

FIVE FACES OF PENTECOST

*The larger the Pentecostal movement grows, the more diverse it becomes.
Is that a good thing?*

by Dean Merrill

The following presentation was given at the Christian Life College Fall Festival, Mount Prospect, Illinois, on November 15, 2005.

When I use the word “Pentecost,” I am not referring to the Old Testament Feast of Pentecost prescribed in Leviticus 23, nor to the day of initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples (Acts 2). Instead, I mean to indicate the current movement of the Spirit across the world, now ninety nine and a half years old.

Labels have always been somewhat in flux in this movement. Charles Fox Parham, whose Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas, was a flashpoint of early outpouring in 1901, freely used three different terms: “Pentecostal,” “apostolic,” and “Latter Rain.” (Parham was the mentor of Azusa Street elder William Seymour.) What eventually got painted high on the side wall of the Azusa Street building in Los Angeles was “Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission” although in the earliest days Seymour and the other leaders said no sign was necessary at all. The Holy Spirit would draw the crowd to the right place all on His own.

Soon thereafter, other terms came into usage (along with such uncomplimentary labels as “holy roller”). By the 1930s at least, “full gospel” was in play, despite its prickly inference that other groups might have only half a gospel. This term perseveres to the present in the name of the world’s largest congregation: Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea.

Then around 1960, as the Holy Spirit began to move in historic denominations, we invented a new term: “charismatic,” from the Greek charisma, for “grace-gifts.” In the 1980s, the renewal led by such figures as John Wimber and C. Peter Wagner came to be called “Third Wave.” Then in the 1990s, stirrings at the Toronto Airport Vineyard and at Brownsville Assembly of God in Florida were dubbed by some the “Fourth Wave,” although the name never really seemed to catch on.

Alongside all this is the term “Pentecost,” a shorthand for those who hold a perspective that church life and experience in the Book of Acts and the first century was not abnormal, but rather normative. It stands for the idea that we should do as they did.

A MUSHROOMING PHENOMENON

It really is quite astounding what has happened in 99 years, since Azusa Street. David Barrett, the esteemed statistician who keeps thorough track of these kinds of things, puts it this way:

Out of 6.3 billion people on the planet, 2.1 billion call themselves “Christians”—this includes Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, everyone. Of this 2.1 billion, 600-700 million of those are classified as “Pentecostals,” “charismatics,” or “neocharismatics.”

In other words, we're roughly one-third of one-third, which is the same as one-ninth of the population of the world. In just a century! It's pretty amazing.

On any Sunday in Brazil, a nominally Catholic nation, more Pentecostals are actually in church worshipping God than Catholics are at Mass.

In the most recent list of the top ten U.S. denominations, Pentecostals hold slot No. 4 (the Church of God in Christ, with 5.5 million believers, mostly African-American) and No. 10 (the Assemblies of God, with 2.7 million).

BUT WHO HAVE WE BECOME?

Growth is good. But it inevitably increases diversity. The bigger we get, the more varieties that sprout up. Especially in a movement with no central authority. As is obvious, we have no "Pentecostal pope" to keep us in line! Nobody has the power to silence assorted tangents.

We have to ask ourselves from time to time, "So who are we anymore? What is central about us?"

I recently read a book by Caroline A. Westerhoff entitled *Good Fences--the Boundaries of Hospitality* (Morehouse, 2004). This very observant Episcopalian, a previous canon in the Diocese of Atlanta, makes the valid point that if we're unclear about who we are in the church, we have nothing to welcome people to. Listen to these excerpts:

"The church, in our desire to call ourselves inclusive, is in danger of blurring our boundaries, or erasing aspects of our core identity... In our desire to be accepting, to be too many things to too many people, we can lose sight of that for which we stand – of who in truth we are." (p. xii)

"Our current words and practices of inclusion too often can reflect sentimental and sloppy thinking... To claim that a local church can be all things to all people is presumptuous at best, but it is a claim into which we too often slide when we are overly anxious about growing and meeting a budget – surviving in some form, any form, without sufficient regard for the ultimate cost to our identity. As my friend Joe is wont to say, 'The recipe for ice cream excludes a lot of good stuff, but if we included all of it, we would no longer have ice cream!'" (p. 28)

"If we do not lay claim to who we are, we will be nothing, and inclusion in our number will have no meaning." (pp. 30-31)

"Gates that open too wide and doors that open too fast do not give us the opportunity to slow down and decide what is important before we make our choices. Jesus even calls Himself the gate." (p. 37)

As I look around today, I see at least five different "faces" of Pentecost. Let me profile each of them for you:

1. RETRO PENTECOST

These are the churches where nothing much has changed since 1962. You walk in, and suddenly you are slapped in the face with a time warp. The vocabulary, the music, the aesthetics of the

building, the manner of the people all reminds you of going to church forty years ago. You feel like you've just walked into a kitchen with all the appliances in lovely avocado tone.

There are more Retro Pentecostals in the small towns and rural areas of America, obviously, where culture does not change so rapidly. But they exist in larger metro areas as well. I could tell some stories from my city of more than 400,000 people, but I probably shouldn't!

God still visits these churches, by the way. He finds sincere hearts there who reach out for his touch. He is not about to reject these folks. Their only problem is that a lot of today's people can't understand them.

I believe Acts 2:4 is vital, the Scripture that says, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." But we also need the role of Acts 2:14, where Peter stood up and said, "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say." Somebody has to articulate the meaning of Pentecostal phenomena in ways that curious outsiders can comprehend.

2. PROSPERITY PENTECOST

Some readers may question whether this is much of a factor anymore. Yes, it is. Just study the Christian bestseller lists, or watch what gets airtime on Christian television.

The trouble here, in my view, is that the message runs pretty much opposite to the ethos of Book of Acts. If you're looking for a rich Pentecostal leader in the New Testament, about your only prospect would be Barnabas. He owned some real estate in the beginning. But of course, very soon he "sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:37). In that, he did what both Matthew and Zaccheus had done before him. He gave it up his assets for the work of the kingdom, and from that point onward, he was no richer than anyone else in the church.

Yes, God retains the option to bless us financially--or not. But it's not a vending machine situation, where you put in the coins and get the candy bar. I've always appreciated the yardstick laid down by Dr. Gordon Fee: Will this "gospel" preach as well in Ethiopia or Nepal or Ukraine as it preaches in Tulsa and Dallas and Orange County? If not, then maybe it needs to be re-examined.

What is Luke 6:38 (a favorite prosperity text) really about? Read the context. Jesus is talking about loving our enemies, even to the point of loaning them money that we know they're not going to repay, though they promise to do so. If we go this far, he says, then "it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap."

What does 3 John 2 actually say? Read any up-to-date translation. "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well." The word "prosper" is nowhere to be found. The apostle is simply giving a conventional greeting to his readers.

We have to teach these things. We have to help people understand what the Word of God is saying and what it is not.

(This “face” of Pentecost, by the way, is the only part that is still called heretical by the rest of the church. Back when I was a kid, mainstream evangelical leaders and magazines used to say all of us were a cult. No longer. Just this.)

3. HYPER PENTECOST

Another term for this would be “Cheerleader Pentecost.” In some churches, you’ll find just about everything but the Jumbotron screen flashing “Get LOUD! Get LOUD!” The whole perspective is that God is to be found in the noise.

Everything is bigger, better than life. If the service doesn’t come off like a pep rally, it is deemed to be flat and “not anointed.”

I was recently talking with a Southern Baptist pastor who has a real heart for the presence of God. He is becoming a strong voice in his circles for getting beyond program and ritual to the moving of the Holy Spirit. “I want the fire of God,” he said to me with the utmost sincerity. “But you have to understand: To most of my friends, ‘charismatic’ means what they see on Christian television. And I have to confess myself, sometimes when I watch, I’m not sure whether I’m watching Elijah--or the prophets of Baal.”

I could not argue with him. He continued, “As I recall from reading the story in 1 Kings 18, it was Elijah who prayed down the fire. All the antics of the prophets of Baal didn’t get results.”

One of the cardinal tenets of Hyper Pentecost is this: “New is good; old is boring.” This is what leads to constant searching for new teachings, bigger and better stories, anything that makes the crowd go “Wow! That’s amazing!” That which is old is, by comparison, dull.

We need to understand the difference between “old” and “classic.” “Old” is riding in a little ’62 Datsun B210. “Classic,” on the other hand, is riding in a ’57 Thunderbird--something nearly all of us would love to do once more. Some things that have been around awhile are worth retaining for the ages.

For the Sunday after September 11, as the nation quivered in fear about when the terrorists would strike next, the worship leader at my church advised us musicians on Thursday to get ready for the Martin Luther hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” It was the perfect message for that kind of day. Even President and Mrs. Bush sang it along with several thousand others at the National Cathedral on live nationwide television that Friday.

But when we arrived at church on Sunday morning, the hymn was missing from the schedule. Why? I asked in dismay. “The pastor felt it didn’t quite fit the style of our church” was the reply.

A gem from the past was shoved aside because it wasn’t quite hyper enough.

4. NOMINAL PENTECOST

On the other hand: Let me address church situations in which the name remains ... but the essence has departed. The Pentecostal distinctives are still in the church constitution, but they are shunned in regular life (and sometimes even joked about). Oh, yes, we’re still “Pentecostal”; we just don’t practice it anymore. Caroline Westerhoff would say we’ve lost our identity.

I've been in some allegedly Pentecostal churches where you could more easily find out details of the pastor's income tax return than you could about the infilling of the Holy Spirit! I'm serious. He just does not want to speak about it.

To such brothers and sisters, I say: Turn back the clock with me 120, 150, or 200 years. Let's go back before Azusa Street and all that followed. How would you feel about preaching these kinds of messages?

Listen to Capt. Thomas Webb, a British military officer and lay preacher, in the first recorded Methodist sermon in America (1766):

"The words of the text [I am not sure which one, but it may have been John 20:19-21] were written by the Apostles after the act of justification has passed on them. But you see, my friends, this was not enough for them. They must receive the Holy Ghost after this. So must you. You must be sanctified. But you are not. You are only Christians in part. You have not received the Holy Ghost. I know it. I can feel your spirits hanging about me like so much dead flesh."

Would you like to accommodate the testimony of Charles G. Finney, the intelligent lawyer from western New York who described what took place a few hours after his conversion to Christ:

"... As I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost. Without any expectation of it ... the Holy Ghost descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity.... It seemed like the very breath of God.... No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say, I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart...."

Since I'm speaking here in Chicago today, let me go to the preaching of D. L. Moody. As you remember, he was doing great things for God in terms of Sunday school and YMCA work--and then the great Chicago fire of 1871 burned down both his Illinois Street Church and his Farwell Hall. He went to New York City that winter to raise funds for rebuilding. While there, he was walking along Wall Street one day when God visited him with a powerful baptism similar to what Finney described.

Five years later in 1876, preaching in the New York Hippodrome, an arena that occupied the same land where Madison Square Garden now stands, Moody said:

"God has got a good many children who have just barely got life, but no power for service.... The Holy Ghost coming upon them with power is distinct and separate from conversion. If the Scripture doesn't teach it, I am ready to correct it.... I believe we should accomplish more in one week than we should in years if we had only this fresh baptism."

Not long before he died in 1899, he said, "I believe Pentecost was but a specimen day. I think the church has made this woeful mistake that Pentecost was a miracle not to be repeated."

One of his contemporaries was A. J. Gordon, the Baptist minister in Boston whose name is still honored through Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Wrote this eminent churchman: "It seems clear from the Scriptures that it is still the duty and privilege of

believers to receive the Holy Spirit by a conscious, definite act of appropriating faith, just as they received Jesus Christ.”

To Nominal Pentecostals, I ask: Would you go even this far? Or would Finney and Moody and Gordon be “too charismatic” for your tastes?

John MacNeill was an Australian evangelist, a Presbyterian. In 1894, he wrote:

“Let us get back to Pentecostal methods. The trouble is that the churches have lost their way to that ‘upper room.’ Let a church only find her way back there and obtain her Pentecost; let pulpit and pew be baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire, and the people will come running in to see the burning.” (This appears in a book published by Moody Press, no less.)

R. A. Torrey, the protégé of Moody who became the first superintendent of the Moody Bible Institute, wrote in 1910, after the events of Azusa Street:

“The baptism with the Holy Spirit is a definite experience of which one may and ought to know whether he has received it or not.... A man may be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and still not be baptized with the Holy Spirit. In regeneration, there is the impartation of life by the Spirit’s power, and the one who receives it is saved: in the baptism with the Holy Spirit, there is the impartation of power, and the one who receives it is fitted for service.”

I must add that Torrey did not see a valid place for speaking in tongues; he was clear about that. However, his belief in and call for a separate, subsequent baptism with the Holy Spirit is undeniable.

Of all the spiritual forebears whom we should study most, the greatest is John Wesley, the progenitor of the Methodist awakening in England in the 1700s. He more than any other Reformer is our theological ancestor. You will remember his biography: son of an Anglican minister, John and his brother Charles were well educated; John spoke five languages fluently. After his Aldersgate Street conversion in 1738, he preached powerfully in the churches and the open fields of England. Some historians credit him with preventing a bloody revolution such as the French suffered just across the Channel at the end of the 1700s.

On August 24, 1744, he was invited to preach at his alma mater, Oxford. He stood in the pulpit of St. Mary’s Church before all the assembled professors and other dignitaries, and you won’t believe the text he chose for his message: Acts 4:31 (KJV)--”And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.”

Listen to his bold words:

“In the fear, then, and in the presence of the great God, before whom both you and I shall shortly appear, I pray you that are in authority over us, whom I reverence for your office’s sake, to consider ... are you ‘filled with the Holy Ghost?’ Are you lively portraiture of Him whom ye are appointed to represent among men? ...”

He spoke directly to the classroom instructors in his audience:

“Ye venerable men, who are more especially called to form the tender minds of youth, to dispel thence the shades of ignorance and error, and train them up to be wise unto salvation, are you ‘filled with the Holy Ghost?’ with all those ‘fruits of the Spirit’ which

your important office so indispensably requires? Is your heart whole with God? full of love and zeal to set up his kingdom on earth?"

Near the end of his message, his passion rose to a pinnacle of urgency:

"How few of you spend, from one week to another, a single hour in private prayer!... Who of you is, in any degree, acquainted with the work of his Spirit, his supernatural work in the souls of men? Can you bear, unless now and then, in a church, any talk of the Holy Ghost?... In the name of the Lord God Almighty, I ask, What religion are you of?"

Tell 'em, John Wesley!

When reading this, I could not wait to get to his journal to see how the message went over that day. Here is the record:

"Tues. 21.--I set out with a few friends for Oxford. On Wednesday, my brother met us from Bristol. Friday, 24 (St. Bartholomew's day.) I preached, I suppose the last time, at St. Mary's. Be it so. I am now clear of the blood of these men. I have fully delivered my own soul."

But then--a surprise!

"The Beadle [university officer of protocol] came to me afterwards, and told me the Vice-Chancellor had sent him for my notes. I sent them without delay, ... admiring the wise providence of God. Perhaps few men of note would have given a sermon of mine the reading, if I had put it into their hands; but by this means it came to be read, probably more than once, by every man of eminence in the University."

Such was the bold ministry of a Spirit-filled model for us today.

In 1995, the eminent professor of religion at Harvard, Dr. Harvey Cox, wrote a book entitled *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (published by Addison-Wesley; now out of print, but used copies are accessible for purchase on the Internet). At first I feared the worst from this member of the intellectual elite. Surely he would look down his academic nose at the poor, misled Pentecostals.

Not so at all. Dr. Cox did his homework, traveling to many lands visiting Pentecostal churches. His descriptions are respectful and even appreciative, almost wistful in places. He describes in great detail the humble beginnings of Azusa Street, and then gives this insightful comment:

"I believe that the question of where and how, and among whom, the modern pentecostal movement came to birth has enormous religious meaning. Like the story of the ancient Israelites and the life of Jesus of Nazareth, it is another example of the way God uses unlikely vessels, at least unlikely in the eyes of the age, to accomplish the divine purpose. Pouring the new blessing on a one-eyed black preacher and a gaggle of social outcasts is like choosing a nation of slaves and the son of an unwed mother to begin new chapters in history. The great temptation facing pentecostals today is to forget or to minimize the circumstances of their birth, to try to blend into the religious and social atmosphere around them. But, as I have noticed time and time again, when they blend in--as they frequently do--they inevitably lose their essence, perhaps one should even say their souls. They become just one more denomination, one more creed, a slightly noisier crowd of religious hucksters trying to outshout the others. When they deny their origins they also deprive themselves of a future." (p. 262)

Finally, let us turn our attention to ...

5. AUTHENTIC PENTECOST

This does NOT mean a church that harps on tongues or miracles all the time. It simply means a church that naturally and freely integrates the supernatural with the whole body of biblical truth and practice. It gives the work of the Spirit a legitimate airing along with salvation and all the other great themes of the gospel.

Perhaps I can best represent Authentic Pentecost through three illustrations:

I was sitting at the lunch table of the Canadian FCA Conference in Fort McMurray, Alberta, in early October 2005. Paul Vallee, now an FCA pastor in Red Deer, Alberta, was recalling his early days as a youth pastor in this town, far up in the northeastern part of the province. Another younger pastor at the table had been a member of the youth group back then.

They told about loading up a bus for an 11-hour ride to a youth retreat with the FCA church in Fort St. John, B.C. One girl in the group had said she would not be going. Why not? Because she was prone to migraine headaches--especially when riding long distance in a vehicle.

“Oh, come on,” her girlfriends pleaded with her. “We really want you to go with us. You’ll be okay.” In the end, the girl was won over.

About three hours into the bus ride, sure enough--the girl began to crash into a fearsome migraine. She had told the group, including her youth pastor, that once these attacks started, there was no relief. She would be in agony for three or so days.

What to do now? Paul Vallee did not ask for the shades to be drawn or the kids to lower their noise level. He didn’t take up a collection of Motrin and Advil. Instead, he called for prayer.

As the bus kept going down the highway, the youth began a “rolling prayer meeting.” They fervently called out for God’s intervention on the girl’s behalf. And in about 30 minutes ... her head came back up, her eyes were clear, and the migraine had stopped! “This is incredible,” she said. “This never happens. I’ve never gotten relief until it ran its full course.”

Even more remarkable was that, as the following months and years went by, this girl NEVER AGAIN had a migraine. God had healed her permanently that day on the bus.

That’s what I call an authentically Pentecostal youth group.

Second story: When I was a junior at this institution (Christian Life College), someone set me up with a blind date. On the first Saturday of November that year, I took a striking blonde freshman named Grace Danielson to the homecoming football game at her college, now North Park University.

We enjoyed getting to meet each other and found we had several things in common: (a) height! She was 6’ 0” and I was 6’ 6” (b) music (c) we were both pastor’s kids, and (d) both sets of parents now lived in the state of Kansas. One thing very different, however, was our theology. Her father was now a conference superintendent of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

She asked what I believed, and I told her. The minute I said Pentecostal, she told me about a wild Sunday evening she and a girlfriend had spent in a Pentecostal church back home that made no sense whatever. They had left in disgust partway through the sermon.

“Well, why don’t you come to church with me?” I suggested, hopefully. “I go to a church over on North Clark Street called Philadelphia Church.”

She wasn’t interested in Sunday mornings, having already committed herself to a Covenant church in the city, even to the point of teaching Sunday school there. But she would be willing to come on a Sunday night.

I should pause here to explain that in those days, Philadelphia Church was not the “hottest ticket” in the city. It had its idiosyncracies. But its pastor, Russell Meade, was a sincere and serious man who preached the Word of God and then asked people to respond to what had been said. He wasn’t flamboyant; he was just “authentically Pentecostal.”

Here is what happened over a period of five months, from November to the next March: My girlfriend heard the Pentecostal message explained ... saw it demonstrated in credible ways ... processed her various questions about what was going on ... went back to re-read the applicable Scriptures ... came to understand the biblical foundation for Pentecostal life and practice ... then came to desire the infilling of the Spirit for herself--and on a Sunday night at the end of the service, while kneeling alone in the prayer room, with no coaching from others, was genuinely filled with the Spirit and spoke with other tongues. All in five months.

That young woman is my wife today.

Is this happening in our churches today? If not, why not?

My final story: In February 2003, I was traveling in western Europe on behalf of International Bible Society, where I served at the time. I arrived in Amsterdam on a Saturday night. I would spend Sunday in church with my host, the IBS director for Holland, and then we would get to our business on Monday and Tuesday.

Now of course, we all know that western Europe is currently no hotbed of revival. But I was pleasantly surprised the minute we walked into his church, an independent charismatic congregation of mostly Surinamese immigrants. There were some 900 in the morning service, and another 600 in the early-afternoon service.

From the minute the praise and worship began, I could sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in this place. All the service was in Dutch, of course; I was sitting up in the balcony with a set of headphones listening to the simultaneous translation. Occasionally I would recognize a tune (from Hillsong or Hosanna) and sing along in English. Otherwise, I would just soak up the divine presence in this place. There seemed to be no manipulation, just genuine reaching out to the Lord.

Across the back wall of the platform area, behind the singers, was a large inscription in Dutch: *Geef de Heilige Geest ruimte*. I puzzled over what that might say in English, but couldn’t make it out.

After some forty minutes, the service moved along to the offering time. When the plates were being passed, I turned to the young man sitting next to me, who also apparently needed at least some translation help.

“Do you read Dutch?” I asked.

“Some,” he replied.

“What does the sign say?” I asked, pointing to the stage.

He gave me the translation: GIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT ROOM.

In that instant, my heart swelled: Yes! Yes! Yes! That’s what I feel in the place. They have made it a central value to give the Holy Spirit adequate space! They are not pushing their own agenda; they want His agenda. They are welcoming whatever he wants to do in their midst. They are freely and openly inviting Him to take charge. As a result, their church is filled with His life and presence.

This is what we need all across North America as well. We need to welcome the Holy Wind to do his work in our midst. All other desires must take second place. We must yield to his purposes in order to please him and accomplish his mission in our world.