

## Chapter 10

### The Challenges of HCM Eschatology

Although HCM eschatology cannot be compressed into one specific perspective, and hence we should strictly speak of HCM eschatologies, there remains a core set of beliefs which can be conveniently summarised under the phrase 'restorationism'. The eschatology had developed from the desire to implement the radical ecclesiology that was perceived to be in place in the first-century apostolic church; this eschatology was then further shaped by the restorationist perspective of history. The eschatology and ecclesiology have therefore been intrinsically twined and so one of the key questions that now faces the diversifying 'new church' movement is how close to that original (eschatological and ecclesiological) vision it should adhere and to what extent that original vision is still shaping those faith communities.

Vincent Branick, a Roman Catholic writer, in his biblical and historical examination of the development of church from the Pauline writings to the fourth century writes that:

The prohibition of Laodicea completes a critical cycle. The Lord's Supper had changed from evening meal to stylized (*sic*) ritual. The assembly had moved from dining room to sacred hall. Leadership had shifted from family members to special clergy. Now the original form of church was declared illegal.<sup>1</sup>

Although making no value judgement on the demise of the original form of church, his observation notes how the original shape (and, by implication, original vision) of church can eventually become 'illegal'. The HCM, like all other groups, needs to heed the lessons from history, and perhaps should look to learn from one of its close 'relatives' and historic predecessor, the Pentecostal movement. Margaret Poloma's sociological study of the leading North American Pentecostal denomination, the Assemblies of God, highlighted the rise of institutionalism and subsequent loss of 'charismatic' identity. In the light of this she suggests that the Assemblies of God need to move away from an increasing priestly leadership, which tends to routinise charisma, toward a prophetic-pastoral leadership which would foster the freedom of spiritual experience.<sup>2</sup> This increased institutionalism is, at least in measure, tied up with numerical 'success', the need to maintain quality control in a rapidly growing movement and perhaps also a shift away from eschatologically held beliefs.<sup>3</sup> The loss of this eschatological emphasis leads Harvey Cox to observe of modern-day Pentecostals that, 'Now they seem confident not that Jesus is coming soon, but that He probably isn't, and that therefore nothing will interrupt their pursuit of success and self-indulgence.'<sup>4</sup>

The same issues face the HCM: numerical growth means that they are no longer viewed as a sectarian inconvenience but have found themselves accepted as part of the wider evangelical movement.<sup>5</sup> All the while that the HCM groups were small they could maintain a clear identity, seeing themselves, to some extent at least, as the true successors of the faith; but now that they no longer meet as a handful in a front-room but in a diversity of public

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1. *The House Churches in the Writings of Paul* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989). The above quote from p. 134 with the reference to Laodicea being the Synod of Laodicea, circa 365, and specifically a reference to Canon 58 which forbade the celebration of the Eucharist in a private home.

2. *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1989), particularly pp. 232-41.

3. Faupel, *Gospel*, places the issue of the imminent return of Christ as a central shaping influence on the whole development of Pentecostalism.

4. *Fire*, 318.

5. Not only are various streams part of the Evangelical Alliance (with Covenant Ministries an exception), but some of the members of HCM churches hold key roles within the Alliance.

settings, with many actively pursuing the refurbishment of large auditoriums, the tendency is to lose a sectarian identity, with the possibility that churches with distinctive HCM roots become simply another charismatically-orientated church in the market place.

Institutionalism is an ever-present tendency as a movement develops and there is evidence that the HCM is no exception. The early-HCM had sought to get back to a simplicity of believers gathering together but perhaps there has always been an in-built bias toward hierarchy with its 'rediscovery' of apostles and prophets.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that the HCM should heed its own history in order to challenge its future. By laying claim to a charismatic ecclesiology the radical nature of that ecclesiology needs to be re-examined and, if necessary, allowed to bring adjustment to its current shape.<sup>7</sup>

There is always a need to be radical and a vital question for the HCM streams to examine is what they believe is the minimum requirement needed in order to define a group of disciples as church. By so doing new models could be considered, and existing ways of being church could be challenged. Such an approach is necessary to avoid institutionalism and to ensure that the church is ready to respond to the emerging post-modern culture. The challenge of new models of church that do not fit the current apostolic structures is one issue, and it might be appropriate for those within the HCM to acknowledge that their forerunners were not actually radical enough. To go back to Scripture, as they did, and discover the shape of the Pauline churches might be an important step, but there might yet be a more radical examination that could allow new models and shapes to emerge. For the HCM this would mean a radical re-examination of its leadership structure and style, even as far as questioning as to the necessity of the continuation of eldership and apostles. Unless the question is faced the tendency will be to move toward the sanctity of the office regardless of the charismatic anointing to fulfil the task, thus falling into the very situation that the HCM has itself historically criticised.

The HCM ideals are being tested by the growth of such phenomena as a push toward church planting movements among distinctive culture groups. Currently, the most challenging could well be that of planting churches within youth culture.<sup>8</sup> If this becomes successful it will not fit easily within the current HCM streams as the expression of church would be adapted toward a youth (and post-modern) culture. The issue for some churches will be to what extent such a movement would be controlled by them, and to what extent they would be empowered and released to develop an independent shape. If the former approach takes place then history could repeat itself, with another generation believing the restrictions were unacceptable and that the only choice was to leave, resulting in yet another expression of new church, perhaps then ironically viewed as sectarian by certain HCM streams!

Another issue that might well cause a challenge to HCM eschatology is teaching on 'spiritual warfare'. From the Ichthus quarter there is an emphasis on territorial spirits,<sup>9</sup> which, in simplistic terms, teaches that the church is to 'bind' the territorial powers in order to gain a breakthrough for the Gospel. Such an approach might eventually be found to clash with the

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6. 'Early Restorationism inevitably put 'apostles' at the centre of the ecclesiastical wheel, because... the apostle was seen as having the ultimate spiritual authority in the church' (Turner 'Ecclesiology', *Vox Evangelica*, Vol. XIX, 1989, 102.)

7. The simplicity of the Anabaptist-Mennonite structures of church are being allowed, in some quarters and to some extent, to challenge HCM perspectives, through such publications as *Anabaptism Today* and a recent work by Walfred Fahrer, *Building on the Rock* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995).

8. A conference under the title of 'Remix' was held at Aston University, July 5-7th., 1996 which drew together around 600 leaders within youth movements and churches, to examine the possibility of planting 'youth churches' which would have a very different flavour to existing new churches. A number of the HCM streams were represented.

9. Forster wrote the foreword to the book Wagner edited, *Territorial Spirits* (Chichester: Sovereign World, 1991).

eschatological teaching of the increase of wickedness with accompanying martyrdom of believers. If the powers can be bound, the question must be raised as to the possibility of shaping the future in such a way that the church becomes victorious, indeed this could ironically, at least for Ichthus, lead to a post-millennialist approach. This teaching on territorial spirits coupled with a strong leaning toward the denial of the absolute foreknowledge of God must impact on the eschatological perspective, particularly within Ichthus and the stream it has most influenced, Pioneer.<sup>10</sup>

Alongside the above beliefs there is a growing conviction in a coming revival. Such expectations can have implications with regard to a belief in the purity of the church and, probably more significantly, expectations of an impact on society. This latter expectation can affect eschatology with an ever-present danger of the 'christianising' of society. The church must have clarity as to how it will implement its numerical success, otherwise the old adage that 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely' could prove to be sadly true. Steven Land's advice to the Pentecostal churches could be well heeded by the HCM; he states that:

The church, where possible, must work to make structures more adequate to the life that is righteously ordered and intended by God. Structures cannot be sanctified in the same way as individuals can, but since the Spirit is at work in all creation, discerning action by the church can bear witness to and participate in those activities which more nearly embody righteousness, dignity and love for people.<sup>11</sup>

In summary, then, there is a challenge to the HCM that will come by looking to its own roots and if done honestly should rekindle the passion for a true charismatic expression of church. Such an expression will challenge all forms of false hierarchy and release a fresh empowering, thereby allow a diversity of church expressions to take place. Alongside this an ongoing commitment to world evangelisation and mission, with a working toward genuine relational unity can only bring about greater church health.

The HCM has never been better placed to embrace its future as a major contributor within the wider church scene. It no longer needs to be over-defensive, but with its distinctives can contribute toward the richness of diverse church expressions. However it is equally true that the HCM could quickly become divorced from its roots and simply become institutionalised, losing all ability to be self-critical, believing that numerical success justifies its existence and *modus operandi*.

Without losing its desire for radicality, it would also behove the HCM to accept the provisional nature of church, by which I mean that all churches have grown up in particular historical settings. This would then allow a reciprocal relationship with other church traditions.<sup>12</sup>

The HCM faces a number of challenges, but rather than erasing its distinctives, there needs to be a fresh embracing of distinctives, even if those distinctives have been somewhat revisioned. The HCM's current shape is being changed, but the danger is that the change will take place simply through numerical success. To avoid this danger the HCM must become faithful to its roots by allowing its current shape to be changed through a fresh empowering of

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10. As proposed in a series of essays by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger in the book *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994). By denying the absolute foreknowledge of God there is an explicit denial of a fixed future. The HCM streams, Ichthus and Pioneer are at the heart of planning a conference with Pinnock on this subject for November 1997.

11. Land, 'A Passion for the Kingdom', *JPT* 1, 39.

12. This reciprocal relationship is one of the proposals in G.R. Evans' book, *The Church and the Churches - Towards an ecumenical ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

new ideas. If this takes place then there will be some challenges that it can offer to the wider church.<sup>13</sup>

Those challenges will essentially be that of flexibility, grassroots empowering, of dismantling structures that no longer facilitate the gospel in our era, with the result that effective mission-orientated bodies are promoted. A demonstration that the HCM is committed to an eschatology that is mission-driven and relationally orientated will prove to be the lasting contribution that the HCM will make to the wider church. Such a challenge must be embraced, and such a challenge must be heard.

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13. Writing concerning the Pentecostal movement, Jerome Boone says that 'we must be faithful to God's purpose for the Pentecostal movement and not compromise our diversity which is expressed in certain Pentecostal distinctives.' ('Community and Worship', *JPT* 8, 129). The HCM likewise needs to acknowledge its distinctives so that through them there is a contribution to the wider church.