

## **An Endemic Problem in Pentecostalism**

1. When I was 6 years old my parents experienced deep personal conversions to Pentecostalism. I sojourned in that tradition for many years and have reflected on those experiences, both good and bad. Because of the prevalence of sexual misconduct among the ministers in the Pentecostal clergy, I began to think about the reasons for this phenomenon. I have come to believe that Pentecostalism has some endemic troubles built into it. It has a distinctive ethos. Its adherents elevate themselves to a higher plane or higher life than ordinary Christians.

That is the way we saw ourselves. I imbibed the attitude myself since childhood. Terms and phrases were used which supported that one-up-manship on an almost unconscious level. The "second work of grace", "the higher life", "Full Gospel", "Baptism in the Holy Spirit", "power for living", "special gifts", "deeper experiences", "work of the Spirit", "move of God", "filled with the Spirit", etc. are all terms and phrases (many biblical to be sure) which capture the subtle spiritual elitism, even if that was not intended. Pentecostals often understand themselves as part of a great last day Restoration Movement. How often I heard the litany of restoration: "Luther restored justification by Faith; Wesley restored sanctification, and the Pentecostals restored the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts!" That was the simplified and truncated version of Church history that I was taught and believed for many years. Real Church history is much messier and more difficult to assess in so few words.

2. We held the attitude that we were somehow a part of the great last days restoration movement. We believed that the true church had been somehow underground since the second century. We felt that the main church had suppressed the Holy Spirit ever since the death of the apostles. The particular independent Pentecostalism in which I was reared led me to imbibe an anti-denominational bias. I was suspicious of other Christians and couldn't quite see how those without the "Fullness of the Spirit" really got along from day to day. I often thought of the verse in Timothy predicting the advent of "those who had a form of godliness but denied the power". I certainly wanted to turn away from them! To me, then, the sign of the Spirit was Power. That meant that the Holy Ghost (we seldom said "Holy Spirit" in those days) was only perceived as active when emotions ran high (shouting, singing in tongues, praise aloud, spontaneous outbursts of praise, etc.) and prophecy, tongues and other manifestations were evident.

3. Concentration on the spontaneity and de-emphasis on form leads to an impatience with the ordinary, the mundane, and the predictable affairs of the church. "God speaks and the Spirit moves here! We don't have that dead, dry religion." Other churches (non-Pentecostal) are caricatured as spiritless, dead, dry, formalistic, ritualistic and dependent upon Man's ways, etc. Institutional matters of are denied their legitimate role. (The church in reality is both community and institution. It must attend to both form and spontaneity in a creative tension).

Pentecostalism (as I experienced it) shifted the emphasis away from reason (in its abhorrence of rationalism) to feeling and the pious affections. Emotions contained the essence of real worship,

not the intellect.

Pentecostalism began as a protest against the left-brain hegemony. However, Pentecostals lodged faith in the feelings and affections (like the Pietisms before them).

In Pentecostalism there is a need to produce emotions and keep the feelings going. High emotions are the sign of the Spirit moving. This also accounts for the stress on music and especially emotional and feeling music in worship.

4. Much of the imagery in Pentecostal worship is subtly sexualized. The Bible uses some sexual imagery but is quite restrained. But think about the words of songs used often in Pentecostal and Charismatic worship: (Holding Jesus close, Drawing near to his arms of love, Sweet Jesus, Surrender, God's embrace, Going deeper, lost in his love, Look into His face, He touched me, etc).

The impatience with institutional and mundane matters especially among independent Pentecostals removes, or de-emphasizes, the necessary checks and balances for its leaders. The preachers, 'prophets', 'apostles' in the movement experience a convergence of institutional power (though this is often denied in the name of spontaneity of the Spirit!) and charismatic power (Spirit led, prophecy, "God spoke to me", special endowments)

The checks and balances are suppressed and the minister stands in almost shaman like exaltation over the ordinary members of the flock. I can see how sexual misconduct has a good chance of attending the intense concentration on feelings, the denial that we are very much like everyone else, and the absence of institutional checks and balances.

5. To some Pentecostals the flesh is to be conquered in a single flash of the Spirit. This is again a denial of the need for ordinary disciplines, checks and balances. The congregations in which I was reared and the Bible College that I attended were impatient with 'secular' psychology and counseling, etc.)

Pentecostals inherited the unfortunate Holiness Movement's fixation of the evils of sex and therefore all but lost the language to speak helpfully about sexuality. The minister is isolated in a tower of spiritual power, but inside knows his or her own vulnerability. Soon the pressure cracks the soul and the man (or woman) of God has a great fall. (I could list the many ministers and ministries where this occurred, but the most notable recent examples known commonly were Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker. Almost every minister (but certainly not all) I know in that movement has succumbed to sexual temptation and encountered a malaise within the communions in which they served. They lived in high stress to keep the feelings going, but face their inner demons alone.

I see these fallen men as tragic examples of having suffered a split inside. They inherited the harsh sexual ethic from their Holiness predecessors. Sex sins are counted as some of the worst [Note: The church raised little concern over the financial matters in Bakker's ministry but the Jessica

Hahn affair ruined him publicly. The law was concerned only with the money; the church was shocked by the sexual tryst.]

6. The cases of sexual misconduct that I know were men isolated from those disciplines which might have assisted them through some lonely times. The lack of checks and balances left them in unquestioned power. The intense concentration of feelings and emotions and need to perform every week perhaps set the scene for the misconduct. I just think of the similar foibles among entertainers, musicians, singers, etc. The need to perform, the superstar status, the admiring and sexually charged fans all make up the recipe for the transgression.

7. Here is my theological bleat: The "Manifest Sons" and "Latter Rain," and "Kingdom Now" movements added (not publicly, but covertly) the theological defense of adultery and sexual misconduct: That is: We are already tasting a little of the fulfilled Kingdom of God on earth where the saints "neither marry nor are given in marriage", etc. We have a foretaste of heaven on earth. God can speak to a man and woman and offer fresh revelation and lead them to relationships that are Spirit approved because they already taste the world to come.

I don't see this analysis as excusing bad behavior. I just see the structure of thought and the contradictions between real life and the inadequate analysis and interpretation of reality as causing a profound split in the person that will usually break out somehow, someday.

8. The Mainline churches are not immune from adultery and abuse by the men of the cloth. Adultery is a "work of the flesh". It is "garden variety sin," really. But there is a more helpful tradition and checks and balances among the established churches. In my denomination (United Methodist) the ministers are not usually under the stress to keep the excitement going with new and higher revelations. Worship is not, as such, an experience that the worship leader and preacher must produce good feelings or manifest extraordinary gifts. It is rational without being rationalistic. It appeals to the heart without having to manipulate the emotions. It is also lodged in tradition that resists the sexualization of worship (Wesley did not like Zinzendorf's familiarity with Jesus). Those are a few of my thoughts on the subject.