

Seeking Another Pentecost

"Revival conditions are not with us at present; this is a day of small things, and we remain pygmy saints" (J.I. Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit).

Is the wind of revival blowing through the church today? With Packer, I would say - no. Despite the many claims to the contrary, and the Pentecostal and charismatic impact upon the church, the church has not been visited by a Holy Spirit-led revival as yet. Let me give my reasons for making this statement.

The charismatics have brought more division than unity. The catholicity that marked the early church has left us. We seem more divided than ever, and that in our dangerous and apocalyptic times. We see walls erected where no walls should exist. The division in churches, the many small denominations and the large mainline churches present a sorry spectacle to a world in dire need of Gospel orthodoxy and practice. Our brokenness accuses us. Are we still concerned about the devastating and rapid secularization of our society? Isn't it frightening that millions in North America are totally estranged from God? Do we long for the day when we will experience the reality of Paul's confession – "There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one Faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:4, 5)?

Individualism

There appears to be little church consciousness. But it was the church that received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, not single individuals. The Holy Spirit works in and through the church. In the institution of the means of grace, the offices of pastors, elders and deacons and the development of the creeds, we witness the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells in the church permanently (John 16:13; Acts 15:28). The stress in the New Testament is not so much on the individual's possession of the Holy Spirit but on the church's possession of Him. Of course the indwelling of the individual believer by the Holy Spirit is also taught. But the New Testament's emphasis falls squarely on the church, the body of Christ – the temple. The thought that the church is God's temple seems new and disturbing. Many Christians have become so individualistic that they no longer see the covenantal relationship with God and one another. But Christians are the temple (Eph. 2:20; 1 Peter 2:5). The individual stones of the building are indwelt by the Spirit. He dwells in the "spiritual house" to which they belong.

Often the power and the fullness of the Holy Spirit have not been noticed. There have been many spiritually barren periods in the history of the church, and there have been times of great manifestations of power and spiritual renewal. Yet the Holy Spirit has always been present and He will be with the church until the end of time.

Divisions

If the Holy Spirit leads the church into all truth, why then are the charismatics so divisive? This century's renewal movement into which a vast proliferation of all kinds of individuals and communities have been drawn, is not cohesive. Charismatics are now found in Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, in liberalism, conservatism and in the whole spectrum of Christianity. Professor Thomas R. Edger pointedly asked:

Is it not inconsistent that a movement which claims to be in direct contact with the Holy Spirit, to have all gifts such as prophecy, apostleship, and the word of knowledge, to communicate directly with God by speaking in tongues and other means, can at the same time include Roman Catholics, conservative and liberal Protestants, amillennialists, pre-millennialists, Calvinists, Arminians, those who deny the verbal inspiration of the Bible, and those who reject Christ's vicarious atonement on the cross?

Charismatics have tended to move, over a period of time, from one group to another, and from one emphasis to another as a matter of personal choice. David Barrett in his detailed study, *The Twentieth Century Pentecostal/charismatic Renewal in the Holy Spirit, with its Goal of World Evangelization*, says that charismatics in the non-Pentecostal mainline Protestant and Catholic churches experience an average involvement of only two or three years.

After this period as active weekly attendees at prayer meetings, they become irregular or non-attending. Barrett remarks that this "revolving-door syndrome" results in an enormous annual turnover, "a serious problem that has not yet begun to be adequately recognized or investigated." As an indication of the latter is the fact that 25% of the 12,000 at the Lutheran annual charismatic conferences in Minneapolis are first-timers, which implies an average 4-year turnover.

The Pentecostals and charismatics are calling churches back to the apostolic experience of the early church. They are not too interested in theological reflections. Their subjective experiences seem more important than the objective truth of God's Word. Dr. Juan Boonstra of the Spanish Back to God Hour reports that over 200 Pentecostal pastors in Latin America, too poor or too busy to get an education, preach sermons they have requested from radio broadcasts. Boonstra makes this interesting observation, "It is worthy of note that people who claim to have received the Holy Spirit have preached sermons provided by Reformed institutions, sent to them from afar." I also see in the charismatic movement the danger of Christian rather than Christ centeredness – the believer instead of Christ receiving the attention. God's agenda becomes identified with the agenda of man. The emphasis is placed on phenomena and subjective experiences. But these experiences are not just the property of Christians. Speaking in tongues is present in non-Christian religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and in sects such as Mormonism. Healings, miracles and exorcisms are also common in non-Christian religions. Trance-like states and communications on a level apart from the mind are common to paganism.

Christians must be careful with spiritual experiences. Not all these experiences are of the Lord. Is God not more important than man? Are Christians today too preoccupied

with their feelings? Generally speaking, the charismatic movement seems to teeter on the edge of emotional self-indulgence. Packer believes that in the charismatic movement the:

"The notes of humility and awe in the presence of the Holy God and of the need to realize the sinfulness of sin, the evil of egoism and the radical nature of repentance are rarely struck."

Our values and desires are not necessarily in line with Scriptural standards. Christ did not go to the cross to give us abounding happiness on earth, a good feeling and trouble-free living. We should never seek the Gospel to gain the goods of life or emotional self-fulfillment. There is an ineradicable gulf between the Biblical standards for Christian living and the standards set by the secular world. This vast difference is underlined by Martin Luther:

"For that is the highest thing that men want, to have joy and happiness and to be without trouble. Now Christ turns the page and says exactly the opposite; He calls 'blessed' who sorrow and mourn."

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