

The Frog King

or the Coming of Age of Pentecostalism

Paper presented at the 9th Conference of the European Pentecostal / Charismatic Research Association, July 13-17, 1999,
Missionsakademie, Hamburg

by

Jean-Daniel Plüss, Ph.D.

Heuelstrasse 45, CH ? 8032 Zürich

Time and again I am reminded that, although many people know that Pentecostalism has grown into a world wide Christian movement, they tend to overlook that there is a great variety among Pentecostals and Pentecostal-like churches. The movements diversity makes it impossible to speak about the Pentecostal movement. It cannot be defined by a major characteristic such as fidelity to a mother church (e.g. Rome) or a common confession (e.g. Augsburg or Helvetic) or a shared historical heritage (e.g. the Orthodox communion) allowing some general denominator. If the Pentecostal denominations and churches have something in common, it is the attention they pay to the presence and power of God's Spirit in the ecclesial and personal life of the believer as well as in creation in general.

If I am attempting to say something about the coming of age of Pentecostalism, then it can only be understood as a bird's view perception of what has been going on among Pentecostals for the past hundred years. But this very mix between diverse emphases and common phenomena may, in the end, prove significant from various points of view. Rather than comparing the Pentecostal movement with a certain Christian tradition I suggest a more neutral approach. Let me, for that purpose, read to you the story of the Frog King.

The Frog King[1]

In olden times, when wishing still did some good, there lived a king whose daughters were all beautiful, but the youngest was so beautiful that the sun itself, who, indeed has seen so much, marveled every time it shone upon her face. In the vicinity of the King's castle there was a large, dark forest, and in this forest, beneath an old linden tree, there was a well. In the heat of the day the princess would go out into the forest and sit on the edge of the cool well.

She took great pleasure in throwing a golden ball into the air and catching it, but once it went too high. She held out her hand with her fingers curved to catch it, but it fell to the ground and rolled and rolled right into the water.

Horrified, the princess followed it with her eyes, but the well was so deep that she could not see its bottom. The she began to cry bitterly, "I'd give anything, if only I could get my ball back; my clothes, my precious stones, my pearls, anything in the world."

At this a frog stuck its head out of the water and said, "Princess, why are you crying so bitterly?"

"Oh," she said "you ugly frog, how can you help me? My golden ball has fallen into the well."

The frog said, "I do not want your pearls, your precious stones, and your clothes, but if you will accept me as a companion and let me sit next to you and eat from your plate and sleep in your bed, and if you'll love and cherish me, then I'll bring your ball back to you."

The princess thought, "What is this stupid frog trying to say? After all, he does have to stay here in the water. But still, maybe he can get my ball. I'll go ahead and say yes," and she said aloud, "Yes, for all I care. Just bring me back my golden ball, and I'll promise everything."

The frog stuck his head under the water and dove to the bottom. He returned after a short time later with the golden ball in his mouth and threw it onto the land.

When the princess saw her ball once again, she rushed toward it, picked it up, and was so happy to have it in her hand again, that she could think of nothing else than to run home with it.

The frog called after her, "Wait, princess, take me with you like you promised," but she paid no attention to him.

The next day the princess was sitting at her table when she heard something coming up the marble steps: plip, plop. Then there came a knock at the door, and a voice called out, "Princess, youngest, open the door for me!" She ran and opened the door. It was the frog, whom she had put completely out of her mind. Frightened, she slammed the door shut and returned to the table.

The king saw that her heart was pounding and asked, "Why are you afraid?"

"There is a disgusting frog out there," she said, "who got my golden ball out of the water. I promised him that he could be my companion, but I did not think that he could leave his water, but now he is just outside the door and wants to come in."

Just then there came a second knock at the door, and a voice called out.

"Youngest daughter of the king,

Open up the door for me,

Don't you know what yesterday,

You said to me down by the well?

Youngest daughter of the king,

Open up the door for me.?

The king said, ?What you have promised, you must keep. Go and let the frog in.?

She obeyed, and the frog hopped in, then followed her up to her chair. After she had sat down again, he called out, ?Lift me up onto your chair and let me sit next to you.?

The princess did not want to, but the king commanded her to do it.

When the frog was seated next to her he said, ?Now push your golden plate closer. I want to eat from it.? She had to do this as well.

When he had eaten all he wanted, he said, ?Now I am tired and want to sleep. Take me to your room, make your bed, so that we can lie in it together.?

The princess was horrified when she heard that. She was afraid of the cold frog and did not dare to even touch him, and yet he was supposed to lie next to her in her bed; she began to cry and didn't want to at all.

Then the king became angry and commanded her to do what she had promised.

There was no helping it; she had to do what her father wanted, but in her heart she was bitterly angry. She picked up the frog with two fingers, carried him to her room, and climbed into bed, but instead of laying him next to herself, she threw him bang! against the wall. ?Now you will leave me in peace, you disgusting frog!?

But when the frog came down onto the bed, he was a handsome young prince, and he was her dear companion, and she held him in esteem as she had promised, and they fell asleep together in pleasure.

A Contemporary Interpretation of the Frog King

Before we can apply this story in any way to Pentecostalism we need to take one more step, namely to consider an interpretation of that tale. I suggest to follow Bruno Bettelheim's psycho-analytic approach.[2] He compares the events of the story with the process of maturation of young people. In the beginning the princess is a young girl carelessly playing with a ball. The ball is important for various reasons. First, everything begins to happen because of the ball falling into the well. Furthermore, the ball is a symbol of perfection, it is a sphere and it is made of gold. Bettelheim compares the ball to the girl's undeveloped narcissistic psyche, it contains all potentials, none yet realized.

?When the ball falls into the deep, dark well, naïveté is lost and Pandora's box is opened. The young princess mourns the loss of its childish innocence as desperately as that of the ball. Only the ugly frog can restore perfection ? the ball ? to her out of the darkness into which the symbol of her psyche has fallen. Life has become ugly and complicated as it begins to reveal its darker sides.?[3]

The rest of the story is a beautiful illustration how an adolescent has to learn to move from the pursuit of pleasure to an acceptance of consequences and commitments in life. Closely related to that, the young person develops an ability to love. What is different, even ugly and revolting can turn into something lovable. Like a frog that seems disgusting to touch, a child may naturally feel uneasy to touch the other sex. As the princess learns to assert herself[4], so does her ability to appreciate otherness increase. First she follows the commands of her father, the king (super ego), but in the end she decides (against her father's orders) to throw the frog against the wall. As she becomes more herself so does the frog, he turns into a prince, and both enjoy each others company.

Thus the story of the Frog King illustrates a person's development from a self-centered life style to a committed life in communion with others. What first seems dark, ugly and disgusting ends up being not that bad after all; even more ? essential for life.

A Pentecostal Interpretation of the Frog King

By now we need not say much as we apply this fairy tale to the coming of age of the Pentecostal movement. We can read the early days of Pentecostalism as the time its members rejoiced perfect bliss with the new gifts discovered as a grace of God. The sphere of the new Pentecost seemed perfect. The golden harvest time had come. But suddenly there came the time where the help of others was called for. There may have been a lot of distrust to other forms of religious life, theological convictions and moral beliefs, but little by little total otherness gave way to an appreciation of what is held in common and what constitutes enriching differences. In this sense one hundred years of Pentecostalism should not only be seen in terms of its remarkable numeric growth, but also in terms of its ideological development. Let us end this reflection by focussing on the theological, missiological, social and ecumenical development of Pentecostalism.

The Theological Development

Early Pentecostal leaders considered themselves as people coming from a variety of traditions that had been brought together by the power of the Holy Spirit. Granted the Holiness Tradition, especially in the United States and northern Europe played a catalytic role in relating personal experience, popular piety and professed doctrine.[5] But early Pentecostal spokespersons came from a variety of backgrounds, religious, social, and cultural. In Europe for instance, it was only after a decade and the turbulence of World War I, that theological reflection lead to a focus on denominational identity rather than on communion with other Christians.[6] The rejection of Pentecostal spirituality by mainline churches led Pentecostals to focus on spiritual gifts as opposed to the apparent lack thereof in the other churches. It was not unlike the princess's preoccupation with her golden ball. The gifts of the Spirit were so sublime and wonderful, they just had to be quintessential.

But soon Pentecostals met otherness: in the often uneasy relationship with Evangelicals, in opposition to liberal theology (whatever that meant), on the mission field, in community efforts, in evaluating and appropriating theological material. What first appeared to be an utterance of darkness, turned out to be a valid expression of faith; once it was beheld in the proper light and personally, yet critically, addressed.

Today, Pentecostals world wide are pursuing critical historical research, raising contemporary ethical issues, and engage in contextualized theological debate. The emergence of various Pentecostal theological journals over the last decades witnesses to that effect.^[7]

The Missiological Development

In olden times, when wishing still did some good, there lived a king whose daughters were all beautiful, but the youngest was so beautiful that the sun itself, who, indeed has seen so much, marveled every time it shone upon her face. This phrase with all its metaphorical connotations illustrates the pre-reflective stage of early Pentecostalism. The power of the Holy Spirit, so vividly experienced, seemed second to none. The gift of tongues, was not only assumed to be a symbol of a new Pentecost. It was thought to be the missionary gift par excellence, equipping the saints to communicate and minister in foreign countries. Soon of course, xenoglossa, the ability to speak a foreign language without first having learned it, turned out to be, in many instances, wishful thinking. Furthermore, early Pentecostal missionary endeavors soon began to rely on the help of larger and established missionary societies. Many lessons had to be learned the hard way.

Nevertheless, the movement grew at a breathtaking rate within a hundred years to a major Christian force on the globe. The vision to prepare a great harvest to the glory of the King of Kings and to the benefit of a lost world has been very real. The desire to bring healing to torn families and weary nations came from a personal experience of restoration as well as from a conviction that God had revealed himself in fullness, not unlike the perfect golden sphere the girl played with. The trouble is, the princess lost her ball. Likewise one could, for example, expect a slowing down of missionary zeal by the time Pentecostalism entered its third generation. The fact that this has generally not happened^[8] may point, if studied, to important emphases within Pentecostalism and the diversity of Pentecostal missionary work today.

The Social Development

Whereas we may find prophetic utterances that reflect estrangement from the world and accordingly a spiritualization as a result of hard social and economic distress^[9] it is no secret that Pentecostalism is in fact for many a way to climb the social ladder. As concern for the welfare of the converts grew, so did the various programs such as schools, child care for working mothers, medical facilities and old people's homes. Good examples can be found among Pentecostal projects in Latin America^[10] and in the developing countries in general.

As awareness of social responsibility grows, so do the areas of concern. A fine example is Miroslav Volf's book on political theology in view of ethnic strife in the Balkans.^[11] Pentecostalism is not only a global phenomenon, many Pentecostal teachers and leaders have become aware that fundamental questions of existence are of global significance and need therefore, to be tackled together. The princess has finally allowed the frog to sit at her table.

The Ecumenical Development

Many have argued that Pentecostalism was from its beginnings an inherently ecumenical movement.^[12] By necessity cross-denominational contacts were called for in missionary work. In North America and Europe contacts with the Evangelicals was sought as a means for gaining status and identity. Some Pentecostal personalities like David Du Plessis were ecumenical in outlook, others like Donald Gee ecumenical in reflection. Besides the fact that some Pentecostal churches in the two-thirds world have joined the World Council of Churches as early as in the sixties, we have been able to follow the developments of the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue for almost three decades^[13] and a similar dialogue with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches since the early nineties. But most importantly, many Pentecostal theologians have had exposure and have been trained by the established universities.

Following the analogy of the Frog King, we may risk the question, When will the princess allow the frog to share her room and bed, or the most intimate aspects of Pentecostal spirituality? This cannot mean, when will Pentecostalism liberalize access to charismatic gifts. By theological definition charisms are a gift from God and as such available to whosoever he pleases. Intimate access to Pentecostal spirituality relates to something different, to the core of its identity and the question arises, will Pentecostalism lose its identity by welcoming others to share, and therefore also to influence, its raison d'être? Would it perhaps lead to an irreversible demythologization?^[14] I believe not.^[15] As Pentecostalism is coming of age, it is not called to give up its spirituality, its devotion to God and the people in need. It might simply be called to understand herself and others more clearly by way of communication, by being in communion with others, and by learning to witness not only by means of compassion but also by means of dialogue. And as this dialogue takes place, it is quite possible that the dialogue partners say similarly with the frog, "I do not want your tongues, your prophecies and visions, but if you accept me as a companion I will be pleased."

Conclusion

In the beginning of Pentecostalism, one might assume, there was the phenomenon of "speaking in tongues". Accordingly, one could define Pentecostalism as a "tongue movement". The idea, at first, seems plausible, after all the charisma of glossolalia was an outstanding qualifier in comparison with the other Christian groups of the time. But would that be all? Cecil M. Robeck has convincingly argued that the "tongue thing" does not satisfactorily describe the Pentecostal paradigm.^[16] Perhaps the Pentecostal paradigm is not by means of definition, but by means of the Spirit. Such a paradigm has brought much diversity, a fair amount of theological blunder, personal hurt and denominational division. But the awareness of the Spirit has also opened doors cross-culturally and touched millions of lives with the Gospel.

There has been diversity within Pentecostalism from its very beginning, and that very diversity is all the more evident a hundred years later. This apparently successful mix between a common intentionality, i.e. proclaiming the Gospel with an awareness of God's presence through His Spirit, and a variety of means to realize this mandate. Might put Pentecostalism in a unique position to dialogue with other Christian communities.

The end of the Frog King tale shows that both the princess and the frog-turned-prince are of regal blood. And either party has not lost, but gained in maturity and beauty. May this story be a challenge to our research and ecumenical dialogue.

Postscript

After the first reading of this text during the 9th EPCRA Conference at the Missionsakademie in Hamburg, Germany, the response was at first an identification of the Pentecostal participants with the princess as my text suggested. Soon after, however, some Pentecostals felt that they were better represented by the frog, pointing to the rejection the movement suffered especially in the first part of the twentieth century, and the bringing back of the golden sphere to the surface (i.e. the awareness of the Holy Spirit and its theological significance to the mainline churches). At this point the non-Pentecostal participants picked up the argument and pointed to the fact that they too felt represented by both protagonists of the story. The vivid discussion ended that night with the realization that dialogue begins when its partners are not so sure whether they are all one or the other.

[1] I have taken the texts from D.L. Ashliman's translation and comparison of the versions of 1812 and 1857 (<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/frogking.html>). I have taken the liberty to start with the introduction from 1857 but to follow the shorter 1812 text for the rest of the tale. The story ends either with the transformation of the frog and the princess, or else, the tale of faithful Heinrich (Iron Henry) is added. I have omitted the faithful Heinrich text as it brings new elements to the primary tale that we need not focus upon.

[2] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), pages 286-291.

[3] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p.287f.

[4] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p.288

[5] Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1987).

[6] The early European Pentecostal conferences in Sunderland, England, for instance, included speakers of Anglican, Lutheran, Salvationist, Methodist and Baptist background.

[7] *Pneuma*, the Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies, *JEPTA* the Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association, the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* and the Cyber journal of PCTII, the Pentecostal Charismatic Theological Enquiry International to mention some.

[8] One may certainly have to differentiate geographically, but it is simply astonishing how Pentecostalism has the ability to incorporate traditional forms of spirituality as well as providing plausibility to secular expressions of life in various parts of the world. See for instance Michael Bergunder, *Die Südindische Pfingstbewegung im 20. Jahrhundert* in *Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity*, vol. 113 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1999) pp. 382, and in terms of secularization also J.D. Plüss, *Therapeutic and Prophetic Narratives in Worship*, in *Studies in the intercultural History of Christianity*, vol. 54 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1988) pp.394.

[9] So for instance a prophecy based on the parable of the ten virgins quoted in Walter J. Hollenweger, *Handbuch zur Pfingstbewegung*, II Hauptteil, 05.28.025, p. 2182 (unpublished dissertation in theology at the University of Zurich, 1967), reprinted in J.D. Plüss *Therapeutic and Prophetic Narratives in Worship*, pages 372-373.

[10] Douglas Petersen, *not by Might nor by Power. A Pentecostal Theology of Social Concern in Latin America*(Oxford:Regnum), pp.260.

[11] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, Nashville), pp. 336.

[12] Most historical studies emphasize for instance the various backgrounds of the early Pentecostal leaders. Theologians point to Methodist, Catholic and African roots of Pentecostal thought. Sociologists have pointed to the ability of Pentecostals to cross social as well as cultural boundaries. See for instance Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism. Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1997) pp. 495; or Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven. The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1997) pp. 346.

[13] Jerry Sandidge, *Roman Catholic / Pentecostal Dialogue (1977-1982): A Study in Developing Ecumenism*, in *Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity*, vol 44 (Peter Lang: Frankfurt a.M., 1987); Veli Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spiritus ubi vult Spirat, Pneumatology in Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue (1972-1989)*, in *Schriften der Luther-Agricola Gesellschaft* 42 (Helsinki, 1998), pp. 509

[14] Similar to the tale of Rumpelstilzchen, when the imp inadvertently gives away its true name and thereby loses its power. Walter J. Hollenweger has discussed Pentecostalism and the power of myth in his, *Erfahrungen der Leibhaftigkeit* (Munich: Kaiser, 1979).

[15] In the end the princess asserts herself and throws the frog against the wall.. This does not mean dismissal, but allows room for disagreement. Ecumenical dialogue likewise allows room for disagreeing parties.

