

Charismatic Renewal and Ecumenical Progress

Auto-biographical introduction

Since completing my doctoral thesis in October 2007, I have had little opportunity to discuss my findings with anyone beyond my tutor and examiners. So in this paper I am focusing on one or two key issues from that work. It had been my conviction, from the beginning of the Charismatic Movement in England around 1960, that the new movement had ecumenical significance. Most of the popular renewal literature I read in the 1960s and 1970s acknowledged this ecumenical dimension of charismatic renewal, but did not prioritise it. The main emphasis was upon empowering the church in mission and evangelism, restoring morale in declining churches, and lifting individual spirituality to new heights. But in charismatic circles, as one saw previously different categories of Christian joined in a common, but not necessarily identical, experience, would it not be natural to expect this to lead to a totally rejoined Christian church? How such a goal might be achieved was unclear, but this was an intuitive hope. Thus as early as 1965, my main research question was taking shape in my mind: could the Charismatic Movement, by renewing the churches in their life and mission, be the principal means of their eventual reunification?

The ecumenical potential of Pentecostalism was noticed from the very beginning of its history. Hollenweger (1997:348) sees an inherent 'ecumenical root' in classical Pentecostalism, believing that in most places it started out as an ecumenical renewal movement. Charles Parham looked forward to the time 'when baptised by the Holy Ghost into one Body, the gloriously redeemed Church without spot or wrinkle, having the same mind, judgement, and speaking the same things.' Parham also saw himself as an 'apostle of unity.' Hollenweger lists several others in that first generation who in different ways saw the hope of Pentecostalism as ushering in an eventual Christian unity (1997:347)

The evangelical Colin Buchanan also noticed the ecumenical potential of the Charismatic Movement in the Church of England. Among the many fruits of the movement Buchanan envisaged a new cross-fertilisation.

'It is likely that the charismatic movement brings missing dimensions to some of the existing traditions in the church. To the evangelical, it brings a release from negative attitudes to sacramentalism, and the created order ... The evangelical may also be delivered from his fear of Rome, and thus share in worship and activities with Roman Catholic charismatics, on a basis of true mutual acceptance rather than fierce hostility. To the Catholic (whether Anglican or Roman) the movement has often brought the Bible to life. It has broken its formal and liturgical bounds, and come into the life of the congregation and individual with a vividness and power, which has astonished the recipients. On the other hand, the critic is still free to say that charismatics duck the harder intellectual task of Christian discipleship.' (1981:39)

But, Michael Harper, made some of the first significant theological contributions of the charismatic movement from the Anglican Church. In *This is The Day* (1979) he devoted a whole book to set out a credible hope for visible Christian Unity, starting from the charismatic renewal. His methodology went beyond an evangelical 'stretching his boundaries a little'. He took a full plunge of theological commitment, based upon what he has observed and experienced from a Charismatic viewpoint. Harper believed that

one of the main purposes of the renewal was to offer a new ecumenism. His ecumenism was not an alternative to the official denominational variety, for he clearly owns, that at some point the realised ecumenism of experience must engage with the hard process of 'round the table' ecumenism. But Harper took the Roman Catholic Church seriously, in a way, which most evangelicals of the 1960s could never quite manage. This is extremely significant, because the Roman Catholic Charismatic renewal, dating from 1967, had started to bring Catholic priests into more ecumenical contact and significantly to the platforms of the Fountain Trust conferences.

The big question, which was forming around this time in the more Protestant charismatic minds had far reaching consequences. Would the Roman Catholics, who had experienced Charismatic Renewal, become 'reformed' in their theology and consequently impact the Catholic Church in that direction; or would they feel they could no longer remain within their parent church and leave for something better? Harper himself seemed to expect some form of 'come-outism' from the Catholics and he struggled with this issue for some-while in his capacity as editor of *Renewal* magazine. At that time there was widespread popular expectation that charismatic Renewal, in renewing Catholics spiritually, would also 'reform' them theologically. But it did not happen. In June 1975, after considerable correspondence, Harper in *Renewal* editorial 57, noted the importance of the endorsement of Charismatic Renewal by Pope Paul and Cardinal Suenens, and saw it as an encouragement for all who look to the Holy Spirit to bring renewal to all the churches. Mather, in her thesis (1983:441) notes, that by 1979, Harper had clearly come to terms with the fact that charismatics were remaining in the Catholic church, and that the reality of the Holy Spirit's continued work amongst them, under these circumstances, had convinced him that they had divine authentication of this.

The growing significance of the Roman Catholic Renewal

The closure of the Fountain Trust, founded also principally by Harper, the rise of the house churches, the drift back to denominational renewal movements, signalled together a new chapter for charismatic renewal. If charismatic renewal had an ecumenical thrust, then it seemed for the moment to be going backwards. However, the renewal within the Roman Catholic church produced a number of seriously reflective theologians from the beginning, and their contributions have been quite significant. A considerable part of my thesis was concerned to study the history of the Catholic charismatic theology and the work of Peter Hocken emerged quite early on as significant. In *New Heaven? New Earth?* (1976: 48f) Hocken says:

'It does not require great powers of perception to see that Pentecostalism has ecumenical significance. Any movement that brings together Assemblies of God and Roman Catholics in brotherhood and common worship has potential... Whilst Pentecostalism had an ecumenical component in its original dynamic, its expulsion or exodus from the Churches that gave it birth can be seen in retrospect to have a providential character. For secession and isolation enabled them to pursue their genius and develop a complete corporate life in fidelity to their basic inspiration; only because of this has pentecostal *otherness* developed so that seventy years later it can confront its elder brethren both as brother and as other ... the ecumenical potential is latent in this combination of identity and otherness'.

Hocken is beginning to unpack here his methodology for Christian Unity. He sees the separated life of the Pentecostal milieu as a providential period of gestation and

formation, (and here is his key concept) not as the basis for a wholly new separate ecclesiastical existence as in (say) the Restorationist movement of the 1970s, but as an essential component of the church waiting to be reintegrated into the whole 'catholic' body.

In later publications Hocken expands on his thought. He sees that it is not useful to equate the separated bodies as mere denominations, but that it is necessary to recognise the peculiar character of each movement.

'In this situation, reintegration has to be on the basis of the work of the Holy Spirit in each grouping and tradition, which means respecting its original character in its positive witness. The root problem seems to be how to integrate revivals, principles and organic substance. The history of the ecumenical movement suggests that any kind of ecclesiastical democracy that treats all the divided Churches as equal partners is doomed to frustration.' (1994:158,159)

Hocken's 'blueprint for unity' here, is saying that one cannot treat all groups, denominations, movements equally around the ecumenical negotiating table. What has to be re-integrated into the greater whole is that which was originally the work of the Spirit within the particular group. That alone is the treasure to be preserved; the rest is baggage, which may be discarded. The assumption is, that given the grace of baptism in the Spirit, which is self-evidenced by the participants across several denominations, there should also be coupled to it a corresponding recognition that within each tradition there is a genuine work of God. It may have become overlaid and obscured over time but it nevertheless remains within; and through prayer, reflection and heart searching can be recovered. Charismatic Renewal in the church, effects a kind of 'peeling back the layers of the onion', not only in a historic sense, but it also puts the denomination back into touch with its root spirituality. The ecumenical task is then seen as the reintegration into the whole of that which was originally of God at the heart of a denomination.

Whilst Hocken was concerned with Christian re-union, other Catholic theologians were wrestling with the earlier terminology of 'Baptism in the Spirit' and its relation to sacramental water baptism. There is a parallelism here with the evangelicals and charismatics wrestling over the theology of conversion and spirit-baptism. In my reading, I failed to discover a Catholic Charismatic who did not accept sacramental baptism as the point of Christian initiation. Simon Tugwell illustrates this tension. He accepts an experience which does not allow denial of itself, but rejects an unacceptable theology such as the term 'Baptism in the Spirit' to describe it. However in reaching forward to find a way past the difficulty, *and this is where he is of ecumenical importance*, (emphasis mine) says: 'In religion, there is a complex dialectical relationship between scripture, personal experience, and the context of our church fellowship, theological studies, and so on. This is a perfectly healthy process, and it is one of the ways in which the Holy Spirit leads the church into all truth...it is the living mediation of the deposit of faith given once and for all, by the operation of the Holy Spirit.' (Tugwell:38). Tugwell puts his finger here on perhaps the crucial interaction between ecumenism and Charismatic Renewal. There is an ongoing complex revelatory process, which is at work through the church. It lives with its 'givens' in scripture, tradition and reason, but the whole must be open to the Spirit's scrutiny. That in its turn requires a magisterium..and so on. It seems to me that a 'complex dialectical relationship' is not so much *part* of the process by which charismatic renewal impels ecumenism, *it is the process*. (emphasis mine)

Emmanuel Sullivan, another Catholic Charismatic author, put it in terms of a church ever open to its future.

‘It would be a mistake to talk about the integration of any movement into a closed Church, a Church convinced of its own final and fully formed entity ... the Church is conditioned by its history. To be faithful to God it must remain unconditionally open to its future and not condition its hope by a precipitous, unthinking determination of what its life must be in the future.’(1983:155)

So the ancient historic churches, as they experience renewal, cannot cling to any assured status from their own past. There is a particular challenge here to the Roman Catholics, Anglican and Orthodox. ‘Ancient’ cannot simply mean ‘correct’, or ‘apostolic roots’ be equated with ‘perfection’ and ‘final form’. Similarly, the ‘renewed theologian’ is free to restate his theology, but inevitably does so from within the stream of a tradition, which will judge and authenticate or not his new formulations. All churches need to re-visit their roots in the ecumenical quest, with an openness to the Spirit as they re-examine their doctrines on revelation, experience and theology. This exercise should lead to positive ecumenical convergence in the future.

Gelpi, also, is aware of the interpretative process contained in that phrase ‘complex dialectical relationship’. In particular, he challenges ‘fundamentalism’. Talking of Pentecostal belief being rooted in a fundamentalistic understanding of Acts chapter 2 he says, ‘The abandonment of fundamentalism is, however, no small matter. It demands a major intellectual conversion and the critical re-evaluation of a host of intellectual, moral, and emotional attitudes which the fundamentalist, for a variety of personal reasons, is unwilling to face.’(1975:178)

Charism and Institution

If charismatic renewal is to have any credibility as an ecumenical motivator, sooner or later, it ought to get noticed impacting the official ecumenical movement. Catholic Charismatic Bishop, Kevin McDonald, noted that ecumenism was the first priority of CCR not just of the past, but of the future. He affirmed that Charismatic Renewal gave birth from its beginning to a vibrant form of ecumenism based on mutual recognition of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but that in itself cannot be a substitute for work of the official ecumenical movement. He sees CCR as an important dimension of the institutional-charismatic dialectic; but that in recent years there has been a tendency throughout Christianity to pull back and stay within the bounds of one’s own church. If renewal is to be ecumenically fruitful it needs not only to be domesticated in its own denomination to leaven its parent, but it must go beyond the boundaries to engage with the corresponding process coming towards it from other denominations. (from personal correspondence)

The Canberra statement of the general assembly of the WCC has an interesting comment:

‘The purpose of the church is to unite people with Christ in the power of the Spirit; to manifest communion in prayer and action and thus to point to the fullness of communion with God, humanity and the whole creation in the glory of the kingdom.’ (Canberra text para.3). The statement does not attempt to define the content of the shared experience, but it does acknowledge that a certain degree of communion (*koinonia*) already exists between the

churches: 'this is indeed the fruit of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of all who believe in Christ Jesus and who struggle for visible unity now' (para.7).

There is an obvious connection, between what is expressed here in the Canberra statement, and the shared experience that charismatic renewal has manifested across the denominations. The term '*koinonia* theology' has almost become a synonym for 'partially realised communion', with obvious pneumatological implications.

Raniero Cantalamessa (1991) sees charismatic renewal and official ecumenism as inherently complementary in the life of the church. 'Charismatic unity was that which the Holy Spirit operated on the day of Pentecost, uniting 'Jews, devout men from every nation.' (Acts chapter 2 verse 5) and also seen in uniting Jews and Gentiles in the centurion Cornelius's house (Acts chapters 10 and 11).' He continues:

'In this charismatic phase the divine initiative prevails, which manifests itself in an unpredictable, powerful and creative way. There isn't time, or necessity, to discuss, deliberate or emanate decrees...The Spirit precedes, the institution must necessarily follow...This unity is not simply doctrinal, or of faith, but total: the believers are of 'one heart and soul' (Acts chapter 4 verse 32). It's a sort of 'fusion by fire', a melting point.'

Charismatic renewal is essentially an exercise in 'primal spirituality' (Cox 1996:83) before it develops into a reflective and theological mode. It is concerned primarily with recovering first-hand relationships with the Divine, both individually and corporately.

Mühlen offered the seminal thought for the interaction of charism and institution by positing the sacraments as 'deposited' charisms. The charisms of Jesus are deposited in the sacraments and thus made available down through history. Thus penance is a repetition of baptismal repentance. Anointing the sick (holy unction) deposits healing. Confirmation preserves Jesus' prophetic charism and Holy Orders is a charism for 'awakening the charisms of others'. Thus if we think of sacraments as a manifestation of the institutional life of the church, Mühlen sees them as having a charism basis. This revised sacramental theology, such as Mühlen posits, which sees sacraments as 'deposited-charisms', has profound ecumenical significance. (Mühlen 1978: 124,125)

Re-grasping the vision

It may well be that charismatic renewal is a foretaste of the ultimate ecumenical reality. That reality is ever present in the Spirit, but awaiting much institutional groundwork and ecumenical pedestrianism, before it can be realised in the far greater glory of a church which has manifestly married the charismatic and the institutional in a creative balance. The charismatic way of ecumenism is not one way of doing unity alongside a number of other options. It is an essential part of the methodology of growing together.

In my thesis I argued that the early ecumenical vision of charismatic renewal has largely been lost. Have things changed? For the denominational evangelicals there is a greater acceptance of the ecumenical climate than forty years ago. The Restorationists have peaked and have opened their windows to their neighbours. The Roman Catholic charismatics have sensed a fresh call to unity from their recent Newman conference. In the midst of it all, the Alpha course, as the latest 'sign', has provided ample confirmation that renewal, evangelism and ecumenism are inseparable. So has the process glimpsed in the 1960s returned to the starting line again?

At the 2006 summer Conference of the Lutheran Ecumenical Institute of Strasbourg, the significance of charismatic renewal for ecumenism was moved to the centre of the agenda. Asamoah-Gyadu presented a very fulsome paper on the inherent ecumenical nature of Pentecostalism (2006:1). Most recently (January 2009) the Council of the Community of the Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) set up a consultation process with young ecumenists on the topic 'Ecclesia semper reformanda. Ecclesiological reflections on the renewal of the Protestant churches in Europe'. Special attention is to be paid to the challenges from charismatic movements. (www.leuenberg.net)

So maybe the charismatic movement with its fifty years of experience and theology, together with the fifty years of Pentecostalism before it, is now able to engage with mainstream ecumenism, with an effectiveness that has not been seen before. The results should be interesting.

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