



The making of the New Apostolic Church (2)

Beginnings of a Catholic Apostolic movement

The association of believers from different denominations dispersed just as they were starting to receive answers to their prayers for an increased activity of the Holy Spirit. However, the end of the Albury Circle was the beginning of a Catholic Apostolic movement.

What was one to think of the reported healings in Scotland? Disagreement soon was ripe: Henry Drummond, who had hosted the Albury Conferences, prayed for more spiritual gifts. Hugh McNeile, the Anglican rector of Albury, eventually turned against him.

Prayers answered

In this the rector was far from alone. A majority of his fellow ministers denied that there could be miracles after the age of the first Apostles. Soon there were suggestions that those who had been healed in Scotland had not really been ill.

Thomas Fancourt at first shared this view. He was a London minister whose daughter had been almost completely bedridden for years. Her spine was deformed and her muscles had weakened. A friend of the family kept praying for the young woman to be healed. One day in October 1830 he asked her whether she believed that God was able to heal her if it pleased Him? When she affirmed her faith in this she was able to stand up and all the visible physical deformations were gone.

Theologians utter their doubts

Her father knew that this was a miracle. Full of joy he reported this in a letter to a religious periodical. Imagine his dismay when his fellow ministers denied the possibility of a miraculous answer to a prayer, although they did not doubt the facts. They felt sure that God did not interfere with the course of people's lives any more, whereas one of the doctors whom the father consulted testified that the healing "was the result of a peculiar interposition of divine favour and power".

Irving's prayers left unanswered

But another man's prayers were left unanswered. At thirty Edward Irving had become the pastor of a congregation of Scots in London. His unusual preaching style had made him so popular that on the strength of this the presbytery commissioned a new church building for about 1,800 worshippers. Irving had assisted Drummond in organising the Albury Conferences and had also been delighted over the spiritual gifts.

His hopes for spiritual gifts in his congregation had not yet been fulfilled. When his two-year-old son, Samuel, had fallen seriously ill the congregation joined in prayer with him and his wife, pleading that the boy might live. The parents had already lost two children soon after they had been born. Alas! Samuel died.

Without sin—like Christ

Irving blamed himself for Samuel's death, thinking that God refused to hear him because of his sinfulness. How could Christians overcome sin? Referring to His relationship with His Father Christ said: "The Father has not left me alone, for I always do those things that please him" (John 8: 29). Irving wanted to reach the same state. He felt comforted by the fact that Christ was not only true God, but also true Man. He concluded that overcoming must have been as hard for Him as for any other man. But, Irving reasoned, since Christ was also the Son of God He also lived in the perfect power of the Holy Spirit. So He had been able to remain without sin. Now Irving hoped that he and many true Christians would receive the Holy Spirit in such power that they could pray to God without sin and work miracles.

"Babylon" within Irving's Church

Regardless of his worries about the bad state of Christendom as a whole, Irving had for many years believed that the Holy Spirit could better be active in his own denomination—the Church of Scotland—than in others. Meanwhile, however, he was deeply worried, wondering whether the Holy Spirit had ceased to guide the Church of Scotland.

His concern was motivated by proceedings against three ministers. While the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland considered the pleadings for and against three of his friends, Irving hoped to support them by prayer meetings he held in his church in London. Also these prayers were not answered as Irving had hoped for. The accused were forbidden to act as ministers of the Church of Scotland.

From this Irving concluded that the Church of Scotland had also left God's ways. So, if all Christians were in the spiritual Babylon (cf. Revelation 18: 2–4) every individual minister was responsible to Christ that his flock did not remain there. Referring to the first three chapters of the Revelation to John he interpreted his position as that of an Angel of the Church (meaning a local church or congregation) who was responsible to Christ alone. He was

supported by some other ministers who also saw themselves as Angels of Churches and felt it their duty to guide their flocks out of Babylon.

Speaking in tongues and prophesying

Irving continued his prayer meetings. Together his followers prayed for spiritual gifts. In the course of the summer some participants spoke in unknown tongues, but also in intelligible words. They sensed that those words were given to them and were convinced that they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Irving did his best to make sure that it really was the case. At first Irving did not want to permit speaking in tongues and prophesying in the regular services, but he finally gave in. As was to be expected, there were negative reports in the newspapers and the curious came and disturbed the services.

Attracted by the spiritual gifts

Not only the curious came, but also people who hoped that the spiritual gifts might be interpreted as signs pointing to a still more wonderful activity of the Holy Spirit, for many prophecies referred to Apostles. Some of those who came later served as Apostles and prophets. Before they could do so, they still had much to learn. Manfred Henke

Next month: The Apostle ministry reoccupied

Speaking in tongues

Words in an unknown language: what was one to make of the things that were happening in those prayer meetings led by Edward Irving, and even before that in Scotland? At the start, the people involved believed that the unknown languages were to be assessed in a manner similar to the miracle of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the listeners at that time were addressed in their respective mother tongues. Soon it became clear, however, that no one could understand this "speaking in tongues". Eventually they came to realise that Apostle Paul had also written about such languages in chapter 14 of his first epistle to the Corinthians. There Paul distinguished speaking in tongues (or glossolalia) from the kind of prophecy that was understandable to all in the congregation. But why would God speak to them in words they could not understand? The way they explained it was that those who had previously been proud of their reason and understanding would first have to learn that, in the eyes of God, they were like newborn babies, to whom God would speak "with stammering lips and another tongue" (Isaiah 28: 11).