

Can the Good, the Bad and the Ugly turn into the True, Good and Beautiful? Musings on Ethics in Pentecostalism

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On Wednesday morning April 18, 1906, many a sober and learned clergy could read shocking words in the Los Angeles Daily Times.

? Breathing strange utterances and mouthing a creed which it would seem no sane mortal could understand, the newest religious sect has started in Los Angeles. Meetings are held in a tumble-down shack on Azusa street, near San Pedro street, and the devotees of the weird doctrine practice the most fanatical rites, preach the wildest theories and work themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal.

Colored people and a sprinkling of whites compose the congregation, and night is made hideous in the neighborhood by the howlings of the worshippers, who spend hours swaying forth and back in a nerve-racking attitude of prayer and supplication. They claim to have ?the gift of tongues,? and to be able to comprehend the babel.

Such a startling claim has never yet been made by any company of fanatics, even in Los Angeles, the home of almost numberless creeds. Sacred tenets, reverently mentioned by the orthodox believer, are dealt with in a familiar, if not irreverent, manner by the religionists. [\[1\]](#)

The Los Angeles news papers carried stories on an almost daily basis about the Azusa street meetings. Headlines read: ?Holy Kickers Baffle Police ? Hold High Carnival in Azusa Street until Midnight?, ?Wife prefers Holy Rollers to Husband?, ?Women with Men Embrace?, ?Holy Kickers carry on Mad Orgies?, ?Whites and Blacks Mix in a Religious Frenzy?, ?Jumpers to Kill Children?. Well, I can console you, the Jumpers did not kill children, but anyone reading this must have been shocked by such statements and must in all likelihood have concluded that those Pentecostals are an irresponsible and immoral bunch of religionists. What ugly scenes must have taken place at that fly-infested-horse-stable-turned-into-religious-meeting-hall? What good could come from such bad taste? What ethical convictions, if any, were common to those unorthodox believers?

Today, Pentecostalism is a world wide movement numbering about 500 Million faithful. Not unlike the situation in Los Angeles during those early days of the twentieth century, Pentecostalism is a predominantly urban phenomenon, growing fastest in the developing countries where the contrast between the rich few and the many poor, between the powerful and the helpless is so evident. What are ethical issues that confront Pentecostal believers today? I invite you to look at the background, at some developments and at the current situation of Pentecostalism as regards ethical implications of their theology and praxis.

The Background

If we accept the presupposition that Pentecostalism started in the USA at the beginning of the last century, we may trace its roots theologically and phenomenologically.

Theologically, it has been argued that most early Pentecostal leaders came from a Methodist / Holiness background. [\[2\]](#) Accordingly, they grew up with two basic convictions that shaped their religious thinking. Firstly, they emphasized saving grace as a liberating reality. Secondly, they were convinced of the need to progress in a lifestyle that reflects this grace experienced. It is common knowledge that Methodism was instrumental in the abolition of slavery, the implementation of mixed gender schooling, the elevation of the role of women in society, and in pursuing numerous social welfare programs. Underlying was on the one hand the notion of a **crisis** experience, a conversion, that put the believer in a new relationship with God, a new reality of living by grace, a calling to a new destiny. On the other hand, there was the conviction that by the indwelling Holy Spirit there was a **process** towards a God pleasing life, leading the believer into sanctification in spite of weakness, injustice and misery. The Holiness movement emphasized the ability of God?s Spirit to restore one?s life to good and holy living. The challenge for the believer was to implement the teachings of the Bible in a dialectic between crisis and development, between being helped by God?s grace and pursuing holy living for the personal and common good. [\[3\]](#) Their spiritual vision of the True, Good and Beautiful had was relevant in everyday life.

The **phenomenological root** of Pentecostalism can be traced to the black spirituality of the Afro-American slaves. Keywords are: orality of liturgy (songs, open prayers, visions, dreams etc.), the importance of witness (narratives of grace, testimonies of a changed life), maximum participation (community of interpretation, reconciliation, male and female participation), a holistic view of body and mind (prayer for healing with laying on of hands, the role of music and dance). In other words, the black roots of Pentecostalism emphasize the relational and expressive aspects of faith.

These two roots indicate that the early Pentecostals were nurtured in an environment where the life of faith meant much more than abiding to a set of do?s and don?ts [\[4\]](#). Rather, experiences of faith and grace were put to practice. In order to exemplify this let us look at issues of racism and pacifism among early Pentecostals. They serve as examples, not only of the ethical potential that has been present since the early days of Pentecostalism, but also of what can come of such impulses.

The issue of **racism** in Los Angeles needs to be contextualized. At the end of the nineteenth century Los Angeles was still advertised as the last citadel of Anglo-Saxon purity by Aryan supremacists like Joseph Widney. [\[5\]](#) Racial discrimination was

strong even though California was not under the Jim Crow jurisdiction. Mob lynchings were almost the order of the day, and of course, most of the time it was Black or Asian folk that had to suffer the consequences. Segregation in church was the tradition of not the rule. In the 1870's Los Angeles was still an unimportant West Coast town. But the situation changed very quickly. Between 1900 and 1910, 5500 blacks, 5000 Mexicans, 4000 Japanese, and more than 30000 Europeans arrived in Los Angeles. By 1910 non-whites and immigrants constituted fully 22 percent of its population. [6] It is in this time of fast growth, change and upheaval that a black preacher, called William J. Seymour, the son of slaves, came to that city of Angels and began to preach the eschatological message of a new Pentecost, a reconciliation through the power of God's Spirit, a mission to the world. It was the mixture of holiness teaching and spiritual validation through experience that led the early Pentecostals to acknowledge the genuine character of each others' faith. The Azusa street church was in its early years a visible statement of interracial fellowship. Frank Bartleman, a white minister and important early chronicler of the Pentecostal revival in Los Angeles, often associated with his black friends proclaiming that the "color line was washed away in the blood" [7]. It is a well documented fact [8] that the headlines of the Los Angeles Daily Times were not only sensational, but actually quite accurate. White and blacks did mingle. Women did embrace men on the basis of new found freedom and joy in Christ. They took I. Corinthians 12:13 quite literally, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

The early Pentecostal position on **pacifism** can also be traced to the teachings of the Holiness movement. [9] Early Pentecostal leaders like Charles Fox Parham and Frank Bartleman were influenced by Quakers, and forcefully preaching against the Christian's involvement in war. Pacifism was also an issue in Europe. Walter Hollenweger quotes Arthur Booth-Clibborn saying :

The Scripture shows us that organized sin [today we would speak of "structural injustice?"] is much worse in the sight of God than are sins of the individuals. The church, to its shame, has compromised itself at times by legitimising "the organized slaying of millions in the wars" through an "unholy alliance" with emperors and governments. [10]

In 1917 the Assemblies of God USA sent a statement to President Woodrow Wilson officially declaring itself a pacifist church. [11] The basic argument was that if an intercultural, interracial and gender inclusive unity in Christ was experienced, how could a Pentecostal then go to war against a Christian brother or sister? Other arguments brought forward were economic in nature, saying that war would only benefit the rich at the expense of the poor. [12]

Looking back at the quickly sketched early Pentecostal attitudes on racism and pacifism, my argument would be, that these believers did not just preach a moral code relating to proper behaviour such as "do not steal" or "live a monogamous life" as could have been expected, but the context of living their faith prompted them to adopt convictions and responsibilities as a group within society as a whole.

Some Developments

Alas, Pentecostalism, as you know, does not always represent the True, Good and Beautiful in this world, rather it is more like Sergio Leone's classical Western, where the occasional Good is facing the Bad and the Ugly. [13] The realities of life weigh heavier than the visions of harmony and bliss. Any critical observer of Pentecostalism will have no problems finding many instances where Pentecostals miserably failed, and ethical convictions they were familiar with faded, or did not materialize in the first place.

The interracial fellowship in Los Angeles gave soon way to separate, predominantly black or white Pentecostal congregations. In South Africa, to mention another example, interracial fellowship gave soon way to a tacit acceptance of apartheid. Similarly, the impact of pacifism began to weaken. The development of these two phenomena, representative of others, can be explained by two factors. The first one is **accommodation**, and the second one is related to the eschatological outlook prevalent in Pentecostalism.

As Pentecostalism in the West grew, it sought contact with established religious groups, in the USA especially with the National Association of Evangelicals. As many ridiculed Pentecostals as immature fanatics it was nice to have a "big brother" and receive recognition and support. As a consequence, however, some of the Pentecostal distinctives were put on ice. So for instance a Spirit focused view of Scripture at the expense of a more fundamentalist understanding of the Bible. Or to give another example, by the 1930s Pentecostalism in the United States had grown to such a degree that it seemed important to have Pentecostal army chaplains in order to minister to the Pentecostal servicemen. This could only be realized by dropping a pacifist stance in favour of patriotic support. Furthermore, accommodation also happened economically. Pentecostals of the second and third generation had in many cases enjoyed a better education than their parents. They moved up the social ladder and lost a feel for the disadvantaged in society.

The other factor has to do with the **eschatological outlook** common in Pentecostal spirituality. In the beginning Pentecostals were convinced that the last days had come. The fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the believers was a sign that Jesus Christ was preparing his people for his imminent coming. Whereas the Holiness people predominantly shared a nineteenth century postmillennial outlook, i.e. they believed that their ethical engagement had a bearing on bringing about the Christian millennium, Pentecostals began to argue the other way around, namely that the future determines their present attitudes and commitments. Instead of placing an emphasis on social reform, they preached the coming of the end times and the total collapse of the worldly structures in favour of a new kingdom. The establishment of a British protectorate in Palestine during World War I, the proclamation of Israel in 1948 and the capture of the old part of Jerusalem in 1967 were all signs that the times of the Gentiles would come to an end. Hence God would establish his divine order regardless of any human preparation. [14] Similarly, Jeffrey P. Goins has argued that western Pentecostals show environmental disregard because they consider creation to be expendable; as inevitably there would be a new heaven and a new earth. [15] G. Francois Wessels, in an article on South African Charismatics and social justice describes their world view as: a) dualistic, b) apocalyptic, and c) pessimistic. [16] So then, it seems that Pentecostals are absent

from the public socio-political scene.

Well, fortunately the story does not end there. We can agree with Wessels that, firstly, social justice cannot only be defined in terms of activism in the public domain, and, secondly, that an eschatological world view as a cognitive construct cannot be the sole criteria for evaluating their practical ethical attitudes. [17] Nevertheless, let us have a closer look at 'accommodation' and 'eschatology'.

The Current Situation

One of the reasons mentioned why Pentecostalism grew so quickly within a time span of only a hundred years, and why pentecostal values were able to fertilize charismatic communities of different convictions, may lay in the fact that its spirituality is not culturally confined. It is 'a religion made to travel' [18] Pentecostalism assumes different forms, according to the social, cultural and religious background or the class identity of the practitioners. As a spiritual movement, Pentecostalism has neither class, ideological, territorial, nor confessional boundaries. [19] The Pentecostal/charismatic spirituality has a cross-cultural disposition in a global context. This, as Harvey Cox emphasizes, is very much like the early Christian communities as depicted in the Book of Acts. [20] The question is, can Christians in general and Pentecostals specifically stand the test of time and differentiate between accommodation in the sense of being globally relevant, or if they submit to accommodation in the sense of complacency 'of buying into the individualist temptations of the global market.

Let us look at a concrete example. How do Pentecostal churches confront poverty in Brazil? Ideally, as Cecilia Loreto Martiz has suggested, [21] Pentecostal churches provide a new identity and self-esteem to the poor who face material privation, marginalization and insecurity. They provide structures that support the family, networks that help to break patterns of destructive behaviour like alcoholism and prostitution. Furthermore, the emphasis on spiritual gifts stand in opposition to material riches, and fortify the dignity of the poor. Ideally I said, for at the same time there are Pentecostals who emphasize the improvement of material life through a 'theology of prosperity'. [22] Here we see a major ethical challenge, will these Pentecostals be able to maintain their focus on fundamental values or will they try accommodate to the mirage of Western affluence and individual power? Obviously this challenge is addressed to all of us. The early Christians in Ephesus did maintain a critical and prophetic stance over against the idol merchants and priests of Diana. Pentecostals, precisely because they value a spirituality that crosses boundaries, are challenged to contribute to a Christian life style that does not only speak about the life in the Spirit but also bears the fruit thereof.

Finally, at least for this presentation, there is the issue of eschatology. As we have mentioned above the eschatological views of Pentecostals have often been described as escapist, often as systematically ignoring the real and physical poverty of the marginalized masses preaching a message that rather focussed on 'pie in the sky for the sweet by and by'. [23] But it is fair to say, that if there are Pentecostals focusing on an escapist eschatology they are likely to be found among the affluent minority. For the large majority of pentecostal and charismatic believers life is not fair. They face evil and illness, rejection and injustice, unemployment and repression, war and perhaps even torture. For them eschatology is a present reality providing them with hope for change. [24] Participating in God's Kingdom through the presence of His Spirit puts their feet on new ground and gives them strength and conviction to live for the Kingdom as Jesus did.

Murray Dempster put it this way,

When the biblical truth of Jesus' second coming is interpreted within the framework of Jesus' own conception of the Kingdom of God a radical shift in consciousness occurs, radical because within such a framework of interpretation belief in Jesus' return actually becomes a powerful motivation for Christian social concern in the same way that the belief has been a driving force for evangelism?

Jesus' own mission, ministry and message clearly establishes an eschatological continuity between the anticipatory reign of God 'already' present in his ministry and the consummated reign of God 'not yet' come. This eschatological continuity between the 'already' present and the 'not yet' consummated kingdom needs to be interpreted within the prophetic tradition with which Jesus explicitly identified his ministry in the Nazareth manifesto (Luke 4:18-19) and elsewhere throughout the Synoptics. [25]

This then would be the ethical challenge for Pentecostals in view of their eschatology. To appreciate and relate the empowerment of Jesus' ministry through the Holy Spirit to proclaim God's Kingdom and act on behalf of it (Luke 4:18-19), with the empowerment of the Christian's ministry through the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit not only to live a Pentecostal spirituality, but also to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:25); to participate in the reign of God, to challenge and confront structural sin and evil, to fulfil a prophetic role in society and to serve through charismatic empowerment. [26]

Conclusion

It is in the nature of Christian spirituality to think in terms of the True, Good and Beautiful. The fact of the matter is, we live in an environment that still needs redemption. It is within this tension that also the Pentecostal has to bear witness. The Good does not live on its own, it has to overcome the Bad and the Ugly. This is the testimony of Christian history. Western Pentecostals especially may benefit if they re-appropriate the history of their immediate predecessors, the Wesleyan Holiness movement and their ethical vision for the True, Good and Beautiful.

It is a bit like in Sergio Leone's Western. The Ugly, after almost having killed the Good of thirst, does everything to restore the health of his partner in an attempt to learn where the money is hidden. He pathetically entices the Good to reveal the secret and argues that when one is ill it is good to have somebody close by. For, as he goes on to argue, we are all alone in the world. Clint Eastwood counters his sarcasm, and thus emphasizing the truth of the matter, by saying in a faint voice, 'I sleep better, knowing that my good friend is at my side to protect me.'

[1] *Los Angeles Daily Times*, Wednesday Morning, April 18, 1906. Copy distributed by A. Butler and C.M. Robeck on occasion of a seminar on early Pentecostalism held during the 19th Pentecostal World Conference in Los Angeles May 28-31, 2001.

[2] See for instance: Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan / Francis Asbury Press), 1981 and Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997).

[3] This emphasis on practical holiness was strong in the nineteenth century revivals in England (Keswick) and the USA (National Holiness camp meetings) and drew not only Methodists, but also Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Quakers and Mennonites. Cf. C.E. Jones *Holiness Movement* in Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee eds. *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: MI, Zondervan Publishing House, 1988) pp. 406-409.

[4] Although it is still common to categorize the moral behaviour of Pentecostals in evangelical Protestant categories. Cf. Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (London: SCM Press, 1972) 'Religion is what you must not do?' pp. 399-412.

[5] Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), p.53.

[6] Harvey Cox, *Fire*, p. 55.

[7] Quoted by many Pentecostal historians for instance by Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below. Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 228.

[8] Evidenced by various scholarly publications as well as by the spread of Pentecostalism to Europe and other continents by white church people describing their contacts with the group at Azusa street..

[9] Jay Beaman, *Pentecostal Pacifism* (Hillsboro, KA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1989), 12-14.

[10] Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, p. 187.

[11] Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, p. 188, referring to Murray Dempster, *Crossing Borders: Arguments Used by Early American Pentecostals in Support of the Global Character of Pacifism*, in Conference on Pentecostal and Charismatic Research in Europe, 1991, Kappel a.A., Switzerland .

[12] Jay Beaman, *Pentecostal Pacifism*, p. 52ff. See also Cecil M. Robeck Jr. *Das soziale Anliegen der frühen amerikanischen Pfingstbewegung in Pfingstbewegung und Basisgemeinen in Lateinamerika* in *Weltmission Heute* Nr. 39 (Hamburg: Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland, 2000), p. 59-64. Originally published as: *The Social Concern of Early American Pentecostalism* in Jan A. Jongeneel (ed.) *Pentecost, Mission and Ecumenism. Essays on Intercultural Theology* (Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity vol. 75; Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1992) pp. 97-106.

[13] 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly?', written by Alberto Grimaldi, directed by Sergio Leone, 1966.

[14] On a summary of Pentecostal eschatological views see D.J. Wilson *Eschatology, Pentecostal Perspectives on* in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, pp.264-268.

[15] Jeffrey P. Goins, *Expendable Creation: Classical Pentecostalism and Environmental Disregard*, Master of Arts thesis in Philosophy (Marquett University, 1997).

[16] G. Francois Wessels, *South African Perspectives in Missionalia* the journal of the South African Missiological Society, <http://www.geocities/missionalia/wessels.htm>

[17] G. Francois Wessels, *South African Perspectives*, p.5

[18] See Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus and Douglas Petersen, *The Globalisation of Pentecostalism. A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1999).

[19] Bernado L. Campos, *In the Poster of the Spirit: Pentecostalism, Theology and Social Ethics* in Benjamin F. Gutierrez and Dennis A. Smith (ed.) *In the Power of the Spirit. The Pentecostal Challenge to historic Churches in Latin America* (Drexel Hill, PA: Skipjack Press, 1996, p. 42.

[20] Harvey G. Cox, 'Pentecostalism and Global Market Culture?: A Response to Issues Facing Pentecostalism in a Postmodern World' in *The Globalisation of Pentecostalism*, pp.386-395.

[21] Cecilia Loreto Martiz, *Pentecostalism and Confrontation with Poverty in Brazil* in *In the Power of the Spirit*, pp.129-146.

[22] In Brazil probably most accentuated in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Providing financial support for the church and its ministries is not the problem, neither is the practice of tithing. The problem arises when promises of wealth are made that deceive the faithful into giving for the sake of a religious gamble ('If I give, God will be my creditor. If God is my creditor, he will have to reward me with interest.?) at the detriment of family support and personal responsibility.

[23] Douglas Petersen, *not by Might nor by Power. A Pentecostal Theology of Social Concern in Latin America* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1996), p. 106f.

[24] Douglas Petersen, *not by Might nor by Power*, p. 107.

[25] Murray W. Dempster, *Christian Social Concern in Pentecostal Perspective: Reformulating Pentecostal Eschatology* in *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, Issue 2, 1993, p. 60f. In this article Murray Dempster elaborates on the analogy between Jesus' Kingdom teachings and the church's Pentecost teachings drawing from R. Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984).

[26] Eldin Villafaña, *The Liberating Spirit. Toward an Hispanic American Social Ethic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993, pp. 193 ? 221.