



Church in Society: The Pentecostal Church in Action

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Abstract

This article focuses on the role of the Pentecostal church in society and as the love of Christ in action. The focus is on three dimensions that the church should gear itself to. These are *kerygma* (proclamation), *diakonia* (acts of service), and *koinonia* (fellowship). Each of these dimensions will be briefly explored to reveal what it means to be in the Pentecostal church in society. For instance, proclamation covers issues such as relevance and effectiveness of preaching. Acts of service cover issues such as the divine healing, institutions of learning, deliverance from demonic possessions, education and social upliftment through the local churches. Fellowship covers the partnership, cooperation, and the “one another” principle. The Pentecostal church in society is encouraged to desist from the private and romantic spirituality of disengagement from societal ills and a decadent culture. The article concludes with a focus on how to reflect these dimensions so that as the church in society, the love of Christ is seen in operation. Some of the practical examples to be highlighted include partnerships in areas of relief and aid for education bursaries, community projects for the marginalised poor, remedial education, and capacity building for church leaders – all these need to be attempted through the church in the community.

Keywords: Pentecostal, Church, Fellowship, Proclamation, Service, Communion.

Introduction

The church is a *communion* with God which cannot be celebrated without attention to the nature and the challenges of the community. Pentecostals are known as people disengaged from the socio-cultural issues, but the true love of Christ never preclude social justice questions. Indeed, it is through the question of social justice that *communion* is mediated. The mission of the church is always preaching, serving, and fellowship. The Pentecostals are much more interested in *kerygma* than in the *diakonia*. Soteriology takes precedence over ecclesiology, which is not ascribed as a healthy balance. Salvation and church life are intertwined, and it is in and through the church that acts of services are appropriated.

Pentecostal Church’s Mandate is Proclamation or *Kerygma*

This Greek word *kerygma* is translated as ‘proclamation’ and it refers to various forms of the ministry of the word in mission such as preaching, witnessing, providing literature, theological education etc. It is a joyful invitation to communion with Jesus and His followers. However, it is not a means of scaring people to God with the fear of hell. Proclamation brings the preacher and the audience closer. Some of the famous missiologists in South Africa, correctly admonish us that:

We do not proclaim from the distance, from the security of some haven of self-righteousness, but that we come very close to the people we are inviting, in relate to them in solidarity because we are as much in need of the good news as they are (Kritzinger, Meiring & Saayman, 1994:143)



The British theologian, John Macquarrie (1997:10) drives the point home:

Gospel is preaching or proclamation; it is a first order language which is unselfconscious, a language in which faith speaks in order to awaken faith through the transmission of the good news on which faith has been founded. Christology on the other hand has taken a step back, so to speak, and has become self-conscious and self-critical

The church in society is the mouthpiece of Christ, and agent of peace. This is a missiological incarnation par excellence. The church is in eschatological journey as a missional channel in the hurting world. Through proclamation, it brings liberation to the oppressed and the marginalised societies where Christ does not rule supreme. This is not the conveyance of human intellect or eloquence.

Pentecostal preaching is not predicated upon human assumptions. Rather, it builds upon the Word, according to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and depends upon the Spirit to convict and bring miraculous results (Hughes in McClun, 1986:91) The German theologian, Moltmann (1989:215), is right that “The Christian proclamation is the messianic message of joy and as such it is the language of liberation.” Pentecostal *kerygma* is always a message of hope and restoration. Through *kerygmatic* activities, the church serves the society.

Proclamational activities in *missiological* endeavours must be balanced with *incarnational* (presence) endeavours. Proclamation must be balanced with presence or incarnation. It is the declaration of the greatness of God’s redemptive work in the world. (Haul & Cesar, 2000:150). The Pentecostal church cannot shout from the distance. She needs to be there to exert her influence. We are trying to build bridges on truth alone, while the world is crying out for proof. *Proof!* Our design is wrong. We need bridges that balance public proclamation with congregational incarnation (Lewis & Wilkins, 2001:40).

Proclamation of Christ and his salvific works enlighten the minds. It is a missiological act that is never something apologetic, nothing diffident, nothing clouded with doubts and misted with uncertainties (Barclay, 1958:102). It is the evangelistic act that is never arrogant, blaring or self-righteous preaching. It calls for stance of authority that moves from uncertain silence to faith-proclamation. This is asserted by Peter Berger (in Crow, 1971:126) that “Ages of faith are not marked by dialogue but by proclamation.” It is not propaganda, but the verbal presentation of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, as the hope of the world (2 Cor 4:5). Proclamational evangelism is done with authority that shines through in both content and style. It is not a voice of human ideology, but a message of hope to those lost in the seas of confusion due to sin infected nature and environment. Hughes (in McClun, 1986:92) correctly points out:

Pentecostal preaching is so unique in its nature and so encompassing in its power that no word other than “supernatural” seems adequate to describe it.

Kerygma is the glue that bonds believers together into the fellowship. Proclamation was a magnet that held people’s attention together. Pentecostals have seen the effect of *kerygma* in all their missiological initiatives.

The faith community – as seen in the New Testament and in our time – evangelizes through its proclamation and its communal life. This is but living out the *koinonia* given to the Church by the Holy Spirit (Kärkkäinen, 2002:214).

The proclamational activities synthesised or enthused by the Holy Spirit should address the human misery brought about by the decadent political regimes at hand. *Kerygma* is theology in action. Proclamational activities without incarnational exertion nullify the validity of theology in context. The authentic Pentecostal message should lead to the total liberation of humanity from the clutches of evil socio-cultural structures. If the message is just for conversion, it will be irrelevant to the human needs in the current South Africa.



The Pentecostal church is marked by fire in its bones which necessitates preaching that is forceful and inspirational. It is the fellowship where members relate to each other for mutual support; and of course, it is here as a servant to humanity.

Pentecostal Church as a fellowship for mutual support or *koinonia*

The church is the pilgrim people of God. She is called out of the world to be sent back into the world. The Pentecostal church is not visualised as a *parochial* or structured operation with problematic legal restrictions marked by numerous *cul-de-sac* signposts. In our postmodern era the Pentecostal church is closely associated with conceptual metaphors of 'community', 'communion', 'fellowship', 'togetherness', 'koinonia', 'the one another'; and many other related terms such as 'partnership', 'connectedness', 'participation', 'relationship', 'cooperation' etc. The Greek word for fellowship is *Koinonia*, which means that which is in common. It is a partnership or union with others in the bonds of a business partnership, or social or fraternal organization, or just propinquity. Christians are told not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-18) because such a union, either in marriage, business, or society, is incompatible with that fellowship with Christians and with God.

Koinonia is a *communion of saints*, which the modern New Testament scholarship usually translates as fellowship, partnership, sharing or even stewardship. In agreement with Kärkkäinen (2002:116), "Synonyms for *koinonia* are sharing, participation, community, communion." It significantly carries the meaning of God's relationship with His people. In this sense it means Christians are literarily partners with God. They are bonded together with God for a common purpose. Nothing is withheld in a true partnership. The resources of each one are shared with the other. It is beautifully expressed by Paul in Phil 1:3-7 where the Philippian Christians are directly involved with sharing in Paul's suffering, poverty, message, and their own lives with him as partners in the gospel.

Sharing implies the release of everything one has with one who is in partnership with. God has given the communion everything needed for life and godliness. Communion members now share in his divine nature. This means that members receive that which is divine into their lives.

Koinonia as stewardship is when members are entrusted with a relationship to God, therefore expected to be good stewards of all that God provides. This refers to the resources of God and letting them flow through *communion* to the rest of the creation of God. As stewards, members receive not what is theirs, but what is someone else's. God has the purpose for what he has given us (1Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 6:1).

Koinonia is fellowship with God. He desires to fellowship with his people. The church has the smooth interaction with God. She is called to love Him, since He first loved her. The *communion* is called to have *koinonia* with God and with one another in order to experience the fullness of life. The important aspect of fellowship is communication. The New Testament use of communication gives the sense of sharing (Rom. 15:27, 1 Tim. 5:22, Hebr. 2:14, 1 Pet. 4:13, 2 Jhn 11). It is principally the idea of *sharing together*, as it is depicted by Acts passages such as 2:44, 4:32, and 36.

The believers of the apostolic church had fellowship in what some English Bibles call "one accord" or "together in one place" or "habitual meeting together". For instance; "They all *joined together* constantly in prayer..." (1:14). "When the day of Pentecost came, they were *all together* in one place" (2:1) "All the believers were *together* and had everything in *common*" (2:44). "Everyday they continued to meet *together* in the temple courts... and ate *together* with glad and sincere hearts" (2:46). "All the believers were *one in heart and mind*" (4:32). "And all the believers used to *meet together* in Solomon's Colonnade" (5:12) etc.



The Greek word for this togetherness is *homothumadon*. It occurs eleven times in the book of Acts. Apart from the texts cited above, others that convey this *togetherness or one accord* are 4:24, 7:57; 8:6; 12:20; 15:25; 18:12; 19:29. To this Rom. 15:6 can be added. One can observe that *homothumadon* was either for positive or negative intentions. The fundamental principle behind *homothumadon* is *Unity is Strength*. In every instance when Christians were of the same spirit and mind, God did something extraordinary such as a miracle, conversions, or guidance. Wagner (1994:104) clearly comments on this fellowship:

While they were growing in their vertical relationship to God, the new believers were also growing in their horizontal relationship to each other in Christian fellowship. This relationship is heavily stressed here, mentioned in four of the six verses in the passage. One of the key factors of church health is to design ways and means for fellowship to be an integral part of church life week in and week out. If it is absent, the church will tend to plateau or decline. New members must be absorbed fervently rapidly. This is one of the reasons the cell church movement is having an increasing impact, not only in Korea where it is most highly developed, but also in many other parts of the world.

This was the secret for their growth. One of the key factors of church health is to design ways and means for fellowship to be the integral life of the church week in and week out. If this does not happen, the church starts to plateau or decline.

Fellowship is one of the marks of the Spirit-filled community. Living in fellowship with one another is definitely one of the effects of Pentecost. When people are baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, they start to enter the new era of cordial relationships. The early church took relationships seriously. In submission, they were eager to receive the apostle's teachings. In love, they were related to each other and as a result became a Spirit-filled community that was loving, caring and sharing. In worship, they were related to God by worshipping him in the temple and in the homes, in the Lord's Supper and in prayers, with joy and with reverence. As a communion of love, they were related to the world through outreach. They were engaged in continuous evangelism. For them, no self-centred, self-contained church that is absorbed in its parochial affairs can claim to be filled with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit. So a Spirit-filled church is a missionary church.

Koinonia is having something in common. The *koinonia* is strengthened by *homothumadon* which means one accord or same in mind or spirit. It means brothers living together in unity (Psalm 133). *Koinonia* engrosses a common salvation through a common faith in God and in His Son, Christ Jesus. "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

The basic idea enhancing communion ecclesiology is that Christians should strengthen and stimulate one another. Christian assemblies are intended to have a positive and helpful outcome, which is encouraging one another. Communion ecclesiology is fellowship in that which is common. It means partnership with others. It is principally the idea of sharing together. It is the communion of the faithful with God in Christ through the Spirit, and hence their common participation in Christian goods. Each member is in communion with God, and all are also in communion with one another. It is the communion that we enter by the act of faith. Ratzinger (2008:128) captures it correctly:

The act of faith incorporates human beings into the community, on the other; it is simultaneously sustained by that community.

Koinonia in its purest form transcends any form of human or structural barrier. Pentecostal movement is known for its "inclusive power, its potency in overcoming ethnic, gender, and social barriers between people" (Robeck, 1986:130). From Azusa Street days, Pentecostals had always enjoyed fellowship with each other regardless of any subliminal barriers in societal structures. Kärkkäinen (2002:214) highlights the fact that:



In living out their Spirit-inspired *koinonia* at the local level, the early Pentecostals and the poor.... During a time when racial when racial and gender inequality was endemic, Pentecostals welcomed black and white, male and female, rich and poor.

In countries like United States of America and South Africa, Pentecostals were divided along the racial lines due to political dictates of the time. It is regrettable that they succumbed to this antinomian pronouncement.

However, living together in community or communion does not mean perfection. Fundamentally, the church is a communion of saints, a gathering of believers. It is called together by the Holy Spirit, hence the dynamic of this fellowship is concretely lived out through the *charismata* (Kärkkäinen, 2002:72). It is where the Word is proclaimed and the holy sacraments are administered. Pentecostal ecclesiology further adds that the church is the presence of the living Spirit i.e. the *charismata* is the permanent feature of its life (Kärkkäinen, 2002:75). The church is both a hidden community and a visible fellowship. It is hidden because faith is the conviction of the things not seen (Hebr 11:1) and visible because of the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

The Pentecostal Church as an agent of service of *Diaconia*

Pentecostals are universally known for passiveness, if not non-involvement in social upliftment projects or programmes on a wider scale. The Pentecostal ecclesiology of the dynamics of the Holy Spirit with the emphasis on soteriological experiences had always been viewed as the ultimate answer for human socio-economic needs. The divine healing necessitated no need for hospitals, revelations or being taught by the Holy Spirit necessitated no need for institutions of learning. Deliverance from demonic possessions ushered in the total liberation of the possessed. Conversion articulated towards socio-political liberation. Education and social upliftment were the lowest items of priorities in Pentecostalism.

Most Pentecostals were and some still are pacifists. Although Pentecostals have historically remained unengaged in politics and public policy, in a *Charisma* article, Meeks writes, "It is becoming an increasingly powerful force with enough potential to change a nation" (2011:2). In agreement with Meeks in the same article, Stemberger continues that "Their theology, which previously saw politics as dirty and something the church shouldn't get involved in, was replaced with a conviction that embraced a believer's duty to be fully engaged in shaping the world" (2011: 4).

It should be noted that from the middle of the twentieth century, Assemblies of God through its mission enterprises of planting new churches in the Third World, found evangelism and people's material needs inseparable. Wilson (1997:139) reiterates and conscientizes us to this fact:

Faced with the overwhelming material needs in their fields, some missionaries early on undertook social action by founding *leprosariums*, orphanages, and schools. Such activities, unwittingly illustrate the Pentecostals' concern for the manifestation of the kingdom of God in this age

However, *diaconal* services were chiefly propagated through acts of evangelism. These services were viewed as subordinate to the task of evangelism, though legitimate and biblical. Pentecostals are historically noted for not formulating some social policies, they are a social policy themselves as their incarnation is the assertion of the love of Christ in action.

Pentecostals' incarnation of the love of Christ is the service evangelism. The Greek word "*diakoneō*" means to serve or to minister – to render any kind of service. This refers to the various forms of ministry and service in which the Christian community, in imitation of Jesus of Nazareth (who was among us as one who serves), puts itself at the service of the whole world (Kritzinger, Meiring & Saayman, 1994:37).



The acclaimed South African missiologist, David Bosch (1991:399) in referring to this as the church crossing frontiers in the form of a servant, declares that:

we should find a way beyond every schizophrenic position and minister to people in their total need, that we should involve individual as well as society, soul, and body, present and future in our ministry of salvation.

Service evangelism is the loving acts of service that are accompanied by proclamational activities. In the words of Kritzinger and his colleagues: “Word and deed are absolutely intertwined as dimensions of the one “good news activity” (1994:143). It was at Amsterdam 2000, when Ross Rhoads explained to the workshop audience: “To couple the work of God with the words of God is a winner. The Gospel needs to be twofold: word and work” (in Winter & Hawthorne, 2001:413).

Service evangelism is embraced in institutional work such as schools, hospitals, community upliftment projects, training, working with those with special needs etc. This can also be expressed in community development programmes where people are trained in life skills (hard or soft) to redress menaces such as poverty, diseases, unemployment etc.

“It is through a high level of commitment to community development that ways are found to make known the reality of Jesus Christ” (Ross, 1997:139). It is very important, especially in Southern Africa to note service evangelism expressed in processes of peace and justice whereby issues such as peace, reconciliation, mediation, advocacy etc. are addressed to all sectors of the societies that may find themselves as victims or even as perpetrators. This is a holistic mission of *ecclesia* – the church *incarnate*. It is a conviction that “Evangelism is everything we do to make faith in Christ an option. It includes sharing the good word and doing the good deed” (Augsburger, Ratz & Tillapaugh, 1990:17).

It is therefore justifiable not to narrow missions to proclamation, but to include all other activities that give people an opportunity to make up their minds to follow Christ. Samuel Moffet (in Winter & Hawthorne, 2001:730) is right that “...the evangelistic proclamation was never so narrow that it became isolated from the immediate pressing needs of the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed.”

Service evangelism is about salvation and service – a call to be engaged in proclamation and social action. Salvation and service are both the incarnational or manifestation of the love of Christ in action. Macchia (2006:219) cautions the fact that *kerygma* and social implications operate in a synergistic congruence:

Though the church cannot neglect its kerygmatic function in pointing explicitly to Jesus as the hope of the world, neither can it neglect the social implications of its loyalty to Christ and the witness of the Spirit.

It is the holistic approach that does not take sides with narrowness which is limited to verbal expression or *diaconal* appearance. A group of social analysts in South America came to the conclusion that:

the holistic witness of incarnational living had once again proven that God’s message to the whole person is attractive and compelling, and many will respond when given the chance to see it lived out in their midst (Yamamori et al 1997:76).

In the real sense of *diaconal* or service evangelism, the Pentecostal church shows the love of Jesus by serving people, not converting them. This is “servant evangelism” which establishes the relationship between the two ministries of servanthood and evangelism. The church is called upon to be engaged in social service rather than social action. Social action implies overt socio-political involvement designed to change social structures. Social service on the other hand speaks of the manifestation of Christ’s love by serving His people so that these



people can become His followers by experiencing and observing His love in action in and through His people.

Conclusion

The church in community can demonstrate the love of Christ through acts of preaching and demonstration of fellowship with one another. Proclamation (*kerygma*) is the communication of God's love to people. If properly administered, brings healing, inspires the soul, encourages actions, stimulates the minds, and galvanizes emotions. On the other hand, fellowship enhances mutual love and care, dispels anxiety, loneliness, shame, and provides a platform for human empowerment in skills of public speaking, sharing from the heart etc. Fellowship is a vehicle of growth in the faith. It encourages transparency – walking and working together in the light (leading to forgiveness and acceptance). This is what missions is all about – Church in society demonstrating the character of Christ that we all should be one. Service is the highest calling in God's kingdom. The church is here to serve as Christ did so that the world may know that we are truly his disciples. In agreement with this declaration, Wilson (1997:140) shows how most of these activities in churches like Assemblies of God, are activated at a local church level:

Virtually every Assemblies of God community in the world maintains some kind of self-help program for member families. In small churches individuals and pastors attend to families in desperate need, while the larger churches a committee is instituted to collect and disburse goods in kind, provide enough money to pay electricity bills, and help the unemployed find jobs.

In South Africa, one of the founding fathers of the Assemblies of God, Nicholas Bhengu, implemented some noted self-help projects as a way of uplifting the church members' lives. For instance, women are trained and encouraged to work with their own hands; firstly to support themselves and their families, and secondly to be able to support the church. The Youth Education Bursary Fund was established to ensure that the young people acquire education that will promote them towards professional, corporate, ecclesiastical and civil leadership. This information is elaborated in the Assemblies of God Church Polity Notes used by Nicholas Bhengu Theological College.

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