



Jamie Buckingham

PERSPECTIVE:

Something is happening to the traditionally narrow denominational structures of America's churches. After years of skepticism of any doctrine not dressed in its own denominational clothes, today's churches are finally accepting a new unity which is breaking down fences.

Although statistics from the headquarters of all the largest denominations show growth has slowed to a virtual halt, spiritual activity outside the historic church is booming. Billy Graham estimates 60,000 "home churches" in America — so-called underground meetings. Young people, once on drugs, now flock to campus and street meetings.

But the greatest change has been brought about by a ground swell of millions of people who have had what used to be called a "Pentecostal experience."

Last week I attended a high level conference in Tulsa made up of 35 of the nation's leading Christian leaders, all of whom had had this "experience." On a day when Tulsa's temperature hit a record 103 outside, there was a different kind of warmth in the closed conference where these men of all denominations sat six hours a day sharing, laughing, worshipping and drinking coffee together. Although many of those present had at one time been dismissed from their churches because of their experiences, all were in agreement that things were now changing.

"Our Sunday meetings in Illinois are more Pentecostal than most Assembly of God meetings," laughed one of the nation's leading Presbyterian ministers.

Bob Arrowsmith, a bearded Jesuit priest from California, threw his arm about Larry Christenson, pastor of one of the largest Lutheran churches on the west coast, and said, "I'm an evangelist. My bishop has assigned me to lead people to Jesus. What church they later join is immaterial."

David du Plessis, respected South African who was once dismissed from his Pentecostal church for being too friendly with Catholics grinned and agreed. "Even the Pentecostals are coming to life."

I sat quietly, remembering my own prejudices against both these groups. It wasn't too long ago I firmly believed anyone not of my particular Baptist persuasion was to be looked upon with heretical suspicion. Church unity scared me.

I saw in it a dangerous kind of watered-down compromise that would turn what was left of the church into nothing more than a social club. Although the spectre of a divided Heaven was unthinkable, unity on earth seemed even worse for it presented the possibility that we wouldn't believe enough to even get to Heaven to begin with. Now, however, exclusivism in churches all over America is melting like the snow in Spring.

"How to you account for it?" I asked Fr. Bill McMahon, newly appointed pastor of America's first Catholic-Pentecostal parish.

"Four things" he said. "The first is a common understanding that our loyalty is not to an institution, but to Jesus. The second is an acceptance of the Bible as God's Word. Third is the practice of the supernatural (charismatic) gifts of the spirit in the church and the life of the believer. Finally" he said seriously, "there is a universal belief that Jesus is about to return."

"Very Pentecostal," I joked.

"No, very Biblical," he countered.

I thought back, remembering my high school Christmas Eves in Vero Beach, when I slipped out and attended the midnight communion services at the Episcopal church. There, once a year, many of us from all churches knelt together at the altar rail in worship. Then we all returned to our narrowness, afraid to think it could be any different. Now I feel glad. Glad that what many have long believed, but feared to voice, is coming to pass.