

# THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT

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The Australian Pentecostal movement today seems to me to be facing a similar problem to that of the Methodists a hundred years ago. Methodism had departed from its early Wesleyan roots and was becoming more respectable. It had ministry training colleges, buildings, schools and impressive publications... and there were those who cried for a return to the old ways and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

William Taylor (1845-1934), the founder of what is now the Wesley Mission in Sydney, was convinced of the need for churches to emulate the methods of the apostles — apostolic methods will still produce apostolic results. Taylor's passion was expressed in a sermon he preached in 1912, the one hundredth anniversary of the first Methodist meeting in Australia. Methodism's only safety lay in its spirituality. And he pleaded with them — *Back to Wesley! Back to the upper room! Rekindle the waning fires of the Church's inner life! Give the Holy Ghost an opportunity!*

It would pay them 'a thousandfold' to stop everything for a year and fall to their knees to ask God to 'alter the atmosphere of the Church.' He challenged the ministers, 'Put fire in the pulpit, and you will soon get fire in the pew.'

'Let the Church go to its knees and master the art of tarrying there, and then, ere this year closes, there shall come to our great Church the one thing, the only thing, that can permanently settle this question — a Pentecost, bursting upon us with all its original power.'

Another who cried for revival was John Watsford, the first Australian-born Methodist minister. He saw six causes

for concern in 19th century Methodism:

Distraction from the all-important work of saving souls; too much reliance on special services and special agents; growing worldliness of the Church; modifying of grand old doctrines; neglect of the doctrine of entire sanctification; neglect of weekly class meetings.

The Pentecostal movement today faces similar challenges. I want to consider some contemporary issues - some which may prove to be controversial. If so, I hope they will stir us up to some useful thinking, praying, reflection and debate which will lead to a positive outcome.

### Negative Trends in the Pentecostal Movement Today

#### ● *An unbiblical emphasis on experience*

This has been reflected in phenomena associated with the 'Toronto Blessing' and 'the River.' One popular visiting preacher told the crowds he addressed in Sydney to 'leave their brains at the door' and just enjoy what was happening. Another warned people not to question, because 'a critical spirit will damn you to hell.' In a recent conference, a prophecy was given telling pastors to burn all their old sermon notes and get 'fresh fire.'

There's a strong focus on encouraging people to achieve personal victory through responding to altar calls, having hands laid on them or being 'slain in the Spirit.'

There is nothing in the New Testament to encourage Christian living by laying on of hands. Christian victory is attained by walking in the Spirit, praying in the Spirit, putting off the old, putting on the new, putting to death the flesh etc. (see Ephesians, Colossians).

Are we training people in an ultimately destructive way

### Editor's note:

*This article is adapted from a lecture given at the Annual Conference of the Association of Pentecostal and Charismatic Bible Colleges of Australasia in May 1999.*

*Worldview has chosen to publish this because we believe it contains some insights of prophetic significance for the Church today - both in Australia and the rest of the world. We strongly encourage church leaders and thinking Christians everywhere to consider Dr Chant's observations.*

# Analysis

## Church Trends

of life and to live by experience instead of faith? The Pentecostal movement has been strong on fads:

The rapture, fasting, deliverance, dancing, falling, groaning, seed faith, prosperity gospel, positive confession, power of praise, scripture songs, praise and worship, spiritual warfare, laughing, crying, etc. Most of these can be valid but the Pentecostal movement has given them first place (one at a time). But nothing should have first place except the gospel!

Rod Lensch writes, 'Without a doubt, heresy creeps into a revival movement when subjective experience is elevated above objective truth.'

### ● **An unhealthy abandonment of sound doctrine**

Sound doctrine has often been abandoned in the face of expediency, especially in the realm of evangelism. If something will bring a crowd, or result in conversions, the Pentecostal movement has often ignored doctrinal and theological problems.

The popular play *Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames* is an example. God is portrayed as harsh and inflexible and the devil as relishing the flames (which were made for his torment!). This is a difficult issue - it seems churlish to find fault with a medium which achieves the salvation of souls. But sound doctrine and effective evangelism should go together. It's not good enough to say, 'Oh, he's an evangelist,' as if that allows for any kind of heresy. It is sad that evangelism (a noble profession) has become associated with extravagance, exaggeration and falsehood.

Jesus said, 'I am the truth.' The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and we ought to be people of truth. Expediency should never dictate our message.

### ● **An unhealthy celebrity mentality**

Most Australians are enamoured by overseas 'big name' speakers. When the *United Charismatic Convention* tried to focus on Australian speakers, attendances plummeted dramatically. From the earliest days of the movement overseas people have always drawn crowds. The post-war Americanisation of Australia is now almost complete — people sing with American accents, kids wear baseball caps (backwards), American TV stars are better known

than Australian politicians! But the Pentecostal movement has been affected more than the general populace: US televangelists draw large sums of money from Australian believers and even though they often represent an unhealthy, celebrity-centred approach to ministry, the biggest crowds attend their rallies. One book publisher claims that 50% of general books sold in Australia are written by Australians. But in the Christian market, only 2% are by Australians.

### ● **An unhealthy consumer mentality**

Sadly, the Pentecostal movement has picked up the secularist, materialist values of society. The consumer mentality is evident in music, entertainment, 'manifestations,' charismatic leadership, comfort and so on. At Tabor College we have found it very difficult to attract students for Intercultural Studies. There seems to be little interest in long-term mission work. Does this reflect a growing appetite for comfort?

Have we become post-modernist in our approach to the faith? ie: What works for us is what is right. Sound doctrine is, for some people, no longer an important issue.

A couple of years ago at Wollongong a large number of people were urged to be re-baptised if they felt they had backslidden or felt far from God. What happens when they feel that way again? Should they be baptised again? But more importantly, what biblical justification is there for such re-baptisms? This is an example of an unhealthy emphasis on 'blessing' above truth. When the end seemingly justifies the means, ethics and behaviour have at times been questionable.

Like the early Wesleyans, Pentecostals saw revival as comprising two elements — conversions and sanctification. They sought to be baptised in the Spirit because they had a yearning and a longing for holiness. They wanted to be a blessing more than they wanted to get a blessing. Today the phrase 'catch the fire' has been a popular one. But John the Baptist spoke of fire as a cleansing, purifying agent (Matthew 3:11,12). In the New Testament, over half of the references to fire are to fires of judgement! Perhaps we have missed that emphasis in recent years.

### ● **An unhealthy leadership style**

Some Pentecostal leaders are elevating themselves above criticism or question and people who raise issues may be told they are being rebellious.

Lensch warns us — Charismatics... tend to gravitate to places where the pastor is a dynamic person and a dynamic preacher... The trouble here is that dynamic people can 'wow' the troops and be put on a pedestal like little popes... I am not saying that all dynamic pastors are prone to error but they must not become a substitute for the Lord and his word.

### ● **There is also an ungodly and unbiblical focus on raising money**

In one church, a visiting US preacher was given over \$100,000 for three meetings. What did Jesus get for the Sermon on the Mount? Other itinerant ministers are insisting on raising their own offerings, and doing very well at it. At a recent conference, delegates were told, in effect, 'Godliness = gain.' I wonder what Paul would say to that? (1 Timothy 6:6-10). These are very worrying trends and signal trouble for the movement.

### ● **A decline in the rate of growth**

According to Australian Census figures, the movement's recent growth rate is 10,000 below the recorded 1976-81 figures. Whilst growth is still good, Pentecostals still represent only 0.98% of the population — less than either Muslims or Buddhists.

The large influx from the charismatic movement is now over. There is now a move back to mainline churches. Reasons: Disenchantment with leadership; shallow teaching. The anticipated growth of the movement has not occurred as was once expected. Should this slide continue, the next five year period could actually show a decline in membership.

## Some Positive Trends

### ● **A healthy appreciation of spiritual experience**

A focus on experience can be either a weakness or a strength. Experience is essential to Christian living. Jonathan Edwards wrote a classic work on this subject.

# Analysis

## Church Trends

“Nothing is more manifest in fact, than that the things of religion take hold of men’s souls... I am bold to assert that there never was any considerable change wrought in the mind or conversation of any person... that had not his affections moved.

“The Holy Scriptures do everywhere place religion very much in the affection... in the affection of love, in love to God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and love to the people of God, and to mankind... holy desire... holy joy... sorrow, mourning, and brokenness of heart... gratitude... compassion and mercy... zeal... It is an evidence that true religion, or holiness of heart, lies very much in the affection of the heart, that the Scriptures place the sin of the heart very much in hardness of heart.”

Donald Gee, the great British apostle, wrote:

“No man possessed of a Scriptural experience needs be afraid of an argument; he is beyond its reach. Any man rejoicing in a living experience of God in his life has a power independent of, and mightily beyond, all external training in logic or theology...”

“The men and women who founded Christianity were those who had been set on fire and kept on fire by burning personal experience. And all down the ages ever since, revival has centred — not around the dust of doctrinal battlefields and the places of exact presentation of some orthodox creed. But rather, where valiant, humble hearts have dared to venture their lives and their all on

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fresh discoveries of the glorious fact and boundless possibilities of the living Christ — the acid test and the most convincing of all proofs — actual experience”.

So although an unhealthy focus on experience is a danger, an experiential faith is essential for healthy Christianity. This is a great strength of the Pentecostal movement.

### ● ***A healthy degree of freedom, initiative and creativity***

There is a remarkable and exciting expression of growth and imaginative enterprise. The whole Church has been affected by what pentecostals have done. There are many examples — new and varied denominations, small independent churches, Christian music and arts conventions, Christian schools and colleges, magazines and journals, etc. There is freedom to follow the leading of the Spirit. The wind of the Spirit blows where it wills and ‘so is everyone who is born of the Spirit’ (John 3:8, NASB).

### ● ***Local leadership***

In spite of the trend towards Americanisation, there is also a growing and emerging number of Australian leaders. Australian Pentecostalism was not started by overseas missionaries — it was indigenous from the beginning. This emphasis is missiologically sound and needs to be sustained and encouraged by good leadership training. We need to be encouraged and reminded that we can do it!

### ● ***An increase in ministry training***

This has been a major deficiency in times gone by. Early Pentecostals were often sceptical of theological training. There is a growing sophistication in our churches and many pastors now face Bible College graduates in the congregations on Sunday mornings. Social issues seem more complex and so glib and trite quoting of proof texts is insufficient to satisfy their needs. The movement needs lucid, scholarly leaders. Without theologically equipped leaders, the Church is destined to remain in shallow waters. It is important to love God, not only with heart, soul and strength, but, as Jesus made plain, also with the mind (Mark 12:29).

### ● ***Growing Unity***

The first three Pentecostal churches in Australia were

not even on talking terms and there was much division and suspicion of each other. The formation of the *Australian Pentecostal Ministers’ Fellowship* in 1978 was a major step forward and now there is talk of a closer affiliation of the various Pentecostal denominations under the banner of *Australian Christian Churches*. If Pentecostalism is truly a work of the Spirit, then unity must be a growing attribute. It is up to us to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

## Conclusion

There are two further points that need to be made. Firstly, from its earliest days, the Pentecostal movement in Australia has been evangelistic. Men and women from the first congregation (Good News Hall) travelled from Perth to Cairns preaching Christ. They used every means they could think of to declare the gospel. But when ‘evangelists’ spend more time talking about other things (eg: raising money) rather than proclaiming Christ, we should be very concerned. The gospel is the power of God to salvation and we are in peril if we do not preach it (1 Cor 9:16).

Secondly, the distinctive of the Pentecostal movement has always been baptism in the Holy Spirit. I am convinced that this is the ultimate key to future success. It’s not just any kind of experience - it’s an experience validated by Scripture. The recent focus on revival phenomena of various kinds may have actually worked against biblical revival. I have concerns that there has been a weakening of the biblical position in this area and that we need to reaffirm it. ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ (Acts 19:2) is still a pertinent question.

The Pentecostal movement was born in an experience of the Spirit. If we keep this emphasis, the future of the Church, for all its difficulties, is secured. We *must* build on the positive trends and address the negatives. If we do, we can still be God’s agents for revival in this nation and beyond.