the taste of the good that is also the goal."⁴ Having tasted of the goodness of God and having been touched by the Divine longing flowing from the heart of God, persons are compelled into mission. There is a sense of participating with the Spirit's mission and agenda.

Often ecumenical discussions and documents regarding proselytism do not take into account the compulsion felt by many Pentecostals to share the good news of Pentecost with others. To experience the overwhelming, sheer excess of God's Spirit many times results in the transgressing of boundaries. Certainly there are those occasions in which Pentecostals have been guilty of a lack of regard for the real presence of Christ in other traditions. However, what is more often the case is genuine enthusiasm and desire that all taste of the freedom and joy of the Holy Spirit.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is today walking among the poor, offering healing and hope. The celebration of Pentecost is a celebration of this presence of Christ. It is the celebration of a power which lifts the lowly and tears down the proud. What is there to lose in the apocalypse of Pentecost? Power, prestige, status, dignity, self-control, all these have already been taken away by oppressive, demonic powers. What is gained is a renewed and transformed vision of the power to overcome and a newfound sense of identity and dignity.

Pentecost as a Marginal Festival

What disturbs me the most about attempts to mainline Pentecost, as evidenced in much of the charismatic movement and in many middle-class Pentecostal churches, is the tendency to tame or domesticate the power of the Holy Spirit. This domesticated form of Pentecostalism seeks to view Pentecost spirituality as providing a fuller and richer Christian life, without all of the danger and scandal associated with such an experience. It attempts to behave itself so that it can fit into existing liturgical and ecclesial structures.

What is lost in mainlined Pentecostalism is the understanding that Pentecost is a festival which by its very nature defies being co-opted by human agendas. Indeed, Pentecost seems to mock all attempts to contain its power. For that reason, it is most clearly experienced in the margins. Pentecost is a marginal festival which marginalizes all who dare participate.

The modern church seems obsessed with a desire to be central, to have voice and influence in the centers of power. Yet, it is being more marginalized in the newly emerging culture of pluralism. Pentecost calls us to relinquish this desire for centrality. It calls us to its own core, its own center of power and authority. Around this core people from every nation are united in a new form of human community.

The community of Pentecost is characterized by the freedom of the Holy Spirit to direct and to determine its character. Within this community the gifts of the Spirit are given to members without regard to "official categories." Indeed, the Spirit seems to delight in creating what appears to be a "feast of fools." The values and positions of the dominant culture seemed to be turned upside down by Pentecost. An illiterate peasant may be given great knowledge and discernment, and the discourse of the educated may be reduced to babbling tongues.

In order to find Pentecost Festival today we must journey into the wondrous and wild realm of the margins. There we may encounter an "upper room," where the dispossessed are tarrying and waiting for a way ahead. If we push into that which disturbs and frightens us about "those people," we may find the liberating power of Pentecost awaiting us in their arms..

Notes

¹ In particular see Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1995), J Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove. InterVarsity Press, 1995)

² Paul Vallarie, *Holy War and Pentecostal Peace* (New York. Seabury Press, 1983), 4, 5

³ Raymond Brown, "The Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel," *NTS* 13 (1967). 12-124

⁴ Vallarie, 25