

What Can the Mainline Learn from Pentecostals about Pentecost Preaching?

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For Pentecostals, Pentecost is not just one period in the liturgical year or one theme among many to be addressed in preaching. It is rather the center of their faith and life, the source of an overwhelming experience of the Divine which transforms one's whole being and expresses itself in all of life.

As I've listened to pentecostal sermons in Brazil over the last two years, I've concluded that *this focus on Pentecost is leading them to an interpretation of Christian faith and life that is quite different from that of our older Protestant churches, both liberal and conservative*. I realize that pentecostal pastors may not use the same theological language I do; in fact, many of them might insist that my interpretation of their faith and experience is mistaken. I can only say that what I am presenting here is the product of my encounter with them, and represents what I consider to be a serious challenge to all of us who are not Pentecostals.

In a New Situation, a New Experience of Salvation

Those of us in the Reformed tradition, as well as those in other churches emerging directly or indirectly from the Protestant Reformation, have taken for granted one compelling interpretation of the gospel that has shaped our theology and determined the perspective from which we read the Bible. It has also given structure to our liturgy and served to define the nature of the Christian life.

This paradigm centers around the recognition that we are sinners, who stand guilty and condemned before a just God. This God, through the Incarnation and the expiatory death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has broken the power of sin, offers us forgiveness as a free gift, justifies us, and sustains us as we respond in gratitude to this gift.

I first became aware of what it means to interpret all of Christian faith from this perspective when I was lecturing at a seminary in Latin America several decades ago. A distinguished German theologian was giving a series of lectures on systematic theology at the same seminary, and each lecture, whatever the topic, ended on the note of forgiveness. Some of the Latin American students were not exactly excited by this. So one day a student interrupted the lecture to raise the question: "Isn't there something more to the gospel than the forgiveness of sins?" The professor, completely taken aback, looked at him in astonishment and replied: "What would it be?"

After listening to much pentecostal preaching, I've come to the conclusion that, while their preachers, especially those most influenced by North American fundamentalism and evangelicalism, often use the same language, their message has a different focus: It centers on the life, death and resurrection of Christ, *leading to and culminating in the manifestation of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost*. This is the central reality of faith, and consequently everything is interpreted and experienced from *this* center.

This shift in understanding and living the gospel is not the result primarily of

systematic theological reflection. It is rather something that is emerging from the moving of God's Spirit in the midst of suffering people on the periphery of society, whose situation is quite different from that of most of us.

We are part of a culture which encourages us to have a strong sense of our own identity as persons, a society in which we have a place of significance and a chance to choose the direction we want for our lives. Along that road, we expect to be recognized for our achievements and rewarded materially. Our great temptation is to center our lives on ourselves and our well-being and advancement; to be confident about our own abilities, proud of our accomplishments, and often arrogant. In this situation we need to hear a gospel message which leads us to recognize that we are sinners and assures us that God in Christ has forgiven and justified us.

The situation of poor and marginal people today, especially in urban areas in Latin America and elsewhere, is quite different. They are involved in an often desperate struggle for survival in a world in which they are deprived of everything we take for granted. Many live in extreme poverty, excluded from and abandoned by society. They and their families face sickness without recourse to medical care, have little chance of finding regular or rewarding employment, and live in the midst of violence. In that context, they perceive that their lives are being destroyed by demonic forces, within them and around them.

More and more they are turning to religion for salvation. But the salvation they are seeking is an experience of the presence and power of God here and now, capable of bringing relief from hunger, misery, and violence, filling them with a sense of their own worth before God and others, and empowering them to put their broken lives together and change their life situation. They long for a religious experience that helps them to bear and overcome their suffering and fills their hearts with joy and peace. In their abandonment, they yearn to belong to a community whose members share their joys and griefs and help each other to survive from one day to the next. And those who perceive that they and their world are "possessed" by demonic forces yearn for an experience of Divine power capable of overcoming these demons.

Hearing the Gospel in a Different Cultural Context

As we consider this shift in religious perspective, we should also keep in mind that it is occurring primarily among people in the non-Western world who have not been immersed for centuries in the culture of modernity, with the modern scientific worldview and the secular mentality that accompany it. This new religious orientation is also appealing to significant numbers of those in our Western world who, having been brought up on this worldview, are now rejecting it or at least seeking to experience dimensions of reality excluded by it.

Pentecostalism in Brazil is appealing especially to women and men who are part of a culture and heritage in which all of life and the world is set in the context of one Supreme Reality, the Realm of Spirit, which encompasses and permeates all areas of their existence and of their world. They assume the presence, and thus the nearness and accessibility, of the Divine in all aspects of their lives and in their world. Consequently, there is no place in their worldview for the radical separation of the material and the spiritual, the individual and the social. This being the case, it is not surprising that, as their present situation becomes more and more desperate, they tend to turn to religions which make life in this Realm of Spirit real for them and provide

them with access to Divine power.

An Emerging New Paradigm

It is out of this context, I believe, that Pentecostals have rediscovered the centrality of Pentecost in the faith and life of the earliest Christian communities. And from this center they have developed an understanding and experience of Christian faith which challenges us to a rereading of the scriptures.

The clearest statement that I have found of what may represent a new paradigm comes from a Pentecostal theologian, Jean-Jacques Suurmond, who is now serving as a Reformed minister in the Netherlands. In his excellent theological reflection on Pentecostalism, *Word and Spirit at Play*, he writes: Pentecostalism “emphasizes Pentecost as the consummation and the crown of the events of Christmas and Easter. The end is more than the beginning. The birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus have made possible the ‘outpouring’ of Christ’s Word and Spirit on all that lives, so that the purifying fire of God’s love can now be kindled all over the earth.”¹

By perceiving God’s redemptive work as moving in a straight line from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to its culmination with the manifestation of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, Pentecostals find themselves knowing and living an experience of faith which most of us in mainline churches have never known.

The new dimension which this brings to our faith and experience is at the heart of Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost: “Exalted at God’s right hand, [Jesus] received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and all that you now see and hear flows from him” (Acts 2:33). In other words, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus enters history in the fullest sense. The risen Christ lives now in the form of the Spirit. The presence and power manifest in Jesus is no longer limited to one particular place and one particular moment in history. Through the Spirit, this presence and power is now manifesting itself unto the ends of the world, as the signs of the inbreaking of God’s Reign, announced and manifested by Jesus of Nazareth, continue to appear.

Pentecostals have opened my eyes to this dimension of the New Testament witness, and compelled me to examine more carefully the assertions in the New Testament regarding the identification of Jesus with the Spirit. Paul goes so far as to declare that “the Lord is the Spirit” (I Cor. 5:17). In John’s Gospel, according to Raymond Brown, the Holy Spirit is nothing less than the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent. Odette Mainville concludes, from her study of the Gospel of Luke and of Acts that “the actions of the Spirit are the continuation of the earthly mission of Jesus; they perpetuate his actions, his options, his ideas, his perception of God and of the human being.”² And Leonardo Boff asserts that the Holy Spirit is “the force and means by which the Lord remains present in history and so continues his work of inaugurating a new world.”³

Implications for Pentecost Preaching

If you listen to pentecostal preachers, you may not hear them speaking in precisely this language. But it expresses what I consider to be at the heart of Pentecost preaching and a major reason for its wide appeal. Here I want to mention several aspects of it which have important implications for us in mainline churches.

1. In the life of the historical Jesus, the most extraordinary manifestations of the Presence of God with power occurred in the midst of the day-to-day struggles for life

on the part of the people, especially the sick, the broken, the outcasts. The same is true with the earliest manifestations of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and immediately thereafter.

For Pentecostals, Jesus, through the Spirit, continues to give life and hope and joy to those in similar situations today. We first became aware that this was happening as we looked at the faces of those entering and leaving Pentecostal churches. As they entered, so many of them looked tired and depressed, overwhelmed by the problems in their lives and the burdens of their world. But when they emerged two hours later, many of these same persons were entirely changed. Their steps were lighter; their spirits animated, and their faces reflected joy and hope.

What had happened? They attended services which often dealt with specific aspects of their day-to-day reality: family conflicts, broken homes, unemployment and poverty, sickness, or demon possession. But those with one or another of these problems did not listen to abstract analyses of these issues. Rather, they were invited and enabled to enter into another dimension of reality: the Realm of the Spirit. There they were caught up in a rich, and often overwhelming, experience of the Divine. This became a source of new life and hope, transformed their perception of their burdens and opened up before them new possibilities for dealing with them.

They returned to the concrete realities of their lives enabled to perceive them differently, and empowered to confront them with new energy and hope. The sick expected to be healed, the tired were filled with new energy, those who had been abandoned expected to find others to share their struggles, and those who had lost all hope of meeting their most pressing material needs were encouraged to take new initiatives, counting on God to guide them.

2. In this context, the church is the place where this continuing presence and work of Jesus among the people, especially the poor and the outcasts, becomes a reality here and now just as in New Testament times. Women and men go to church with the same spirit of expectation that people had when they gathered around Jesus. They know that something exciting, something out of the ordinary which they cannot anticipate, is going to happen. A sick person may be healed, an evil spirit may be cast out. Those who came to church tired and broken, or worried and harassed, leave the service with a new lease on life.

In our conversations with people attending Pentecostal churches this is the one thing that they most often mentioned to us. And some also commented that, when they attended mainline churches, they could not understand why it was that “nothing happened.” When I mentioned this in a discussion with a small group in one of our churches in Rio, the pastor commented, “We come to this church assuming that nothing will happen. And we would be shocked if it did.”

3. The events of the Day of Pentecost were so out of the ordinary, such a clear and compelling manifestation of God’s power, that the small community of Christians gathered on that occasion could only speak of them in terms of the “last days.” They were manifestations of the end time when God’s redemptive purpose for humankind would reach fulfillment. Peter, in his sermon, made explicit reference to this drawing on the words of the prophet Joel. Pentecostalism, since its earliest days, has preserved what Harvey Cox has called a “millenarian sensitivity,” a sense of expectation of imminent and dramatic manifestations of God’s presence and power.

In many of these churches, especially those most influenced by North American

premillenarian theologies, pentecostal preaching has preserved this sense of expectancy, interpreted in traditional premillenarian terms. But this did not have a central place in the preaching we heard. Many in the younger Pentecostal movements are experiencing a taste of the millennium in their lives and world *here and now*. The sick are being healed, demons are being cast out, human lives are being changed dramatically. The future reign of God is already becoming a reality, as happened in the preaching and ministry of Jesus.

4. Pentecost preaching urges those who believe in Jesus and His resurrection to move to a much richer experience of God through the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. This brings with it greater dedication to the ongoing work of Jesus as well as the experience of being filled with new energy for it. And in the eschatological context we have just described, those who receive this baptism are convinced that their efforts are moving in the direction of the Reign of God.

In their preaching, I found something that once was central to our Calvinist faith: the conviction that the Christian life is a dynamic, exciting, and very serious journey. Those who have broken their addiction to alcohol or drugs, through the power of the Spirit, mark and celebrate little victories on their journey toward health. Those who struggle with demonic forces in their daily lives may have their ups and downs, but expect to move ahead as they entrust their journey into the hands of God.

Moreover, those who are captivated by the spirit of Pentecost expect to be led, time and again, into new paths of service. We frequently met women and men who did not seem to give great importance to what they possessed or the positions they occupied, no matter how secure or rewarding all this had become.

I remember especially a conversation with a pastor and his wife from northeastern Brazil. About a decade ago, they had started a new church which had established seventeen new congregations. What caught my attention was that they were more interested in talking about new ventures of faith than about what they had accomplished. The wife spoke of her experiences with the suffering and struggles of abandoned girls in her city, and of her plan to begin a small center from which to work with them. She had no money, no promise of any governmental or private support, and no expectation of receiving a salary for her work. But she was convinced that this was the direction in which God was leading her and was determined to find her way. Her husband spoke of their hope to eventually become involved in mission work in Africa. They had no missionary board or church to support them, but that did not stop them from doing everything possible to move toward this goal. After all, he said, this is simply an essential element in the life of a faithful Christian.

5. One of the more dramatic results of the manifestation of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was a most extraordinary experience of community. Men and women, coming from many different geographical areas and speaking different languages, found themselves communicating with each other and thus being bound together. They not only gathered daily in worship. They ate together and shared their food. They sold their possessions and gave to those in need.

Pentecost preaching may not refer very frequently to those verses dealing with the "selling of possessions." But the emphasis upon responsibility for the neighbor in need is a constant, and it is demonstrated in almost every congregation. What I have found most moving is the way in which the poorest families, often living in one- or two-room shacks, and with barely enough food for themselves, take in and help to

support not only members of their extended family but others who have no place to live. And some Pentecostals often have a special spiritual sensitivity to the particular needs of others and respond to them without being asked.

6. Perhaps the most central and constantly repeated element in Pentecost preaching is the call presented to all believers to be engaged in evangelism. We might say that all pentecostal preaching is evangelistic and carries with it the expectation that it will lead to conversions, as occurred on the Day of Pentecost.

Moreover, every believer, from the moment of conversion, knows that she is called to tell others about the marvels God has wrought in her life. This almost always begins in the family, and extends naturally to friends, neighbors, and companions in the workplace.

Moreover, all members are encouraged to become evangelists. They may begin by giving out tracts and soon move on to preaching on street corners or other public places. Out of this experience emerge those who offer their services to the church to begin new "preaching points." And those most dedicated and successful may be designated evangelists as they lay the foundation for new congregations, and often move on to become pastors. Thus evangelism is not only at the center of the life of the believer but also provides the context out of which vocations for ministry are cultivated and recognized by the church.

We who are not Pentecostals often think that they preach a limited message of "individual" "spiritual" salvation. This was certainly evident in much of the preaching we have heard. But this is changing. A new interpretation of the faith leads to a concept of salvation that embraces the fullness of life, spiritual and material, of the individual in the context of a community.

The Pentecost preaching we heard rarely spoke about the "social responsibility" of believers. But many of the lay women and men we interviewed declared that their faith was leading them to become increasingly active in popular organizations, social movements, and political parties. This trend has been confirmed by recent sociological studies in Brazil, which indicate that Pentecostals are as much involved in social and political struggles, especially of the poor and marginal, as are the members of the socially oriented Christian base communities. And, what is perhaps more important, Pentecostals who discover this dimension of their faith usually bring to the struggle a strong spiritual dynamic which may well play a major role in the empowerment of movements for social change among those who face increasing impoverishment and social disorganization.

I realize that I have not mentioned other elements in Pentecost preaching which those of us in mainline churches might consider to be distorted interpretations of the Bible and of our theological heritage. I am also well aware of the fact that much preaching in Pentecostal churches would negate some of the very things which have most appealed to me. But in and through all of this I have sensed the movement of the Spirit challenging all of us to be open to new perspectives on our faith, strive more persistently to discern where the Holy Spirit may be guiding us at this time, seek more ardently the renewal and transformation of our faith communities, and be challenged to respond more to the needs of suffering people. To the extent that we are able to do this, we will, I believe, be equipped for an ongoing dialogue with Pentecostals from which all will benefit.

Notes

¹ Jean-Jacques Surmond, *Word and Spirit at Play* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans, 1995), 139.

² Odette Mainville, *L'esprit dans l'oeuvre de Luc* (Montreal: fides), 91.

³ Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroads, 1985), 150.