

THE RENEWAL OF PENTECOSTALISM:  
A RESPONSE TO JOHN CARPENTER

Simon K. H. Chan

I believe Carpenter and I are basically agreed that early Pentecostalism was either directly or indirectly influenced by certain Evangelical bodies and traditions such as the Wesleyan-Holiness movement, various Reformed-Baptistic groups and the Plymouth Brethren. What we disagreed over is, given the fact of these historical links, how should Pentecostals understand themselves in relation to other Christian traditions? Carpenter would like Pentecostals to reaffirm their historical linkage. This, he thinks, is the “only” way for a “genuinely Pentecostal traditioning” to be done (p. 313).<sup>1</sup> I am, however, calling on Pentecostals to reevaluate those links and develop a broader vision of themselves as part of the larger Christian spiritual tradition without thereby repudiating their evangelical heritage.

It is vital at this point to make a distinction between evangelicalism that belongs to the larger Christian tradition—what Donald Bloesch describes as “true evangelicalism” which “is at one with a true Catholicism”<sup>2</sup>—and the Evangelicalism<sup>3</sup> represented by various movements and bodies, especially in Britain and North America, which over the last hundred years or so has come to be identified with a particular theory about the scripture and a reactionary attitude towards culture. The former seeks to be true to the teachings of the apostles concerning Jesus Christ and to maintain a confessional standard that is

---

<sup>1</sup> All the pages references are to John B. Carpenter, “Genuine Pentecostal Traditioning: Rooting Pentecostalism in Its Evangelical Soil: A Reply to Simon Chan,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 6:2 (2003), pp. 303-26.

<sup>2</sup> *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, when Evangelicalism is capitalized it refers to the latter.

universally binding.<sup>4</sup> In a pluralistic age when truth is relativized, the insistence on a confessional standard is crucial. It is, according to Braaten, what makes the evangelical faith different from the gospel of neopaganism.<sup>5</sup> The Evangelical movement, on the other hand, may embody this evangelical faith, but it has tended to distinguish itself from the larger Christian tradition. It sees features of the larger tradition such as sacramental theology, episcopacy and liturgical worship as representing at best a compromised gospel. It is a deeply paradoxical movement. While resisting the influence of non-Christian culture, it is nonetheless deeply influenced by that very culture. This has been well documented by historians of the movement.<sup>6</sup> Not all the influences were bad,<sup>7</sup> but the impact of romanticism on the Holiness and Keswick movements (two movements that had a direct contribution to twentieth century Pentecostalism) did more harm than good. As Bebbington noted, “[b]y shifting the fulcrum of Christianity from the head to the heart, [the Holiness movement] blurred ecclesiastical boundaries and softened the doctrinal inheritance.”<sup>8</sup> Carpenter is perhaps aware of the problem; this is why he seems to prefer the Reformed and Puritan strands of the Evangelical movement. Yet, as I shall point out later, as long as Evangelicalism continues to operate without regard for the larger Christian tradition, it will ultimately fail in its renewal efforts.

I am all for an evangelicalism that is understood as an authentic spiritual impulse that runs through historic Christianity. Such an evangelicalism transcends the Evangelicalism which came about as a largely reactionary movement against the threat of liberalism. The trouble with a reactionary movement is that its basic identity becomes more and more shaped by what it opposes than by positive belief. Reaction to a false belief has tended to result in an over-compensated

---

<sup>4</sup> I am basically in agreement with Carl Braaten’s understanding of what it means to be evangelical. See *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 32-43.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *Either/Or: The Gospel of Neopaganism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 3-4; David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 80-97.

<sup>7</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 57-74.

<sup>8</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 180.

belief. Like Phariseeism that seeks to put a hedge around the law, Evangelicalism confuses its own questionable accretions with the historic Christian faith. That is, instead of affirming the authority and normativeness of the scripture, it sought to defend a particular theory of the scripture, namely, inerrancy (which in fact bears little resemblance to the views of the magisterial Reformers).<sup>9</sup> Instead of affirming the historic saving work of Christ, it sought to defend a particular theory of the atonement. It takes an anti-liturgical view of worship and an anti-sacramental view of the church. There is no question that “establishment” Pentecostals have developed close affinities with this kind of Evangelicalism, as Carpenter’s references make clear.<sup>10</sup> My concern is that as they do so, they will be drawn into the same narrow vision and end up equally impoverished, unable to appreciate and contribute to the larger Christian tradition of which evangelicalism is a part.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that Pentecostalism was not *directly* influenced by the larger Christian tradition does not mean that it has nothing to do with the latter. What is remarkable is that the distinctive Pentecostal experience from the 1960s has found a home within Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy and many mainline Protestant denominations. This shows that as far as Pentecostal experience is concerned, the sacramental tradition is not foreign soil, contrary to what Carpenter may think (p. 305). There is a kind of catholicity in Pentecostal faith and experience that cannot be confined to a narrowly defined Evangelicalism. Even within the Evangelical movement, as David Bebbington has noted, there has been significant crossovers into the sacramental tradition.<sup>12</sup> My attempt to forge a link with a catholic Christianity, therefore, is not simply to create a “myth of origin” (pp. 305-306). Historian of Pentecostalism Walter Hollenweger has shown that the first ten years of the Pentecostal revival exhibited a much bigger vision than what their immediate Evangelical

---

<sup>9</sup> See the insightful discussion of this issue by Michael J. Christensen, *C. S. Lewis on Scripture* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), pp. 81-92.

<sup>10</sup> In particular, his reference to Douglas A. Oss (pp. 305, 310).

<sup>11</sup> The evangelicalism I have in mind here is similar to that which Richard Foster identifies in his book *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998). It is one of six valid streams (the others being the contemplative, holiness, charismatic, social justice, and sacramental) which together make up the “Great Tradition” of the Christian faith.

<sup>12</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 97.

precursors bequeathed to it.<sup>13</sup> This point has been noted by other Pentecostal scholars as well.<sup>14</sup>

My view of traditioning, however, does not depend on recovering the “golden age” of Pentecostalism, even though there is more to be said about this than Carpenter’s “return to the pristine faith of the Bible” (p. 319). Carpenter sees traditioning as largely the work of applying to the present a fixed body of truth given in the past. Here, in fact, is the Evangelical creation of a myth—the myth that the Bible can be read objectively, and that one could get at its pure objective meaning through “sound exegesis” (p. 310). If this were the case, I wonder why Carpenter would need to be concerned about learning from Evangelicals’ puritan forebears—if the truth can be independently established apart from any interpretive community. The idea that an objective meaning exists apart from the interpretive community has its origin not in the Bible but in Cartesian philosophy and came to influence Evangelical thinking through Scottish common-sense philosophy. It is this tradition of interpretation that underlies much of the Evangelical distinctiveness, including the doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the kind of traditioning that Carpenter advocates is itself the product of an interpretive tradition or community, but mythically projected as a “return to the pristine faith of the Bible.” The tradition that Carpenter ostensibly favors (sixteenth

---

<sup>13</sup> “Pentecostals and the Charismatic Movement” in *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1986), pp. 550-51. Hollenweger especially noted the ecumenical spirit of the Pentecostal pioneer William J. Seymour and refers to the early years of Pentecostalism as the “heart” rather than the infancy of the movement.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., a study of early Pentecostal spirituality by Steven Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993). Gerald Sheppard, “Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: The Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship,” *Pneuma* 6:2 (Fall 1984), pp. 5-34 has shown that the earlier Pentecostals were non-committal towards dispensationalism.

<sup>15</sup> See the critique by Harriet A Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 90-92. Ron Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 44-52 has shown that Scottish common-sense philosophy was also the basis of Warfield’s doctrine of cessationism. It is no coincidence that Warfield was an ardent defender of the theory of inerrancy as well. Common-sense philosophy implies that truth is “static and open to investigation to people irrespective of time or place” (p. 47). The doctrine of inerrancy is simply the application of this idea to the scripture.

century Reformation-Puritanism-Evangelicalism) is one that is thought to maintain this primitivistic impulse.<sup>16</sup> But as D. H. Williams has observed, this “fall paradigm” (nothing good came from the church after the apostles and before the sixteenth century Reformation) undermines the very process in which the church came to canonize its scripture and uphold orthodoxy:

How can any church today claim a connection with the apostolic era when it has remained ignorant of and often rejected in practice the church age which followed the apostles and which was *the* critical period for the very formation of the New Testament, for the propounding of the doctrines of Christ and the Trinity, for the confessions of redemption and eternal hope—in short, for the development of what it is to think and live as an orthodox Christian?<sup>17</sup>

Failure to appreciate the epistemological issue has led Carpenter to misrepresent what he calls the “post-liberal” idea that theology is “merely a community’s ‘talk’” (p. 309). Barth and Lindbeck are singled out as representing this “post-liberal” view. For Carpenter, it has to be a choice between pure objective truth and mere community’s talk, neither of which actually represents Barth’s position. Stanley Hauerwas in his recent Gifford Lectures has, in fact, shown that Barth’s theology is quite the opposite of what Carpenter makes it to be.<sup>18</sup> In my book I have sought to argue for a dialectical relationship between the scripture and the interpretive community.<sup>19</sup> Only in this dialectical relationship can the process of canonization and other doctrinal developments, as noted by Williams above, be properly understood.

Carpenter’s own proposal is for Pentecostals to “start with a new Pentecostal historiography” which “must be rooted in the core values of the evangelicalism of which Pentecostalism is a part” (p. 316). Is

---

<sup>16</sup> But as I have noted earlier, the sixteenth century Reformers were not the wooden literalists that some modern Evangelicals made them to be.

<sup>17</sup> *Retrieving the Great Tradition*, p. 27

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (London: SCM, 2002). It is interesting to note that Hauerwas contrasted Barth with William James and Reinhold Niebuhr. The latter two sought to develop a theology from religious experience; whereas for Barth, theology is *about* God based on God’s revelation of himself in Christ.

<sup>19</sup> *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), ch. 1.

Carpenter suggesting that historical conditioning should determine how Pentecostals should shape their own identity? Must Pentecostals remain dispensationalists because it was a system that shaped much of its history? I suspect that that is not the reason for Carpenter's proposal. The reason why Pentecostals are told to let their historical links with Evangelicalism shape their own identity is because the latter is believed to be true. In other words, Evangelicalism as Carpenter understands it, and whose historiography he outlines in his article (pp. 315-26), is set forth as the true tradition. This is an assertion that I want to challenge and which I would like to show to be inadequate.

First, Evangelical historiography based on the "fall paradigm" has to ignore large chunks of Christian history, or at best consign them to a position of relative unimportance. This accounts for its anti-liturgical, anti-eucharistic stance. It does not matter that as far back as the early second century, Christian liturgy already revealed a eucharistic "shape";<sup>20</sup> for Evangelicals, if it is not clearly taught in the scripture it cannot be of any real consequence for the church.<sup>21</sup> This has led to a rather constrictive view of Christian history. Only the tradition of interpretation that follows such Evangelical distinctives as the "primitivist" impulse, the "fall paradigm" and their idea of Christian "fundamentals" (such as the penal-substitutionary theory) is considered true. Nowhere is this constrictive reading of history more apparent than in Carpenter's understanding of Wesleyan history. Basically, it is read with an Evangelical lens (p. 319). Ostensibly, the only thing that might be worth retrieving would be its Reformed and Pietistic strands, which have to pass through, to use a different analogy, the Evangelical sieve. From this perspective, the rich and multifaceted nature of Wesleyanism is regarded as "a mutt, not a pure breed" (p. 320). The fact that the Wesleyan revival was, according to Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright, a eucharistic revival<sup>22</sup> has no real place in Carpenter's historiography, since such a fact is not part of the Evangelical tradition,

---

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., the classic study by Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Glasgow: Dacre, 1945).

<sup>21</sup> But even what is perceived as clearly taught in Scripture is actually based on a particular tradition of interpretation which, under Cartesian influence, Evangelicals fail to recognize.

<sup>22</sup> See his "Introduction" to the Wesleys' *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, facsimile reprint (Madison, NJ: Charles Wesley Society, 1995).

although for the Wesleys themselves, eucharistic theology and spirituality played no small role in the Wesleyan revival.<sup>23</sup>

Like the Wesleyan tradition, the Reformed and Puritan traditions are filtered through Carpenter's brand of Evangelicalism. For Reformed theology, Carpenter appears to privilege the Princeton School. But what about the Mercersburg School? Is it less Reformed because it advocates a high eucharistic theology?<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Puritanism is not so monolithic a movement as Carpenter makes it to be. Even if we discount the Quakers as Puritans, it still includes a wide range of spiritual traditions which cannot be comprehended within a narrow Evangelicalism. My own research has uncovered a strong contemplative tradition with deep affinities with popular Catholic devotion.<sup>25</sup> Or, again, if we consider the Evangelicalism of today we discover at least two discernible strands: the Evangelicalism represented in, e.g., the Chicago Council on Biblical Inerrancy (cf. p. 305) and the Evangelicalism in the Chicago Call (1977). The Chicago Call is especially significant because it acknowledges the need for Evangelicals to enlarge their historical and theological frame of reference. Among other things, it calls on Evangelicals to recognize the "evangelical impulse" that runs through the entire church, not just among the Protestant Reformers (Article 1). It also calls for Evangelicals to "sacramental integrity" (Article 5). Over all, the Chicago Call represents a new awareness among Evangelicals in the late 1970s that if the movement is to continue as a vibrant tradition it needs to discover its roots in the larger Christian tradition. This explains why of the eight articles of the Call, four (Articles 1, 3, 7, 8) deal with the *catholicity* of the church. It is noteworthy that in recent years we are seeing a group of "younger evangelicals" who are heeding the Call.<sup>26</sup> Are these

---

<sup>23</sup> For a recent discussion of this see Lorna Khoo, "Wesleyan Eucharistic Spirituality: Its Nature, Sources and Future" (Ph.D. dissertation, Open University, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> The Mercersburg School is characterized by its high churchmanship. Among its better known scholars are Philip Schaff (1819-93), the church historian and John W. Nevin (1803-86), a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian who wrote *Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Calvinistic Doctrine of the Eucharist* (1846), facsimile reprint (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1963).

<sup>25</sup> "The Puritan Meditative Tradition: A Study in Ascetical Piety" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> See Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002). Webber identifies three types of evangelicals: the "pragmatic," the "traditional," and the "younger" evangelicals.

evangelicals any less evangelical because they are also catholic? What Carpenter has offered us is a highly selective reading of evangelical history. Yet it is within this narrow strand of Evangelicalism that Carpenter would like for Pentecostals to understand themselves!

Secondly, when we examine the attempt of the more serious Evangelical scholars<sup>27</sup> at dealing with problems within their own tradition, it at once reveals the inadequacy of the Evangelical tradition at self-correction. This is exemplified in the works of David Wells. Wells has done a brilliant job analyzing and critiquing a culture-bound Evangelicalism.<sup>28</sup> But when it comes to renewing Evangelicalism, his answer is a return to "Protestant orthodoxy."<sup>29</sup> This is manifestly inadequate for two reasons. First, it implies that the sixteenth century sets the benchmark by which all theologies must be judged. This could only lead to a fossilized theology as it does not allow for further development of doctrine *from* the sixteenth century. It is this static view of doctrine that has led many Evangelicals to a static view of the church. Evangelicals, of course, believe in the need to ensure that our present-day doctrines are truly in line with the teachings of the apostles. There needs to be continuity of doctrine: "Believers succeed the apostles as they accept what the apostles taught. It is a succession not of ecclesiastical power as the Church of Rome teaches but of doctrine."<sup>30</sup> But the succession of doctrine is not so easy to determine as Evangelicals make it out to be. For some, it is simply a matter of correct interpretation of the scripture. But as we all know, everyone can claim that his or her doctrines are biblical, including Mormons, Moonies and Jehovah Witnesses. How do we know that what we believe is truly what the apostles taught? The only way to know is when we can trace its continuity in *history*. And the way to establish historical continuity is by way of the living tradition of the church, the historic interpretive community. What Evangelicals have done is to replace the authority of the church as the interpretive community with the authority of the theologians. Secondly, the return to Protestant orthodoxy has tended to mean largely a return to the rationalistic stream of Protestant orthodoxy.

---

<sup>27</sup> These are the "traditional evangelicals" in Webber's classification.

<sup>28</sup> *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) and *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> *No Place for Truth*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Wells, *No Place*, p. 103.

Carpenter's understanding of "Evangelical" and Protestant orthodoxy is remarkably similar to Wells'. But recently, Pentecostal Terry Cross questions if this stream alone is able to rescue Evangelicalism from its theological vacuity.<sup>31</sup> Cross argues that the evangelical movement, once unified, is being pulled apart in different directions. He faulted those "mainline" Evangelicals like Carl Henry and Millard Erickson for focusing only on the rationalistic stream of the evangelical tradition (viz., the Reformed wing) and ignoring the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. The result is a wooden doctrine of the scripture (inerrancy, grammatical-historical interpretation) and a pneumatology that is only concerned with the revelation of Christ and illumination of the scripture.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the Evangelical tradition that Carpenter regards so highly has been shown to be seriously flawed in its ecclesiology. In fact, according to Stanley Grenz in his recent study, it has no ecclesiology.<sup>33</sup> The church is understood as a voluntary society, the result of like-minded, born again believers banding together for a common mission. Even then, the "real" church of true believers remains invisible and cannot be identified with any visible, organized church. Grenz calls it a "(non)ecclesiology" or a "parachurchicity"; that is to say, church is only a "ministry" existing alongside of the ecclesiastical structures.<sup>34</sup> More accurately it should be called a docetic ecclesiology, since the "real" church is inward and spiritual and does not correspond to any visible structure. Such a view of the church means that spiritual renewal is seen as largely the work of the Spirit in the individual's heart. If there is one thing that the postmodern world has made us deeply conscious of, it is the fact that the individual does not exist in isolation; rather, the individual's identity is decisively shaped by the community of which he or she is a part. Failure to understand this fact has resulted in a superficial renewal at best. For, unless the individual is changed as part of a traditioning community, the transformation will be short-lived. Our focus on the church, however, goes beyond this postmodern insight. Ultimately, our ecclesiology must draw on the resources from the

---

<sup>31</sup> Terry L. Cross, "A Proposal to Break the Ice: What Can Pentecostal Theology Offer Evangelical Theology?" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 10:2 (2002), pp. 44-73.

<sup>32</sup> Note his critique of Mark Noll and Wells in "A Proposal," pp. 50-53.

<sup>33</sup> *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 288-308.

<sup>34</sup> *Renewing the Center*, pp. 289-94.

Christian tradition itself: our faith in the triune God, the confession in the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” and the church’s liturgical and sacramental life which presupposes an essentially theological understanding of the church.<sup>35</sup> Failure to understand its theological nature would reduce the church to another sociological entity. In other words, while valuing the postmodern insights on the role of interpretive communities, we need to see the church as not just another interpretive community, but as the polity of the Spirit.<sup>36</sup> Its special link to the triune God through the Spirit makes it a “divine-humanity.”<sup>37</sup> As Grenz puts it, what Evangelicals need is a “theological ecclesiology” that sees ecclesial life as existing in perichoretic union with the triune God through the Spirit. It is what gives the church its true mark as the church of Jesus Christ.<sup>38</sup> This is to recognize the ontological status of the church. Traditional Evangelicalism has a strong ontology of persons, which accounts for its emphasis on “convertive piety.” This has been the strength of evangelicalism. But what it needs is to move beyond personal ontology to an ontology of the church which the Catholic and Orthodox traditions provide. Evangelicalism has tremendous potential for good for the kingdom of God if its convertive piety is combined with a more “generous orthodoxy”<sup>39</sup> that recognizes the contribution of the larger Christian tradition.

The difference between Carpenter and me on the way tradition is conceived reflects different understandings of the church. For Carpenter, the church’s task is to preserve the fixed deposit of truth embodied in the scripture that can be objectively retrieved. For me, if we go back to Protestant orthodoxy it is because Protestant orthodoxy was able to return to the church truths that had been neglected in the course of Christian history. In short, Protestant orthodoxy represents a valid and important

---

<sup>35</sup> The view that the church is not merely a social construction but an ontological reality is an insight shared by the major Christian traditions. Among Protestants, the most cogent expression of this ecclesiology can be found in Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. part IV.

<sup>36</sup> See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II, pp. 204-205.

<sup>37</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 253-55.

<sup>38</sup> *Renewing the Center*, pp. 321-24.

<sup>39</sup> The term was coined by Hans Frei and used by Grenz to call Evangelicals to embrace a broad-based orthodoxy (the “center”) that goes beyond the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. See *Renewing the Center*, pp. 331-51.

phase in the church's doctrinal development rather than the epitome of all the truth the church needs to know. I see an organic link between the scripture and the church. The scripture forms the church and the right interpretation of the scripture could only come from that community that is shaped by it. This means that the nature of doctrine cannot be understood apart from the nature of the church, whereas for Carpenter, the scripture and the truths it contains could be retrieved and understood quite independently of the church. The nature of the scripture and the church is the basic point at issue. I believe that on this issue the future of the evangelical (and Pentecostal) movement will be decided.