

Religious Experience in Worship:

A Pentecostal Perspective¹

Jean-Daniel Plüss²

*'To complain that man measures God by his own
experience is a waste of time; he has no other yardstick'
(Wirt and Beckstrom)*

Introduction

It may be somewhat surprising to hear these words from Dorothy Sayers, a mainline Anglican whose life was focused on discipline, careful linguistic research and a penchant for doctrine.³ One would rather expect it from, let us say, a popular charismatic speaker. All the same, the question remains, how does one speak about one's faith, especially in the context of worship? How is a religious experience expressed, and what are the consequences of shared faith for the community of believers, and for that matter to anyone else? This presentation shall focus on the role of experience from a Pentecostal point of view, i.e. Pentecostal in terms of its focus, ecumenical, however, in terms of its approach.⁴ Or to put it differently, the challenge is to speak about valid Christian experiences that can be meaningful to more than to a particular group worshipping in a particular context.⁵

In order to be able to approach this challenge in a straightforward fashion let us, if you will, assume three basic presuppositions. The first is a theological one; the other two are more phenomenological in nature. This will provide us with a platform for dialogue and clear out possible basic misunderstandings.

Theological/biblical presupposition

The first presupposition deals with the question, Why are we able to speak about religious experience in the first place, or do we just fool ourselves with wishful thinking? To this we have primarily a theological answer. It focuses on the nature of God and the way God is portrayed in the Bible. It makes sense to answer theologically, for religious experience is placed in the context of its claims, namely that it is an encounter with the divine, with God. The theological presupposition can be formulated as follows, 'We believe that God is love, and that this love is manifest in the divine Trinitarian relation as well as in God's relation to humankind.' The internal life of the Trinity is the relational life of God in self-giving and other-receiving love. Miroslav Volf, a theologian with Pentecostal roots, summarized it well, saying:

'When the Trinity turns toward the world, the Son and the Spirit become, in Irenaeus' beautiful image, the two arms of God by which humanity was made and taken into God's embrace (see *Against Heresies* 5,6,1). That same love that sustains non-self-enclosed identities in the Trinity seeks to make space 'in God' for humanity. Humanity is, however, not just the other of God, but the beloved other who has become an enemy. When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross... We, the others – we, the enemies – are embraced by the divine persons who love us with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace.' (Volf 1996:128f)

The first presupposition then brings religious experience away from the profane into the context of worship, the nature and presence of God. From a Christian point of view, it would be the nature and presence of God as it has been communicated through the Word, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of God's Spirit in us. A Christian experience may have many forms in which it is contextualized, but ultimately it will relate to God's loving intention for humankind.

Religious/Christian presuppositions

The second question that concerns us is: *how* can we speak about religious experience? The following presupposition, then, is focusing on the way we speak about our faith. It may be formulated as follows, 'It is meaningful to speak about a Christian religious experiences if they fulfill the following criteria: a) the foundation and intention of such experiences must be related

theologically to the Bible, b) any such experience will ultimately aim to be relational, c) any such experience can only be called religious if it yields a surplus of meaning.’ We can reword this statement in three separate sentences.

First, Christian experience can only be called Christian if it draws its interpretation from the Bible as the Word of God. In fact, it is the dialectic between the (given) narratives of the Bible and the liturgically celebrated (received) narratives of the church that brings meaning in the here and now.

Secondly, Christian experience is typically ecclesial in nature. It is in the context of the church, the body of Christ, that the Spirit of God enables, legitimates or questions a believer’s experiences. If M. Luther said ‘Without the people of God there is no Word of God’ we could paraphrase ‘Without Church there is no Christian experience.’⁶

Thirdly, Christian experience is explained as an encounter of the other, as such it relates to the otherness of God and yields meaning that goes beyond human experience. It is a disclosure situation that points to the observable and more, it is an experience of subjective transcendence as an answer to objective transcendence.⁷ In this way we answer the legitimate question: *when*, or in what case, can we speak about religious experience? We are consciously limiting the use of the term ‘religious experience’ to experiences of self-transcendence. Even if the average Pentecostal cares little about the hermeneutic placing of religious experiences, he or she would be quick to agree that it is by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that a particular religious experience is caused and makes sense.

These presuppositions answering the why (God), the how (community), and the when (surplus) are necessary for the setting of our discussion, even if today, theologians are no longer as hesitant to speak about religious experience, especially Pentecostal religious experience, as perhaps a generation ago (Bühler et al 2000; see Schmid 2000). As we move to the main body of this paper let us take a more descriptive approach, illustrating how Pentecostals place the role of experience in worship.

Experiencing unity

The experience of unity is fundamental in a Pentecostal worship service. As Daniel Albrecht (1999) has ably illustrated in his *Rites in the Spirit* unity is expressed from the very beginning of the church service until the very end, whether it is the practice of ‘greeting’ each other with an embrace and words of joy, affirmation or encouragement, the practice of ‘worship’, a time of common singing and prayer, or the practice of the ‘altar call’, when the priesthood of all believers is practiced by personal commitment and prayer for each other (Albrecht 1999:129; 136ff). It is an expression of the ‘unity in the Spirit’ (Eph.4:3) in the Body of Christ (I Cor.12:13). These expressions of unity are most visible in terms of a social coming together.

At the same time there is an experience of unity that has its foundation in being accepted by God, in his grace, through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, and by the witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:16). In practical terms this means that the believer has unrestricted access to the ‘throne of God’. Being accepted, being forgiven, being filled and gifted by the Spirit, being called to serve are all expressions of God’s unconditional love. This message is regularly communicated to the Pentecostal believer, and constitutes the basis of Christian living. Of course, this message is not particularly Pentecostal, but it seems that Pentecostals make a special effort to communicate this unity in God often. Perhaps because they are not afraid to speak about sin separating people from God’s presence and, on the other hand, speaking about God’s Spirit empowering the believer for daily living.

Experiencing unity is based on the communion the Christian enjoys in Jesus Christ. In Lukan and Pauline literature it is also expressed in the community building fellowship of the Holy Spirit (Wenk 2001:66-81). It seems, therefore, appropriate to have a look at different aspects a Pentecostal may experience this communion in Christ and the fellowship of the Spirit. In order to do this we may appropriate Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical approach that he calls the threefold mimesis (Ricoeur 1983:85-129) and apply it in a liturgical context. By mimesis we mean a representation of a human experience or insight.⁸ It is a process of understanding that moves from a pre-reflective reaction, to a conscious configuration of what is being understood, and eventually leads to an expression of commitment based upon gained insight.

Understanding thus is not to be misunderstood as a straightforward rational deduction like reading a manual and then know the use of a machine. In other words, it is not a question of

intellectual orthodoxy. Understanding in the Ricoeurian sense applies to the whole person, it is a process that involves orthodoxy as well as orthopraxis. So let us turn to the first mimetic element and focus on pre-reflective representations of religious experiences in worship.

The reactive element: enjoying the fruit of communion in Christ

Being ‘touched’ by grace is not just a metaphorical phrase. People that just have had a conversion experience, people that have moved ‘from darkness to the light’, are often overcome by emotions such as joy or peace that they intuitively express their ‘new life’ by awe, praise and prayer. It is, as Ian T. Ramsay (or for that matter Acts 9:18) would say, as if ‘the scales have fallen from their eyes’. The first reaction is typically a pre-reflective expression that is suitably placed in the context of worship. The Pentecostals that I have met gave room for such expression, not just once but repeatedly, not just in the context of conversion but each time believers had disclosures of God’s love.

As a consequence there is passionate singing that confesses faith, there are proclamations of grace that encourage and motivate. But there also communications of sorrow that immediately provoke a reaction of care and a feeling of being cared for. It is in this pre-reflective context that the physicality of worship is most concretely expressed. The body is allowed to speak by singing, clapping, dancing, shouting, and touching. In a sense it is a literal celebration of the incarnation of Christ in the believer.

The re-enactive element: celebrating communion in Christ

The second stage in which religious experiences can be appropriated is re-enactive in nature. It is a configuration of what is being understood, it is a symbolic representation of a religious reality. In a Pentecostal context we find at least three⁹ such re-enactive elements: communion, baptism and prayer for restoration.¹⁰ In the celebration of *the Lord’s Supper*, the promise of unrestricted communion is confessed. The focus on the cross and the resurrection allows for the renewal of personal commitment in Christ.

Baptism, probably because it is mostly practiced by immersion of young people and adults, is experienced as a personal demonstration of union with and commitment to Christ. It follows naturally that many Pentecostals also focus on the promise of the Spirit at that point.¹¹ A life

through the Spirit (Romans 8) is the consequence of union with the crucified and risen Lord through baptism (Romans 6).

By *praying for the sick*, and with the weak and discouraged, Pentecostals follow the example of Jesus as they see it. I would argue that they do this because they have experienced the ‘touch’ of Jesus in their own life so that it follows that others can do the same. It is as if the eschatological promise of glory can already be realized to a degree in the here and now. It is an expression of the fellowship of the Spirit (II Cor.13:13) in which no one is excluded.

The proactive element: commitment as an expression of communion in Christ

The third stage, by which religious experience is interpreted, focuses on a re-figuration of truth as it is perceived. It is the result of a disclosure and prompts to action. Examples of this commitment can be seen in the missionary attitude, the cell group churches and belief in empowerment by the Spirit of God, all three being an extension of an experience of unity.

The missionary zeal among Pentecostals has turned a small group of Californian believers to number 500 million globally in just 100 hundred years.¹² Because of the speed in which this growth took place Pentecostals are experiencing global unity differently than, let us say, Roman Catholic believers. They pledge help enthusiastically, because for the most part, they sense solidarity not just historically/intellectually, but also in terms of spiritual/physical affinity.¹³

The cell group activities represent a recent phenomenon, especially taking place in the larger urban centers. Pentecostals that are members of large churches have felt the need to meet in small groups in which they can share their physical as well as spiritual joys and needs. Cell groups have become the center of social solidarity on a personal level, as in contrast to the social programs initiated by larger organizations and missionary programs that express a mediated form of solidarity. As such, cell groups have become a tangible sign of communion in Christ. Experiencing unity in a world that produces stress, strife and sometimes even seems to be falling apart is important.

Related to the social concerns expressed in both the missionary zeal and in the cell groups, is the strong belief that empowerment by the Spirit of God enables them to do ‘works of the Kingdom’ in the midst of injustice and human suffering. A good number of Pentecostal theologians have in recent years argued that a Pentecostal ‘eschatological orientation’ is not producing an otherworldly attitude devoid of social passion, but on the contrary, encourages Pentecostals to be

sensitive to engage in building the Kingdom of God, because the Holy Spirit is working a change (see Kärkkäinen 2001). A liturgical consequence of this conviction is the importance Pentecostals attribute to intercessory prayer in the worship service. Those prayers tend not to be formalized as in many historic churches (embedded in ‘Lord, have mercy’ and ‘Lord, hear our prayer’) and they receive more room. This is even more the case in small group meetings. That intercessory prayers are important among Pentecostals has a theological reason, but it may also be due to the fact that most Pentecostals are poor and depend on God’s mercy in their daily subsistence. In that respect they may not be that different to other Christians in the two-thirds world.

So far we have emphasized unity in Pentecostal worship. However, Pentecostals, although they enthusiastically expect the Kingdom of God to come, a symbol of ultimate unity, they experience, as all other human beings, also diversity, dissonance and decay. How they handle diversity in the context of worship will be the focus of the next section.

Experiencing diversity

Religious experiences take place in a fundamentally human context. On the one hand, they can be understood as bringing harmony to a diversity of human experiences. On the other hand, religious experiences lead to narratives, statements of faith and claims that are always in tension with narratives, statements and claims of others. This is probably the reason why many hesitate to speak about religious experiences. They are too subjective, some say; others claim that they bring disorder into the church.¹⁴ Nonetheless, we cannot avoid the issue, as Dorothy Sayers has pointed out. I suggest approaching the topic of statement and counter-statement through the notions of ‘revelation’ and especially that of ‘testimony’.

The idea of revelation

We have said that a religious experience is pointing beyond itself because there is a disclosure with a surplus value, it comes as a revelation. We have also noticed that the reaction to a religious experience is mimetic, in the sense that it is first a pre-reflective representation of a human event. In classical terminology one could say that at this point the *lex credendi* is not separate from the *lex orandi*. In other words, a response to revelation takes place in the context of worship. What then is

the appropriate way to respond? How can the person who has had a religious experience, and how can the people that listen to an account of such an experience, respond properly? In a Pentecostal context, these questions are typically answered by pointing to the role of testimony.

A hermeneutic of testimony

The testimony functions as a mediator between a revelation, imagination or insight and any temporal contingencies. Without going into a detailed explanation of a hermeneutic of testimony as Paul Ricoeur (1981) has done we may hold on to the following three aspects.

First, a testimony has a quasi-empirical character, the one who testifies gives an account, he reports an event and he narrates. Those who hear the witness must decide whether or not they can believe in the reality of the facts told. It is not enough for the witness to make statements, for she will also have to give account of their truthfulness.

Second, this leads us to recognize a situation of trial that every testimony evokes. There is a struggle of opinion. The trial does not necessarily debunk the testimony. It may also enhance its value by acclamation or imitation. Testimony thus is characterized by a decision of justice. The testimony receives an exterior dimension through the judgment of its hearers. Karl Rahner (1965:106) would in this context speak about the collective finding of truth. The pivotal question is: What do we have in common? Through the decision of justice which is not in the power of the witness, the testimony receives an ethical dimension. But equally important is the fact that this decision is vital to fight the danger of subjectivism which ultimately leads to un-truth.

The third aspect is related to false testimony. False testimony does not refer to an error in the account of the thing seen; it is a lie in the heart of the witness. It may, for example, be the deliberate shaping of a the narrative to suit one's own preferences, it may be an embellishment for the sake of presenting an integrated story, or it may be the parroting of someone's else's story. On a more fundamental level false testimony meets the test of conviction. If the witness is willing to pay the price of life, then his or her name changes into martyr. Testimony has now, more than before, an interior aspect. It is identification with a (hopefully) just cause.

For the Christian it is evident who symbolizes this total commitment, this faithful and true witness. It is in Jesus Christ that the symbolic tradition, which mediates between meaning and event in the hermeneutics of testimony, finds its focus and fulfillment.

This excursion on the hermeneutics of testimony was important in order to emphasize the significance of testimonial discourse in Pentecostal worship. Religious experience, in my opinion, should not only be discussed in terms of a reductive hermeneutic (for instance in psychoanalysis), but should primarily be given room in terms of an amplifying hermeneutic (for instance in phenomenology). In our context this means in the life of the church.

The role of testimony

Historically the confession of faith has played an important role in the liturgy of the church. The reciting of a creed is in many historic churches an integral part of the worship service. Some Pentecostal churches do also recite a creed, but for most a personal testimony is more relevant than a formal confession of faith.¹⁵ The role of testimony fulfils a double function. First, it relates the confessor to the Christian ‘cloud of witnesses’ (Heb. 12:1) and as such stresses the unity within the body of Christ. Second, because it is a personal testimony it reflects the diversity within the community of faith, as the participants come from many walks of life.

Testimony also causes the worshipers to praise God. For the witness illustrates God’s faithfulness, mercy and loving care by his or her narrative that tells the story of a person’s encounter with God’s grace. It often happens that the congregations respond to a testimony by singing a hymn or a contemporary worship song. Often a spontaneous acclamation is interpreted as a ‘clap offering,’ it is a joyful expression of praise, not to the speaker, but to God who is acknowledged as ‘the author of life’ and reason for the resolution of problems in the story of the believer’s life.¹⁶

A testimony often produces encouragement for the listening congregation. The witness may tell an incident in which fear, loss or failure was overcome by appealing to God’s promises or submitting to the divine counsel in the Bible. Those testimonies have a different quality than for instance a sermon, because they do not have an exhortative nature. On the contrary, they are a non-violent appeal based on the personal openness and vulnerability of the witness. In other words, because testimonies can be questioned and because they call upon a personal reaction by the hearer, they are inviting rather than moralizing in character.

Bringing order in diversity

Pentecostals are convinced that testimonies are an asset to evangelism. This may best be explained by comparing testimonies to fairy tales (Plüss 1988:161-202). Both rely on biographical elements, illustrate the difficulties and tensions that are typical to everyday life and then introduce a new player that changes the destiny, or resolves the misfortune. The fairy tale may speak about villains and heroes. A religious testimony, in comparison, may speak about sin and grace. And just as a good fairy tale has a happy end, but inevitably leads back to an everyday life situation, so does a valid testimony speak about a God-given resolution, but acknowledges the person's existence in the world. Hence we can say that a testimony is a tool for drawing the map of one's life, by appealing to the transforming power of the creator, an experience then is not a fragment of fancy, but a necessary element for the understanding of life. And it is a religious experience because it appeals to transcendence, it points beyond the self, thus bringing order by looking beyond self-centeredness.

Within the context of diversity.

We have talked much about order and unity. A testimony, though, will always remain in the context of diversity, within the fabric of life with its subjective and existential nature. Here we find one of the big differences between a testimony and the recitation of a creed. Whereas a creed, as a given text, is a formal theological statement that can either be embraced or left alone, the testimony functions within the very tension between the spiritual and the secular, the sacred and the profane. In comparison to a given text, that can be read from a hymnal or book of prayer, a testimony is usually an oral presentation, directly related to an individual. As such it invites the hearer, as we have said above, to test that which was said. This test is by nature placed in the context of diversity. The hermeneutic intension is thus different, for a creed emphasizes stability and tradition, a testimony, on the other hand, focuses on transition and change.

A testimony's reception is also an experience of tension between the individual and the group. The telling of a religious experience is at least implicitly also making claims, it challenges the hearers. There is a deliberation on who is right. In a sense it is the continuation of the tensions as they existed between Jesus and his adversaries, between Peter and the crowd at Pentecost, between Paul and the Athenians, to mention just a few. From a Pentecostal point of view it is not only

important to verify the truth in as far as that can be done in a self-transcending context. It is just as important that the claims are evidenced by the spiritual fruit the religious experience produces.

As a logical consequence of the ‘test’ and the ‘fruit’ issues, we can see the role of testimony as navigating change within the tension between tradition and renewal. Histories of the Pentecostal and charismatic renewals are a good illustration of how this tension has been met. In some cases change has not produced improvement but alienation, in some communities change has been minimal because of the dominance of tradition. In other instances, however, change has transformed churches and the societies they are part of. Based on the cohabitation of Pentecostals with other Christian churches in the past and present it could be argued that the testimonial tradition is an important tool for ecclesial reform and ecumenical understanding. The question is, are testimonies allowed their role on the market place of the faithful?

All attempts of ecclesial reform and ecumenical understanding are, however, subject to their penultimate character. Jesus Christ has yet not come back in his glory. Hence we ask, how do Pentecostals relate experiences of diversity to their understanding of eschatology?

Testimony as an interpretation of the eschatological ‘already’ and ‘not yet’

The eschatological emphasis among Pentecostals, in view of their pneumatological convictions, relates strongly to the tension between the presence of the Spirit ‘already’ enjoyed, and the reality of the Kingdom of God ‘not yet’ fully realized. Pentecostals like Steven J. Land (1993:98ff) have pointed to passionate charismatic activity in order to relate to this tension. Others like Simon Chan (2000) and Jean-Jacques Suurmond (1994) have described the phenomenology of the charismatic gifts as eschatological reality being ‘played out’ in everyday life.

On a more basic level, one that is not confined to charismatic worship or to a Pentecostal understanding of the Spirit’s activity in the world, we find once more, that religious testimonies, if they meet the test of authenticity, have the capacity to relate to the eschatological tension by relating the realities and convictions involved to each other. Not only do they illustrate how a person or a group can enjoy God’s grace in view of a fallen situation, but they also have the ability to address any person that is not part of the group (Plüss 1988:81-201).¹⁷

In concluding this section on experiencing Pentecostal faith and life in diversity, I would like to repeat that Pentecostalism is by virtue of its fast growth and global nature predisposed to think in terms of diversity. There is no such thing as a normative Pentecostal experience or a singular

Pentecostal point of view. The experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit may be a common theological notion, but it is played out in diversity. In all likelihood the experience of diversity will be a decisive factor in promoting Christian cooperation and ecumenical discussion. Hence it makes sense to reflect in the last section of this paper on the issue of experiencing reconciliation.

Experiencing reconciliation

Reconciliation is a term mostly used by theologians. Roman Catholics are familiar with the ‘sacrament of reconciliation’. Today it is also a secular expression, we may hear about the ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ in South Africa, ‘Aboriginal Reconciliation’ in Australia or a ‘Victim–Offender Reconciliation Program’. In any case, if we speak of reconciliation we have something holistic in mind. Reconciliation is more than an intellectual exercise. It is more than an emotional experience. It is more than a humanistic achievement.

Where in terms of Christian faith and life then do and could Pentecostals experience reconciliation?

Reconciliation with God

If we remember our presuppositions, we can say that reconciliation from a Christian point of view is reconciliation with God, through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Such an experience of reconciliation, we said, holds a surplus value. But Christian reconciliation is also with people that were created in the Image of God. As Miroslav Volf would say, one cannot embrace reconciliation with God and exclude one’s neighbor. Putting this topic in Pentecostal vocabulary one could say that by the affirmation of the Spirit we experience forgiveness in a world full of accusations. By the seal of the Spirit we find peace in a restless world. And by the charismata of the Spirit we are empowered to commitment for reconciliation. This all sounds good, but the question remains, why are there not more signs of reconciliation in the world if 500 million Pentecostals and many other Christians are practicing what God has done in their life? I cannot answer this question, but I would like to introduce an un-Pentecostal element into our discussion: silence...

An un-Pentecostal virtue: silence

Pentecostal worship is known for its dynamics. There is always something going on. If Pentecostals are prayerfully participating in worship and there is a moment of silence, many begin to open their eyes as if something unexpected is going to happen. They may be right; the fact however is that for most of them, silence is at best a virtue during a time of private prayer.

I would like to suggest three reasons why silence could be an experience that Pentecostals need to cultivate if they want to practice reconciliation.

First of all, reconciliation is facilitated when we are able to listen. If people are full of themselves they are not able to see what is going on around them. If a person is constantly talking, how could the same person be listening to what others have to say? Fortunately, the testimonial tradition in Pentecostalism is always also an exercise in listening. The importance thereof cannot be underestimated.

Secondly, when we are able to be silent we take ourselves back and let others and/or the Other act. 'Waiting on the Lord' is paradoxically a well known phrase among Pentecostals. It is often used in relation of 'seeking the Baptism of the Spirit', by which they often mean receiving the gift of speaking in tongues. Simon Chan (2000:73-96) picks this theme up and suggests that such a thing as Pentecostal asceticism does exist. He would argue that speaking in tongues is a form of silence, just as the Jesus Prayer in the Orthodox tradition, or the experience of mystery and awe for the desert fathers (ibid:82f). As the person speaking in tongues does not understand the meaning of what is being said and because 'He who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God' (I Cor. 14:2), she takes herself back and allows room for openness. Speaking in tongues is an exercise that points to self-transcendence. There are, of course, other ways to practice a taking back of oneself. I would simply add at this point that Pentecostals, could surely benefit if they would allow for more physical silence in their forms of worship. Silence allows them to be intimate with and attentive to God (Psalm 46:10).

A third reason why silence may be essential for Pentecostal reconciliation work is the teaching on holy living among Pentecostals. If God is 'holy' and God's people are 'set apart' to worship and serve him, then the emphasis on holiness brings to focus the transformation of the believer from a life in separation and sin to a life of communion and grace. Pentecostalism has its roots in the Methodist Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century (Dayton 1987). The desire to understand and do the will of God necessitates a setting apart, figuratively speaking a going into the desert.

This metaphor illustrates the need to be able to abandon daily routine and customary thought patterns in order to be open to the Word of God that teaches, to the Spirit of God who directs, and to a person that was created by the same Spirit and is in need.

Silence may still be considered an un-Pentecostal virtue, but the short discussion on silence has shown that Pentecostals have within their own tradition tools that are indispensable for the work of reconciliation.

Reconciliation with others

Many groups within the Christian tradition have emphasized personal reconciliation with God. Within the context of Pentecostal proclamation and worship this is the most prominent emphasis. As this is undisputed, we may turn our attention instead to experiences of reconciliation that relate to people, to other individuals as well as groups. For reconciliation not only needs to be experienced but also practiced. I invite you to consider two areas which may be significant for Pentecostals. First, the communal experience of reconciliation, and second, reconciliation in terms of a new ecumenism.

As the communal experience of reconciliation is concerned, allow me at this point to speak from a personal point of view. I grew up in a bi-cultural environment as my parents came from two different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and later in life I made a conscious decision by embracing yet another cultural background through marriage. It is for this reason that I much appreciate what Miroslav Volf has done with his theology and ethics of reconciliation. We cannot go into details at this point. Suffice it to say that he, as a Croatian citizen in a semi-Serbian environment, has had first hand experiences with practicing reconciliation and pondering its significance. Furthermore, as a former member of a Pentecostal church he at one point chose to join the Reformed churches. His own biography encourages both traditions to take his contribution seriously.

There is, however, also another area where communal reconciliation is necessary, namely in the particular local churches (see Wenk 1999). Instead of emphasizing the obvious, the sometimes dramatic familial reconciliation taking place when a person experiences a conversion and then brings a whole family or a clan to the church, I would like to point to the need to cater to individuals in an urban environment. Especially in Pentecostalism one can notice that it is primarily an urban phenomenon. Pentecostal churches are growing rapidly in the mega-cities of the world

and assuming dimensions that make an individual seem insignificant in the large congregation. The challenge arises to provide for a 'spiritual home' that goes beyond the Sunday worship experience. The formation of house groups, workshops, cells and the like are a response to fight anonymity and estrangement in large congregations. The division into small groups does two things that are related to our topic. First, the believer is given an opportunity to relate to others and participate in their faith and life. He or she can experience unity, be challenged by diversity and practice reconciliation within a manageable and therefore meaningful relational entity. Second, the believer is not left alone with his or her religious experiences. They can be shared, tested and related. If it is true that religious experiences play such an important role in the life of Pentecostals, then it is of paramount importance that some form of spiritual coaching is going on. A pastor of a mega-church can do comparatively little in that respect. It becomes the task of the priesthood of believers to minister to the body. Ideally, the group leaders have been taught to do the job.¹⁸ In all instances there has to be a committed teaching of the Word of God and a reliance on the presence and work of the Holy Spirit to guide them.

Finally I would like to relate reconciliation to an emerging form of ecumenism that has different emphases than a preoccupation with the theological debates rooted in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. This new kind of ecumenism receives attention because there are changes in the church as well as changes in the missionary movement.

Whereas mainline churches closely relate to a historic identity and cultural values of the West, there are many new non-conformist, post-colonial and counter-cultural churches rising to prominence. Instead of portraying a certain institutionalized identity, they are more interested in a flexible setup and in networking with other churches in the area. Most Pentecostal churches belong to that new group. This new face of the church can especially be found in the two-thirds world. It can be compared to a partnership model in which diversity and common interests create an interesting interplay. Paul C. Pierson, a Presbyterian missiologist, has studied these new churches and illustrates their interdependence:

'An example, Ahmed, seeking for the meaning of life began listening to a Christian radio program, wrote asking for a Bible correspondence course. This led to his meeting with a Christian worker (a tentmaker) living in his country, who led him to faith in Christ. Running his shop and caring for his family, he attended a night Bible course in another town and became

part of a growing church fellowship. Five agencies coordinated their efforts over several years... The radio broadcasters gave his name to the Bible correspondence people, who referred him to a Christian worker in the area, who passed his name to Bible teachers and national Christians. Clearly these individual parts of the Body of Christ combined to do something that none could have done alone. They needed each other to carry out the mission.’ (Pierson 2002, lecture 3:2)

The new churches are less institutional, less denominational and less government related, and at the same time these churches are more sectarian, charismatic and flexible. They are less interested in post-modern *Beliebigkeit* (‘preferential options’ for the lack of a better term) or maintaining cultural relevance,¹⁹ but rather focus on lay ministry, the practice of gifts, not in terms of liturgical correctness but in terms of relevancy in daily life; they do not sing about God, they sing to God; they are meeting the marginalized not through political opinions but in small fellowships on a regular basis. Last but not least these new churches are ardently missionary.

Before turning to the issue of reconciliation, allow me to mention the changes that have taken place in the missionary movement. For they make a similar point. At the beginning of the 20th century 80 % of the North American missionaries came from the mainline churches, but at the end of that century only 6% of them were from these churches.

‘In 1800 approximately one per cent of all evangelical Christians lived in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, with 99% living in Western Europe and North-America. By 1900 the figures had changed to 10% and 90%. By 2000 about one third lived in the West, two-thirds in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.’ (Pierson 2002, lecture 1:2)

What has happened is that the center of gravity has shifted from the West to the Two-Thirds world, from the established churches to the new type of communities, from the agenda set up by the churches of the Reformation to the one claimed by the churches of the South and East. Does this mean that the new churches will not join the ecumenical bandwagon? Will the Pentecostal churches in the West go different ways than their sister churches in the developing countries? As far as the Pentecostal Churches are concerned, I would argue that because they consciously accept diversity and interdependence among their ranks, because they know that historically they developed from

the old churches, and because they have an ecumenical mission strategy that believes that the 'whole church' brings the 'whole Gospel' to the 'whole world', they will remain interested in ecumenism. But it will be an ecumenism that calls for more than intellectual agreement and occasional co-celebration and coordination. It will call for reconciliation so that hopefully members of new and old churches can come to know and appreciate each other by the love of God. It is my prayer that the desire for reconciliation will come from all sides, and perhaps it will be a reconciliation based on personal experiences that hold a surplus value. Perhaps there will be room for testimonies that tell the story of exclusion turning to a friendly embrace because the presence of God has wrought a change in all parties involved. Perhaps religious experiences will join hands with theological reflections, and both will reach out in commitment to touch the ones that yet have only sad and unredeemed stories to tell.

In the end, only those experiences will be truly ecumenical that concretely reflect the love of God, the salvific reality of Jesus Christ and the eschatological presence of the Holy Spirit. Matthias Wenk is right when he says that Pentecostals will participate in ecumenical dialogue when they will be able to live and move ecumenically. Only if there is a story to tell about this dialogue, if there is a testimony about it, will interest be awakened among Pentecostals on a larger scale (Wenk 2001:77).

Conclusion

We have made a tour assessing Pentecostal worship and life by focusing on how unity, diversity and reconciliation can be experienced. The key argument was that any religious experience has to be transformed in order to be understood and applied. It can be either represented verbally (testimony), symbolically (liturgy) or by personal action (ethical commitment).

By attributing an important role to the Holy Spirit and holiness, Pentecostals acknowledge that any religious experience is but a process in their Christian walk of life. They also see the need for discernment in evaluating what happens to the individual and the community as a result of a shared experience.

In terms of worldwide Christianity we are challenged to dialogue with the experiences of others, especially since most Christians have their cultural home in a non-western context. If it can

be said that true religious experiences will glorify God, then it should be our concern that these experiences, in all their diversity, work towards unity and reconciliation so that the Christian message may be believed (John 17:20-21).

Endnotes

¹ Paper presented at the 6th WARC/Pentecostal Dialogue Amsterdam May 17 – 22, 2002.

² Contact: jd.p@bluewin.ch

³ <http://www.sayers.org.uk/dorothy.html>

⁴ This presentation has not been written as an academic lecture or rhetoric masterpiece, but rather as a working paper providing food for thought for both partners in dialogue. Hence I have made allowance for subjective comments.

⁵ Walter J. Hollenweger put it like this, ‘I think it makes ecumenical dialogue easier if Pentecostals no longer argue that *their* spirituality is entirely and solely spirituality of the Spirit and the other churches’ spirituality is *only* traditional rites and outward form. The Spirit uses outward forms and fills them with life, if we let him (or her) do so and if we do not make of the culturally determined forms of dogma.’ (Letter of Walter J. Hollenweger to D.A. June 3, 2000, emphasis his).

⁶ Matthias Zeindler (2001:22) rightly reverses the statement and says that ‘Without the Word of God there is no people of God’. One is tempted to say: ‘Without Christian experience there is no Christian church.’

⁷ Ian T. Ramsey and Paul Ricoeur, for instance, have extensively discussed this topic. For a short introduction see Plüss (1988:28-32).

⁸ For further reading on the Greek concept of mimesis see: <http://www.westland.net/venice/art/cronk/mimesis.htm>

⁹ Some Pentecostals would, for instance, add the washing of feet as another example.

¹⁰ I prefer, in accordance with Michael Brown (1995) to translate the Hebrew ‘*rapha*’ in the larger sense of ‘restoration’, rather than in the narrow sense of ‘healing’ although I admit that Pentecostals seem to be speaking about healing more than about God restoring one’s life. On the other hand, Pentecostals may speak about healing in a wider sense and have wholeness and restoration in mind, for often the physical and the social go together.

¹¹ Somehow conflating Johannine (the paraclete), Lukan (empowerment in the name of Jesus) and Pauline (the Spirit in you who is the Lord) theology.

¹² I am fully aware that this claim is formulated simplistically. All the same, it is appropriate and pertinent to the argument that Pentecostals have a different sense of belonging together, due to their short history and development.

¹³ Maybe this is a biased statement; or just a personal statement of a Swiss Pentecostal that spent many years actively in a Belgian Catholic environment as well as in a Reformed setting in Switzerland and had much time to ponder the different dynamics in those established churches.

¹⁴ It is the classical tension between new creative ideas and the notion of change, in contrast to continuity and tradition in the church (cf. Rendtroff 1985).

¹⁵ In South Korea, for example, the Apostle's Creed is part of the liturgy.

¹⁶ That this reaction is not a routine was once vividly observed by the author at an US Army Retreat in Berchtesgaden during a 'prayer and share' session. Many testimonies were applauded to, everything seemed to be repetitive (music, testimony, acclamation, music, testimony, acclamation etc.) as suddenly no one applauded at the end of someone's 'testimony' because apparently everyone sensed that there was something wrong, although on a superficial level the usual 'narrative markers' were present.

¹⁷ Without going into much detail, I would argue that testimonies, because they also make use of metaphors, have the ability to relate that which is and that which is not. And because they are narrative and metaphorical they can be understood by outsiders, as every person can relate to narratives and metaphors. Cf. Jean-Daniel Plüss, *Narrative in Worship*, 81-201.

¹⁸ Many large churches have, for that reason, established strong teaching programs and apprenticeship systems.

¹⁹ A situation I witnessed as a member of a decision making body in the Reformed Church of Zurich for many years.

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