

What Kind of Spirit Are We of?
One Pentecostal's Approach to Interfaith Forgiveness
and Interreligious Reconciliation

Tony Richie

Introduction

An especially fruitful interfaith dialogue I was recently privileged to participate in released a cooperative statement containing several descriptive suggestions about the nature of religion and the religions. Among other things, it admitted that “religion has often been used, rather misused, to shed blood, spread bigotry and defend divisive and discriminatory socio-political practices”. That is sad but all-too-true. It also insisted, however, on the “necessity and usefulness” of interreligious dialogue “for promoting peace, harmony and conflict-transformation” in our world today.¹ And that, I think, is true too. I am therefore both challenged and encouraged at the present opportunity to wrestle through these issues together with religious others by focusing on themes of forgiveness and reconciliation among the religions from my perspective as a Pentecostal Christian.

¹ “Report from Inter-Religious Consultation on ‘Conversion—Assessing the Reality’”, Lariano, Italy, May 12-16, 2006. This important dialogue event was organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City, and the Interreligious Relations & Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, Geneva.

Extinguishing the Forbidden Fire of Sectarian Strife

In the context of sectarian strife, really full-blown religious and racial prejudice and tension between Jews and Samaritans, two of Jesus' disciples desired to call fire down from Heaven to consume their competitors. Jesus firmly forbade them. Some ancient manuscripts add an explanatory comment from Jesus that "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Lu 9:56 NIV margin). Biblical exegete Craig Evans opines that while the addition "is probably inauthentic" "it certainly captures the essential point of the passage." According to Evans, the episode "portrays a loving and gracious Lord who does not seek vengeance".² In other words, Jesus wills forgiveness and reconciliation among rival religions and the Spirit he has given his disciples wills us in the same way. With its appreciation for pneumatological nuances, Pentecostalism's theology and spirituality ought unquestionably to guide us in the same direction.

Pentecostals, as Harvey Cox has aptly described us, are concerned with "fire from heaven".³ Following Scripture, Pentecostals themselves speak of baptism with the Spirit and with fire, and also frequently use fire as a metaphor for intense spiritual experience and fervor (cf. Matt 3:11-12). Yet the destructive fire of sectarian strife is forbidden. Unfortunately, as Pentecostal ecumenist and historian Mel Robeck sadly shows, after the religiously ecumenical and racially open age of the first few years of the modern Pentecostal movement, that understanding has been apparently deliberately discarded in a

² Craig A. Evans, *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1990), p. 162.

³ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

grave act of disobedience to the Spirit's leading.⁴ Accordingly, members of the modern Pentecostal movement desiring to return to its authentic and original biblical and historical ethos must address relations among the religions with more openness and understanding than has all-too-often been the case since.

I call upon Pentecostals, therefore, to overtly identify religious aggression and/or violence of any kind by any party as incontrovertibly inconsistent with the Spirit of Christ and of Pentecost which we claim as our ecclesial heritage in the Christian family of faith. I also call upon Pentecostals to actively promote procedures or programs of justice and peace among the religions with same kind of faith and fervor that we pursue Christian evangelism and Pentecostal experience. Only then can we correctly answer the question based on Jesus' descriptive statement: "What kind of Spirit are we of?"

Taking Divine Healing and Deliverance a Few Steps Farther

Divine healing for the body and deliverance from the oppressive demonic realm are important, intrinsic values of the Pentecostal faith. I myself have experienced what I can only describe as miraculous physical healing and spiritual deliverance. Lately, I have learned that divine healing and deliverance are not less than but more than individual and physical or even spiritual. They can and ought to be emotional and mental as well as institutional. More specifically, I have come to believe God wills to heal interreligious pain and deliver the religions from roadblocks to wellness and wholeness in their reciprocal relationships. This welds well with Latino Pentecostal theologian Juan Sepuœlveda's description of the Pentecostal community of faith as a place of "enormous

⁴ Cecil M. Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission & Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006). Cf. pp. 313-25. I have argued elsewhere that Pentecostalism has an inherent ecumenical and inclusivist impulse that has been artificially stifled. See my "'The Unity of the Spirit': Are Pentecostals Inherently Ecumenicists and Inclusivists?" *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theology Association* (2006), pp. 21-37.

curative or healing efficacy.”⁵ The context clearly suggests he perceives this “curative or healing” power to extend beyond the physical to emotional and social realms. I infer it includes relations among the world religions as well.

Pentecostal educator and scholar Cheryl Johns concludes that Pentecostalism is not only capable of but actually conducive to “conscientization” among marginalized masses of oppressed peoples. Conscientization is “a process whereby persons become aware of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and their ability to transform that reality.” She adds that the term implies action joined with awareness.⁶ Accordingly, Pentecostals are becoming more aware of and more actively involved in social and institutional areas of concern as an authentic extension and application of our individual religious concerns. As Johns says,

Despite its tendencies toward emphasizing personal experience over social witness, there is potential within Pentecostal-charismatic circles for a radical witness of the meaning of Pentecost for the world in which there is exhibited justice, peace, dialogue and authentic self-giving love and in which there is no oppressed-oppressor distinction.”⁷

The time has come that those social and institutional concerns more directly include our relations with other religions.

Pentecostal theologian of religions Amos Yong argues that a distinguishing characteristic of Pentecostalism is its multidimensional or holistic view of salvation. Personal, familial, ecclesial, material, social, cosmic, and eschatological facets of

⁵ Juan Sepuëlveda, “Reflections on the Pentecostal Contribution to the Mission of the Church in Latin America”, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (October 1992), pp. 93-108 (p. 102).

⁶ Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed* JPTSup 2 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, 1998), p. 13. Cf. pp. 62-110.

⁷ *Ibid*: p. 81.

salvation are therefore included in a full-orbed Pentecostal soteriology.⁸ Again, this view advances considerably beyond traditional fascination (or fetish) with merely individual experience among many Pentecostals; but it is clearly consistent with the classic emphases of the mainline Pentecostal movement from its inception. Accordingly, relations among religions ought to be understood as an authentic and essential extension of salvific efficacy by Pentecostals and their peers. In Pentecostal parlance, this implies that “full gospel” believers ought to grapple with how our relations with religious others are affected by our relationship with God in Christ and the Holy Spirit. No area of our lives ought to be untouched by the Spirit’s presence and power made available to us in Christ and expressed toward all others through us as his witnesses to the world of God’s grace, love, and mercy. That, I think, includes attitudes and expressions of forgiveness and reconciliation among the religions.

Suggesting Possible Directions for Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Since I have repeatedly affirmed that Pentecostal involvement in institutional and social areas are authentic and appropriate extensions or applications of our Pentecostal theology and spirituality, I think the most profitable approach at this juncture is the further juxtaposition of personal salvation and social salvation with specific attention to interreligious relations. In other words, I wish to apply institutionally what we Pentecostals already endeavor to put into practice individually.

Pentecostal New Testament scholar and theologian Hollis Gause speaks of the way of salvation (*via salutis* vis-à-vis *ordo salutis*) as a journey involving justification from sin and adoption into the divine family; and repentance for sin, regeneration, and

⁸ Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 91-98.

sanctification;—all issuing in a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life of love toward God and others. He particularly stresses “the unity of redemptive experiences.”⁹ Accordingly, individual salvation cannot be complete without relational and social application. Experiencing God’s love for each of us overflows into our love for each other. This, of course, must now be understood to include relations with religious others. The sense in which I wish to be understood is not in some soteriological universalism, but in the unilateral application of Christian themes of forgiveness and reconciliation to interpersonal and institutional relationships.

Christians, including Pentecostals, who expect justification or forgiveness from all sin for Christ’s sake, ought also to be forgiving of others’ sins. In other words, the forgiven ought to be forgiving. While we have no responsibility or right to pronounce whether or upon whom God’s forgiveness finally falls, we can say that as we ourselves experience forgiveness we also are enabled to forgive others their sins against ourselves (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). Furthermore, the height of arrogance and ignorance would be assuming we Christians do not also need forgiveness from others for our sins against them. As stated, this applies not only individually but institutionally. Christianity, out of the overflow of its own understanding of its redemptive experience of God’s justifying grace in Christ, ought to extend forgiveness to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism for real or perceived transgressions against its rights or interests. Forgiveness necessitates a release from further culpability into restoration of conciliatory relationship. Forgiveness is an entry point into peaceful coexistence, into a reconciled relationship, both between God and Christians (Rom 5:1) and therefore between Christians and others, including

⁹ R. Hollis Gause, *Living in the Spirit: The Way of Salvation* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway, 1980), “Introduction” and pp. 125-36.

other religions. Christianity is called to be a peacemaker (cf. Matt 5:9). Christianity, to be consistent with its own inherent ethos, is responsible for promoting peace with and among others. The Christian message and ministry of reconciliation, though firmly focused in evangelistic outreach through the gospel of Christ (2 Co 5:11-21), ought never to exclude any part of a process that promotes peace between all peoples (Rom 12:18; Heb 12:14).

Such forgiveness and reconciliation among the religions will at the least hinder and eventually halt the use of aggression and violence by religious extremists who are intent on furthering their own radical agendas. They cannot continue to act or exist in a context of interreligious reconciliation. More optimistically, interreligious forgiveness and reconciliation may allow cooperative efforts on humanitarian causes to proceed more effectively. World religions can become partners for good rather than “partners in crime”, so to speak. And even more hopefully, the religions may one day learn to live in mutual respect and appreciation for one another. While discerning disagreement may not pass away among us, dialogue and dedication may help us to recognize the valuable contributions of each religious faith when it is true to its own innermost impulse. However, for the sake of honesty and transparency, I stress that Pentecostals will undoubtedly always sense a strong need to maintain our own distinctiveness in relations with both other Christians and with non-Christians. Nonetheless, I am optimistic that Pentecostal commitments can be maintained in an amicable environment.

Significantly, Pentecostals stress the importance of forgiveness in the context of repentance. My own classical Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God (Cleveland, TN USA), states in its formal “Declaration of Faith” that “all have sinned and come short

of the glory of God and that repentance is commanded of God for all and necessary for forgiveness of sins.”¹⁰ Its original “Teachings” also stressed “Restitution where possible”.¹¹ These two statements say much. A doctrine of sin excepting none from culpability and responsibility is assumed. The reality of the possibility of forgiveness for all is proclaimed with the necessity of repentance. The importance of penitents acting practically to make wrongs right as an expression of true repentance is underscored. However, limitations of completely making up for whatever wrong has been done are conceded. Deeds done cannot be undone. Repentance is an essential part of the original message of Jesus Christ regarding the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:15) that has universal application (Lu 13:5). I therefore feel obligated to insist that forgiveness and reconciliation in interreligious relationships requires repentance on the part of all parties implicated (i.e., everyone!). “Repentance” (*metanoia*) implies not only an awareness of wrongdoing and regret for it, but also a willingness to make radical changes in one’s behavior. In fact, the test for genuine repentance is demonstrated in transformation of behavior (Matt 3:8).¹² I reject as inadequate and impotent any version of interfaith forgiveness and interreligious reconciliation that does not give appropriate attention to the importance of repentance.

We cannot reasonably expect non-Christians to repent in the Christian sense before offering them forgiveness and entering reconciled relations with them. That is not at all the reason for my remarks. Rather, I suggest that we all—they and we—may repent in a practical and relational way for the wrong we have done each other; in fact, I insist it

¹⁰ Charles W. Conn, *Like a Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway, 1996), p. 337.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: p. 139.

¹² Cf. French L. Arrington, *Christian Doctrine: A Pentecostal Perspective* vol. two (Cleveland, TN: Pathway, 1993), p. 202.

is necessary for forgiveness and reconciliation between us. To be real and lasting forgiveness and reconciliation must be much more than simply saying, “I’m sorry” and “Let’s be friends”. Actions must be attached to the words. Otherwise they are artificial and superficial. At the very least this requires cessation of sinful behavior. Even better it leads to benevolent and positive actions toward the religious other. As to what constitutes “sinful behavior” or “benevolent and positive actions”, I am confident that true dialogue in the best tradition of each religion can find common ground when economical and political agendas are interpreted in the light of the values of faith rather than the converse. I am sure themes of justice and peace will be in the forefront of each faith’s value system. I am personally persuaded that religion is a force for peace rather than a weapon of war.

In a Pentecostal context of discussing forgiveness and reconciliation among the religions I am outlining a process in which reconciliation occurs as a fruit of forgiveness and forgiveness occurs as a result of repentance. I also add that forgiveness and reconciliation ought always to be pictured against a backdrop of grace and faith (Eph 2:8-9). Faith, of course, ultimately has God as its object. However, faith is not only divine-vertical but also human-horizontal. In interreligious forgiveness and reconciliation both directions are applicable. Without intending at all to impose Christian convictions on religious others, I still must maintain that forgiveness and reconciliation occur in a context of faith that the Divine or Ultimate is actively involved in the process. A Power greater than us or our organizations is at work bringing about the interreligious reconciliation for which we yet yearn. Forgiveness and reconciliation are the work of God, and will be successfully wrought between us only when we willingly allow God to so work. But in addition to faith in God, faith in our fellow human beings is also

absolutely essential. An attitude of trust must replace the politics of suspicion if we are to really experience together genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. This interreligious trust may eventually be broadened and deepened through probationary trial and error encounters over prolonged length of time; that is, hopefully we will eventually prove ourselves trustworthy to one another. Yet its initiation must begin out of an affirmation of free grace that extends at least a tentative trust to those with whom and for whom the results are risky. Trust is a worthwhile risk; but, though we often carnally declare “trust is earned not given” the truth is faith is a free gift.

I therefore urge Christians in general and Pentecostal Christians in particular to apply our tradition of grace and faith to the field of interreligious forgiveness and reconciliation. Let us lead the way in freely offering to religious others forgiveness even as we lead the way in frankly asking forgiveness of them. Let us not build our hope on human merit but on faith in divine grace. Nevertheless, this does not at all negate the importance of relational faithfulness on the part of all religious partners. Pentecostals tend to stress the essentiality of perseverance in God’s grace for enduring enjoyment of eternal salvific benefits and status. Accordingly, to extend a gracious gift of forgiveness to religious others will in no wise diminish the significance of integrity and sincerity in ongoing interreligious relationships based upon mutual reconciliation. Real reciprocity all around is essential for interfaith forgiveness and interreligious reconciliation to continue and grow.

Conclusion

As a Pentecostal Christian desirous of interreligious forgiveness and reconciliation, I am pleased that at its most recent biennial International General Assembly, my denomination recently published a “Resolution” regarding war and violence in the Middle East. Though it may not yet go far enough for many (or for me, for that matter), it is certainly a step in the right direction. I will close with its inclusion. Before reading, please note that in spite of a history of strong support for Israel, which is indeed undiminished, a move is also made to recognize others and offer humanitarian aid to all. I am hopeful that this indicates a broadening of the horizon of concern for all peoples. If so, this would suggest interfaith forgiveness and interreligious reconciliation are in order. Perhaps most importantly, the entire document is set in the context of prayer for peace. Perhaps the most important act for peace may indeed be persevering prayer to “the God of peace” to be with us all (Rom 15:33).

Resolution of Prayer for the Current Crisis in the Middle East

WHEREAS “Proclaiming the Power of Pentecost” is the theme chosen for the 71st Church of God International General Assembly; and

WHEREAS during this, the 71st International General Assembly, we are witnessing an escalation of conflict and acts of terrorism in the Middle East; and

WHEREAS the unfortunate nature of war involves the loss of innocent life; and

WHEREAS the call to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is explicitly stated in God’s Word (Psalm 122:6); and

WHEREAS as prayer was timely and appropriate at the time of the Scriptural injunction, it is more necessary now as we observe the carnage and destruction of human life and property, and the suffering of women and children of both Jews and other peoples; now therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED that the international family of the Church of God reaffirms the previous resolutions on *prayer for the peace of Jerusalem*; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Church of God around the world pray that this conflict will end, and peace will come to Israel and the Middle East; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that humanitarian support be given to those suffering on all sides of the conflict, where possible.¹³

¹³ Resolution of the 71st International General Assembly of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN USA), July 24-28, 2006.