

Encounter with the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement

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Summary

This article describes, and evaluates, a renewal movement within the Fife Bay circuit of the United church. While some aspects of this movement are perhaps specific to the eastern area of Papua, many of its features are similar to other such renewal movements. The author is somewhat critical, and cautious, of this movement, and yet recognises that the church needs to learn from it, and to make a positive response.

Introduction

The aim of the “charismatic movement” in the Suau area of the United church is to bring Christian renewal to the church from its “sons”, who are employed in Port Moresby, or Alotau. The result of the crusades is that the encounter has taken the form of a renewal movement, through which the young villagers have formed small fellowship groups in many villages.

The “born-again” Christians claim to have had direct experiences of the Divine God, through Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. But emotionalism may mislead individuals to found their faith

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on false emotions and feelings. Nurturing the small fellowship groups is a problem, because each group does not have a trained pastor. Therefore, emotionalism, and lack of proper pastoral nurturing, can become a major factor, leading to schism.

But, among United church members, there remains confusion, misunderstanding, and tension, over different opinions, theologies, and Christian lifestyles, between the “born-again” and the “not born-again”. The differences have become the current challenge to Christian faith and practice of the United church members in the Fife Bay circuit. This current challenge can be termed a “faith crisis”, because the faith of the Christians is challenged seriously. We shall now clarify, and interrelate, the “faith crisis” between the movement and the church.

Clarification of the Faith Crisis

The “faith crisis” has revealed that the United church members do not really understand the current situation. Many members do not know where they stand in their faith; whether they are with the United church, or with the Pentecostal-charismatic movement. It is important that the root causes of the “faith crisis” be revealed in our discussion.

(a) Direct and Indirect Experiences of God

Many of the Pentecostal-charismatic Christians claim to have had real and meaningful direct experiences of God in the crusades. New expressive designations such as “born-again Christians”, “not born-again”, the “haves” and the “have nots”, are used, as a means of distinguishing between the “converted” and the “not converted”. Direct experiences of God are overemphasised, while indirect experiences are hardly recognised and appreciated.

In this situation, it must be remembered that God is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. God cannot be confined to being directly experienced in the crusades only. Direct experience is mostly personal, and God can cause it to happen anywhere, and any

time, when He wills to do so. The apostle Paul had an unexpected direct experience of God, while he was travelling on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-6).

Indirect experiences of God are realised through His providence in creation, in the answers to prayers, and in other people, or events. Therefore, direct and indirect experiences of God are both important, for they reveal the fullness of God's will for each person.

(b) The Mind and the Body

The Pentecostal-charismatic movement has developed a charismatic spirituality. It depends, strongly, on the use of feelings and emotions in worshipping God. Freedom of participation and emotional expressions are allowed, and the preaching is usually emotional. The mind is least engaged in the charismatic spirituality.

On the other hand, the spirituality of the Fife Bay circuit puts emphasis on theology, doctrines, creeds, sacraments, bible studies, etc. Orderly worship and preaching give good teaching about Christian growth and development. The circuit operates on hierarchies and structures, as approved by the Assembly of the United church. Christian discipline is given to correct the wrong-doer, and with proper nurturing, he is assisted to learn to grow into Christian maturity.

In the Fife Bay circuit, it has become noticeable that bodily expressions are only for the young people. The elders are seen as mature Christians, who are able to use only the mind and the heart to praise, and honour, God in worship.

In this kind of situation, it must be realised that human beings consist of the mind, the body, and the heart. All three form the totality of a human being. And, made in the image of God, we must be able to worship God in the wholeness of the given image. But the heart is the

centre of the whole human being. And when Christ is in control, He is able to control the mind, and the body, from the heart of man.

Therefore, Christ, the Lord and Saviour, is able to control, and discipline, the mind and the body, from the heart, so that man may be able to worship God in faith, spirit, and in truth.

(c) Religious and Practical Works

Within the renewal movement, some of the “born-again Christians” would spend the whole day studying the Bible, and praying. As a result, their gardens have no food, because no crops were planted, leading to hunger.

The Christian character is a religious character, which must exercise the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) in order that the quality of the religious Christian character is realised, witnessed, and appreciated in reality. The religious Christian character is only abstract, when it is without deeds. Therefore, by praying only, it cannot produce a quality religious character, in reality. This means that faith, exercised in prayer, must be actualised as faith in action. Faith without works is a dead faith (James 2:15-16), or faith without works is an abstract faith, a faith that cannot be witnessed in reality.

Therefore, both religious and practical works are important, and need each other for meaningful results. And so, all Christians must be encouraged to exercise their Christian faith, not only in prayer, but also in works. Only then, will the quality of Christian character be realised in reality, as worthy citizens in the Christian community.

(d) This World and the Next World

The Pentecostal-charismatic evangelistic crusades strongly emphasise the times and events of the second coming of Jesus Christ. The signs of His coming are interpreted by the current increase in chaos, disorder, and natural disasters, in the world today. The

preaching is forceful, emotional, and intimidating, which may suggest that people are converted out of fear, and not from the heart.

The direct experiences of God contribute to a strengthened expectation of the second coming of Jesus Christ. At the same time, “born-again Christians” forget that they are still in the present world. This creates the problem of trying to be spiritually in the next world, while one is physically in this world.

In trying to address this issue, it is to be understood that this world, and also the next, are both important, and interrelated, biblical themes. The kingdom of God is both “now” (in this world), and also “not yet” (in the next world). The kingdom of God as “now” (in this world) is a spiritual power of righteousness, peace, and joy that is living in the hearts of men, women, and children, who obey the will of God, and are redeemed, and forgiven of their sins. In the kingdom of God, Christ reigns as the power and authority over the life of a Christian. The fruit of the Holy Spirit reveals evidence of the presence of the kingdom of God, and of Christ’s rule, in a Christian (Gal 5:22-23).

Therefore, the purpose of Christians is to make known the kingdom of God, and the reign of Christ, to this world, while, in faith, hoping for the next world, through the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The Root Causes of the “Faith Crisis”

The root causes of the faith crisis seem to lie in both the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, and also in the United church Fife Bay circuit.

In the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, “born-again” Christians cause the “faith crisis”. They begin witnessing within their immediate homes, and, consequently, many families have left the United church. They convince people, by sharing their conversion experiences, and teaching on the nearness of the second coming of the

Lord Jesus Christ. It is through personal evangelism that the movement has easily convinced many United church members. Of course, the greatest effect comes from the crusades.

On the other hand, within the United church, there seems to be a lack of evangelism. In the early 1980s, Revd Gasika Gasika and Revd Morea Igo travelled to the Fife Bay circuit, to hold evangelistic meetings there. Many converts were received, and cared for, in the various United church congregations. But, for many years now, the Fife Bay circuit has not had any evangelistic meetings, that is, until the arrival of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement.

Equally, the United church circuit has had an inefficient “seekers’ class”, as may be seen from two points. Firstly, as most congregations have had only lay pastors, and caretakers, of congregations, they lack the knowledge to run seekers’ classes properly. The other problem is that, without seeking the will of the candidates, their names are forwarded to the congregation meeting, for consideration to attend the seekers’ classes. Usually, this was done, simply to fulfil the requirement of sending young people to these classes. Later, upon the recommendation of the pastor, the church meeting decides who is eligible for confirmation.

This has, then, raised the important question of “confirmation or conversion”, which is the most-controversial issue at this time in the Fife Bay circuit. This is the main cause of the divisions, because it is dealing with the faith of Christians. The “born-again” Christians believe that their recent conversions are more meaningful to them than when they had confirmation in the United church. Through their new conversion experiences, and testimonies, many United church members began to doubt their confirmation in the church.

Confirmation is when, in a special service, the congregation, on his confession of faith, accepts the *Tau eo’o* (“seeker”). The confession of faith declares that Jesus Christ is their personal Lord and

Saviour, who is also Lord of all races and nations. It also declares their belief in God's gifts of forgiveness, love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. The confession is also to be faithful members of the congregation, and of the church. It is concluded, in promising to use the new life in Christ, in personal life, in the family, and in the community. Then, hands are laid upon the head of the candidate, with prayer to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to be strong against all evil forces, and to continue to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, in newness of life.

Confirmation involves the reaffirming of the candidates' baptismal vows. And so, through the grace of God, the candidate is received as a confirmed church member. Confirmation calls upon the willpower of the candidate to make a confession of faith before God. The candidate makes a vow from his heart, through the consciousness of his submission, and confession, to God.

On the other hand, the Pentecostal-charismatic conversion experience is more emotional, in their submission to Jesus Christ. Conversion is the act of turning away from sin and self, towards God, through Jesus Christ, and is the kind of testimony claimed by many of the "born-again" Christians.

The harmonising factor, is to look beyond conversion and confirmation, and to see the truth of each belief, exercised in reality, in the Suau context. The gospel, in reality, always settles in well with any context, and is lived by the people harmoniously.

Decline in the Nurturing of the Community of Faith

The identified root causes of the faith crisis have gradually penetrated other parts, and functions, of the church in the circuit. This penetration has caused a general decline in the life of the church, and, especially, in the pastoral care and nurture that is offered to the people.

Lack of nurturing of the youth is one major evidence of the decline of the functions of the circuit. Young people are generally enthusiastic, and always wanting to discover life themselves. But the congregation pastors, and lay pastors/caretakers, are responsible for all the youth in the circuit. The youth members do not participate actively, or eagerly, to take over God's work from the elders. The church is not encouraging the youth enough, to recognise their place in the participation of all of God's people, in their immediate context. The youth fellowships in the congregations are now divided.

Related to this, as we have already mentioned above, the lay pastors and caretakers cannot adequately lead their youth fellowship in the "seekers' classes". Good interpretation of the word and theology are needed to give understanding, and win obedience of "seekers' class" candidates.

It has become obvious that in the congregations many of the deacons have been in their positions for too long, so that their leadership qualities gradually decline. Although the deacon's group members know that their leader is not really working to the expected standards, it is usually argued that deacons should stay for the whole term as required by the church's policy.

Other church positions held by laymen also apply the policy of the term of office in the same way. It should be mentioned here that the young people are always encouraged to take up responsibilities but yet give little response. This is probably due to their desire to take up responsibilities only in their youth fellowship groups.

Further evidence of the decline in the functions of the circuit is seen in the lack of other aspects of church ministry. The Fife Bay circuit has not managed to live the gospel, to the standard expected by the church, especially in youth ministry, Sunday school, and in teaching Christian education in the schools. Most youth fellowship groups, and Sunday schools, operate, according to the abilities of the

leaders. The lay pastors, and the caretakers, do not help to organise these young people. Hence, the young people's needs are not met in these fellowship groups. Due to the circuit's continuous financial problems, many of the regionally-organised programmes are frequently not attended.

Pastoral Approaches to the Encounter

The faith crisis in the United church members begins to form, when they see, or hear, unusual acts, or testimonies, in the crusades, and the "born-again" Christians. These unusual acts, or testimonies, create a contradiction to their faith, as taught in the beliefs and practices of the United church. The more they see and listen to the stories of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, the more the United church members become convinced of it. In this way, the two views on the Christian faith create conflict in their thinking. On one hand, there is the faith and beliefs of the United church, and on the other, the beliefs and practices of the Pentecostal-charismatic renewal.

The way to address the situation is to select the concerns of the United church members on the Pentecostal-charismatic beliefs and practices, and to exegete them, using biblical themes. But it must be remembered that Pentecostal-charismatic views are not the same as the United church, in all their beliefs and practices. Therefore, the controversial issues in the faith crisis must be examined biblically, to reveal the truth, in relation to the beliefs and practices of the United church.

United church members do not have their Christian faith planted firmly in their hearts. A firm faith in Jesus Christ would never be moved. And so, the problem with the United church members is that they do not have a faith in Jesus Christ, sufficient to keep standing, in their encounter with the Pentecostal-charismatic.

The weak faith of the United church members is due to the weakness of the work of the gospel in the Fife Bay circuit. The

weakness is seen to be in the planting of faith after infant baptism. As the child grows up, the family and the community are responsible to bring the child up in the Christian faith. But parents seem to fail in teaching the Bible to the children at home, and further, the church is failing to teach the children effectively in Sunday school, and through Christian education.

As the child grows older, the weaknesses in the youth fellowship, and the seeker's classes, mean that the confirmed member is still to come to faith in Jesus Christ. If the confirmed member discovers a change in heart, during the confirmation, then he needs Christian nurturing to lead him into a genuine personal commitment. Close guidance is very important for newly-confirmed members, and should be a priority in the United church at Fife Bay.

The weakness in nurturing and counselling has resulted in poor leadership qualities, backsliding, and a failure to be actively involved in the work of the church. Therefore, there is an urgent need for ways and means to draw backsliding Christians back to Christ. There is need for Christian conversion, and for Christians to live Spirit-filled lives.

If the root need is for Christians to live Spirit-filled lives, how can this be achieved? What is a Spirit-filled life? Is it a once-only experience, or something that may happen many times? These are vital questions that must be answered, and then exercised, so that the theory is proved, practically.

More specific to the present situation, there can be two forms of direct approach to the problems. The first approach is through personal contact with members of the movement, by United church members, who feel that they can approach them. The aim is to establish personal understanding and appreciation of each other. Both should make clear to each other their differences. Good relationships, and life in the community, are needed urgently. The communal life of

society is now disintegrating, and, therefore, other ways and means must be attempted to restore the missing togetherness of the society.

The other way of direct approach to the present situation is for the Fife Bay circuit executives to have a round-table discussion, on the present life in the society. The leaders of the two groups should make a critical evaluation of the crusades. God expects good living, and concern for people, from all Christians. If the Pentecostal-charismatic leaders do not respond positively to the call, then other indirect approaches should be strongly encouraged.

These indirect approaches are to be centred on the work of the church in the circuit. It should, by now, be realised that the future of the circuit depends on the present, younger generation. Likewise, in the indirect approaches, the aim must become the nurturing of a child, from youth to maturity. This means that the gospel must be applied, at vital points in the life and growth of the child. These vital points are: when the child is young in age, when he is converted, and when he is mature.

Therefore, when a child is at a young age, Sunday school, Christian education, and youth fellowship must be taken seriously by the clergy. This must be seen as the beginning of helping the young people realise the meaning of the gospel, in their own context and understanding. The seeker's class is the next important point, where the young people are taught, and guided closely, to learn the meaning of being a Christian, of Christian living, and the responsibilities involved. After being confirmed as a church member, it is important that they are nurtured, through Bible studies, and other church activities.

In the Suau context, a vital point is missing in the continuing nurture of Christians, in that the church and marriage ceremonies are not integrated. There is a missing link, in the life of current Christian marriages. The couples, although Christian, are living a life that is not

blessed by the church. What the church should now do is to take part in the marriage ceremonies, and to engage the gospel, in the customary marriages. In this case, the service of blessing may be held at any time after the marriage, but it would be better for the service of blessing to be held during the customary marriage. This is something that the circuit executive should seriously think about, and discuss in the church's council meeting.

However, evangelism, and the teaching ministry must not be overlooked. The purpose of evangelism is conversion, and teaching about Jesus Christ, in relation to the needs of the people. The teaching ministry is very important, because it brings the understanding that should consolidate the faith, already founded on Jesus Christ.

Overall, the Fife Bay circuit needs to seriously reconsider its present functioning, and should plan to make necessary adjustments. Ministerial training is an essential need, and young Suauans should be encouraged into this field. All church members should be encouraged, by the circuit, to take active participation in the work of the gospel of Jesus Christ: the children, young people, those who are married, bachelors, the elderly – everybody should play their part.

The Challenge of Vernacularisation

Underlying much of this problem, is the wider need for the vernacularisation of the gospel. The United church had moved through localisation, indigenisation, and contextualisation of the gospel. The vernacularisation of the gospel is to be seen as the dynamic force that can energise indigenisation and contextualisation, in the hearts of the local people. The vernacularisation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not the Pentecostal-charismatic speaking in tongues, or speaking in unknown local languages. But the vernacularisation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to bring the gospel to the people, where they are, and in the true, known, and lived languages of the people. The language of the gospel must be translated into the language of life. Therefore, the language of the gospel must be translated into the

language of fishing, gardening, making houses, the language of cutting grass, etc. The language of the gospel must become the language of the totality of human existence, in their contextual realities.

The language of the people and the language of the gospel must interact so that both reach their climax in the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. When the language of the people, and the language of the gospel in Jesus Christ, interact, then the gospel is incarnated in the language and culture of the people; the vernacularisation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is realised.

The United church has members, who speak many different languages, live different cultures, and are vastly separated, but are united in the language of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The language of the gospel must speak to each language group, within the whole church. This is the vernacularisation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, the United church Fife Bay circuit urgently needs the vernacularisation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, through the ways and means that are known to the people – the Suau language – to be in that totality of life that makes a Suauan, a real Suaun, in his own proper context. The vernacularisation of the gospel will bring true meaning to the people of the Fife Bay circuit.

It is a fact that many of the trained clergy, today, do not speak Suau, while others never preach a sermon in the local language, until they are transferred to other circuits. How easy it was, when, before the end of their first year of God's mission to the Suau people, Revd James Chalmers and Pi, a South Sea Islander, translated the first two chapters of Mark's gospel, and a few hymns, into the Suau language.

The disciples, on the day of Pentecost, were filled with power for ministry, and spoke in known languages. Is this not a sign that the Holy Spirit can teach the present clergy of the United church to speak the language of the people, to whom they are ministering? Therefore,

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the United church Fife Bay circuit is in the position of appealing to God's workers to vernacularise the gospel to the Suau people.