

“Historical Meanings of the Charismatic Movement”

History Interest Group

Joshua R. Ziefle
Northwest University

Presented at the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies

Introduction

Charismatic Christianity is many things to many people. For some, it represents the only religious life they have ever experienced. For others it is an intriguing yet foreign version of their own practiced faith. Still others see it as a great unknown that simultaneously beckons and repels. Whatever one makes of such faith, over the course of the last century many have rushed to embrace what they understand to be the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in their own unique religious settings, while others have strongly rejected it as distasteful if not heretical.

The persistence and growth of Spirit-centered faith around the globe guarantees that the commentary and debate surrounding it will not subside. The past year has been witness to this, as Reformed cessationist stalwart John MacArthur published a book entitled *Strange Fire*¹ that constituted a veritable trumpet blast against the seemingly hideous regiments of Pentecostalist practice and—in his mind—heretical theology. The conference associated with the monograph attracted press² even as it brought together the continuing forces aligned against charismatic practice within world Christianity.

During the same season, Pope Francis continued to ruffle ecumenical feathers much as he has since the opening of his pontificate. In August 2013 he confessed that while he had been

¹ John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit in Worship* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

² Nicola Menzie, “‘Strange Fire’ Conference: John MacArthur Calls Out Charismatic Movement as ‘Unfaithful,’” *Christian Post*, 17 October 2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/strange-fire-conference-john-macarthur-calls-out-charismatic-movement-as-unfaithful-106849/> (accessed 28 February 2014).

Joshua Ziefle, "Historical Meanings of the Charismatic Movement"

initially skeptical of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, feeling that such individuals "confuse[d] a liturgical celebration with samba lessons," his opinion had now changed:

Now I think that this movement does much good for the church, overall...I don't think that the charismatic renewal movement merely prevents people from passing over to Pentecostal denominations...It is also a service to the church herself! It renews us.³

Recently Francis has gone even further by extending an openhanded greeting to a conference associated with the Word of Faith movement, an intriguing decision that speaks to the possibilities for ecumenical dialogue with even a branch of Charismatic Christianity often sidelined by the cultured elites within Pentecostalism itself.⁴

Though MacArthur and Francis are but two of the voices currently discussing Spirit-centered Christianities, the rather public nature of their activities tells us two important things. First, that Charismatic Christianity is perceived to be worth talking about in the first place. In many ways this goes without saying. Even considering that numbers may be inflated and various estimates of worldwide Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianities can differ significantly, the movement's substantial growth is undeniable. By some counts, Asia now has over 125 million, Latin America over 180 million, and Africa over 175 million adherents. Some foresee Charismatic Christianity growing as large as 789 million by 2025.⁵ At one point in the last decade Philip Jenkins made waves by predicting as many as one billion Pentecostals by 2040.⁶ No matter the exact head count, it is hard to deny that that charismatic practice, theology, and style is becoming a dominant expression within Christianity.

³ Francis X. Rocca, "Pope Francis Discovers Charismatic Movement a Gift to the Whole Church," *Catholic News Service*, 9 August 2013, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1303443.htm> (accessed 28 February 2014).

⁴ Dale Coulter, "Pope Francis and the Future of Charismatic Christianity," *First Things*, February 2014, <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2014/02/we-know-pope-francis> (accessed 28 February 2014).

⁵ Todd M. Johnson, "Three Waves of Christian Renewal: A Hundred Year Snapshot," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 2 (2006): 75-75.

⁶ Philip Jenkins, "The Next Christianity," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2002, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2002/10/jenkins.htm> (accessed 28 February 2014).

A second insight the MacArthur/Francis comments provides is that, while Charismatic Christianity is now a pervasive aspect of our shared faith, the jury is still out on exactly what it might mean. Considering, therefore, that the theme of this year's conference is "Hermeneutics of the Spirit," it seemed appropriate to investigate some of the historic meanings of the Charismatic Movement before considering relevant aspects of contemporary analysis and applicability. The state of world Christianity and the place of Holy Spirit-centered faith demands no less. As this short essay progresses, therefore, it will describe some of the ways in which many viewed the mid-twentieth century Charismatic Movement before briefly turning its attention to how these same interpretive lenses might provide insight into the contemporary world and our American context.

But first, let me offer a word of definition. The sometimes amorphous nature of a movement as broad as the Spirit which "blows where it wills" (John 3:8) means that terminology can often become confusing. Understand, therefore, that when I use the term Charismatic Movement from this point forward I am referring specifically to the activity located in the 1950s through the 1970s that saw those from non-Pentecostal Christian backgrounds embracing much of the teaching and practice of classical Pentecostals while remaining within their own churches and denominations. It was this era that saw everything from Charismatic Catholics to glossolalic Episcopalians to Presbyterians seeking divine healing. I choose this era in particular because it represents an initial broadening of Pentecostalism in a way that led to the multiple blossoming forms we see today. As it carries the deep structure of Pentecostal praxis, it forms a helpful bridge for thinking about both past and present. I daresay it may even provide a helpful way forward for our troubled times.

Interpreting the Past

While it is popularly assumed that the Charismatic Movement began in the 1960s with the experience and testimony of Episcopalian Dennis Bennett⁷, in reality the roots of the revival trace to the 1950s and before. Drawing upon the power of the popular postwar Salvation-Healing Revival⁸ and the work of a group like Demos Shakarian's Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International there was a growing awareness during the Eisenhower years that Pentecostalism might have something unique to offer. Add to this its continued growth around the globe, and curiosity was piqued on a number of levels. The work of David du Plessis was important during this era, for it was often he who was called upon to represent the whole of Pentecostalism before ecumenical gatherings and ministers of various denominations. Such was his role as a representative of the movement that he eventually began to be referred to as "Mr. Pentecost."⁹

Especially in his early years of involvement as a Pentecostal ambassador, du Plessis together with British Pentecostal Donald Gee understood burgeoning interest in the work of the Spirit as an extension of the evangelistic mission of God. This interpretation (or hermeneutic, if you will) of such work was well in keeping with a traditional Pentecostal outlook. Among other things, it was indicative of a deep missionary ethos, in this case seeking to spread the gospel of the Holy Spirit to any denominational Christians who would listen.¹⁰ In 1958 Donald Gee wrote the following in his magazine *Pentecost*:

Even if it is admitted that the Pentecostal churches have only five per cent of faith and practice that is distinctively and peculiarly their own, it hereby is humbly claimed that the deposit is unspeakably precious. To surrender it would

⁷ "Rector and a Rumpus," Newsweek, July 4, 1960, 77.

⁸ David Harrell, *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975).

⁹ See David du Plessis and Bob Slosser, *A Man Called Mr. Pentecost* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1977).

¹⁰ This is one of the arguments I make in my book *David du Plessis and the Assemblies of God: The Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Brill, 2013).

Joshua Ziefle, "Historical Meanings of the Charismatic Movement"

be to surrender a sacred trust from the Most High and renounce a testimony of great value even to those who reject it. The Pentecostal Revival performs its true function within the whole Body of Christ while it keeps unimpaired its distinctive testimony. The Church NEEDS a Pentecostal Revival.¹¹

So too there was the sense during the early stages of the revival that what was taking place was not the work of human efforts but rather a deep and spontaneous move of the Holy Spirit.

Donald Gee is helpful here again, writing in March 1964 that

...there is this increasing new gale of the outpoured Spirit that is penetrating the old denominations with such intensity that we can hardly keep abreast of the news of all that is happening...touching "high" and "low" church, liberals and fundamentalists, and it is clear that God is no respecter of persons or denominations, but only looks on the heart. Staid old-time Pentecostals are puzzled at the sovereignty of the Spirit.¹²

Both the missionary heart of God and pneumatological sovereignty were thus related ways of understanding outside interest in and appropriation of Pentecostal theology and experience during such a seed-bearing epoch.

One of the interesting and undeniable developments one sees as the Charismatic Movement gained ground in the 1960s is the increasingly ecumenical framework within which it was interpreted. For someone like du Plessis this was the natural "next step" in his work within and amongst the ecumenical movement and various denominational Christians. As Pentecostal outsiders embraced the personal work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, there was an understanding not only that God was doing a new work, but that He was leading His people into a kind of unity rarely known. This ecumenism of the Spirit became a centerpiece of du Plessis's ministry, especially after his embrace of it led to ejection from the Assemblies of God in 1962. Unbound by denominational strictures, he was free to minister to, with, and amongst any to whom he felt called. Perhaps the best statement of his views on the matter is as follows: "the

¹¹ Donald Gee, "Do 'Tongues' Matter?," *Pentecost*, September 1958, 17.

¹² Ibid., "Pentecostal Winds of Change," *Pentecost*, March 1964, 17.

Joshua Ziefle, “Historical Meanings of the Charismatic Movement”

renewal of Christianity must be both charismatic and ecumenical.”¹³ These were powerful words that summarized well du Plessis’s understanding of the work of God in his time.

It was not only Pentecostals like du Plessis who began to experience the revival by means of this hermeneutic, but outside denominational figures as well. Reformed pastor Harald Bredesen praised the work done by David du Plessis, noting “those of us who serve and fellowship in churches that are members of the National Council and World Council of Churches can appreciate this man’s ministry when we see and feel the strong ‘wind of the Spirit’ which is bringing a change of spiritual climate.”¹⁴ Speaking of Christian denominations, Dennis Bennett said “the Holy Spirit today is reaching into the structures that man has set up, ignoring our labels, and touching and empowering those who are receptive. What will the Church be like when the Holy Spirit really has His way? None of us know the full answer...”¹⁵ So too Roman Catholic Ralph Martin wrote that “Catholics and Protestants alike find in the Spirit the bond of unity that knits them together, opening them to accept and love one another, even to receive and learn from one another.”¹⁶ The high water mark here is almost undoubtedly the Kansas City Charismatic Conference of 1977, where representatives from nearly every denominational group then touched by the renewal gathered together for corporate prayer, praise, and fellowship. A notable prophecy shared the following: “Come before me, with broken hearts and contrite spirits,/for the

¹³ David J. du Plessis, “The Renewal of Christianity Must Be Both Charismatic and Ecumenical,” *Korea Pastoral Change Catechetical Newsletter*, June 1981, David du Plessis Center for Christian Spirituality, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA.

¹⁴ Harald Bredesen, “Testimony of a Reformed Church Minister,” in *The Spirit Bade Me Go* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1970), 4.

¹⁵ Dennis Bennett, *Nine O’Clock in the Morning* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1970), 203

¹⁶ Ralph Martin, *Fire on the Earth: What God is Doing in the World Today* (Ann Arbor, MI: Word of Life, 1975), 29-30.

Joshua Ziefle, "Historical Meanings of the Charismatic Movement"

body of my son is broken... Turn from the sins of your fathers/And walk in the ways of my Son/Return to the plan of your Father."¹⁷

Slow in warming to charismatic-style ecumenism, even classical Pentecostal denominations came over time to embrace what was taking place. While traditional Fundamentalists and Reformed evangelicals certainly utilized their hermeneutics of suspicion when it came to Pentecostals and Charismatics, this had certainly not forestalled the Assemblies of God from becoming founding members of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942 or A/G General Superintendent Thomas Zimmerman being chosen leader of the organization in the early 1960s. Pentecostals were ready to embrace outsiders; outsiders, it seemed, were comfortable enough with tongues speakers in their midst. Though this may very well have had to do with the growing gentrification of Pentecostalism and their desire for respectability¹⁸, there was also the strong likelihood that the Spirit-filled saw this as an opportunity to further spread the spiritual blessings God could readily distribute.

While cessationists in the John MacArthur mold or antagonists like arch-Fundamentalist Carl McIntire did exist during this period, the hermeneutics they affirmed were largely rejected or muted by both evangelical and Pentecostalism alike in the groundswell that was the Charismatic Movement. The long arc of history seemed to be moving in their favor as classical Pentecostals came to embrace the new revival, even if not all of its ecumenical implications vis-à-vis du Plessis and the World Council of Churches.

In addition to the spontaneous move of God and the ecumenical designs of the Spirit, the third and perhaps most intriguing historical hermeneutic of the Charismatic Movement I wish to

¹⁷ David Manuel, *Like a Mighty River: A Personal Account of the Charismatic Conference of 1977* (Orleans, MA: Rock Harbor Press, 1977), 195.

¹⁸ See Edith Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith: The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

Joshua Ziefle, “Historical Meanings of the Charismatic Movement”

discuss is this: “third way” orthodoxy in a time of disequilibrium. Often, the story of the Charismatic Movement is told either from the Pentecostal or intra-Christian point of view.¹⁹ Such interpretations do make sense; the revival was, after all, a movement amongst churches. However, disconnecting the events from the time period in which they occur is suspect at best. It matters that the Charismatic Movement took hold in the United States and approached its peak during the tumultuous era of the 1960s. The disruptions wrought by those years have rightly been fodder for innumerable treatises, studies, and monographs and ought to be considered further by historians of the movement.

Though not an academic historian, New York Times columnist Ross Douthat has recently written a book entitled *Bad Religion* that details the chaos fostered within Christianity of the period.²⁰ As the mounting problems of political division, the sexual revolution, globalism, “the religious consequences of America’s ever-growing wealth,” and class intersected with a decline in church attendance, a sense of crisis emerged within the more previously solid American Christian tradition.²¹ Douthat sees churches responding to these realities in either liberal “accommodation” or recalcitrant “resistance.” Neither response is what he felt America needed. His is an intriguing analysis. Yet by only considering churches that sought to throw off the chains of the past or cling too tightly to them, I feel that he ignores a major development of the 1960s that sought to do both at once: the Charismatic Movement. Already named a “third force in Christendom” in the 1950s by Henry Pitney van Dusen²² (albeit in a different sense),

¹⁹ This is one of the oversights of my own dissertation and the monograph published from it (*David du Plessis and the Assemblies of God*).

²⁰ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65-82.

²² Henry P. Van Dusen, “Force's Lessons for Others,” *Life*, 9 June 1958, 122-3.

Joshua Ziefle, “Historical Meanings of the Charismatic Movement”

Pentecostalism and its inheritors in the Charismatic Movement came to be seen by some as a new way forward in troubled times.

Within a Christianity that was splintering into either cultural accommodation or fortresses of resistance, the Charismatic Movement provided a means for Christianity to be open to new religious forms and expression all the while remaining connected to both orthodoxy and the traditions of the past. Not embracing the experimental spirituality or Eastern mysticism of certain liberal Protestants, charismatics nevertheless provided a breath of fresh air in changing times. So too they did not simply retread old theological paths or simply devolve to timeworn Holiness codes, but lived their new Spirit-infused lives in a variety of ways. Being part of a denomination-transcending movement that included liturgical Catholic priests, pipe-smoking Episcopal laymen, and non-teetotaling Presbyterian Sunday School teachers certainly kept things from being dull.

There is evidence to suggest that contemporary participants understood the Charismatic Movement in light of their times. Charismatic Catholic Ralph Martin spoke in 1975 of a “crumbling world” and a “Church torn in fragments,” in response to which God is “casting down his fire anew, not for the sake of the Church alone, but in order to draw all men to himself.”²³ J. Rodman Williams helpfully illustrates these ideas further:

The church today is obviously in much ferment and seeking almost desperately to discover some secret, some strategy whereby it can find its way in a very difficult time. In the midst of all of this a strange thing—exciting to many, baffling to others—is also occurring which seemingly has little relation to these various things, namely, the rediscovery of a Pentecostal reality.²⁴

He goes on to say that

By no means is there any intention of discounting the significance of the Church’s varied efforts in faith and life—for God is surely at work in many

²³ Martin, 6.

²⁴ J. Rodman Williams, *The Pentecostal Reality* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972), 1-2.

ways. But beyond these something is happening in the lives of many people of so vital a nature as to make possible new impulses of power for the complete round of Christian activity. Nothing therefore in the life of the church today calls for more urgent consideration than this contemporary rediscovery of the Pentecostal reality.²⁵

While not following a strict chronology, even Vatican II's early 1960s drive for *aggiornamento* and openness to the refreshing of Church by the Holy Spirit has been seen as tantamount to the beginning of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.²⁶ It seems appropriate, therefore, that a Roman Catholic welcome to its Christian brothers and sisters in the midst of the Spirit's work symbolized and exemplified an important third way in the midst of the changes of the 1960s and beyond.

Although this hermeneutical approach to the Charismatic Movement fascinates, it must not obscure the fact that the energy, focus, ecumenism, and "third way" possibilities inherent within seemed to dissipate after the 1970s. Especially following the Kansas City Conference, difficulties emerged in various areas. The Shepherding controversy²⁷ tainted the enthusiasm of some, later 1980s televangelist scandals affected others, while the politicizing of more conservative forms of Christianity may have drained the remainder. All told, there was both a decline in focused interest and, perhaps, a retrenching to charismatic experiences within and amongst individual denominations rather than between them. Not all was lost, however, as the continual growth, development, and practice of Pentecostal and Charismatic faith grew powerfully across the globe and came to deeply affect personal faith practices within American Christianity by means of the "Third Wave" movement and the emergence of the pervasive contemporary worship culture.

²⁵ Ibid., 2.

²⁶ Peter Hocken, "The Impact of the Charismatic Movement on the Roman Catholic Church," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 25 (August 2004): 205-206.

²⁷ S. David Moore, *The Shepherding Movement: Controversy and Charismatic Ecclesiology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003).

Meaning for Today

If, borrowing from Robert Handy’s *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*²⁸ and Ross Douthat’s *Bad Religion*, we understand the 1960s as a kind of “third disestablishment” for Christianity, what then of our contemporary period? If the Charismatic Movement was a new way forward in those troubled days, what might it be for us? Even now, the previously discarded secularization thesis seems to once again to be rearing its ugly head and serious questions persist about the moralistic, therapeutic, and deistic faith American Christians pass on to their children.²⁹ In this era of a fourth and perhaps final “disestablishment” it may very well be that the alternate approach of the Charismatic Movement has something to add. If we are indeed at a 1960s-esque point of disjuncture in which churches are forced to either retrench or accommodate, the potential inherent in the Charismatic Christianity to chart another course is enticing.

The present growth and ubiquity of Charismatic Christianity across the world has augured a host of monographs, essays, papers, and studies.³⁰ From historical investigations to theological writings to sociology analyses, there is much upon which to reflect. The broad contours of the revival and its numerical explosion over the past few decades have caused many both inside and outside of the Christian world to take note. Attempts to understand what is

²⁸ Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

²⁹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118ff.

³⁰ A selected assortment might include, among many others: Allan Anderson, *To The Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); David Harrell, *Pat Robertson: A Life and Legacy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

happening have led to numerous contemporary hermeneutics no less powerfully attractive than those during the heyday of the Charismatic Movement. From many within Pentecostalism there can be an implicit sense of triumphalism at the numbers involved. For others there are fears about the possibly heretical or unhelpful directions in which the movement may be progressing.

Similar to the 1960s, there is also a sense amongst the charismatic faithful that much of this work does involve the spontaneous work and progress of the Kingdom of God in the world, even as it is deeply connected to worldwide missionary efforts and outlooks. To be a Pentecostal or Charismatic means to consider deeply the sovereign, evangelistic, and unexpected work of God's Holy Spirit. Similarly, the deep ecumenical hopes of the 1960s, while less pronounced, may be headed for a similar resurgence as Charismatic Christianity continues to awake from its slumber and find that the world has become Pentecostal. The implications of this *de facto* ecumenism are yet to be seen, but it is difficult to imagine how such realities might not continue. Especially when considering the decreasing influence of the traditional Christianity in the West compared with its steady rise in the Majority World, it stands to reason that charismatic Christians the world over may grow increasingly close even as Christianity grows progressively more charismatic.

As much as these first two interpretive approaches are in keeping with the birth of the Charismatic Movement and contemporary realities, so too does the final hermeneutical lens—that of a third way forward—provide an interesting way to interpret its contemporary place in society. No matter what evangelical or political co-option of Pentecostalism and its inheritors has taken place, something like the historic Charismatic Movement and today's increasingly charismatic Christianities always carries within them a unique set of qualities. Among these are, not surprisingly, the same heart for missions, focus on God's sovereign reviving action, and

Joshua Ziefle, "Historical Meanings of the Charismatic Movement"

ecumenical belief that the Spirit is meant to be poured out on all flesh that stoked the traditional hermeneutic of the Charismatic Movement. It makes sense that the third part of this hermeneutical *troika* should also be transposed to our contemporary situation. As much as the first two approaches are faithful to the history and the evidence at hand, the appeal of the third way may be best suited as we consider the world as a whole.

Such a hermeneutical view towards the Charismatic Movement's utility and purpose means an avoidance of the Scylla and Charybdis of our age. On the one hand, a properly charismatic Christianity cannot abide the bromides of warmed over secularization or the more insidious heresies of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. God for the Spirit-filled believer is simply far too alive, too personal, and too real for that. The Charismatic experience can be many things, but by its very definition is certainly predicated on the active and immediate actions of God. On the other hand, the third way of today's Charismatics means that regression, retirement, and/or a bunker mentality need also not apply. A Spirit that is understood to be advancing the mission of God in ways far beyond ourselves, our denominations, or even our nation, is central. The onward and ubiquitous work of the Spirit's legacy in the Charismatic Movement calls believers from losing sight of the big picture of God's will in the world for evangelism, social advocacy, relief work, matters of justice, and much more. The work of God's Spirit, if understood in this way, holds the charismatic Christians close to the heart of God even as that same Spirit impels them forward in action.

Conclusion

Just as the Charismatic Movement has not disappeared, so too the lessons and related thoughts of its power need not remain trapped in the past. If the stalwarts of the 1960s saw the

heart of God involved in a mission to bring the Church together and revive it at a time when many were proclaiming its death, might not contemporary inheritors of the movement consider the same? While orthodox Christianity has always believed in the transcendentally sovereign plans and purposes of God which will come about despite human interference, how believers in various ages have understood and interpreted this action has varied. In the case of the Charismatic Movement, our forbearers have provided some helpful patterns with which to interpret the work of God as His Spirit pervades our lives in the world at large. The spontaneous action of God's Spirit over all the world by necessity draws believers together even as it provides an important way forward in a world that wishes to provide us with lesser options. At least this is what participants in the Charismatic Movement might say. While these are certainly not the only hermeneutics by which we might approach the past, present, or future, they are worth considering as helpful Pentecostal/Charismatic approaches to understanding the revival(s) of our times.