

Controversy Clouds Pearson's Ministry

People are leaving the Oklahoma pastor's church because of questions about his doctrines

Despite a mass exodus of his congregation and a large drop in numbers at his annual Azusa summer conference, Bishop Carlton Pearson of Tulsa, Okla., said recently he will stand by his commitment to preach a "more appealing and attractive message of God's unconditional love for all."

Pearson talked with Charisma in July for several hours in Tulsa, where he pastors Higher Dimensions Family Church. He offered a revealing look at his ministry's current standing in the wake of his recent shift to what has been called the "gospel of inclusion"—a doctrine that teaches no declaration of belief in Christ as Savior is necessary for going to heaven.

Pearson's preaching caused a split in his congregation three years ago. Four pastors left and founded other churches. The bishop came under widespread public scrutiny earlier this year after he lost a bid for mayor of Tulsa and after a May article in Charisma called attention to his controversial doctrinal stance.

His annual conference has always averaged 7,500 to 10,000 people a night, he said, but not this summer.

"This year, we never had a crowd above 4,500. In my church, people left by the hundreds. We probably lost thousands. But some are already coming back," he said.

Although he does not like the term “inclusion,” Pearson said he does believe that Jesus’ death and resurrection paid the price for all the world to spend eternal life in heaven, without the requirement that people repent, confess and receive their salvation.

Citing verses in Hebrews, Romans, Isaiah, Timothy and Revelation, among others, Pearson said Scripture clearly shows that the “vast multitudes” will be in heaven. He interprets that to mean most of the world, not just the 20 percent or so of the world’s population who are Roman Catholic or Protestant or who claim to be born again.

“I have been preaching this for several years,” he told Charisma. “It’s not ‘new.’ But evidently someone heard it who was not a regular part of this congregation and didn’t understand.”

He pointed out that once when he appeared on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, a guest made the statement: “The whole world is saved; they just don’t know it.”

He said his response to that was: “And I said: ‘Say it again. Are you listening, Higher D?’ It’s just like when [Word of Faith preacher Kenneth Hagin Sr.] says, ‘You’re healed—you just don’t know it.’”

Pearson said he is not the only one introducing what he labels a “paradigm shift.” Other pastors, who call themselves “Universal Reconciliationists,” also preach it, he said. The controversy has caused Pearson to come under censure from his longtime mentor, Oral Roberts. Pearson says he resigned from

the ORU board last year and that contact between him and the Robertses has ceased.

Though the dispute is creating upheaval in his ministry, he believes the real issue is “in determining the exact moment that a person is reconciled to God that is causing the chaos.”

Pearson preaches that God loves all, that Jesus died for all and that any decision to live for Jesus is between the person and the Lord and is not within any preacher’s realm or responsibility to convert. Only Jesus saves.

Where Pearson veers from orthodox doctrinal norms is in stating that human beings are neither required nor given a choice to determine their eternal destiny. The presumption is they will go to heaven. Only those who have “tasted of the fruits” of real intimacy with Christ and have “intentionally and consciously rejected” the grace of God will spend eternity separated from Him, Pearson maintains.

“We try to transform lives, and He never tells us to do that,” Pearson said. “Jesus said, ‘Pray for the harvest.’ We are trying to convert, and we just need to convince. Scripture doesn’t say to make decisions. It says to make disciples. We keep telling people what they need to do—not what He already did ”

Pearson said the belief that souls are already “regenerated” does not negate the fact that those with the knowledge of Christ are called to make disciples. He believes that by showing people of all faiths the loving acceptance that comes with knowing Jesus, many who hear will transform their lives on earth.

"Presenting the gospel doesn't affect their going to heaven; it affects only their life on earth," Pearson said. "Jesus said, 'Thy will be done on earth.'"

The pastor said he is befriending Hindus, Muslims and those of other faiths who see a difference in him because of his loving acceptance. A Hindu now underwrites Pearson's radio program.

"My Hindu friend wasn't sure he wanted to become a Christian because he and his family had been Hindu for generations and he didn't want to believe that his father—a good, devout Hindu—was in hell," Pearson said. "I said: 'I think your father is in heaven; don't you think so? Your dad is as reconciled to God as I am, according to the Scriptures.'"

Other pastors say that kind of teaching is heresy and may prevent many people from taking the steps necessary to ensure their salvation. Oral and Richard Roberts, who declined to comment to Charisma about the controversy, did not allow Pearson to hold his annual Azusa conference at ORU's Mabee Center in August.

Leaders of the August Prophetic Awakening 2002 in Fresno, Calif., requested that Pearson use his allotted speaking time to address his theology at their conference. At press time for this story, Integrity Music was weighing a decision on whether to release Pearson's new album, Azusa: We Cry Out.

"You must believe in Jesus Christ and confess your sins to Him to be saved," said Keith Walker, senior pastor of the World Harvest Church in Fresno. "Anything else is just not scriptural."

"We are praying with Pastor; we believe in him; we love him," said Bishop John Vincent of Fellowship Church Ministry in Tulsa, who has known Pearson since the 1970s. "He's a man of God, and we should not turn our back on him at this hour."

Pearson has said he is open to "loving correction" if he can be shown that he is off-base. However, he admits he has been hurt by rejection from Roberts and other high-profile leaders.

"I've lost some of the dearest, most respected friendships I've ever had," Pearson said. "But even though they misunderstand me, I still highly value them." Pearson said he plans to hold a Contending for the Faith conference at Higher Dimensions Oct. 2-4 to answer questions and clear up any misunderstandings about the teaching of universal reconciliation.

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