

ANOTHER VIEW: Baptists & Pentecostals stand stronger on common ground_40504

April 2, 2004

Posted: 4/02/04

ANOTHER VIEW: Baptists & Pentecostals stand stronger on common ground

By Roger Olsen

“Holy rollers,” “religious fanatics,” “sectarians,” “crazy Christians.”

What religious group is being described? Pentecostals? Yes; by their uninformed critics. But also Baptists—in some parts of the United States, Canada and Europe.

Baptists and Pentecostals too often ignore their common ground. Both traditions stand squarely in the center of the free-church heritage eschewing ties with the state or social support by the dominant culture. Both baptize only believers and have believers-only churches. Both have deep roots in revivalism, share a warm love for Jesus Christ, are evangelistic, believe in the authority of Scripture and sing their faith in God. Both are renewal movements within Christianity that emphasize spiritual vitality over creedal orthodoxy.

And yet, for all that, Baptists and Pentecostals look askance at each other

across their shared fence.

**Too often,
Baptists
stereotype
Pentecostals
as "weird," and
Pentecostals
disdain
Baptists as
"lukewarm
Christians."
None of this is
necessary or
helpful to the
greater cause
of the kingdom
of God to
which both
sides are
committed.**

Pentecostals who defect to Baptist churches often lose friends and strain family ties. Baptists who become Pentecostals sometimes risk social standing and find themselves ostracized from their circles of friends and acquaintances. Too often, Baptists stereotype Pentecostals as “weird,” and Pentecostals disdain Baptists as “lukewarm Christians.” None of this is necessary or helpful to the greater cause of the kingdom of God to which both sides are committed.

Of course, some Pentecostals invite ridicule and suspicion from evangelicals and Baptists by engaging in extreme emotionalism or denying

the Trinity. But the vast majority of Pentecostals are embarrassed by the antics of television evangelists who specialize in throwing the Holy Spirit at audiences to make them fall over and shun non-trinitarian Pentecostals from fellowship.

Pentecostals should no more be held responsible for the irresponsible acts of their own lunatic fringe than Baptists should be held responsible for the few extremists who wander around the margins of their movement spouting hatred or condemning Billy Graham for (allegedly) being “liberal.”

Researchers are increasingly examining Pentecostalism because of its explosion in developing countries. This includes mainline Protestant (generally considered liberal) social scientist-theologians such as Donald E. Miller of the University of California and Harvey Cox of Harvard University.

Cox's “Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century” attributes Pentecostalism's success to an alleged “ecstasy deficit” in mainline Christianity. His book is an excellent example of “Pentecostal chic” on the part of scholars who seem to have no particular evangelical faith of their own.

Miller's forthcoming “Pentecostalism and Social Transformation: A Global Analysis,” co-authored with Ted Yamamori, extols the benefits of Pentecostalism for the poverty-stricken populations of developing nations. “Liberation theologians turned to the poor and the poor turned to Pentecostalism” is an increasingly popular description of the religious situation in Latin America.

Philip Jenkins argues in “The Next Christendom: The Coming Global Christianity” that Pentecostalism is about to overwhelm all the mainline and evangelical forms of Christianity in the non-Western world. Some researchers estimate as many as 50 million Christians worldwide are some kind of Pentecostals.

What is the appeal of Pentecostalism? One author called it the “vision of the disinherited.” Pentecostalism emphasizes heaven and gives people “a little bit of heaven to go there in.” This ties in with Cox's theory of religious ecstasy. Pentecostalism promises and delivers joy and peace transcending human and earthly possibilities. Especially non-Western (outside Europe and the upper half of North America) people seek a profoundly experiential religion, and a purely cerebral, liturgical or volitional (will-centered) Christianity leaves them cold.

Pentecostalism offers visible results wrought by the divine power of the Holy Spirit. The sick who cannot afford modern medicine are healed; the outcasts are given a community and place; the demon-possessed are liberated from bondage. Contrary to popular belief, most Pentecostals do not revel in speaking in tongues or ecstatic prophesying; being “slain in the Spirit” is much more common on cable television than in the average Pentecostal worship service. Nevertheless, it is true that Pentecostal services give people the freedom to rejoice and lament that North Americans often only allow themselves at sports events.

What can Baptists learn from Pentecostals and what can Pentecostals learn from Baptists?

Increasingly, developing-world Baptists are adopting Pentecostal forms of worship. The passion and uninhibited worship of the Pentecostals is characteristic of many Baptist and other evangelical churches.

Unfortunately, in the United States many Baptists and other evangelicals are going in the other direction toward more formal, liturgical worship or worship that allows no room for lay participation, spontaneity or emotion. (“Contemporary worship” is not necessarily spontaneous, Spirit-centered or uninhibited. Sometimes it can be just another kind of liturgy.)

This excludes many if not most of the ethnic groups that are finding a home

in Pentecostalism. They prefer a more passionate form of worship and church life that involves intimacy, accountability and transforming experiences.

Baptists can learn from Pentecostals the freedom of worship in the Spirit; they can absorb from Pentecostalism passion manifested in tears, upraised faces and arms, joyous praise and prophetic preaching.

What can Pentecostals learn from Baptists? Baptists insist on connecting heart, head, hands and feet. Pentecostalism has tended to divorce them by reveling so much in feelings that the intellect and active service take a back seat to emotional worship. Although Pentecostals believe in the “gift of discernment” (mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12) they all too often lack the biblical scholarship and sound doctrinal teaching that is necessary to avoid religious fanaticism and heresy.

The Pentecostal challenge to Baptists is to practice wise discernment without quenching the Holy Spirit; the Baptist challenge to Pentecostals is to “go with the holy flow while still getting down to basic business.”

Baptists are good at the basic business of establishing functioning agencies and organizations and planning worship services and church meetings. Pentecostals excel at the holy flow of dynamic flexibility and praise in the midst of the mundane.

If Baptists are going to ride the revival wave of developing world, non-white, non-Western Christianity—which seems to be the future of Christianity worldwide—we need to turn sympathetic (not uncritical) eyes and ears to our Pentecostal brothers and sisters and learn from them. We do not need to adopt speaking in tongues as the essential ingredient of Spirit fullness in order to do that.

If Pentecostals are going to avoid the mistakes of church history and learn how to make the spiritual functional organizationally and intellectually,

they can listen to us.

Roger Olson is professor of theology at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.