ECUMENISM FROM THE BOTTOM UP: A PENTECOSTAL PERSPECTIVE

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PRECIS

This essay describes Pentecostalism's emergence as a movement with an ecumenical spirit, emphasizing "spiritual unity" and developing a grassroots ecclesiology. Notwithstanding its ecumenical ideals, Pentecostal churches tended to be fissiparous and came to reject the formalities of the global ecumenical movement. Rather than lament a history of division, the essay recognizes that the independent nature of the movement facilitated its diversity and global mission. In this light a Pentecostal approach reconceives ecumenism not as the pursuit of one church but as a many-centered unity, one that transcends what is visible because it is not one thing but a myriad of things connecting and converging and moving freely in the Spirit.

Like early Pentecostalism, the ecumenical movement traces its origins to the first decade of the twentieth century. One hundred years on, the two movements have pursued very different, although complementary, trajectories. While Pentecostalism emerged with what might be described as "an ecumenical spirit," it has generally been indifferent to (and sometimes hostile to) the formal processes of ecumenism that were established under the auspices of the World Council of Churches and its various subcommittees. This stance has often been attributed to the influence of some conservative streams of evangelicalism on Pentecostal culture, but the more important explanation is ecclesiological. That is to say that, even if the ecumenical spirit of early Pentecostalism had been maintained, its grassroots, bottom-up ecclesiology would have prevented substantial involvement in the formal, creedal, and institutional processes that have characterized the ecumenical movement to date.

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As both Pentecostals and Ecumenicals\(^1\) celebrate their history and look to the future, there is an increasing awareness that this situation has to be rectified. For its part, the ecumenical movement appreciates the need to include Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements in its vision of a united Christianity, given not only the growth and size of this part of the church but also its importance in regions such as South America, Africa, and Asia. Likewise, Pentecostals are increasingly aware not only of their emergence as a community that sought unity in the Spirit but, further, that their growth and prominence place upon them a responsibility to take seriously the shared mission of the gospel. This essay intends to provide a way of thinking about ecumenism that expands the horizons and approach of the Ecumenicals and, at the same time, encourages Pentecostal participation in ecumenical mission.

**The Ecumenical Spirit of Early Pentecostalism**

Pentecostalism was birthed in a series of revivals that occurred globally at the dawn of the twentieth century. From the outset, it was not one thing expanding but a multicentered movement of the Spirit that brought about a series of interconnections between people and communities.\(^2\) That is to say, Pentecostalism did not spread from Charles Fox Parham in Topeka, Kansas, to William Seymour in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, and from this North American context enlarge its “tentacles” to the outer reaches of the planet. It is not and has never been a single thing, nor is it, as is sometimes assumed, an example of the Americanization and McDonaldization of evangelical religiosity. Rather, from the outset, Pentecostalism emerged as the coalescing and interconnecting of distinct but related global Christian spiritual experiences and missionary impulses. As Allan Anderson has noted, “Pentecostalism has had many beginnings, and there are many ‘Pentecostalisms.’”\(^3\) Early Pentecostal revivals, which occurred almost simultaneously in North America, Britain, Australia, India, Korea, China, and many other places, created a shared set of experiences that connected black and white, poor and (occasionally) rich, women and men, and people from diverse ecclesial, national, and cultural traditions.

Taking the nomenclature “Pentecostal,” these movements were identified with the unifying and empowering work of the Spirit in Acts 2. In this passage, the outpouring of the Spirit is manifest in the bewildering gift of “many tongues,” as symbolic of a new unity among people of every nation and the fulfilling of the prophecy of Joel that overturns social barriers of every type. The experience of Spirit baptism to which this passage is linked is thus central to

\(^1\)A label used in this essay as a reference to the formal bodies of the ecumenical movement. It is not intended to imply that those not involved in its organization are anti-ecumenical.


Pentecostalism, since, as Simon Chan observed, it functions to “actualize our communal life.” In contemporary usage, spirituality is almost always an individual matter concerned with self-actualization, but for the early Pentecostals the infilling of the Spirit involved the empowerment of the person to transcend self and participate in the shared mission of proclaiming the gospel. The experience and the emerging theology of baptism in the Spirit thus constituted the ecclesiology of Pentecostal movements and framed and directed their praxis. The notion of baptism in the Spirit as universally available and universally empowering for people of all genders, races, classes, intelligences, and churches was a vital symbol of unity and diversity, harmony and change.

David Martin, when considering symbols of change and symbols of stability, argued that, ideally, social development occurs by way of “a creative balance between necessary stability and destructive openness,” that societies overemphasizing traditions of stability have a tendency to stagnate and entrench the oppression of particular people while, conversely, overemphasis on symbols of change undermines the social stability that is vital to a flourishing community. It can be argued that, at its best, baptism in the Spirit facilitated precisely the creative tension Martin was describing—one that was concerned with spiritual unity in the church but one that was also, at the same time, insistent on diversity, empowerment, and change. Its importance for ecclesiology is primarily personal and cultural, not institutional—at least not directly. The Spirit transforms people and, thereafter, reframes the cultural values of the church. Only indirectly does this impact ecclesial structures, and it does so in a manner that facilities diversity and difference.

In terms of our focus on ecumenism, it was certainly the case that the spirituality informed by the experience of Spirit baptism generated an explicitly ecumenical vision. Like the ecumenical movement, Pentecostals looked back on the preceding centuries of competitive Christianity and envisioned a different future. Locating the problems of the church in stultifying tradition and divisive creed, they set their hope in the power of the Spirit to break down the walls of division and reform the church. Not wanting to become merely “another” competitive church institution, Pentecostals initially avoided the label “church” altogether. As Sarah Jane Lancaster, founder of Pentecostalism in Australia was to observe: “THE APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION is NOT another CHURCH [sic]. It is the Assembly of those who, throughout Australasia, are seeking to prove that our Blessed Lord is just the same as He was when He commissioned the disciples to ‘go into all the world.’”

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8Clifton, Pentecostal Churches in Transition, p. 73.
As already suggested, Pentecostalism is a cultural movement rather than an institutional structure or a single church. For nearly two decades the movement in Australia did not adopt formal doctrinal statements or ecclesial structures; neither did it ordain pastors, preferring flat structures and the more familial titles “sister” or “brother”—Lancaster herself being known as “mother.” The rationale was not only the universal empowerment of the Spirit but also the ecumenical thrust of the movement, which was understood as transcending formal doctrine and structure, a nondoctrinal unity in the Spirit. As Lancaster was to argue in a 1913 issue of the *Good News*:

> We have no quarrel with any of God’s dear children who differ from us in doctrine, believing that the Father permits these differences that we may receive practice in that greatest thing of all, “Love.” Therefore, praising Him that by His grace our love is greater than our knowledge, we gladly fellowship with all who comply with the essentials of salvation as given in Rom. 10:9, recognizing that if the Body of Christ are ever to be of one mind (and they are), the unity can only be achieved by meeting together and enjoying liberty of the Spirit (2 Cor. 2:17).

Lancaster was envisioning a grassroots, relational unity, which understood the “the body as an organism, not an organisation.” It was a vision common to Pentecostals everywhere. In North America, Jonathan Perkins summarized this pneumatological and eschatological vision when he argued: “We must have unity of the Spirit. Getting everybody into one church organization would not settle the world’s problems, nor the problems that confront religious leaders. Everybody in one church organization would not mean spiritual unity, but would make for spiritual disaster.” The spiritual and organic unity imagined was not abstract. It did not dichotomize spirit and flesh, and it certainly was not to be concretized in religious systems or structures or a single “church.” It was, rather, understood as the simple communion among people of the Spirit.

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10Baptist minister Gordon Bennett described Lancaster by saying: “I have known our Sister, who is affectionately known to many as ‘Mother,’ for over twenty five years: during that time, she has been a gracious, loving and helpful ‘Mother’ to many of God’s children and to many who did not know God” (*Good News* 23 [July, 1932], p. 18; cited in Barry Chant, “The Spirit of Pentecost: Origins and Development of the Pentecostal Movement in Australia, 1870–1939,” Ph.D. dissertation at Macquarie University, Sydney, 1999, p. 215.


unity was not sustained, largely because it did not take into account the fact that human communities need organization and institution to function and that even creeds and religious traditions serve a functional purpose. Sadly, far from serving as a unifying force in the broader church, it was not long before Pentecostals were fighting among themselves. One illustration of the difficulty can be seen in the fall-out between the two female pioneers of Pentecostalism in Australia and America. In 1922 Aimee Semple McPherson was invited by Lancaster to tour Australia. Upon arriving, however, McPherson dissociated herself from Good News Hall, citing grave doctrinal differences.14 As it turns out, Lancaster, whose background was Seventh-day Adventist, was an annihilationist who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. Lancaster was happy to fellowship with people like McPherson, who held more traditional views than herself, and she could not understand why McPherson rejected her. In her published response to the slight, she observed: “No statement was ever made broadcast by any representative of G.N.H. that they believed doctrinally ‘exactly’ the same as the Evangelist. How could they? We do not suppose that any two ministers on Mrs McPherson’s platform believed doctrinally ‘exactly’ the same as the Evangelist.”15

It was likely that McPherson was concerned about the impact her association with a nontrinitarian would have upon her public ministry, especially given the increasing influence of conservative evangelical constituencies on emerging Pentecostalism. Even more substantially, what Lancaster failed to realize is that doctrines and creeds function within ecclesial communities, as George Lindbeck observed, to provide “a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.”16 The difficulty for early Pentecostalism was that, in juxtaposing spiritual unity over and against creed, tradition, and institution, it denied the significance of sociocultural structures for the functioning of ecclesial communities.

In the decades that followed, Lancaster, as with Pentecostals globally, started to recognize the need to hold together, rather than juxtapose, the spiritual/organic and the organizational.17 British Pentecostal Donald Gee observed that the Apostles in the Book of Acts

insured the continuance of the revival by “government.” If I said that in some places they would want to drive me out. But God has opened our eyes to the fact that there is nothing in divine governing to quench the Spirit. God has blessed this movement, as we have recognized the importance of “governments.” 1 Cor. 12:28. I was brought up on the thought that all organization, all government, is fleshy and carnal. I am so glad that God has opened my eyes to see things better than that.18

17Clifton, Pentecostal Churches in Transition, p. 66.
For some commentators, the transition that Gee described is indicative of a move away from the liberative and empowering spirituality that categorized the early Pentecostal movement. It entailed the establishment of procedures for ordination and for local church and national constitutional documents (even if the language of “denomination” was assiduously avoided). In so doing, Pentecostal movements set out doctrinal statements, adopting the very creeds that, in their pursuit of spiritual unity, they had formerly disavowed. Over time, they also established administrative procedures and bureaucracies that enabled them to conduct the “business” of “church” and mission. The impact of these developments upon the spirituality of Pentecostal movements globally has been well documented. In America, for example, Margaret Poloma has described the “institutional dilemmas” that resulted from the bureaucratisation and institutionalization of the Assemblies of God. As Poloma observed, “There is a sociological tendency for religious groups to move from a prophetic to a priestly stance, from the free flow of charisma to its routinization.” The impact of this routinization was apparent, among other things, on female involvement in Pentecostal ministry, as it was on the ecumenical spirit of the movement.

I have argued elsewhere that the problem was not institution per se but, rather, the particular shape and culture of the institutional developments that occurred. At its best, Pentecostalism established structures that facilitated church leadership, that framed the proclamation of the “full gospel,” that focused on the priority of the local church, and that facilitated shared efforts in education and mission. Pentecostals modeled a pragmatic spirituality, and their institutional structures were implemented (and changed repeatedly) for practical reasons related to the efficiency and effectiveness of the mission of the church and, ideally, to facilitate the free flow of the Spirit. At its best, then, Pentecostalism remained first and foremost a personal and cultural movement of the Spirit that did not reify or sacralize its institutional structures. Because this was so, the movement was capable of emerging in multi-forms, a fact that goes to the heart of its globalization. Its pragmatic spirituality enabled it to change its shape as it made its way as globalizing spirituality, connecting and establishing an indigenous grassroots fellowship of Spirit-filled people.

Initially, the institutional structures established were modeled on those of congregational “free churches,” which intended to emphasize the shared respon-

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20 Poloma’s original analysis in 1989 has been updated by studies published in 2002, which continue to identify the “isolationist mentality that has made the AG so wary of ‘ecumenism’”—although she commented positively on the impact of Pentecostal scholarly work in opening the movement’s horizons. See Margaret M. Poloma, “Charisma and Structure in the Assemblies of God: Revisiting O’Dea’s Five Dilemmas,” manuscript prepared as the Assemblies of God “Case Study” for the Organizing Religious Work Project (2002).


22 The fourfold or full gospel was the shorthand way of summarizing the Pentecostal message that Jesus saves, heals, baptizes in the Spirit, and is coming again. For the origins of this message, see Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1987).
sibility of Spirit-filled believers for the organization and ministry of churches, with ecclesial administration thereafter built from the ground up. The problem over time, however, was the close association with conservative streams of evangelicism and the cultural values that came to be appropriated as a result. This included narrow, propositionalist attitudes toward doctrine that conflicted with the movement’s open spirituality and concern for a spiritual unity that transcended the creed. Harvey Cox has described what he called the tension between the experientialist and fundamentalist impulses of Pentecostals, a tension that had a felt impact on the movement’s treatment of women, on its increasingly narrow interpretation of the “full gospel,” and, for our purposes, on the silencing of its ecumenical values and activities.

The loss of the ecumenical vision, so important to early Pentecostals, was apparent not only in the movement’s failure to participate in the ecumenical movement but also in the divisiveness that came to frame Pentecostalism itself, not long after its initial unifying zeal. Indeed, Pentecostal denominations proliferated. While I have been suggesting that this, in and of itself, was not necessarily a bad thing, what was problematic was the dogmatism that led not only to competition between variously branded Pentecostal churches but also to outright intolerance and open warfare. To speak from my own context by way of example, the late 1920’s saw the formation of the Apostolic Faith Mission under the leadership of Lancaster, which was soon after condemned as heretical (for reasons already mentioned) by the newly formed breakaway fellowship that took the label “Assemblies of God.” Justifying the breakaway, George Burns, in his inaugural presidential address (ironically titled “The Need of Unity and Love”), observed:

That unity amongst God’s saints is desirable and right goes without saying, but let it always be remembered that the ‘unity’ the Lord Jesus prayed for was a ‘unity in truth.’ Unity may be obtained at too high a cost. Unity that condones error in doctrine or impurity in life is not the unity for which Christ prayed.

In referring to “unity in truth,” Burns was moving away from the concept of “spiritual unity” and defining unity in dogmatic and creedal terms. In this light,

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23To borrow from Lindbeck’s categorization, a propositionalist approach conceives of doctrine as “propositions or truth claims about reality,” grounded on an understanding of the Bible as being infallible and inerrant and, thereby, subject to narrow interpretation (Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 16).


it is perhaps not surprising that what ensued was a series of internal Pentecostal “wars.” In the 1930’s, for example, the Assemblies of God found itself “under attack” from the newly formed Apostolic Church of Australia. While the spirituality and theology of both movements were similar, grounded in the fourfold gospel and the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit, the Apostolics established a distinct ecclesial structure that vested authority for the church in Apostolic Pastors and structured their organization around the fivefold ministry offices of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher. Outsiders would find it hard to distinguish the two movements, but the Assemblies of God was at pains to identify the false teachings and “Apostolic Church Error.”27 Further divisions were to wrack Australian Pentecostalism in the decades to follow, a situation that mirrored Pentecostalism globally. In the United States, the movement split along racial lines and between Oneness and Trinitarian Pentecostals.28

As Grant Wacker observed, “Rancor—bitter, partisan rancor—formed one of the most salient features of the pentecostal movement’s early history . . . ‘fratricidal brawling’ marred converts’ relations with each other, and much the same could be said about their relations with outsiders.”29 Wacker identified the problem as being the result of the tension between the “primitivist” and “pragmatic” impulses of Pentecostal culture.30 The former relates to the strength of their conviction that God was speaking directly in and through them, a conviction that, at its best, inspired passionate devotion and missionary zeal but that also, when encased by fundamentalism, allowed little sensitivity or generosity to alternate perspectives. The latter identifies the determination of Pentecostals to work within the social and cultural parameters of the age. This enabled the movement to adapt itself to the myriad contexts of globalizing society31 but was also capable of fostering competitive and confrontational attitudes.

We should not, however, paint an entirely negative picture. We have already noted that Pentecostalism was to become a globalized movement precisely because of its loose-knit, fissiparous nature and its capacity to change its shape as it made its way in the context of global and local (glocal) societies.32 Spiritual, passionate, diverse, pragmatic, and grassroots Pentecostal movements have adapted and morphed across cultural borders and over time. Taken altogether, there has emerged a “many-centered” mobilization of the Spirit that has acted as a force of personal and social transformation throughout the world.33 While “rancor” and division have, sadly, accompanied its progress, the Pentecostal fo-

30Ibid.
32Ibid., p. 1.
cus on the Spirit ensures that the ideal of spiritual unity is never fully set aside. David Martin observed:

Of course, bureaucratization occurs, affecting this or that branch of the movement, and small leadership groups arrogate power to themselves, including the power to trace correct spiritual genealogies and define who or what is in or out. But the movement itself simply runs riot in any number of alternative channels.  

Indeed, notwithstanding the fundamentalist impulse, the experience and theology of baptism in the Spirit acts as a potent symbol of spiritual unity. Despite a century of bewildering division and diversity in church structure, doctrine, liturgy, and culture, Pentecostalism remains an identifiable global movement—not one church, but a movement of churches that share a transformative and unifying experience of the Spirit. As a result, Pentecostals are able to recognize one another, not because of any institutional or theological uniformity but, rather, because the Spirit transcends their differences, even over and against the partisanship that too often sets them in competition. The supernatural capacity of the Spirit to affect this sort of unity has been nowhere more apparent than in the charismatic renewal of the 1970’s and 1980’s. Grounded in emphases on Spirit-baptism and experiential spirituality, but transcending the constraints of Pentecostal denominations, the renewal created unique relationships between people with very different church commitments, both within and beyond the traditional “borders” of Pentecostalism. This was not an ecumenical movement organized by denominational hierarchies or by way of formal theological conversations but, instead, by the Spirit’s bringing people together in worship.

The unity that was accomplished was precisely that envisioned by the earlier generations of Pentecostals: setting aside denominational distinctions, creeds, and religious traditions and building relationship between people, while enabling them to remain within their own tradition (at least to the extent that particular traditions could accommodate renewal). Commenting on the unity experienced, Brisbane-based Pentecostal pastor Gerald Rowlands aptly noted, “Whilst it is true that we have many areas of variance in our comprehension of God we may still enjoy the unity of the Spirit. We do not have to create this unity. The Spirit has already done this!”

Pentecostals and the Ecumenical Movement

It will probably come as no surprise to discover that, notwithstanding their ecumenical vision, Pentecostals have not been substantial contributors to the formal ecumenical movement. Very few Pentecostal churches are members of the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.) and, although individual Pentecostals have participated in the work of its subcommittees (such as the Faith and Order

34Martin, Pentecostalism, p. 170.
Commission, the movement as a whole has not joined in with such activities. In fact, at certain points in their history, despite the intentions of their founders, Pentecostals have been actively hostile toward the Ecumenicals. During the 1960’s, for example, the General Council of the Assemblies of God in America described the W.C.C. as a forerunner to the Scarlet Women of Revelation36 and, in 1962, infamously asked “Mr. Pentecost,” David Du Plessis, to cease his ecumenical ministry or, alternatively, surrender his Assemblies of God credential.37 Du Plessis took the latter option, an injustice that was not rectified until 1980.

Recent decades have seen a more open response, as is apparent by the contribution of Pentecostal scholars to W.C.C. events and other ecumenical activities. In particular, this has included participation in bilateral dialogues, the most significant of which has been the long-running Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue, instigated in 1972 by Du Plessis.38 Yet, even these are not without their difficulties, not least of which is the inability of Pentecostal participants to speak on behalf of their movements. Du Plessis, for example, always made it clear that he was not representing any movement or denomination but, rather, was sharing his own testimony.39 Most Pentecostal participants in dialogue have been scholars, aware not only that they cannot speak on behalf of what is, after all, a diverse and diffuse movement but also that the challenge of diversity is virtually insurmountable. Indeed, there is no fixed body of teaching that constitutes the Pentecostal position on any particular topic.40

We have already hinted at some of the explanations for the failure of Pentecostals to become significant contributors to the formalities of ecumenism. In the first place there is the impact of conservative streams of evangelicalism and their historic suspicions of the W.C.C. To the extent that Pentecostalism has allowed itself to be driven by these suspicions, it has understood association with Catholics and “liberal” Protestants as involving compromise and a denial of the “truths” of the “full gospel.” Contrary to this viewpoint, however, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the appropriation of the doctrinal categories of evangelicalism is itself a denial of the experiential spirituality, which is so central to Pentecostal’s “full gospel” theology and to the culture of the Pentecostal movement in general. As Walter Hollenweger observed in the inaugural issue of the

40Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness,” p. 12.
Journal of Ecumenical Studies

Journal of Pentecostal Theology, “for a long time Pentecostals tried to present themselves as a kind of “evangelicals plus,” that is to say, evangelicals plus fire. . . speaking in tongues,” etc. “But,” he went on to say, “that will no longer do.”

No longer is it good enough simply to adopt evangelical paradigms and add to these rigid theologies the “Pentecostal distinctives.” On the contrary, the movement’s originating concern for spiritual unity and its emphasis on the transformative power of the fullness of the Spirit should place church unity at the forefront of its vision.

Second, it is also the case that suspicion has been a “two-way street.” Pentecostals may well have rejected relationships with mainline churches, but the very existence of the label “mainline” implies something about the alienation of movements (such as Pentecostalism) that are excluded from that category. Historically, it has been common to describe Pentecostalism as a sect, and it remains the case that the Pentecostal movement tends to be ignored, patronized, and even rejected outright. Worldwide, Pentecostals are described by more traditional churches as “popularist,” “shallow,” “consumerist,” “cult-like,” “fundamentalist”—to name just a few of the typical denigrations.

Church leaders may be interested to learn about the “secrets” of Pentecostal growth, but there is a common perception that Pentecostalism is a movement with little substance, at least when compared to the “depth” of the traditional churches and their associated scholarship.

In fact, part of the difficulty is that the formal ecumenical movement has tended to relate primarily to Pentecostal scholars, people whose training equips them for ecumenical work but who are themselves something of an anomaly in their own movement (at least to date). As Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen has observed:

Perhaps the most uneasy challenge to other churches is: Now that there is pneumatological resurgence all over the Christian oikumene, are Pentecostals consulted for their contributions on the subject that, in fact, is the issue for them? Are other churches humble enough to invite Pentecostals to teach them about the whole spectrum of gifts of the Spirit, from healings to prophecy to exorcisms or Spirit-baptism or other favorite Pentecostal topics?

This is not to say that the Ecumenicals themselves continue to dismiss and disparage Pentecostalism, since their raison d’être is to overcome the suspicion that divides the church and undermines its mission. It is, simply, to note the ongoing attitudinal and cultural challenges confronting Pentecostal involvement in the formalities of ecumenism. Beyond mutual suspicion, however, there is a more fundamental barrier, which relates to the particular Pentecostal understanding of the nature and mission of the church, one that differs from the standard ecumenical vision.

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42See, e.g., the discussion of this issue in “Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness,” p. 31.
The ecumenical movement is grounded in a vision of the “one,” “visibly unified” church that presumes, whether intended or not, a top-down and idealized ecclesiology. This assumption is framed in various ways. Among the older churches, there is the shared belief that the separation in the church at, for example, the time of the Reformation was a tragedy. This reading of history is motivated by a historical ideal of the one institutional church, so that what is envisioned in ecumenism is a return to an earlier unity. Of course, this fact is not always stated explicitly, but the language of “tragedy,” “scandal,” “restoration,” “reunion,” and “full communion” that frames even the more recent documents of the Faith and Order Commission imply this historicized ideal.

One blessing of the ecumenical movement has been the gradual and increasing discovery of the many aspects of life in Christ that our still-divided churches share; we all participate in some way in Jesus Christ, although we do not yet live in full communion with each other. Such divisions among the churches hinder the mission of the church. Not only does mission have as its ultimate goal the koinonia of all, but effective mission is also thwarted by the scandal of division: Jesus prayed that all his disciples be one precisely “so that the world may believe” (Jn. 17:21). Thus, mission is essentially related to the very being of the church as koinonia (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1–3). This is why the restoration of unity among Christians, brought about through committed dialogue about issues that still divide them as well as through the continual renewal of their lives, is such an urgent task.

There is, however, an alternate reading of the history of the church, one that renders the separation of the Reformation and the subsequent denominationalization of the church not as “tragedy” and “scandal” but, rather, as the inevitable progress of the church as it made its way into a democratized and increasingly globalizing world. From this perspective, the separation of the church during and after the Reformation was not to thwart the mission of the gospel, as implied above but was the very thing that made that mission possible in a new society. As Nathan Hatch observed in his description of The Democratization of American Christianity, “However diverse their theologies and church organizations, they all offered common people, especially the poor, compelling visions of individual self-respect and collective self-confidence.” The democratization of Christianity (labeled by some as “division”) facilitated the questioning of hierarchal and often oppressive structures and authorities, and it made way for new ways of thinking about the church and its mission.

This is not to say that the period of the Reformation and the developments within fissiparous Protestantism since that time are a perfect work of the Spirit.

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Ecclesial history before and after the sixteenth century is an ambiguous mix of grace and sin, which is as true of Protestantism as of Catholicism. Rather, it is to argue that the move away from the “one” institutional church was not, in and of itself, a scandalous undermining of the gospel. It is also to insist that the Spirit has been at work in and through the voluntarist streams Christianity—those to which the labels “division” and “scandal” seem to be most forcefully directed.

The ecumenical movement is, of course, not unaware of the importance of diversity (even if it forgets that we have diversity because of the very “divisions” it laments); for this reason its vision of unity is also grounded in the theology of koinonia. Drawing from social descriptions of the doctrine of the Trinity, the ecclesiology of communion takes seriously the importance of diversity for unity. In particular, it stresses the priority of the local church, enabling the ecumenical movement to understand its unifying vision as being the facilitation of communion between local churches. As Walter Kasper commented with respect to the ecumenical dialogues undertaken by the Roman Catholic Church:

[The dialogues converge in the fact that they revolve around the concept of communio as their key concept. All dialogues define the visible unity of all Christians as communio-unity, and agree in understanding it, in analogy with the original Trinitarian model, not as uniformity but as unity in diversity and diversity in unity.]

Even if we were to set aside the fact that a significant portion of Pentecostals are Oneness Pentecostal (and, further, a significant portion of so-called orthodox Trinitarian Pentecostals are not theologically literate and so do not focus attention on trinitarian theology), the difficulty, as Kasper observed, is that “on closer inspection, different understandings are hidden behind the term. The common concept of communio has different meanings and thus calls forth different expectations and projected goals.” This is largely because the concept of trinitarian communio is necessarily an abstract one that fails to differentiate adequately between the nature of God and human society.

Whether it is even possible to model human community on the divine is an open question, but, when applied to the practice of ecumenical convergence, the inevitable result is a reversion to the historical ideal of institutional unity described earlier or, alternatively, some other basis that is informed by the perspectives of traditional ecclesiologies. This might include a sacramental and eucharistic conception of unity or a confessional basis. In both instances, what is envisioned is a formal unity, which proceeds by way of formal dialogue and written agreements and is, therefore, inevitably centralized and institutional. Whatever the priority that is intended to be given to the local church and ecclesial diversity, the very structures of formal ecumenism are centralized and theological, and the goal remains a visible unity that is sacramental and credal: a single institutional church, either overseeing diverse local assemblies or formed by the


48 Ibid., II-2.
agreements of unified local churches.

It should be obvious by now that this approach to ecumenism inevitably excludes Pentecostals, whose loose-knit ecclesiology resists institutional convergence. It has been suggested that the real problem is that Pentecostals do not have an ecclesiology, although that is to presume that the church has to have an institutional, sacramental, or creedal shape. Our early summary of the narrative of emerging Pentecostalism set out what I believe to be the central elements of Pentecostal ecclesiology, and it is worth briefly restating these now before considering their ecumenical implications:

1. Pentecostal ecclesiology is pneumatological; that is, its communal life is actualized by the experience and theology of Spirit baptism.

2. Pentecostals preach Jesus (the full gospel: Jesus saves, baptizes in the Spirit, heals, and is coming again) and focus on the power of the Holy Spirit to transform, first, personal values and, thereafter, the cultural values of local churches and communities.

3. Spiritual unity among Christians is an important element of these values (even if this has sometimes been forgotten).

4. Because its spirituality starts with personal empowerment (distinguished from individual empowerment, since the Spirit transforms people in their relationships with each other), Pentecostalism is a grassroots movement prioritizing the local church.

5. As a grassroots movement, Pentecostalism is not defined by any particular or fixed authority structure, creedal formulation, or liturgy. It does not reify or sacralize institutional forms but changes its shape in response to the context, situation, and progress of the Spirit.

6. Therefore, it is not and has never been one thing or one church but is a loose-knit movement of people and churches. It is a multicentered, fluid, and diverse community, identifiable not by creed or liturgy or institutional structure but by shared experience of the Spirit.

7. Pentecostals are pragmatic in orientation, since their spirituality is concrete rather than abstract, and they tend to be concerned with the practical issues of preaching the full gospel and growing local churches and are not disposed to be focused on abstract theological or sacramental ideals.

8. The open spirituality, fissiparity, flexibility, and practicality that frame Pentecostal ecclesiology are both its strength and its weakness. These characteristics have enabled it, in the power of the Spirit, to flourish in a diverse and rapidly changing globalized world, yet they have also made way for the possibility of syncretism, competitiveness, fundamentalism, and abuse of power. Even so, the priority given to the free play of the Spirit ensures that such abuses cannot permanently constitute the totality or the mainstream of the movement.

Taken altogether, these elements of Pentecostal ecclesiology have a number

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of implications for its approach to ecumenism and its involvement with the formalities of the ecumenical movement. The most obvious is that Pentecostal ecumenism will tend to be informal and focused at a local level, rather than with the W.C.C., the Faith and Order Commission, bilateral dialogues, and the like. This fact actually presents a challenge to the ecumenical movement, which might need to consider changing its focus or, at least, broadening its understanding of how ecumenism is achieved. As Kärkkäinen has suggested:

To look at the issue from another perspective: Is “ecumenism” defined only in terms of “official” ecumenism? How should we regard the fruitful exchange of Christian goods at the grassroots level in mission fields and churches around the world, where Pentecostals and other Christians are working side-by-side? What are the implications for Christian unity of common social projects or evangelistic campaigns . . .?50

This rethinking of the vision of ecumenism might extend to dispensing with the idealized vision of “one” church and visible unity, at least as these are normally understood. It has been the case that bilateral dialogues, such as that between Pentecostalism and the Roman Catholic Church, have stated explicitly that their “goal is not structural unity, but rather the fostering of . . . respect and mutual understanding.”51 This might be judged as merely a surrender to the unfortunate reality that Pentecostals and Catholics are too far separated to make visible unity a realistic goal of dialogue so that, at some future time, structural unity might be put on the table. I would suggest, however, that the better way of interpreting the situation is to say that Pentecostals do not envisage any need for structural unity, at least not in any singular sense. They are, instead, motivated by the pursuit of spiritual unity. This is not the opposite of visible unity, a spiritualized “invisible unity.”52 It is, rather, a concrete movement of the Spirit, bringing unity between people and communities. It is a glocal (global and local) network of the Spirit. It is a manyentered unity of interconnectedness, one that transcends what is visible because it is not one thing but a myriad of things connecting and converging and moving freely in the Spirit.

In addition to the fact that this way of envisaging ecumenism prioritizes diversity and grassroots ecclesiology, it also enables one to put aside the problem of compromise that has dogged creedal and theological approaches. It is an understanding of ecumenism that is not pursuing any sort of theological convergence that might be judged to require compromise. There is no need to be concerned about coming to agreement on any particular institutional structure, liturgical practice, eucharistic sacrament, or confessional statement. There is, rather, the drive to pursue “the Spirit” who creates “a spirit” of generosity and friend-

50Kärkkäinen, “‘Anonymous Ecumenists’?” p. 27.
51“Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness,” p. 11.
52Braaten, in Mother Church, suggested that “Protestantism ought to put an end to talk about unity in spiritualistic terms, as if the unity we have in Christ is an esoteric, invisible unity that defies expression through visible forms” (Braaten, Mother Church, p. 34). He is, thereafter, forced to insist that the “reunited church of the future will be equipped with a papal office and the college of bishops” (Braaten, Mother Church, p. 36), precisely because visible unity is necessarily institutional.
ship between people of different religious traditions. Far from entailing compromise, to work for such friendships is to refuse to set aside the goal of spiritual unity.

It is necessary to recognize that the argument set out in this essay might be seen as a capitulation to the present situation of division, not only by those from Catholic and mainstream Protestant traditions but also by some within Pentecostalism itself. The Pentecostal ecumenists who have followed the groundbreaking work of Du Plessis (and there are too many to name) have given themselves to the difficult task of ecumenism in the hope that the Pentecostal vision of spiritual unity can be made concrete. Cecil Robeck spoke for many when he challenged Pentecostals, asking:

When will we discover that we are one people regardless of our pet denominational names or our claims to independence? When will we discover, no, when will we finally admit that together, we are the People of God, the Body of Christ, followers of Jesus Christ, the Church? When will we finally confess that many of our reasons for separate existences or different denominations are as artificial as our national demographic differences?  

Elsewhere, Robeck has recognized that there are many models of unity, “none of [which] has found universal support.” In moving away from the quest for models there is recognition that the nature of unity will need to emerge as God builds the body of Christ in the power of the Spirit. As Cheryl Bridges Johns has observed, “a new form of ecumenism is needed in order to embrace the present challenges of worldwide Christianity.” While it cannot be claimed that the position taken in this essay mirrors the hope of Robeck, Bridges Johns, and others, what it proposes is not a capitulation to division but a different way of envisaging a mult centered, networked unity in and through the Spirit.

Finally, in terms of the specific work of the W.C.C. and the formal ecumenical movement, documents produced on, for example, the “Nature and Mission of the Church,” as well as reports on bilateral dialogues are put in their place—a phrase that is not intended negatively. Their purpose is not to create one visible church, not only because they can never hope to do so, or because the Pentecostal participants cannot speak or make decisions for anyone other than themselves, or even because few Pentecostals are likely to read the documents produced. More fundamentally, it is because the Pentecostal vision is not concerned about establishing the sort of unity toward which these dialogues tend to aim, which, by their very nature, is confessional and institutional.

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56Jeffrey Gros, a long-time Catholic participant in dialogue with Pentecostals, noted that, while the goal of Faith and Order is visible unity in one eucharistic fellowship, “Pentecostal churches will need to discern whether this is an affirmation to which they can respond” (Jeffrey Gros, “A Pilgrim-
This is not to say that multilateral and bilateral dialogues serve no purpose. On the contrary, they help to transform the values and attitudes of participants, who come to understand and respect one another and, more substantially, form friendships where love and trust transcend (without eliminating) differences. Thereafter, through the impact of participants and the dissemination of their teaching and reports in the multicentered network of relationships that constitute global Christian movements, the Spirit works to transform the cultural values of people and churches everywhere.

In this way, the ecumenical movement is capable of performing a prophetic function. Given that syncretism, competition, and “partisan rancor” have too often distorted Pentecostal culture (and church culture more broadly), the prophetic voice of the ecumenical movement needs to be heard. If this is to occur, however, the Ecumenicals will need to be aware of the history of Pentecostalism, its ecumenical vision, its priorities, and especially its grassroots ecclesiology. In this awareness, they will be invited to celebrate a work of the Spirit on the margins. That Pentecostals are only loosely connected to ecumenical structures is not a failure in the ecumenical vision but a surprising realization of that vision—a redefinition of what ecumenism can be.

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