

Three Streams & One River: The History & Future of the Convergence Movement¹

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Introduction

The dictum “There is more that unites us than divides us” has gained momentum within the Church as Christians from denominations around the world have engaged in deeper conversations examining their histories, polities, and theological views. One way this has been seen is by looking at how the historic traditions, or “streams,” of Christianity have converged in various denominations and movements.

When we hear the word “convergence,” most of us might imagine a river confluence, a stained-glass window, or even a quilt. In all three cases the concept is the uniting or coming together of multiple things into a single entity. Convergence, often known as “the Convergence Movement,” seeks to consciously unite – or reunite – the various traditions, or “streams,” of Christianity. This paper will give a basic history of convergence, including a few notable events and people, offer an overview of a communion of convergent congregations, and discuss the possible future of convergence.

Lesslie Newbigin

The first concrete thoughts concerning a movement in this vein were written in the 1950’s by the British-Presbyterian-missionary-turned-ecumenical-bishop, Lesslie Newbigin. In his classic book, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, Bishop Newbigin asks the question, “By what is the Church constituted?”² Newbigin describes the Church as being “Protestant, Catholic and Pentecostal.”³ He goes on to say these three facets join us to Christ and, consequently, the Church.

According to Newbigin the primarily “Protestant” facet focuses on the reception of the message of the Good News. Newbigin states, “[We] are incorporated in Christ by hearing and believing the Gospel.”⁴ Newbigin characterizes the “Catholic” facet as our “sacramental participation in

¹ Originally presented at the inaugural Florovsky Week lectures at Newman University, Wichita, Kansas, July 10-14, 2018.

² Lesslie Newbigin. *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), ix.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 31.

the life of the historically continuous Church.”⁵ Finally, Newbigin couches the term “Pentecostal” as the stream of the Church that “[receives] and [abides] in the Holy Spirit.”⁶

Newbigin saw the embrace of these three facets as strengthening agents for ecumenism and a possible starting point for reunification efforts within the Church. At the end of the first of the lectures that constitute *The Household of God*, Newbigin asserts, “The moment one has stated these three positions in this bald way, it is at once apparent that they are far from being mutually exclusive...” (Newbigin 1953, 31) Gordon T. Smith adds to this idea in his use of the analogy of the “vine and branches” found in John 15 as part of his examination of the historic streams of the Church: “[It] only makes sense that we would embrace every possible and God-given means by which we could be living in the vine and bearing the fruit to which we have been called...”⁷

The Movement Gains Momentum

The ideas and experiences of Newbigin, and those with whom he served in the Church of South India, percolated and began to spread from South India, through the United Kingdom and Europe, before finally sparking in the United States. In the afterglow of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Catholic Charismatic Renewal began in 1967 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at Duquesne University, after a few professors experienced the “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” This experience soon spread to the University of Notre Dame. Ten years later, in 1977, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, ecumenism, and the converging of the various streams of the Church gained national attention at a rally of charismatic Christians in Kansas City, Missouri. The further development of this movement of the streams of Christianity was evident in the World Council of Churches’ paper “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” (1982), as well as articles in high-profile Christian magazines, such as *Charisma* and *Christianity Today*.

The bylaws of the World Council of Churches state that the goal of their Faith and Order Commission is “to proclaim the oneness of the Church...and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ.”⁸ This is done with the missiological goal “that the world might believe.”⁹ The “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” document focuses this goal through an examination of the meaning and practices of baptism, the Eucharist, and ordination. In the penultimate paragraph of the final section, “VI. Towards the Mutual Recognition of the Ordained Ministries,” the authors of the paper offer a statement which is good advice for the content of the whole paper which

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gordon T. Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental, and Pentecostal: Why the Church Should Be All Three* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 21.

⁸ World Council of Churches. “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.” Faith and Order Paper No. 111(Geneva: World Council of Churches. 1982), v.

⁹ Ibid., v.

precedes it: "...obstacles must not be regarded as substantive hindrance for further efforts towards mutual recognition. Openness to each other holds the possibility that the Spirit may well speak to one church through the insights of another. Ecumenical consideration, therefore, should encourage, not restrain, the facing of this question."¹⁰

Dr. Richard Lovelace's 1984 *Charisma* article "Three Streams, One River?" observed changes in the Church since the 1977 Kansas City charismatic rally. Lovelace noted the significance of people such as Dr. David du Plessis, who worked to foster relationships between "ecumenical Protestants and Catholics," and Dr. Robert Cooley, an Assemblies of God minister who became president of the historically evangelical Gordon-Conwell Seminary, both of whom acted as signals of the change coming within the Church.¹¹ While Lovelace noted some of the rough seas that happened in the decade after the Kansas City rally, he also offered a thoughtful critique on the converging of the three streams of "Pentecostalism," "Protestants," and "Catholicism," and ended his article by noting, "There will be many knots to be untied before we have a united church which is truly Catholic, evangelical and Pentecostal. In the meantime, we should design events which model this mixture, which form signposts toward the meeting of the streams."¹²

Dr. Randall Balmer's 1990 *Christianity Today* article "Why the Bishops Went to Valdosta" chronicled the journey of a charismatic congregation into the Episcopal Church.¹³ In the late 1980s, the Reverend Stan White, pastor of Evangel Assembly of God Church in Valdosta, Georgia, "became seized with what he called an 'ecumenical spirit.'"¹⁴ White began to utilize the Book of Common Prayer from the Episcopal Church in his devotion time and would occasion one of the local liturgical congregations. Over the course of a couple years White began to incorporate some of the historic teachings and traditions at Evangel Assembly of God. Several congregants suggested White start a new congregation with a Pentecostal-liturgical influence. After prayer and consultation, White planted what eventually became Church of the King, a non-denominational, interracial congregation that "combined historic forms with charismatic fervor..."¹⁵ A large portion of the article describes the service in which White and Church of the King were welcomed into the Episcopal Church. It is full of descriptions of high church formality and charismatic energy. A particularly striking observation came from the homily of Bishop John Howe, then Bishop of Orlando, as he commented on the historical continuity of the journey of Church of the King, "Howe compared the Episcopal Church to a great, carved marble

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ Richard Lovelace, "Three Streams, One River?," *Charisma* (September 1984): 8.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Randall Balmer, "Why the Bishops Went to Valdosta." *Christianity Today* (September 1990): 19–24.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

fireplace, and the spiritual ardor of nineteenth-century Methodists and twentieth-century Pentecostals to a fire. The fire, Howe declared, belonged in the fireplace.”¹⁶

Convergence Comes of Age: Robert E. Webber and Richard Foster

If Lesslie Newbigin is the grandfather of the convergence movement, Dr. Robert E. Webber is seen as its father. A long-time professor at Wheaton College and the founder of the Institute for Worship Studies in Jacksonville, Florida, Webber was brought up in the Baptist Church and ordained in the Reformed Presbyterian Church. The 1970s saw Webber engaged in a study of the early Church and an examination his own evangelical context. The results of Webber’s research were his entrance into the Episcopal Church and his book *Common Roots*. In the introduction of *Common Roots* Webber admonishes his readers that, “The major issue facing evangelical Christianity, the one from which all other problems flow, is a kind of evangelical amnesia. Evangelicals have forgotten the past. There is a need to change...our ‘sadly deficient’ state of historical knowledge.”¹⁷

In 1999, Webber authored a book, *Ancient-Future Faith*, which would start to cement some of what he had been observed and experienced in the Church in the previous quarter century. *Ancient-Future Faith* asserts that the road forward must go through the past. One of Webber’s colleagues, J. Julius Scott, said, “If you really want to understand Christianity, you need to put it into a nine-hundred-year period. Understand the three hundred years before the first century and six hundred years after the first century, and you will grasp the origins and essence of the Christian faith.”¹⁸ Taking inspiration from this, Webber examined postmodern Christianity (1980-1999) in the light of first-century Christianity. Webber pulled no punches when he wrote, “Our calling is not to reinvent the Christian faith, but, in keeping with the past, to carry forward what the church has affirmed from its beginning.”¹⁹ Webber, who died in 2007, authored several books which have served as guides and access points to people who have felt the call to walk out an “ancient-future” Christianity, including *Journey to Jesus*, the *Ancient-Future* series, and the eight-volume *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, for which he served as editor.

At the same time Webber was developing his ideas on “ancient-future” Christianity, Dr. Richard Foster began considering the spectrum of Christianity from a praxis-based, historical point of view. Foster’s landmark book, *Celebration of Discipline*, investigates twelve “classical” spiritual disciplines, ranging from meditation to service to celebration, which make up part of the bedrock of the streams of Christianity. Foster describes these disciplines as classical not “merely because they are ancient, although they have been practiced by sincere people over the centuries. The

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 15.

¹⁸ Robert E. Webber *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 1999), 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

Disciplines are classical because they are central to experiential Christianity.”²⁰ Foster goes on to state that “the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our normal daily activities. If they are to have any transforming effect, the effect must be found in the ordinary juncture of human life...”²¹ This thought of the Disciplines being tied to the centrality of “experiential Christianity” would underpin Foster’s work, yielding books such as *Freedom of Simplicity* and *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. This culminated in Foster’s 1998 book *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*.

In *Streams of Living Water* Foster examines six “traditions,” Contemplative, Holiness, Charismatic, Social Justice, Evangelical, and Incarnational, which he notes are “streams of spiritual life.”²² Foster noted that there was a movement occurring in the late 20th century that was “deep,” “powerful,” “dancing,” and “broad,” like the river of living water mentioned by Jesus in the Gospel of St. John.²³ The beauty, and the miraculous side, of this for Foster is,

The astonishing new reality in this mighty flow of the Spirit is how sovereignly God is bringing together streams of life that have been isolated from one another for a very long time...Over the centuries some precious teaching or vital experience is neglected until, at the appropriate moment, a person or movement arises to correct the omission. Numbers of people come under the renewed teaching, but soon vested interests and a host of other factors come into play, producing resistance to the renewal, and the new movement is denounced. In time it forms its own structures and community life, often in isolation from other Christian communities. This phenomenon has been repeated many times through the centuries. The result is that various streams—good streams, important streams—have been cut off from the rest of the Christian community, depriving us all of a balanced vision of life and faith. But today our sovereign God is drawing many streams together that heretofore have been separated from one another.²⁴

Considering the thought of an attempted reunification of the Church, Foster encourages us that we are not alone in this: “We are not the only ones from a different culture and age who have wanted to imitate the life of Christ. Others—myriads and myriads of them—have sought to imitate the way of Christ and translate that way into their own settings and surroundings.”²⁵ The views of Foster coupled with the views of Webber undergirded the experiences of many who not only contemplated but put into practice the concepts of convergence expressed above. While this

²⁰ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper & Row. 1978), 1.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Richard J. Foster *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (New York: HarperCollins. 1998), xvi.

²³ Ibid., xv.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 22.

praxis was seen in some of the established denominations previous mentioned (i.e. Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Church) many people involved in these movements attempted to reconcile the practice of convergence in a way that would be authentic yet would not commit subterfuge or undermine the Traditions of the Church. The next section contains a summary of the genesis of one such group: The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches.

The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches (CEEC)

Over the past 25-30 years many small denominations and “communions” have emerged which seek, or have sought, to practice this converging of the three primary historic streams of Christianity. One such group is the Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, or CEEC. The CEEC seeks to be a multi-faceted expression of the evangelical, charismatic, and liturgical/sacramental traditions of the Church, which is anchored in Scripture and Tradition, and encourages “local church diversity of expression.”²⁶

The first seeds of the CEEC began in 1989 as conversations among three clergymen from the central United States – Wayne Boosahda, Michael Owen, and Robert Wise – who recognized “the need to go beyond the Charismatic renewal and incorporate aspects of the historic church into worship.”²⁷ In the early 1990s the term “convergence” was first used to describe the “blend [of] charismatic experience, biblical renewal, liturgical renewal, and sacramental worship.”²⁸ The term was attributed to Boosahda, who convened the first conference to address the topic, titled “Treasures Old and New: The Convergence of the Streams of Christianity,” in 1993.²⁹ Participants in that initial event included “founders of the newly formed Charismatic Episcopal Church, Fr. Peter Gillquist of the Antiochian Orthodox Church [previously with Campus Crusade for Christ], The Rev. Bob Stamps [Oral Roberts University’s chaplain during the 1970s], Dr. Thomas Oden, and Dr. Robert Webber...”³⁰ Webber chronicled this development with an entry by Boosahda and Randy Sly in the second volume the previously mentioned *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, in which Boosahda and Sly lay out key elements of the three streams.³¹

The CEEC fully took root in October 1995 when 300 people gathered in Fredericksburg, Virginia, to witness the “consecration of [the] first two bishops and the ordination of 25 pastors and 7 deacons,” along with the reception of “twenty-five independent congregations from a wide

²⁶ The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, “What is Convergence?,” The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, 2017, accessed January 23, 2018, <https://www.ceec.org/what-is-convergence/>.

²⁷ The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, “Initial History and Growth of the CEEC,” The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, PDF, 2, 2009.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid..

³¹ Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers), 1996.

variety of denominational backgrounds.”³² Since its inception the CEEC has seen clergy serve on six continents, ranging from parish clergy, missionaries, chaplains, educators, bi-vocational clergy, and serving in parishes of other denominations. The flexibility of the three streams allows for the aforementioned “local church diversity of expression”,³³ which means that while congregations may not look identical they share the same essence. Today, the CEEC is actively involved in ecumenical dialogues, helping to sound forth the call for unity and acting as a bridge between denominations of different traditions.

The Future of Convergence

When approaching the future of convergence, it is important to keep two things in mind. First, convergence is a movement, not a denomination or a worship style. The struggle with many past movements in the Church is that zealous participants, whether early adopters or, as is more often the case, “second wave” or “third wave” devotees, often wanted to codify the movement in which they participated, preserving the facet of the movement which they held most dear, and allowing them to hold up this crystallized facet as the “correct” incarnation of the movement and, thus, the one that should be perpetuated at the expense of all other facets. The problem with this is that it, at best, discounts other facets of the movement in question and, potentially, denominations within the Body of Christ and, at worst, vilifies other facets of the movement in question and denominations. Part of the beauty of convergence is the multifacetedness of the movement. This allows clergy, congregations, and whole communions or denominations to “step in the river,” if you will, at the place that suits them at the moment, realizing that there exists room for growth and development in all streams.

The second thing to keep in mind is the heart for unity. Many proponents of convergence are actively involved in ecumenical dialogues and inter-denominational gatherings. It should be pointed out that the goal of these dialogues and gatherings is, ultimately, not institutional unity, with all denominations forming a meta-denomination. Rather, the goal of this unity is to do the will of Christ, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and showing by word and deed that we are the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. As the Body of Christ comes together to pray, worship, study, and fellowship, the world will have the opportunity to know that we are Christians by our love for one another (John 13:35).

This call for unity does not demand that we discard centuries of doctrine and dogma; rather it requests that we give primacy to Jesus’ words to the lawyer in Matthew 22:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You

³² The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, “A Brief History,” The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, 2017, accessed January 23, 2018, <https://www.ceec.org/origins>.

³³ The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, “What is Convergence?”

shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.³⁴

Conclusion

Evangelical/Protestant, liturgical/sacramental/Catholic, charismatic/Pentecostal – regardless of their different names, they are three streams that flow into one river. In the introduction of his book *Evangelical, Sacramental, and Pentecostal: Why the Church Should Be All Three*, Gordon T. Smith offers this perspective on the streams: “[In] the first, the church is the gathering of those who hear and believe the gospel; in the second, the church is found in sacramental participation in the community that is in historical continuity with the apostles; and in the third, the church is the fellowship of those who receive and abide in the Spirit.”³⁵

The philosophical ones among us may be content with Smith’s initial thought, however the praxis-based ones among us will be asking, “But how do they blend together? And in what ratios?” Smith wrestles with these questions at the end of the first chapter of his book; he writes, “The response of course is that it is not either/or but all of the above. And the three ways are not all of one kind... The three—Spirit, along with Word and sacrament—are then the means by which the intent of the cross is fulfilled in the life of the church, the means by which we abide in Christ as Christ abides in us... Each is essential if we are to embrace the words of Christ: in and through him our joy is made complete (John 15:11).”³⁶ That is part of the mystery and beauty of convergence.

Smith concludes his book with hopeful words: “The Spirit, the Word, and the Sacramental life of the church are all housed within a community that is demarcated by love and committed to mission in the world.”³⁷ This dovetails so well into one of Jesus’ final discourses, what is often called His “High Priestly Prayer” – His prayer for His disciples and those who will follow Him later:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20-23, ESV)

This heart for unity from within diversity is what undergirds convergence. It is the underlying theme which has surfaced so often for those who have been on this journey: The coming-together of the various streams of Christianity into the one river of the Church.

³⁴ Matthew 22:38-40, The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001).

³⁵ Smith, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

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