

Spiritual guidance and the Pentecostal tradition¹

by Brian McKinlay

I

Many Christian traditions have contributed to the vocation of spiritual guidance. It has ancient roots. Jesus himself was a spiritual guide, and the vocation of spiritual direction dates from the desert fathers.² The Pentecostal and charismatic movements have been a significant force in twentieth century Christianity. The sheer size of these movements gives them contemporary relevance requiring evaluation. This essay explores Pentecostal spirituality in the belief that it can make a contribution to the traditional vocation of spiritual guidance, though this may be yet unrealized. But identifying common threads between the two traditions, the essay suggests possibilities for Pentecostalism and traditional Catholic spiritual direction to enrich each other. We will note some distinctions between Pentecostal custom and the traditions of spiritual direction, but these are fewer than at first might be thought. To understand Pentecostal belief and experience is also useful to spiritual direction because spiritual directors will meet clients from these backgrounds.

Christopher Bryant says that the spiritual director's task may be roughly summarized under four headings: prayer, self-knowledge, vocation, and the ordering of daily life.³ Prayer is central, but must be complemented by spiritual development.

Many for whom prayer is an important priority may be hampered through ignorance and may be greatly helped by quite elementary instruction on such matters as realizing God's presence, the importance of the body as the soul's ally in prayer, the devotional use of the Bible, and the use of the imagination as a help to prayer.⁴

The spiritual director, by judicious questions, can help the seeker to the self-knowledge essential to healthy growth, leading to genuine repentance when needed. Needs, talents and strengths are discovered, awareness of which balances growth and enhances spiritual maturity. Vocation means the call and purpose of God for each

¹ The footnotes acknowledge my sources as appropriate. However, a number of portions of the essay are unattributed because I am relying directly on my own experiences and observations during 39 years as a member, deacon, and leader in Pentecostal and charismatic fellowships.

² See Yungblut, J., "The tradition of Christian spiritual guidance" in "The Gentle art of spiritual guidance". - *Continuum*, 1995, pp.7-21

³ Bryant, Christopher "The Nature of spiritual direction: sacramental confession" in *The Study of spirituality* / edited by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, [and] Edward Yarnold. - London: SPCK, 1986, p.568

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.568-9.

individual. The spiritual director will help each individual who seeks counsel to discern where God is calling them. The spiritual director may help the counsellee to establish a "rule of life" as a framework and discipline for prayer, study and contemplation.

We will describe aspects of spiritual direction in more detail as we consider their interaction with Pentecostalism. First however, we need to consider the distinctives of Pentecostal belief and experience, especially those of potential value to spiritual guidance.

II

The *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* says that, "each of the [Pentecostal] characteristics . . . has appeared before in the rich and colorful tapestry of Christian spirituality through the ages. But the combination is new"⁵

Swiss theologian Walter Hollenweger has studied and written on Pentecostalism in depth⁶. He takes early Pentecostal spirituality as the norm by which to measure its subsequent history. Seen from that viewpoint, he says, the characteristic features of Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality are:

1. an emphasis on the oral aspect of liturgy;
2. theology and witness cast in narrative form;
3. maximum participation at the levels of reflection, prayer and decision-making, and therefore a form of community which is reconciling;
4. inclusion of dream and vision into personal and public forms of spirituality, so that the dreams function as kinds of icons of the individual and collective; and
5. an understanding of the body/mind relationship which is informed by experiences of correspondence between body and mind.⁷

These spiritual measures are found in present-day American and European Pentecostal and charismatic groups, Hollenweger argues, but there is a tendency for them to be constrained by authority based on status, education, money and juridical power.

"Participation, vision and dreams are welcome as long as they do not jeopardize

⁵ *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* / Stanley Burgess, Gary McGee and Patrick Alexander, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 5.

⁶ Hollenweger, Walter J. - *The Pentecostals*. - Minneapolis: Ausberg, 1972, 1976, reprinted, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988, and *Pentecostalism: origins and development world wide*. - Peabody, Mass. : Hendrickson, 1997.

⁷ Hollenweger, Walter J. "Pentecostals and the charismatic movement" in *The Study of spirituality* (note 1), p.551-2

established theological and ecclesiastical values, which is of course a normal behavioural pattern in any organisation, secular or religious."⁸

Hollenweger suggests that the element of Pentecostal spirituality that churches at large will be most eager to adopt, is its approach to the body/mind relationship. In this they may rediscover the healing power of prayer and liturgy, especially the healing power of the Eucharist.⁹ Understanding of the body/mind/spirit relationship is a meeting-point between Pentecostal/charismatic spirituality and the spirituality of churches in the Third World. In the Third World especially, dance, speaking in tongues and healing of the sick, awaken confidence, make people feel accepted and loved by God and strengthen their trust in their inborn inventive gifts. Spiritual gifts, Hollenweger says, if used as instructed by Paul (I Cor. 12-14), will liberate the people of God and free them from dehumanizing cultural, economic and social forces. Imported ideologies are supplanted by political literacy of the whole people of God, practiced and learned within an oral liturgy for which the whole congregation is responsible.¹⁰

Stephen Land is another often-cited scholar of Pentecostal history and theology who notes the importance of spirit-body correspondence in Pentecostal worship. He confirms Hollenweger's appreciation of the place of anointed preaching, teaching, witnessing, singing, and exercise of spiritual gifts to oral-narrative theologizing by Pentecostal people.¹¹

Paul Heibert¹² discusses the reasons for growth of the Pentecostal movement to more than 100 million people in less than a century. First among these, of course, is the work of the Holy Spirit. A second reason is the movement's emphasis on the affective dimension of human experience, reaffirming the importance of feelings of joy and ecstasy expressed through glossolalia, joyful music, raising of hands, dance and praise. This restoration of the emotional expression of Christian faith has been an

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.552.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.553.

¹¹ Land, Stephen J. "Pentecostal spirituality : Living in the Spirit", ch.17 in *Christian spirituality : post reformation and modern* / edited by Lois Dupré and Don E. Saliers London: SCM, 1990, pp.484-5. See also Land's *Pentecostal spirituality : a passion for the Kingdom*. - Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993. (Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series; no.1)

¹² Heibert, Paul G. "Discerning the work of God" ch.9 in *Charismatic experiences in history* / edited by Cecil M. Robeck, Jr.. - Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1985, pp.148-150.

important contribution of the charismatic movement to the wider church. A third reason for the growth of the charismatic movement is its concern with making God's presence relevant to the problems of everyday life. It stands against the neo-Platonic view that divides reality into spiritual and material realms.

From a more formal theological perspective, Claire Randall notes key differences between traditional Protestantism and Pentecostalism that need to be explored.¹³

Daniel Albrecht¹⁴ argues that its spirituality distinguishes Pentecostalism - a spirituality that fosters a deep, even mystical, piety emphasizing an immanent sense of the divine. Pentecostals' understanding and practice of worship lies at the heart of their liturgies and spirituality. For them, Albrecht says, "worship" refers to the encounter with the divine as mediated by a sense of the divine presence or power. Pentecostals believe strongly in the manifest presence of God and practice worship as an experience of the immediate presence of God and as a way into that presence. Worship involves a deep communion between divinity and humanity, an encountering. Prayer and worship are intermingled. An attitude of expectancy shapes the practice of this communion. Believers expect God to come and meet with his people. God alone inaugurates this experience by God's gracious acts and presence. Liturgy is a preparation, but cannot force God's presence and moving. The Spirit initiates, guides, facilitates, and leads true worship.

Though Pentecostals seem largely unaware of it, Albrecht asserts¹⁵, they participate in a rich heritage of Christian mysticism. Sunday services provide a context for a mystical encounter, an experience with the divine. Often, celebration melts into contemplation. This experience of being in the presence of God is fundamental to the Pentecostal spirituality.

¹³ They are: (1) different understanding of the Trinity and the direct activity of the Spirit in the life of the Christian; (2) difference between the liveliness and informality of Pentecostal worship and spirituality and the liturgical and formal worship of other churches; (3) different understanding of the gifts of the Spirit and what this means in the empowerment of the laity; (4) different perception of the work of God and humans in divine healing; and (5) different emphasis between personal and spiritual liberation and public liberation. "The Importance of The Pentecostal and Holiness Churches in The Ecumenical Movement" / Claire Randall, [URL <http://www.bu.edu/sth/BTI/ecudocs/kosta.htm>] originally published in the journal *One In Christ*

¹⁴ Albrecht Daniel E., "Pentecostal Spirituality: Ecumenical Potential and Challenge" *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal/Charismatic Research* [URL: <http://www.pctii.org/cybertab1.html>] 2 (1997)

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

The conclusion of Jean-Jacques Suurmond's discussion of the relationship between mysticism and Pentecostal experience is interesting.

The conclusion is that the New Testament baptism with Christ's Word and Spirit corresponds with the mystical experience, but for Pentecostals generally it remains a pre-mystical experience. In addition to their defensive attitude and inadequate theology, it is also a fact that the mystics speak so inexplicitly about the Spirit that they are not very accessible to Pentecostals. It is remarkable that, on the other hand, theorists in the sphere of mysticism are so often negative about Pentecostalism. One of the few exceptions was the important Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who has described Pentecostalism as an 'everyday mysticism'.¹⁶ It seems to me that specialist attention should be paid to the Pentecostal experience. In present-day Pentecostalism the dream of the great mystics that everyone should share in their experience seems nearer to realization than at any other moment in history.¹⁷

Tongues-speaking in private prayer and contemplation is a means and an expression of the immediacy of the divine presence.

For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. ... Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. (I Cor 14.2,4a NRSV)

Harvey Cox speaks of Pentecostal spirituality as "primal spirituality."

[Pentecostalism] has succeeded because it has spoken to the spiritual emptiness of our time by reaching beyond the levels of creed and ceremony into the core of human religiousness, into what might be called 'primal spirituality,' that largely unprocessed nucleus of the psyche in which the unending struggle for a sense of purpose and significance goes on.¹⁸

Cox refers to "speaking in tongues" as

an ecstatic experience, one in which the cognitive grids ... that normally prevent people from opening themselves to deeper insights and exultant feelings, are temporarily suspended¹⁹ [T]ongue speaking has persisted ... because it represents the core of all pentecostal conviction: that the Spirit of God needs no mediators but is available to anyone in an intense, immediate, indeed interior way.²⁰

Complementary to this sense of immediate presence, Pentecostal people actively pursue personal responsiveness to God. In addition, the most mundane elements of life are ground for supernatural encounter. Signs, wonders, and miracles are not limited to Sunday ritual. They are to be a part of daily life.

In worship Pentecostals link body movements to music, the spoken word and personal spiritual impulses, seeking to worship God with the whole being, presenting

¹⁶ Here Suurmond cites Karl Rahner. *The Spirit in the Church*. - New York: Seabury, 1979, pp.9-31

¹⁷ Suurmond, Jean-Jacques. *Word and Spirit at play : towards a Charismatic theology*. - London: SCM Press, 1994, p.160

¹⁸ Cox, Harvey. *Fire from heaven: the rise of Pentecostal spirituality and the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century*. - Perseus, 1995 p.81

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.86

the body as an instrument of worship (Romans 12.1). Though in a sense mystical, Pentecostal prayer and worship is not incorporeal. Pentecostals experience God as embodied people propelled by the Spirit.

The roots of Pentecostal spirituality are wide and complex. Hollenweger finds that Pentecostalism has roots in black oral tradition, Catholicism, evangelical Protestantism, criticism of existing church practice, and more recently, in ecumenical experience.²¹ Pentecostal understanding of baptism, communion, and the manifestation of God's power in divine healing is sacramental in ways reminiscent of Catholic origins.²² However Pentecostals understand salvation in the reformist tradition as such as strictly "through grace" (Eph 2.5) by faith, requiring repentance and reception of Christ as Lord and Saviour. Yet there is an ongoing emphasis on sanctification and cleansing through the work of the Holy Spirit who will, "reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16.8 AV). Sanctification and spiritual development are the work of Christ who,

loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5.25b-27, AV)

Pentecostals bring together things that some traditions keep apart. Faith and works, testimony and the daily walk, love and obedience, law and gospel are fused. Works never justify, but one cannot receive justification without standing for righteousness. Law is the structure of love, and forgiveness is not incompatible with restitution of wrongs whenever possible. Justification asks for sanctification, which demands Spirit filling, which then empowers and demands mission and evangelism. Especially important, is the already-not yet eschatological fusion, Land argues.²³

On the other hand, the Pentecostal experiences some spiritual values as in tension with each other. Revelation and reason, "heart" and "head", Scripture and "creeds" are examples of tensions in which the former is valued over the latter. In the Spirit there is fullness of joy, but there is also waiting in tears.²⁴

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.87

²¹ Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*.

²² Here I rely on my own observations.

²³ Land, *op.cit.*, p448.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

III

We may now draw some comparisons and contrasts, noting where Pentecostal spirituality affirms and may potentially contribute to the discipline of spiritual direction.

Divine presence

In examining the distinctives of Pentecostal spirituality we have seen an emphasis on the immediacy of the presence of God the Holy Spirit. This awareness of God is also encouraged in spiritual direction, though there are many differing ways of developing and encouraging such awareness. The mystical element in Pentecostalism gives it a commonality with Catholicism that might not be expected from Pentecostalism's fundamentalist doctrinal roots.

Mind/body

Spiritual direction encourages the believer to encounter God through all of human experience. The body is an essential element of our experience of God in prayer. The liberation which the Pentecostal experiences to use the body in worship and prayer through gesture and dance may well be helpful to spiritual directees seeking new liberating ways of prayer. As we have seen, Pentecostalism believes that the death of Christ brings atonement and restoration for the whole being, body, soul and spirit. "By his stripes we are healed." (Is 53.4, I Pet.2.24). Again, this is in sympathy with the holistic approach adopted in spiritual direction.

Vocation

Pentecostals experience God as personally empowering and commissioning - individuals experiencing a personal God. God is the commissioning Sovereign, the One who empowers, calls and sends. Personal empowerment is also a calling to assist others. Pentecostal spirituality has a strong sense of vocation - a desire to seek, identify and carry out one's personal God-commissioned walk and mission. Pentecostals believe that each believer has a divine mission, a purpose in life. Similarly, the discipline of spiritual guidance seeks to assist the believer to understand his or her vocation.

Discernment

To encourage awareness of the spiritual dimension in everyday life is to invite the Holy Spirit to work on our lives. But it also brings about a need for heightened discernment in the spiritual realm. Some of the gifts of the Spirit described by Paul (I Cor. 12) are to bring to the body of Christ discernment of the mind and wisdom of God. There are no simple phenomenological tests of whether spiritual experiences are manifestations of God's spirit. In this, oversight of Christian charismatic and Pentecostal experience and the discipline of spiritual direction come together. The two traditions employ similar scriptural emphases in discerning the work and word of God. They ask, "Does this contribute to the glory of God?", "Is the name of Christ upheld?" and, "Does this build up the body of Christ?"²⁵ They test spiritual practices by the Scriptures and by their spiritual fruits - love, joy and peace. There is a common seeking for wisdom, balance and maturity.

Sanctification

Spiritual direction may seek to help the believer establish a "rule of life". Traditionally, an important part of such regular discipline is the examination of conscience as a basis for repentance, renewal, and sanctification. Similarly, we have seen that Pentecostal spirituality encourages a life of personal holiness and sanctification, made possible through repentance and the power of the Holy Spirit. In both traditions, the Communion or Eucharist is a crucial place at which the believer should seek to be at peace with God.

Sacrament

Articulated Pentecostal theology of the sacraments differs from the Catholic teaching accepted by many who practice the discipline of spiritual direction. Nevertheless, Pentecostals have a more sacramental attitude towards baptism, holy communion, divine healing, marriage and other Christian rituals than is found among evangelical Protestants. A Pentecostal does not find it strange, for example, to be encouraged to receive healing at the Lord's table.

Seeking

Early Pentecostalism emphasized "seeking" experiences or crises not very different from the "dark night of the soul". "Tarrying" meetings and personal prayer

²⁵ Hiebert, *op.cit.*, pp.150-154.

sought the empowering of the Holy Spirit so that evil might be resisted and confronted with God's demand for righteousness and love. But this aspect of Pentecostal spirituality does not sit completely with traditional spiritual guidance. Pentecostalism is rooted in a communal experience of God. The essential mystical quality of Pentecostal experience encourages focus on the personal and individual dimension of spirituality. Certainly, private prayer, meditation and experience of God are encouraged. But its communal characteristic is foundational to Pentecostal life and part of its attractiveness. The discipline of traditional spiritual direction encourages silence, retreat, and solitariness - for at least a time. The Pentecostal, however, will often seek God by joining together with others in corporate worship, prayer and waiting on God. In the common gathering, also, the members of the body may hear from God through spiritual gifts.

Counselling

It is quite common for Pentecostal and charismatic people to seek prayer and laying on of hands from one another. Many would not feel reluctant, I suggest, to seek advice and spiritual help from a church leader or more mature fellow Christian. It is common for "prayer partners" to meet together regularly for sharing, mutual support and prayer. New converts are often placed under the pastoral care and guidance of a more mature believer. In my experience, however, a long-term guiding relationship, of the kind experienced in spiritual direction, is less common, unless the counsellee has a special need for care. Thus, I believe, many Pentecostals would not find it strange to participate in a relationship of spiritual direction, though Pentecostalism does not make a direct contribution from its own tradition to this kind of relationship. In my experience, the "counseling" relationships in which Pentecostals participate from time-to-time are deliberately more directive than would be found acceptable in traditional spiritual direction, where the director is encouraged to be a "life-servant", not a "life-fixer".²⁶

IV

We have seen ways in which spiritual direction and Pentecostalism may enrich each other. But Pentecostal spirituality presents a challenge to the spiritual director.

For Pentecost is not a body of thought, but an event. In recent decades, there has been much work to systematize Pentecostal theology, for example through the Society for Pentecostal Studies and its *Journal*.²⁷ But what the Pentecostals proclaim is a particular encounter with the Divine. Any such encounter is in part mystical and cannot completely be reduced to words. Traditional Pentecostalism teaches that one must be "baptised in the spirit" as the starting point of an enriched, empowered, spiritual life. It would be strange to suggest that one could understand and enjoy Pentecostal spirituality apart from the activity of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, it would be a challenge for a spiritual director to truly understand the experiences of a Pentecostal directee, unless the director had in some way also encountered the Pentecost experience.

Yet, the contemplation and prayer encouraged through spiritual direction also seeks an encounter with the Divine, and movements of charismatic renewal have touched those branches of the church in which traditional spiritual guidance is fostered. The discipline of spiritual guidance, therefore, may draw from Pentecostal spirituality while remaining with its historical origins.

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²⁶ See Schmitt, Robert. "The spiritual director as life servant." *Presence: an international journal of spiritual direction*, 1(2): 13-20, 1995

²⁷ "Doctrinally Pentecostals need to show how they display their theology in a systematic way and with a comprehensiveness that has been heretofore lacking. The missionary movement is only about 100 years old -- in terms of its intensive and extensive impact. But it is time to do more than write an evangelical theology with special added sections on Spirit baptism and gifts. The biblical and historical work which is being going on for several decades should continue, but it is time together to rock these results into a more comprehensive proposal." Land., *op.cit.*, pp.494-5

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