

## **Historic Churches and New Christian Communities: Looking for Ecclesial Accountability in a changing religious landscape**

**Ephraim Radner, Wycliffe College, Toronto**

Our goal is to engage the material we have heard the level of the Christian church's vocation and in particular her vocation to unity. How we do this requires some difficult judgments, but judgments nonetheless. They are ones we will have to ponder and discern with great care – with fear and trembling even – in the days to come.

This is my wrap-up theme: making judgments finally about our own duties with respect to how we understand the “right” relationship between Historical Churches, and New Communities or Churches. In the first place, we have judgements about what categories we are going to use simply in talking about this or that group, and how we define them. We can speak of “churches”, for instance, but are we speaking sociologically or theologically, and in any case, in what way? And if theologically, much depends on the content of our definitions.

So, for instance, how will we construe some of the Pentecostal groups we have talked about? If we are talking theologically – and in this case, in terms of the Christian church's vocation in unity – we are faced with a very stark religious judgment to make; or, if we are to avoid such a judgment, we must have good reasons for doing so. The judgment we must make is this: has God done a new thing with and among Pentecostal Christians that represents a redemptive fork within human history, a new gifting of the Holy Spirit that touches the shape of the future in a way that demands Christian deference? That, after all, is the general self-claim of Pentecostals – a new divine thing has happened of a decisive kind in human history -- and it is as starkly

demanding of decisional responses as strong Roman Catholic claims regarding the primacy and authority of the Papacy and of the particular traditions it represents and orders.

To keep with my example: if we choose to deny the basic Pentecostal claim regarding God and history, we are still able to engage Pentecostalism and specific Pentecostal groups and congregations on the level of a common Christian life and vocation – that is, on something we *share* fundamentally in Christ. But such an engagement will be very different from an engagement based on an affirmative response to Pentecostal self-understanding. And we might in fact qualify our engagements with sociological or historical evaluations that may or may not inform our sense of God’s purposes – i.e. non-Pentecostals have something to “learn” from Pentecostals about “how” to engage this or that social dynamic or demographic etc.. Or methods and focus of evangelism. But fundamentally, we will be addressing our reflections on a very different and distinctive basis depending on the direction of our judgment regarding divine history in this case.

I take it this is what Kate Bowler asked us to do on the more limited topic of the Prosperity Gospel churches: she said, towards the end of her talk, “I hope that you will make up your own minds about whether the movement is a holding pen for the gullible or the ambitious or the earnest or maybe even the very lucky”. But my point is this: “making up our own mind” on this, or on any number of claims set before us by various churches and forms of witness and life that we have been considering together is precisely one of the challenges, perhaps even problems, confronting Christian unity: unless all our lives are Gamaliel moments, extended forever – “let’s wait and see how it all turns out” -- it will never work precisely because we have a Lord to

follow *today*. Some of you may remember the famous sermon of Martin Niemoeller, before his arrest and imprisonment by the National Socialists in 1937:

As a matter of fact, the Apostles preach exactly the opposite of what Gamaliel believes and acts upon. They preach Him Who was crucified and rose again. They preach that as regards their affairs the decision of God has already been made, and that any apparent success or failure makes no difference to this at all; that the crucified Jesus is the living Christ and Lord of His Church; that the decision whether He should be recognized or rejected cannot possibly be made dependent on what the future may bring forth. (Martin Niemoeller, 1937, From the August 16, 1937 issue of Dawn).

Likewise – and certainly related – our basic ecclesiological understandings will come into play as we look at this or that non-denominational or trans-confessional Christian group; or our own Christian group! All the sociological sensitivity to this or that practical and contextual nuance will not be able to re-found this or that group’s Christian identity if we are, for instance, committed to a strict Roman Catholic view of church and communion. And our use of the term “church” will be very different in meaning, than if we adopt clear Protestant commitments ecclesologically. The Chemin-Neuf community is free to do what it does, *in part*, because it assumes the governing framework of a Catholic ecclesiology and authoritative structure. I see no way of getting around that. Other Charismatic ecumenical communities have fallen apart over the years just here.

And while all this may be obvious, in point of fact it is my experience that, on a popular and even pastoral-missionary level, we avoid thinking of this too much, and instead actually tend to adopt *pragmatic functionalist* approaches to much of our inter-Christian judgments: what is it

that “works” and for what ends and with what reasons among what peoples and persons? If this or that Christian group is measured positively in this regard, we can take them seriously. After all, nobody is much interested in taking the Shakers as serious ecumenical partners today: despite deeply influencing American material and musical culture in the 19th century, there are only 3 Shakers left (according to [Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, September 17, 2010](#)) That is what you get when you have a theology of communal celibacy as a church. The Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, to which Prof Bowler referred, on the other hand, has well over 800,000 members; so, it is perhaps worth taking seriously, in a functionalist sense. If it comes to numbers in a specific culture, Yoido wins hands down over, say, the Chemin-Neuf.

It is not my goal to press my own personal judgments on these and related matters. But I want to suggest several places where our judgments need to be made.

### 1. Protestantism

First of all everything we looked at in this conference is basically “Protestant” in its ecclesial origins and self-ordering. (Exceptions include the Chemin-Neuf, or Church of England Fresh Expressions – to which I will return.) I use the term in an American way, one that goes beyond confessional particularities, and instead simply contrasts all that is self-consciously distinct from Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy . Although there are outliers that we did not speak about explicitly – Mormonism or the Zion Christian Church in South Africa, which may well have moved into wholly new categories of religious meaning – that is, where new revelations and messianic figures may represent, if you will, different religions. But, I will point out, making

this judgment is related to other judgments we *do* need to make.

But leaving that aside, we are faced with the judgment of Protestant-Catholic significance regarding theological authority – history, tradition, continuities of experience, the “communion of saints” and so on. I am not sure we can simply allow all these things to stand unexamined. The point being, our catholic or protestant fundamental commitments must rightly inform our judgments about “new Christian communities”, or we are being dishonest to some degree.

## 2. Congregationalism

Secondly, we should understand the actual ordering of most of what we have looked at – again, with some real exceptions – as “congregationalist” in its ecclesiology. This, I believe, represents a common and fundamental set of commitments about where Christian salvation is located – within individuals and on the basis of individually defined criteria of discernment. In practice, there are many tensions and struggles over this ordering within various groups; but the outcome to these struggles generally represents a reassertion of the Congregationalist DNA of ecclesial life. Again, Chemin-Neuf has chosen another direction, as has, in theory anyway, the Church of England. What do we think of this?

## 3. Socially, or culturally adaptation

One thing that has come out, and that is associated with the two elements above is that many of the groups we have discussed are therefore highly adaptable to changing social context in

general, and to the social contexts that have, in various ways, arisen over the last century especially – and now spreading across the globe – of diverse economic individualism, consumerism, and potential affluence. The Prosperity Gospel is perhaps only the most obvious in this regard. As the traditionally cohesive and usually agrarian and rural societies thin out or crumble, a space is opened for new social orderings. Likewise, the vast demographic movements of the past 50 years or more, which include historically unprecedented migrations of persons due to war, economic or political insecurity, have shaken up previously stable group identities into newly challenged locations. Ethnic churches are only one example of this. It is my belief that Protestant-congregationalist Christian groups are pre-eminently adaptable to these spaces. Furthermore, within the social pressures attendant to these transitions – from violence and insecurity, to unstable economic existence, and social dislocation and its ills – specifically outcome-based, or pragmatic, forms of Christian life that can be individually appropriated will be especially and adaptively attractive. How does this cohere with our evangelical commitments, understood broadly? There is a familiar “Christ-and-culture” set of issues; but familiar because unescapable. Does the Gospel stand with, to the side or, or openly *against*, say consumerist and generationally dislocated society?

#### 4. The Providence of God – in mercy and judgment both.

The final element I want to point out is that, in fact, most of the groups we have looked at, *do* in fact claim some kind of providential character: that is part of their self-understanding, although in different ways and explained differently. Still: “God *wants* us to exist in the way we do”, they would claim, and this can be seen in terms of a range of functional demands that have been

fulfilled. Adaptability, yes: but that is only because of a purported divine blessing or wisdom that has been granted. So, we have to wind our way through this as well. And it is here, as I have perhaps already suggested, that we find our deepest ecumenical challenge: “what is God *doing* in all of this?”; and then only, “how therefore shall we respond?”. It *is* after all a “God question” that we are dealing with, is it not?

Here, on this providential question, I confess in my own case that I am quite confused in my Christian judgments. It is hard for me to know what God is up to. On the one hand, I personally hold what many would see as rather “catholic” commitments regarding theology and order. But these catholic commitments are profoundly tempered by my sense of divine judgment upon Catholicism itself. When it comes to the Church Catholic it hasn’t all worked the way it was supposed to! Take the end of Isaiah 19: The Lord says, “In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, [even] a blessing in the midst of the land; Blessed [be] Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance.” (vv. 24-25; AV). That is a wonderful promise about unity amongst different and even rival groups. But it is a promise. And read backwards – that is, if today we look at the past 3000 years, from the era Isaiah uttered the promise, it is a promise clothed in an utter and tragic mess, with whatever clear lines there may be here and there. And given that, how are we to read this promise as we go forward, from today onwards? That Egypt, Assyria, and Israel should be friends and the road is now clear for that to happen? In other words, even if we have a strong sense of God’s promise of unity, shall we say, unity even amongst identifiable groups – Israel, Egypt, Assyria; Catholic, Protestants, Pentecostals, etc. – there is nothing in the promise that tells us whether or not, at *this or that moment* in time, God is not exercising on one or the other or on all, judgment, rather than mercy.

Isaiah promises unity between Israel and Egypt; but Jeremiah warns the Israelites, in his day, not long after, that fleeing to Egypt is a way of rejecting God. We may, in this or that location, have “ecclesial deficits”, as Prof. Birmelé suggested; but that does not guarantee that the alternatives on the table are any less deficient, and in fundamental ways.

So, from the ecumenical standpoint, I want now to dwell on this last point, then: discerning God’s judgment and mercy, as we face bewildering Christian movements, including our own, that claim a providential basis for their existence and shape. On what basis shall we discern this?

Will it be the form of historical experience and development? There is no question, for instance, that the missionary dynamic of the Christian Church over the past 200 years has been linked to the dismantling, in some fashion, of hierarchical connectionalism: the rise of independent missionary societies and so-called “parachurch” organizations and so on, began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and they have continued to flourish even more so in our era. This has led to the pressing downwards of the level at which evangelism is done and has proved a vehicle for unleashing Christian movements of growth around the world. Congregationalist evangelism is the most effective (leaving aside, as I said, groups like the Mormons).

We can engage this issue of increasing localization of the church’s missionary life, as I said, on purely sociological grounds: how organizations work, how money and resources are gathered and distributed in a changing set of economic and international contexts; how messages are communicated and received on a personal basis. Methodism was not so well adapted to Britain as it was to America in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – and we can see this. Wesley, an

organizational genius, was highly controlling and successful personally in England; but he was an extension of the Church of England in many respects in this regard, and was basically forgotten in America, as a much more flexible hierarchical method was followed. American Methodism flourished; British Methodism eventually withered.

But is this divine providence as mercy, or as judgment? When does the sociological cross the line into the moral and finally theological? How much “functional” value – carefully and legitimately analyzed, of course -- is necessary for something, in Christian judgments, to become a witness to God’s blessing? This is a very difficult point, and a sensitive one. I had a brother-in-law who was a committed Marxist atheist, and had been raised as such. He was also a medical doctor, and spent the end of his life working in rural Chiapas, in Mexico. I visited him shortly before his death, and was surprised to hear him speak positively about Christians – something he never did before. It all had to do with what he saw happening in the local Pentecostal churches: when a man converted, he stopped drinking and beating his wife silly. My brother-in-law was doing studies of rural health at the time. He had all the statistics, and they challenged his preconceptions. “Yes”, he told me, “I have come to respect the Pentecostals”. But he was torn. For at the same time, he had deep concerns about the Pentecostal churches’ quietist political commitments in this area, even as he was also increasingly torn about his preconceptions of what “political justice” and Leftist strategies amounted to. Still, there was Guatemala across the border, where a self-professing Pentecostal military president, supported publicly by well-known American Pentecostal figures like Pat Robertson and Youth With a Mission, had waged a deadly war against indigenous peoples, under cover of Christian righteousness. Gen. Efraim Rios Montt’s trial for crimes against humanity is currently on hold.

So if functional adaptability is a providential sign, it is an obscure one. I think we all realize this, but are a bit afraid of the muddying consequences this causes in our discernments. The fact is, Catholic ordering has been extremely effective by most social measures until recently –and still is, arguably, even in many growing areas. But it has also proved deeply problematic in the face of any number of moral challenges, not only in the past, but more recently as well. And the same can be said about Protestantism, and its protean ecclesial social structures.

I will not go into the varied test cases. But let me just mention a few that I have had some engagement with recently.

1. We all know about the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Study of the churches' role in all of that has only just begun. But what seems clear is that there was no functional, ordering, even ecclesiological character that saved any Rwandan church from horrendous crimes, at least in terms of their leaders and members: Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Pentecostal, what have you. Interestingly, the same is true of those ordered efforts at ecumenical gathering: the official and non-official “councils” of churches in Rwanda that had been in place well before 1994 were not just powerless, but proved avoidant of and in some cases their member representatives were actively complicit in the crimes of the nation. In my experience, these ecumenical groups had little purchase on leadership, lay or ordained. They were often populated by small elites, with their own non-local sources of funding, and had little accountability. They talked among themselves, and then went home, and did what everyone else did.

2. The nation of Burundi, to the south of Rwanda, had had its own genocidal civil wars before the mid-1990's; and in 1994, along with Rwanda, it descended into an abyss of violence, although in their case, not all at once, but drawn out over a 13-year civil conflict. The contrast, however, with Rwanda was noticeable. Perhaps having learned a number of lessons in earlier horrors, and recognizing the shocking character of Christian blasphemy in Rwanda, many churches in Burundi slowly and tentatively, but actually, extricated themselves from the killing and the politics behind it; they worked to provide havens of security, repeatedly spoke against the violence, and finally even offered some measure of leadership in the difficult work of ceasefires and negotiation.

But it was a steep learning curve that was only partially navigated. I had occasion to meet with a group of mostly but not exclusively Anglican Christians in Burundi, after the civil war had ended. In 2006, I returned to Burundi, Africa, where I had worked for the church 20 years earlier. At one point, I asked them “what was the safest church to be a member of during the civil war?”, “The Anglican Church”, they replied. That’s where you had the greatest chance of survival. And why was that? Their answers were complicated. Still, they came down to three reasons. First they said, there was their ecclesial order. They were episcopal and diocesan, as well as national and international-communion-oriented, and had lived and worked on that basis for 80 years. They insisted this was different from congregational churches in Burundi which, when the war happened, tended to become locally-oriented, and indeed, in some cases, family oriented around a pastor and his relatives. There was no overlap in social identities within these churches. Another reason they gave was the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, their literally

translated Kirundi version of the 1662 English prayerbook. “We all prayed together”, they said. Literally. WE all learned together the same things, somehow. Across the country, across regions and ethnic groups and hillsides and political affiliations: over all these years, we all heard the same things, received the same things, prayed the same things. Killing each other didn’t fit the way we prayed, as it might have in other churches in some other churches. What about the Catholics? I asked. “Ah”, they said: “too big”. If you are everybody – 80% of the country in this case – the same dynamics of local group membership simply assert themselves. There’s no pushback.

The third thing they offered, though, countered somewhat their obvious Anglican chauvinism, but it is important, I think, only in relationship to these two earlier elements. “We had the Revival”, they said. That is, the deep-seated currents of the East African Revival that began in that part of the world in the 1930’s, and still carried on as part of their bequest. Some of the hallmarks of the East African Revival were spiritual renewal – that is, in the Holy Spirit – open repentance and confession before others (“walking in the light”) and the forgiveness of the crucified Jesus. As some of you know, East African Anglicanism in many places, is characterized by deep holiness elements; it is “evangelical”, affective and “phenomenalist”, to use Pleuss’s terms, and powerful. In many cases, “charismatic” even.

If in fact, Burundi’s civil war experience was one of relative integrity for Anglicans – and, by the way, I really don’t know – it was from a strange and unexpected and probably unrepeatable *convergence* of elements: the historical experience of moral failure (they knew, from the 1960’s and ‘70’s, the evil they were capable of); the warning of brethren to the north (Rwandan

Anglicans and other Christians) in their fall into horror; and finally, the juggling of several Christian elements, both catholic and protestant, and we might also say perhaps, Pentecostal together. Was this convergence of elements “providential”? And if so, what do we learn from it?

Subsequent to the civil war, I might add, things have changed in Burundi again. The religious doors were flung open, and the country has been flooded by missionaries and missionary churches, and, I might add, Muslims as well. Where once there had been 6 Christian groups -- Catholic mostly, and then a handful of Protestants, based on the circumstances of early 20<sup>th</sup> c. missionary footholds in the country (Anglicans, Free Methodists, Swedish Pentecostals, Brethren, and Evangelical Friends) -- there are now hundreds. The current President, like many others not exactly giving up power easily, is the son of a murdered Anglican catechist, and his wife a Pentecostal minister in her own right. They are seen on televised services at a large Pentecostal church in the capital. The notion of a religious “market” fits well, along with the way markets get influenced by this or that interest. Is any of this good? I doubt it. Christian groups, as I read the situation, have pretty much retreated back into their quietist postures, now energized by proselytizing competition. And the country’s government itself slides into increasingly monolithic and coercive roles.

If there is something to learn from this, perhaps it has to do with the need for the church – and churches – to maintain some vital order for diverse *accountabilities*. I don’t just mean contacts, although this is usually a necessary condition. Rather, that which answers the question: “who am I accountable to, for my faith and my witness?”, with the answer, “you, and you, and you”. We

all want to say that we are accountable to “God in Christ!”, of course. But through what medium – that is the key. Accountable, then, to whom? To myself? To my congregation? To several congregations? To my leader? Bishop? Prayerbook? Other churches and leaders? With the question of actual accountability – that is tied up with what happens to my money, who fires whom, who decides what, discipline, sharing – we are getting to the question of unity, I think. Which is, in the end, I think that the Chemin Neuf and the theoretical ordering of the Church of England’s Fresh Expressions is a key direction for us to positively consider.

More recently, my wife and I were teaching in Egypt. It was during the last elections, and we had the chance to talk to many Christians and Christian leaders in a volatile time. I don’t pretend to understand things there, but I can report on what I was told. One thing was this: we need solidarity among ourselves – as Christians – for the sake of our *security*. And this is only recently coming to the fore as both a need and a possibility. No longer can Evangelicals denigrate – and yes, here’s the “proselytizing” challenge -- the Christian faith of Coptic Orthodox; and vice versa, no longer can the Coptic Orthodox avoid Protestant and Catholic neighbor Christians. It’s probable that Christianity is growing in Egypt now, although one doesn’t really know. But it is still the case that the verdict is out on whether Christians will *stay* in Egypt, or have to flee it in order to stay alive and practice their faith. The united witness of Christians, and I might add, moderate Muslims in some cases, against religious violence and intimidation over the past 2 years has been a key element in securing a space of ongoing Christian life in Egypt over all.

This resonated with some visiting Algerian Christians we met: in Algeria, there is no question

but that there is an exploding Christian population, at least relatively. Most of this is Evangelical Protestant, and it is happening among Berbers in areas like Kabylie, which has long had political grievances with the Arabizing forces of the central government. While it is more open than in Egypt, it is hardly secure. And our visitors – one worked for Campus Crusade, and another for a related group – bemoaned the fact that new Christian groups were springing up without coherence, and dividing up as quickly as they formed. It was not a critical observation, because there has been no leadership or help in this movement. “But we shall be the seed scattered on the dry ground”, he said, “ready to be eaten up” by the ever vigilant forces opposed to such Christian growth, or simply opposed to the very diversity of human life a Christian presence in Algerian might imply. “Show us how to be one church.”

How “one”? I certainly believe that providential pressures of places like Rwanda, or Burundi, or North Africa, represent not rays of light upon the chosen vessel of ecclesial integrity, but rather calls to make the decisions for “oneness” that require hard judgments. And looking at these kinds of circumstances confirms some basic realities on this front: the virtues of Catholics and Protestants, even extreme ones, need one another in order to flourish *as* virtues. Christians need their common order, they need the challenge of multiple accountabilities that are drawn from the catholic realm – the whole -- , they need – we need – the adaptive freedoms to reach people from the ground up, not the top down; we need appeals and witnesses to the heart set afire and the clarities of biblical proclamation. This sounds perhaps equally as naïve as the simple providential claim of divine ecclesial favor that I am rejecting. But the reason for both is a single stark reality: we are no good on our own. That is the judgment I am forced into in pondering what we have done these past days. We are no good on our own. Historic Churches are not.

And New Christian Communities are not. “Israel third”, as Isaiah writes.

We can indeed affirm the basic Christian identity of each of the groups we have been talking about these past days; and we should. As should our own Christian identity be affirmed. But we can all be affirmed in this way, only insofar as we admit that the affirmation itself is part of an identity that is profoundly compromised. Every providential claim about the church is thus one that is a *mixture* of mercy and judgment together. That is partly why I can see no alternative to an ecclesiology of fallibility as a root theological commitment; though it is a claim that has theological integrity only as we apply it, not only in general, but to local churches and individual leaders and members. We are no good on our own, whatever charms we may genuinely note as we look into the mirror, or that others may sense as we show up at parties. We “need” each other, rather, in the deepest moral sense, and hence for the sake of our very Christian integrity.

The ecumenical issue is how this “need” for one another is ordered in a way that it can be met in a perduring fashion. The challenge of Pleuss’ paper for me is to outline how the dynamics at work in our churches themselves, in how each is ordered, do not of themselves move in the direction of such perduring order for common life in the face of the evil that is not only the world’s, but lies in our own hearts. When Catholics face Protestants and Lutherans face Pentecostals, and Pentecostals face Anglicans and so on, we are all being faced with a third image: something none of us yet is or even understands! On this, Chemin Neuf’s pneumatic self-offering is perhaps the most suggestive, because honest. Our oneness does not lie in organizing against common enemies in our political and social contexts, or in adopting new methods and attitudes – although that is not precluded – because it involves finally a

transformation into the unknown of Christ Jesus, rather than an alignment.

There *are* limited examples, I think, of how a fallible church appropriated a fallible renewal movement – that is what I am talking about -- for the sake of actual transformation of witness and of spirit: the integration of itinerant religious orders into the Catholic Church, as Prof. George mentioned (although that had its own problems that took centuries to resolve: after all, the first to call the Pope Antichrist were not the Protestants, but the Franciscans two centuries earlier!). There is also the case of the East African Revival, that I mentioned a moment ago, in Anglicanism, when a holiness movement was actually integrated into the very heart of an organized catholic-oriented church (something Anglicans had failed to do with Methodism two centuries earlier). To be sure, not all Anglicans, especially in the West, accept East African revivalism to this day, hence some of our Anglican divisions!

So, whatever the judgments we make about Providence in this light, it is clear we are called to a harder labor than ever in the past, since the past cannot be our model here: Timothy George's story about ECT, or van Beek's description of the Global Forum, or Schirmmacher's Evangelical Alliance work, or the slow, person-by-person communal life of Chemin-Neuf -- and the long commitments to relationship-building many have witnessed to here – there are glimpses into the work we have been given. I think, in fact, others understand the need, although it is not well-articulated. It is of interest that in several strongholds of Evangelical and even Pentecostal education – Wheaton College, Biola University, in the US, and Briercrest in Canada – there have recently been noticeable upsurges in faculty and students turning to *ore* catholic churches, so much so that it is viewed in one institution as a “problem”. The reasons given are all the ones

you might expect – about liturgy and tradition and the Fathers and so on. But another reason I have heard is interesting: we expect to argue and to struggle in our faith; we expect conflict. But we need a place where such struggle has the means to be waged over time, for the long haul. Otherwise, we are only cast adrift on our own, once again. And here is something our developing world culture certainly needs resistance over and against: the demeaning of the individual creature, by leaving her or him to fend for themselves. That goes for Christians as much as anyone,