

Response to Dr. Charles Estridge, *Ecumenism and Spiritual Renewal*

Edgar R. Lee

I want to commend Dr. Estridge for addressing the issue of Ecumenism and Spiritual Renewal. Pentecostals generally have been fearful of ecumenism, thinking it the pathway to the great apostasy of the eschaton. They have readily concluded, as Dr. Estridge has noted, that ecumenism and spiritual renewal are mutually exclusive. Even so, Pentecostals have always had contacts with the wider Christian community and have forged close friendships and working relationships with persons of faith in the varied traditions. If anything, the tempo of these contacts has increased in recent years. As this conference has reminded us, there are numerous, if unofficial, on-going dialogs always in process. These exploratory meetings are bound to increase, if for no other reason than the pragmatic necessity of making common cause against the onslaught of post-modern paganism.

In addressing ecumenism, Dr. Estridge has, of course, responded to a deeply biblical stream of our faith. In this conference we have repeatedly heard Jesus' prayer for his disciples, "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21). The essential unity of the people of God is a theme that runs throughout the Scriptures and cannot be evaded by superficial stereotypes. Speaking of the Jew/Gentile divide, but in a way that is surely applicable to all diverse people of God, Paul pointed out that Christ in his own crucified flesh "has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of

hostility” and created “in himself one new man [person] out of the two...” (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Pentecostals hear and affirm this ecclesiological reality on a theoretical level, and on a personal level as they engage devout believers in other traditions. But on the level of practical and institutional engagement in common mission, they often find themselves unable to resolve the tensions both of their own biases and what they perceive as heterodox beliefs and practices of their would-be ecumenical partners. Dr. Estridge, helpfully, is suggesting some ways to move us along and he is to be commended. In talking about spirituality and spiritual renewal, he has plumbed the essence of Pentecostal faith and sought to establish a pneumatological connection with other traditions. Biblical ecumenism is indeed a work of the Spirit who regenerates and sanctifies all those who trust in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. As Paul put it, “we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13). Whatever we bring to the ecumenical process must be predicated on what the Spirit has already done and is continuing to do.

Given the pervasive reality of the Spirit, I found Dr. Estridge’s explication of spiritual renewal to be helpful. In the Pentecostal-charismatic tradition, we have usually understood renewal in American revivalistic terms as an occasional visitation of God that engenders a crisis experience that either brings people to faith or “jump-starts” a new aspect of sanctification or charismatic experience. With his sometimes overlapping “dimensions” of renewal, identified as (1) personal, (2) corporate, (3) conceptual, (4) structural, (5) evangelistic, and (6) theological, Dr. Estridge has attempted to reach back

into the broad stream of Christian tradition and bring out a deep and disciplined spirituality that communicates vitality to the whole body of Christ and therefore explicates the Spirit's ecumenical impulse.

His investigation of the spiritualities of the great ecclesial traditions of the church is also useful. We have usually concluded that other traditions should learn from us but have not always conceded that we may actually learn from them and that we both may be the richer for it. Dr. Estridge's project here reminds me of the way Richard Foster, using a more experiential taxonomy, has attempted to bring together the various spiritual streams in the church. In his recent book, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*¹ Foster labeled these streams as (1) Contemplative, (2) Incarnational, (3) Evangelical, (4) Social Justice, (5) Holiness, and (6) Charismatic. Each stream is necessary to properly enrich and renew the church and Foster has not failed to emphasize the importance of the Charismatic tributary.

Coming from a somewhat different trajectory, Russell Spittler has recently expressed the hope that the Pentecostal-charismatic "sidestream" might flow into the "mainstream." He writes, "The finest hope for the confluence of sidestream and mainstream may be that vitality become clothed with stability, tradition balanced with enthusiasm, and experience tempered by love."²

In his Pentecostal spirituality, Dr. Estridge has rightly emphasized the *charismata* and refers to them as the "manifested presence of God." It seems to me that the chief distinguishing characteristic of Pentecostal spirituality is the expectation and experience of the charismata. I do not know if I am comfortable with the notion of "manifested presence of God," which may too easily play into what Russell Spittler calls Corinthian

spirituality.³ But Pentecostals do indeed believe that the Spirit of God is personally present and working in a regular exercise of the *charismata* that can indeed bridge over to sincere people of faith. That is not to deny, of course, that much Pentecostal theologizing remains to be done in order to provide a congruent and convincing theological rationale for our beliefs and practices.

There are several areas in which I would like to encourage Dr. Estridge, and all of us, to continue the investigation. First, he has tended, in this paper at least, to treat as synonymous two notoriously slippery terms, “spirituality” and “spiritual renewal.” Neither term has been historically in vogue with Pentecostals but both, properly defined, reflect deep and abiding Pentecostal realities. Estridge’s “dimensions” help to show what he means by spiritual renewal and those dimensions will preach. But “spirituality” goes deeper than “spiritual renewal” and merits continuing study.

While we Pentecostals have always had a distinctive spirituality, our use of the term and our disciplined reflection on its significance is relatively recent. Dr. Estridge profitably draws on the work begun by Russell Spittler⁴ and Steven Land.⁵ Other helpful Pentecostal studies come to mind as Simon Chan’s two recent books, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (1998)⁶ and *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (2000),⁷ both of which are solid theological contributions.

While the topic is much larger than he could or should have done in this paper, in the interests of ministerial formation and ecumenical dialogue, I would like to encourage Dr. Estridge and his New Testament colleagues to continue their explication of Pentecostal spirituality from the biblical text. Spirituality is certainly denoted by the etymological root in the adjective *pneumatikos* that is noted in this paper. But there is a

larger root system of biblical spirituality to be excavated. Russell Spittler recently pointed out the affinities with Pentecostal spirituality of Louw and Nida's semantic sub-domains "Experiencer" and "To Cause to Experience" (in, into, upon, fall, happen, undergo, overwhelm, enter, and taste) in their *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*.⁸ Pentecostals have always preached their spirituality from prominent biblical metaphors conversant with the language of those domains, e.g. Jesus' use of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-6), and Paul's assertion that believers are the temple of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19).

In closing, I am somewhat unsure about Dr. Estridge's final observation that "we would find a dialogue on spiritual renewal to be more productive if we stay with dimension and forms...[rather] than a discussion of dogma or theology." It seems to me that it is precisely in a carefully nuanced spiritual theology with a prominent place for the charismata that we can engage, challenge, and contribute to the common experiences of the various Christian traditions. Granted, the various traditions will never exactly match their theological rubrics with ours. However, we can, I believe, continue to make progress if we explore the richness of each other's traditions using common tools of responsible biblical exegesis and theological exposition.

Breaking free of traditional strictures that are suspicious of any ecumenical outreach is never easy. I commend Dr. Estridge for helping us to move forward in an ecumenical journey that recognizes the essential spiritual unity of the church of Jesus Christ, that cherishes our own tradition, and that values the authentic spiritual expressions of other traditions.

¹ (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1998).

² “Corinthian Spirituality: How a Flawed Anthropology Imperils Authentic Christian Existence” in Edith L. Blumhofer, Russell P. Spittler, and Grant A. Wacker, eds. *Pentecostal Currents in American Protestantism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 16.

³ Russell P. Spittler, “Corinthian Spirituality...”

⁴ “Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality,” in Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 804-809.

⁵ Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

⁶ (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

⁷ (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

⁸ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: New York Bible Societies, 1989).