

Streams - Encountering Different Church Traditions

Series (Parts 1 to 3). Holy Trinity Twickenham, January 2009.

Part 1: Catholics (Isaiah 6:1-8, Luke 22:7-19)

Today we're starting a new series called Streams. We're looking at the main streams or traditions that make up the church. And that means whole denominations, like the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, but also traditions within our own church. In other words, why is it that you can go to one of our neighbouring Church of England churches and it feels more like a Roman Catholic church, and you go to another and it feels more like a rock concert with a chat at the end?

We're taking 3 weeks to look at 3 Christian 'streams', starting with the Catholic tradition. First a bit of history. For the first 1,000 years or so of church history there was really only one church. The first followers of Jesus were fired up with a new faith, a new hope and a new vision, and they spread the Christian message around the Roman Empire and eventually the rest of Europe and the world.

Of course there were differences and different emphases in different bits of the church. But the idea of different churches or different denominations didn't exist.

The big change came in the year 1054. There was a big split between the churches in the West of Europe, which looked to Rome as the heart of the faith, and the churches in Eastern Europe that looked to Constantinople (now Istanbul). The eastern part of the church became known as the Orthodox Church (as in Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox), and the western part became the Roman Catholic church.

Why did they split? A lot of it was due to cultural differences. They actually agreed on the core Christian beliefs. But they'd been gradually growing apart over the styles of worship, and the main thing they disagreed about was the Pope. The Roman Catholics in the west believed the Pope was the head of the whole church, while the Orthodox churches said he wasn't. And that's still true today.

The second big split in the church is in the 16th century. What we call the Reformation. It doesn't affect the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches. But it splits the Roman Catholic Church down the middle. This is a time when you see the start of the Lutheran churches, the Reformed churches and the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. Together these are known as Protestant churches, although that word isn't used much today - unless you live in Northern Ireland!

Why did this second split happen? Partly it was a time when the Roman Catholic church had got into a mess. A lot of its leaders weren't exactly godly people, so the Reformation was a protest against abuses that had crept into the church over the years. It was also about some secondary Christian beliefs and practices. All Christians agree on the central things like God being a Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), the importance of Jesus, life after death and so on. But they sometimes disagree about styles of worship and secondary issues of theology. The Reformation was about these issues as well.

So the two big splits, in the 11th and 16th centuries, gave us the big movements in the church that you see today: Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant. These days we live in a mobile, connected-up world, where people move from one country to another and lots of people don't stay in the church they were brought up in. So these churches aren't now restricted to particular areas of the world. So in most parts of the UK, you have Orthodox churches, Roman Catholic churches and any number of Protestant churches. The core beliefs are the same, but there are differences in styles of worship, and secondary points of doctrine and spirituality.

But these days the word Catholic doesn't only mean the Roman Catholic Church, headed up by the Pope. It's also a stream within our own church, the Church of England. Some churches belong to the Church of England, but they like the style and emphases of Catholicism. They're Anglican, but feel Catholic, so they're known as Anglo-Catholics.

So here are a few Catholic distinctives:

- The importance of the **Pope**.
- **Priests** remaining unmarried.
- Lots of **ceremonial** in services (processions, carrying crosses, clergy wearing ornate robes, bowing, and making the sign of the cross).
- Engaging the **senses** in church (paintings and statues, lots of candles, using incense).
- An emphasis on the Virgin **Mary** and **Saints** that you don't get in other churches.
- Emphasis on the **sacraments** of the church, especially Baptism and Communion, which they call the Mass. In the Mass, Catholics believe the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus. Lots of other churches see them more as symbols.
- In morality, an emphasis on the **sanctity of life**: eg anti-abortion, anti-euthanasia. And a focus on human rights and justice.

Those things will be true of Roman Catholic churches, like St James's down the road in Strawberry Hill. But they also tend to be true of Anglo-Catholic churches like All Saints, our next-door parish just off the Staines Rd, or All Hallows near the rugby ground. They're Church of England, but the inside of the church and their services will feel like Roman Catholic churches.

So what's good and what's not so good about the Catholic stream? Well, here are four positives that all Christians can get from the Catholics:

- 1) **Reverence in worship**: A focus on the majesty of God, a reminder that God is awesome and majestic. It's like our first reading from Isaiah, where Isaiah's confronted with a vision of God and his grandeur. At its best, Catholic worship has that same sense of awe and mystery. Sometimes non-Catholic churches like ours can so focus on making services informal and accessible that you lose the awe and wonder, the 'otherness' of God.
- 2) **Importance of church**: A lot of people who aren't Christians will tell you church doesn't matter. They have a private faith. And lots of people who are active Christians also tell you church doesn't matter. What matters is knowing Jesus, so going to church is neither here nor there. But Catholicism has always said the church is important.

And that's a biblical view. We need each other, we need the encouragement and teaching we get in church, because church is people. And Catholics are right to emphasize the sacraments, especially Communion. You meet God not only in your own head, in your own feelings about God, but in tangible ways like bread and wine. God comes to us in solid ways, even when we can't work up much emotion or faith of our own.

- 3) **Roots and tradition**: Some modern churches have exciting worship and fellowship, and they throw out tradition. But after a few years, some of the people who go to those churches start to crave something with deeper roots. They want to connect with older traditions of faith and spirituality. There's an extraordinary resource in the Catholic Church of methods of prayer and spirituality, church music and role-models like Mother Teresa and St Francis. We don't have to reinvent the wheel in every generation, and the Catholic church gives people a living tradition to draw on.
- 4) **The Value of Life**: The Bible tells us all life is a gift from God. It's not something to be taken for granted, or taken away lightly. There are times when thinkers and societies and governments lose sight of that. A 19th movement called Social Darwinism decided the so-called primitive peoples around the world were less highly evolved than us, so we had the right to kill them and take their land and children away. Governments in the 20th century experimented with eugenics, deciding which people don't deserve to stay alive. There are societies today where abortion is just another form of birth control, a routine operation.

The Catholic Church insists that all life is God's gift and is precious. We might question some of the areas they apply that to, like their views on birth-control. But their basic instinct about the sanctity of life is surely right, and profoundly Christian.

So, four positives about Catholicism that all Christians can learn from. What about some of negatives? Let me mention three:

1) **Their emphasis on Mary and the Saints** often goes too far. If you read the gospels, what's special about Mary is that she's a girl who says yes to God. She plays her part and then the focus shifts to her Son, Jesus. I've been to Catholic churches near the Mediterranean where you'd think it's about goddess-worship. You have statues and paintings of Mary everywhere. People pray to Mary, sing to Mary and light candles to Mary. That's biblically bizarre and spiritually unhealthy, as lots of Catholic leaders themselves point out.

Incidentally, a lot of areas around the Mediterranean were involved in goddess worship in pre-Christian times. When Catholicism arrived, it often took over existing festivals and Christianised them. So when you see processions with statues of Mary being carried around and described as the Queen of Heaven, these local traditions may have pre-Christian roots.

It's the same with saints. Some Catholics pray to saints for blessings and to help them through the day. The implication is that God is remote and rather angry, so you've got to have holy people who'll act as go-betweens. Again, biblically bizarre and spiritually unhealthy. If the Christian faith tells us anything, it's that God's a loving heavenly father who wants nothing more than a close relationship with people. That God can be approached directly, without the need for intermediaries. Mary and the saints should be respected and admired, but no more. At its best, the Catholic church teaches that. At its worst popular forms of Catholicism get the emphases all wrong.

2) **The danger of being a Catholic, but not a Christian.** This is not my criticism. It was pointed out to me by a French Catholic monk! And I was talking to a Catholic woman recently who leads retreats and conferences. She said exactly the same thing.

When you're brought up as a Catholic, it's a cultural identity you carry around with you for the rest of your life. People talk about themselves as Catholics even if they never go to church and they don't believe in God. In some areas, Catholic stops being a faith word and becomes a way of talking about which street you live in, or what school you went to, or which pub you drink in or which football team you support.

Catholic leaders tell me the hardest people to reach with the Christian gospel are nominal Catholics. People who were baptised as children and grew up in a Catholic home but have never taken their faith seriously. It's as if they've been inoculated against the real thing. I once went to a French Catholic monastery where they gave out leaflets that asked the question: 'Catholic - but are you a Christian?' It's a good question.

3) **Legalism and guilt!** For some people, a Catholic upbringing meant lots of 'thou shalt nots', rules laid down by nuns or monks, and a legacy of guilt about lots of things. But Jesus said he came to bring life in all its fullness. Sadly, some Catholic churches and institutions down the years have taken the Gospel message of 'loving God, loving people' and made it a list of do's and don'ts. Which has been spiritually devastating for lots of people, and has put them off Christianity for life.

So there are pitfalls and dangers in Catholicism. But as we'll see, there are different pitfalls for each of the other traditions in the church as well. The point we're making in this series is this: a Church which draws on the best of all its traditions will be a stronger and more mature church than one that puts its fingers in its ears and shouts out that it's right and everybody else is wrong.

The Catholic stream has its faults. But at its best, it can teach all of us about the importance of reverence and mystery, the importance of the church, the need for roots and tradition, and the value of life as a gift from God.

Part 2: Evangelicals (Psalm 119:105-112, Luke 23:44-49)

We're continuing our series of talks where we're looking at the streams or traditions that make up the Church. And that means whole denominations, like the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, but also the traditions within our own church. As we said last week: Why is it that you can go to one of our neighbouring Church of England churches, and it feels more like a Roman Catholic church, and you go to another and it feels more like a rock concert with a chat at the end?

Last week we looked at Catholicism. Today we're looking at the Evangelical stream. And again we're starting with a bit of history. Back in the 16th century there was the second big split in the church, what we call the Reformation.

The man who sparked the Reformation was a German priest called Martin Luther. Not to be confused with Martin Luther King, who lived nearly 500 years later! Back in 1517, Martin Luther produced a list of 95 complaints against the church, known as his 95 Theses. And he nailed it to a chapel door in the town of Wittenberg. And what he did in those 95 Theses was to launch a full-scale attack on the Catholic church of his day.

What Luther hated most was the selling of things called indulgences. An indulgence was a document authorised by the Pope, which claimed to give people spiritual blessings or time off in 'purgatory' before they went to heaven. The idea was that the church had a 'treasury' of holiness and goodness built up down the years, and it could be sold to anybody with enough money to pay. In other words, it was a money-making scam.

The other thing Luther criticized was some of the teachings of the Catholic Church of his day. The Church taught that the way to God was through good works. In other words, if you were good enough, you could earn your way to heaven. Martin Luther couldn't square this with the Bible, which says repeatedly that it's faith that brings us into a relationship with God. What makes somebody a Christian is having faith in God and trusting him, not being good. And Martin Luther found that psychologically, the gospel of good works was bad news as well. Nobody could ever be sure if they were good enough to be a Christian, or get to heaven. What was the pass-mark? Nobody knew!

Martin Luther didn't want to start a new church, but that's what happened. The Pope threw him out of the Catholic church. The result was the Lutheran churches of northern Europe. Then a whole lot of other people started to go back to the Bible and compare the state of the Church in their day with what they found there. And they ended up breaking away as well. One of these was John Calvin, who was French. He was the big influence on the Reformed churches, including the United Reformed Church, the Baptist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Church of Scotland, as well as groups like the Puritans.

Then the Church of England broke away as well, only in this case it was partly due to Henry VIII's desire not to be told by the Pope who he could and couldn't marry! But at the same time, the ideas of the Reformation profoundly shaped the Church of England. Then in the 18th century you get John Wesley starting the Methodist Church. In the 19th century you get William Booth starting the Salvation Army. In the 20th century, Billy Graham starts doing his big evangelistic events around the world.

All these people were Evangelicals. They all sparked renewal movements within the church, inspired by Luther and the Reformation. What they all did was to compare the Church in their own day with what they found in the Bible, and they wanted to rediscover the passion of the early Church.

So these days you get whole denominations that are basically Evangelical, like the Baptist Church and the Evangelical Free Churches. But you also find churches that are Church of England, but identify with Evangelical emphases. You get Anglican Evangelicals in the same way that you get Anglo-Catholics.

For the sake of completeness, we need to add that churches can change over the years. Some of the denominations that started off as Evangelical now have a majority of members who probably wouldn't describe themselves as Evangelical. That includes the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Quakers. Also, within the Church of England, you might get a vicar who's from one stream, but most of his church aren't.

So you might have an Evangelical vicar leading an Anglo-Catholic church, or vice-versa.

So what are the main distinctives of Evangelicals?

- **The centrality of the Bible**, as a guide to faith and how to live. If you ask a Catholic where the authority lies, they'd say the teachings of the Church, and a Pope who's infallible. If you ask a Christian who's part of the liberal tradition, he'd say it lies in reason, that faith has to be judged against human reason, what current thinking allows us to believe.

For an Evangelical, the final authority has to be the Bible, because they would say the Bible's not just the record of people's spiritual experiences. The Bible's the inspired Word of God. So you'll never hear an Evangelical say: 'Oh well, the Bible was written a long time ago, so you can't possibly believe that sort of thing today!'

- **Worship tends to be simpler and more informal.** We said last week how Catholics like ceremonial (processions, carrying crosses, clergy robes, bowing, making the sign of the cross). And we said Catholicism likes to engage the senses (paintings, statues, candles, incense). Evangelical worship tends to be the opposite. Buildings that are plain and simple, services that are more informal. You're more likely to find a rock band leading worship in an evangelical church than in a Catholic or Anglo-Catholic Church!
- **The focus of services is less on Communion, more on the sermon.** Last week we said Catholics are big on sacraments, especially Communion, what they call the Mass. For Catholics, the main place you meet God is in the sacraments of the church. They believe the bread and wine become the literal body and blood of Jesus. For Evangelicals, what matters most is the sermon that unpacks the Bible. That's where God meets us most powerfully. So in Evangelical churches, sermons tend to be longer.
- **Conversion.** Most Evangelicals have made a conscious decision to become a Christian, to give their life to Jesus. That might be a sudden decision, or it might happen over a period of time. But there's an awareness that something's changed. You've been converted to Christianity, and you're heart's in it, in a way that it wasn't before.

If you ask a Catholic what makes them a Christian, they'd probably say they were baptised. Baptism's the entry point to the Church, so that makes them a Christian. But an Evangelical would say by that faith to be real, it has to come from the heart. You're a Christian because you've put your faith in Jesus. Evangelicals would say ceremonies like baptism and confirmation are meaningless, unless the people involved have real faith.

So what are the positives of Evangelical churches?

- 1) There's an **energy** about them which is infectious. Holy Trinity Brompton has 3,000 members. St Helen's Bishopsgate has 1,000. St Stephen's East Twickenham has 800. In the C of E today, 1% of the churches attract 10% of all church attendance. In other words, there are some BIG churches out there. And of these, well over two-thirds are Evangelical.
- 2) Evangelicals tend to be more **active** in the life of their church. They tend to read their Bible more, be more involved in home groups, and give more to church and good causes. These are mostly people who've had some sort of conversion experience, or at least made a conscious decision to prioritise their faith. They tend to get more obviously excited about their faith than people in Catholic and traditional Anglican churches.
- 3) They have a **Scripture Principle**. What I mean is this. If you look at how Jesus viewed the Bible, he believed that what the Bible says, God says. (Of course, the Bible Jesus used is what we call the Old Testament). If you read Jesus's teachings, time after time, he backs up his message from the Hebrew Bible. Jesus has a 'Scripture Principle': God really has acted and spoken in human history, and we have an inspired account of it in the Bible. If you want to know what God thinks about the world, or how we should be living, your starting point is in the Bible. So Evangelicals say that they're simply following what Jesus taught about the authority of the Bible.

And this is a helpful antidote to today's relativism, the idea that values and beliefs all change from one era to the next, and from one place to another. Evangelicals say there's an unchanging core of belief and morality that applies to all time and all people, because God's revealed it. There's an anchor that can hold people firm in choppy waters. It's about looking to God, rather than human reason or church tradition, because human wisdom and the church have often got things wrong down the centuries.

So what are negatives and pitfalls of Evangelical churches? Let me mention two:

1) Because Evangelicals have a high view of the Bible, there's a risk of being **over-literal** and not reading it intelligently. When we read the Bible, we should always ask questions about the literary style or the cultural background of the bit we're reading, and how that affects our interpretation. And questions about how it fits with other insights, like science.

The best Evangelical leaders do that. But through history, some Evangelicals have had a habit of taking an odd verse from the Bible, taking it out of context and saying because the Bible says it, that's the gospel truth. I have to say, American Evangelicals have been particularly prone to that. Here are just two examples of things some people believe, based on taking Bible verses out of context:

- **The Rapture.** The idea that before the end of history believers will be whisked up into the clouds while the rest of the earth suffers 1,000 years of torment.
- **Women** should never speak in church and should always have their heads covered.

2) Another failing is a tendency to **dismiss other Christian traditions** as boring or dead. Lots of people in other traditions have an equally genuine faith. It's just that they might prefer more formal or traditional styles of worship. They might value the sacraments of the church and silence. Things that Evangelicals sometimes see as unimportant.

One of the themes of this series is that the Church is at its strongest when it draws on the best insights of all its traditions. From Evangelicals, the whole Church can learn about being like Jesus in seeing the importance of the Bible. And about energy and commitment in faith. But we don't have to buy the whole package of a church tradition to learn from it.

Some of you know my last church was an inner-city church in Finsbury Park. What we had there was a vicar who'd describe himself as a thoughtful Evangelical (me), thrown together with a church that would describe itself as Anglo-Catholic. What we ended up with was faith that came from the heart and was based on the Bible, but it was expressed in quite a formal, liturgical way on a Sunday morning. It was a creative mix.

Or there are churches like Beverley Minster in Yorkshire, or Bath Abbey, which are strongly Evangelical in their faith but use traditional cathedral worship. Here's the thing. If you're a Christian believer, you don't need to be boxed into one tradition of the Church, as if that's right and all the others are wrong. We're all inheritors, of all the traditions of the Church.

And as we each connect with what's best in those different traditions, we'll grow in faith, and the Church as a whole will become stronger and more unified.

Part 3: Pentecostals & Charismatics (Acts 2:1-6, Mark 1:9-13)

We've reached the third part of our series where we're looking at different streams or traditions of the church. We've looked at the Catholic stream and the Evangelical stream. This week we're finishing with a look at the tradition that's the most colourful and exuberant, but people often find hardest to understand. And that's the Pentecostal or Charismatic stream. We'll explain what those words mean in a minute.

First, a bit of history. It's Los Angeles in 1906, in the industrial area of the city, at 316 Azusa St. A quietly-spoken black minister called William Seymour sets up a series of meetings in a disused church hall, which is being used as a warehouse. His pulpit is made of old shoe boxes, and he starts preaching that God wants to bring revival to his church.

What follows over the next three years is astonishing. Hundreds of thousands of people come to hear Seymour, from all round the world. They end up having meetings seven days a week, three times a day. And every meeting's packed out. People experience the power of God in dramatic ways. Some fall over, some speak in tongues (we'll talk about that in a minute), some are healed. The event becomes known as the Azusa Street Revival. And the whole movement is known as 'Pentecostalism', after the day of Pentecost in the Bible, when the Holy Spirit's poured out on the followers of Jesus.

The result is that new Pentecostal churches are set up around the world. But it's not long before the emphases of Pentecostalism find their way into the mainstream churches as well. There's a name for people who like a Pentecostal style of worship and believe in the Pentecostal experience, but don't go to Pentecostal churches. They're Charismatics (it doesn't mean they have 'charismatic' personalities, it comes from the Greek charisma, which means gift, as in gifts of the Holy Spirit). So you get Anglican Charismatics, Roman Catholic Charismatics, and so on.

So the Charismatic movement overlaps with the two streams we've already looked at in this series. Most Catholics aren't Charismatics, but lots are. If you look at Evangelicals in this country, about half are Charismatic, half aren't. Churches like Holy Trinity Brompton and St Stephen's in Twickenham are Evangelical and Charismatic. Churches like St Helen's Bishopsgate and All Souls Langham Place are Evangelical and not Charismatic.

There are about 2 billion Christians in the world. Of these, about a quarter are now Pentecostal or Charismatic. They're the fastest growing part of the church around the world. So what are the main distinctives of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians?

- They believe the Holy Spirit still gives people the **supernatural gifts** you read about in New Testament times. For example, healing: people can pray with other people and ask God to bring physical or emotional healing. Or a word of knowledge, where somebody gets a supernatural insight into somebody else's situation, revealed by God.

Then there's speaking in tongues. The idea here is that sometimes our human language is inadequate to worship the majesty of God. So God gives people a special prayer-language, which sounds like a jumble of sounds that's not intelligible to anybody else, not even to the person praying. It's like putting your brain into neutral and bypassing normal rational faculties in the presence of God. Sometimes people speak in tongues in church services, but more often people use it in private prayer.

So the heart of Pentecostalism is experiencing of the power of God today, in the sort of ways we read about in New Testament.

- The other obvious thing about Pentecostal and Charismatic churches is their **worship**, which is energetic and lively. Black gospel music comes from this stream of the church, and so does most of today's contemporary Christian music, in a rock or folk style.

In Pentecostal and Charismatic worship people often raise their arms in worship as a symbol of praise or self-offering to God. It's a bit like the Catholic idea of making the sign of the cross or bowing in church. It's a way of enacting your worship physically with your own body, rather than just sitting and thinking about it.

So what are the main positives of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity? Two things:

- 1) **Rediscovery of the supernatural.** Back in the 18th century there was a time called the Enlightenment. The heart of it was rationalism. Things had to be reasonable and provable. That obviously influenced philosophy and science. But it also influenced the church.

People started to repackage faith to appeal to the mood of the times, which meant stripping out the supernatural bits like Jesus's miracles. What you ended up with was essentially a moral system with a thin Christian veneer. That's the kind of church you see in Jane Austen's novels, where the vicar's only there for tea-parties or butterfly collecting! Faith becomes rational, calm and non-miraculous. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church carries on believing in miracles, but doesn't want too much emotion in its services. So their services continue to be rather formal. And that's the legacy that continues in lots of churches to the present day.

One of the leading Christian scholars today is Gordon Fee. And he asks an interesting question: 'If St Paul were to return to our churches and compare them with the churches he set up in the first century, what would he see as the main difference?' It's a very interesting question. And Gordon Fee's answer is: 'Expecting to experience of the power of the Holy Spirit'. They did, and we don't.

I think he's right. There's nothing in the Bible to say the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are restricted to the first century. In fact, there's a lot that implies the opposite. 'I tell you the truth', says Jesus, 'anyone who has faith in me will do what I've been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.'

The Pentecostal and Charismatic stream is about rediscovering a dimension of Christianity which has been marginalised down the centuries. In some churches you never hear about the Holy Spirit, or about the gifts of the Spirit. And that's an imbalance that Pentecostalism wants to redress.

Now, that raises important questions. Like: how much healing can we expect? And we don't have time to explore these wider questions today. But the principle William Seymour rediscovered is surely right: Christianity should be about the possibility of experiencing the power of God, and expecting the unexpected. Christianity is supernatural from beginning to end, and if you take away the supernatural it stops being Christian at all.

- 2) **Worship.** In traditional Anglican worship, people listen to Bible readings and services written in the popular language of the 17th century, and sing hymns based on popular pub tunes from the 18th and 19th centuries. The vicar wears robes based on popular fashions of the Greeks and Romans! Traditional C of E worship is worship expressed in the popular cultures of a bygone age. Nothing wrong with that, but culturally that's what it is.

In contrast, Pentecostal and Charismatic worship wants to use the styles of today. Black gospel music was a huge influence on popular music like Motown, and today's soul and dance music. Today's gospel music is in the styles of popular soul and hip-hop. Charismatic denominations like Hillsong and Vineyard use contemporary rock and acoustic styles of music, which is what you find in most Anglican Charismatic churches too.

Now you might like the idea of that, or you might hate it. You might like the idea of raising hands in worship to praise God, or you might hate it. What you can't deny is that lots of people today, especially younger people, want two things in worship. They want to worship God with a style of music they enjoy, and they'd listen to on their iPod. And they want to experience the power of God, not just think thoughts about God. Pentecostal and Charismatic worship offers that. And that's a main reason it's so popular around the world.

What about the negatives of the Pentecostal and Charismatic stream? Two points:

1) **They can over-emphasize personal experience.** Remember, we said that for the Catholic, ultimate authority lies with the church and its teaching. For them, the most important part of a service is Holy Communion, the mass. For Evangelicals authority lies in the Bible, and the most important part of the service is the sermon.

Pentecostals have a high regard for the Bible, but where they really expect to hear from God is through the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit. And by inner promptings or words of knowledge from other Christians. For most Charismatics and Pentecostals the point they feel closest to God is not in Communion, and not in the sermon, but in ecstatic times of worship, or when they're moved by the power of the Spirit in a personal way.

The danger here is that it can all become rather frothy and subjective. Truth is whatever you feel. The teachings of the Bible and the wisdom of church tradition can be neglected. Just one example. Pentecostal preachers preach that God wants to give people spiritual blessings, which is clearly true. But some extend that to say he wants to give unlimited material blessings too - prosperity. And unlimited physical blessings in terms of healing. And they teach that both of these come through the death of Jesus on the cross every bit as much as salvation.

I've heard some Pentecostal preachers say that if we're suffering poverty or illness, it's because we're not claiming the total health and wealth Jesus came to bring. 'Name it and claim it'. There's no time to go into the theology of this, but suffice to say it's flaky! It comes from taking Bible verses out of context. But if you're in a service where there's an electric atmosphere from a funky worship band, and the preacher's passionate and excited about what he's preaching, it's not a great environment for asking critical questions.

2) **They sometimes generalize from their own experience.** Because they've met with God in a particular way, some Pentecostals conclude that that's what a genuine meeting with God has to look like. Again, just one example. Pentecostals believe in speaking in tongues. They point out that St Paul says it's a gift of the Holy Spirit.

But some Pentecostal churches go further and teach that if you don't speak in tongues you're not a real Christian, because you haven't received the Holy Spirit. Which is nonsense. Biblically, the most you can say is that tongues is right for some people. And St Paul is actually against tongues being used in public worship, in case it scares off visitors! Pentecostals can thank God for the experiences he's giving them. What they can't do is criticize other Christians because they prefer to worship God in silence or with liturgy.

In this series, we've said the Church is at its strongest when it draws on all its traditions. And that each one of us can draw on the best of each stream in our own journey of faith. So often, what the church ends up with is the worst traits of all its streams:

- From Catholics, the dangers of legalism, of emphasizing secondary things, and of having a nominal faith, where you dutifully attend church but your faith stops there.
- From Evangelicals and Pentecostals, the danger of dodgy interpretations of the Bible, based on taking verses out of context, and a tendency to be judgmental.

Just think what the Church could be like if it drew on the best insights of all its streams:

- From Catholics, reverence in worship, the importance of the church and its sacraments, the value of good tradition and an emphasis on the sanctity of life.
- From Evangelicals, a love of the Bible and commitment to Jesus.
- From Pentecostals and Charismatics, a rediscovery of the Holy Spirit and worship that's heartfelt and experiential and relevant to today.

Just think what my own journey of faith could be like if I stopped being nervous of traditions I'm less familiar with, and drew on their *best* insights to help me reconnect with God.