

Will the Assemblies of God Keep Growing in the Next Century?

The typo on the envelope jumped out at me: The letter was addressed to the “Assemblies of Good.”

“I like that,” I said to myself. “Yes, our goal is to be both the Assemblies of God and the Assemblies of Good.”

That set me to thinking. What are the indispensable traits of our fellowship that have marked us since 1914, when approximately 300 pastors and missionaries gathered to form this movement that has been so wonderfully used by the Lord?

I suppose the list of such characteristics could be lengthy, but the Spirit recently impressed three distinct ones on my own heart, all stemming from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. While these three words—*humility*, *hunger* and *heart*—are not the sum-all descriptors of the Assemblies of God, I do know that if you remove them from our spiritual DNA we would not be witnessing the national and worldwide growth we currently enjoy. In fact, I believe that whenever these three traits are present in any believer or church, there is health and vitality.

1) Humility

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). I am told that, in the Greek text, Matthew could have chosen a different word for “poor.” One kind of poverty is that of a person just getting by. The other kind describes a destitute person who will die unless someone gives them food, shelter and clothing. It is this second meaning that is

used here for “poor”—“Blessed are the destitute-poor.”

I became a pastor in Southern California at age 29. I grew up as a missionary kid, pastor’s kid and evangelist’s kid (same parents, just different roles at different times!). I received the finest theological training in the world, completing my doctorate at Fuller Theological Seminary months before taking the pastorate.

The church had been through a division and was down to about 60 adults. I thought I was the answer to what that church needed. After all, didn’t I have a great heritage and education? My mother had gone as a single missionary to China and Tibet in 1924 when she was only 26 years old. My father went 8 years later. They courted on the boat and married when they reached Shanghai, setting off for the remote interior the day after their wedding.

Heritage? Check. Training? Definitely. Surely I could come in and save this struggling church.

But in the first six months we lost a third of the congregation. We couldn’t meet our bills. I began meeting with the deacons on Saturday mornings to eat breakfast, pray and decide what bills to pay that week. We needed \$400 a week to break even but were only receiving about \$200. And unfortunately, we’d already burned through all the meager cash reserves of the church.

“Pastor,” one of the deacons said, “we haven’t made a single missionary commitment that we pledged in the six months you have been pastor.”

It was true. Our commitments totaled \$257 a month, but all the missionaries were in the \$5 to \$10 pledge range. *We need it more than they*, I had thought.

This deacon had other plans. “I think we ought to take

whatever comes in the offering tomorrow and pay at least two months' worth of missionary commitments before we pay a single bill."

The others thought that was a great idea, prayed over it and then said, "You understand we won't pay your salary either." I hadn't understood that (and we were selling furniture out of the house to put food on the table), but I went along.

The next day, after the morning and evening offerings were counted they totaled \$1,354! It was such a miracle! The next morning while praying in my office, I asked the Lord, "What is the lesson You want me to learn?" I felt the Holy Spirit say to me, "George Wood, I am not interested in building this church on your personality. I'm interested in building it on Mine, and if you put Me front and center I'll take care of you."

And He did. For the next 17 years the church grew until our missionary commitments were \$45,000 a month.

There is much fruitfulness today in the Assemblies of God, both in the U.S. and worldwide. In the past six years alone we've seen over 2,000 new churches planted in America. But there is no room for pride. It's the Lord's work, and it is marvelous in our eyes (Ps. 118:23). The Lord has been so good to us.

This Pentecostal movement began in humble places of worship, among humble people. Scripture teaches us that "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5). In the same verse we are told to "be clothed with humility." We must be careful as Pentecostals that we never boast about ourselves, our members and our empowerment. If anyone would boast, let it be of Christ (2 Cor. 10:17).

When John Ashcroft, my lifelong friend, was confirmed by the United States Senate as Attorney General, I said to him, "If your Dad were alive, he would be so proud of you."

John instantly corrected me, "Oh, George, Dad would never use that word *proud*; he would say *grateful*."

The poor in spirit get the kingdom. It's nothing in our hands that we bring. As Mother Teresa once said: "God wants to show His greatness by using nothingness. ... It is His work. I am like a little pencil in His hand. That is all. He does the thinking. He does the writing. The pencil has nothing to do with it. The pencil has only to be allowed to be used. In human terms, the success of our work should not have happened."

Humility makes us totally dependent on the Lord. We remember His words that without Him we can do nothing.

2) Hunger

Matthew 5:6 says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." I recently went to Shiloh in Israel. For nearly four centuries, the House of the Lord was there before David moved the capital to Jerusalem and his son, Solomon, built the Temple. Today archaeologists are working on confirming the site where the Tabernacle once stood. Our group prayed at what is believed to be the Tabernacle entrance, in the area where barren Hannah poured out her soul to the Lord. We poured out our souls to the Lord there also, asking that He would answer the barrenness in our own hearts and make this centennial year for the Assemblies of God an unparalleled season of fruitfulness.

Amid prosperity and growth we must avoid the danger of the Laodicean church, which said, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing" (Rev. 3:17, NIV). Their attitude was the exact opposite of hunger. When believers and church bodies are no longer hungry for the Lord or even hungry to be used by Him, decay sets in.

I had the privilege of ministering at New Life Assembly of God

in Chennai, India. Pastor David Mohan began that church in 1973 with only seven people. Now they average about 50,000 each Sunday. If you go there, you discover that on the bottom floor of their church facility there are prayer rooms. Twenty-four hours a day, every day, people are praying. It's no wonder the church has grown and the Lord continues to confirm His word with signs that follow!

As a Pentecostal/charismatic movement, we treasure the baptism in the Holy Spirit and our freedom of praying in the Spirit with languages we didn't learn. But Spirit baptism is an initial event meant to propel us into empowerment to bear witness. There must not only be initial evidence of being baptized in the Spirit; there must be continuing evidence of a Spirit-empowered life.

A Pentecostal church that is not reaching people for Jesus is a contradiction in terms. We were never formed to be a small group that gathers and says, "Here we are, Lord—bless us." No! Like Abraham, we are called to bless the world. There is a great, unfinished Commission to take the gospel to all the unreached peoples of the earth. If we are not hungry for more of Him, we will not be effective in that task.

We must also avoid being hungry for the wrong things. Some just want to be thrilled at unusual phenomena or extrabiblical revelation. Because of this, the Pentecostal movement has often collected a strange assortment of teachings. In fact, even back in 1914, a Pentecostal publication then compared the movement to a gas street lamp on a summer night that attracts "all manner of bugs."

In the Assemblies of God we have sought to be guided by the analogy that the Spirit is a river and the banks of the river are the Scriptures. If the river is dry, then the church is not effective; but if the river overflows the banks, terrible damage is done. In the past 100 years, we've seen in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements both drought and

destructive floods. The river does its fertilizing, life-giving work when it is strongly flowing within the boundaries of Scripture. We seek not what is new, but what is true! We seek not the sensational, but the Savior! And He desires to keep filling us with the Spirit so we are effective for Him!

Hunger is at the very core of our Pentecostal experience. During the Azusa Revival, there were many churches, good preachers, stirring liturgical services and solid fundamentalistic doctrine. But these Azusa pioneers were driven by a hunger not to know about God, but to know God; not to hear about God, but to hear God. They wanted to know the Lord in His fullness—thus, the term *full gospel*. They took to heart what Jesus declared about the Spirit: that any who believed in Jesus could have streams of living water flow from within him (John 7:37-39).

They came to the Mission on Azusa Street expecting an encounter with God Himself. That expectancy and the reality of God's presence made them oblivious to things that seem to matter so much today: well-appointed sanctuaries, neatly packaged services, "star-quality" speakers, homogeneity and upward mobility in the members of the congregation, social recognition and acceptance.

May it be said of us in our day, "They hunger for the Lord and hunger to reach this world for Christ."

3) Heart

Jesus also taught, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matt. 5:7). Throughout our 100 years, the Assemblies of God has sought to have a heart for people—for the lost, the least and the last.

One of my missionary friends was sitting on the platform for a large crusade he was holding in a foreign country. He was rather proud of himself for the size of the audience. While

waiting to preach, he reached into his pocket and began to read a letter his godly father had sent him. It said, "Son, if you ever lose heart for people, pack up your bags and come home." My friend instantly repented of his self-congratulation.

The shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35, "Jesus wept." One day it struck me with such force. The statement comes near the close of Jesus' ministry, at the tomb of Lazarus. After three years of full-time ministry, the "Jesus wept" statement indicates He never became calloused toward people. Ministry was not something He did mechanically. He felt for people.

Have you ever noticed what Jesus did on the cross? A thief hangs next to Him and says: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Does Jesus ignore him? Does Jesus say to Himself, my breath is short and I need to save my breath for more important things? Does Jesus turn to the man and say, "Can't you see I'm dying for the sins of the whole world? I don't have time for you." No! Jesus lets His own suffering be interrupted by the need of another!

Are we willing to do the same?

Mark Buntain, an Assemblies of God missionary, founded a great work in Calcutta. Early on he knew that physical needs of people must be tended to as well as their spiritual needs. So he began a clinic. There, children were successfully operated on to restore their ability to walk.

But Mark had bigger dreams. He wanted to build a hospital. Land was scarce, however, in that densely packed city. There was a plot of land on Burial Ground Road (Park Avenue) that was the site of a "dead" English cemetery. He sought permission to build on that land, but after two years of red tape, no approval was forthcoming.

While driving in his car during a rainstorm he saw a well-dressed man trying to hail a taxi. Mark pulled over and picked

him up. A few minutes later, Mark saw a little boy crawling like an insect along a muddy path by the side of the road. Mark stopped the car, got out, picked up the boy, disappeared into the slum and returned with the muddy boy, placing him in the back seat. Mark explained to the man that he had a clinic and this boy could be made to walk. He apologized for disappearing for a few minutes but had needed to find the boy's mother to get permission to take him. Mark further explained that someday he hoped to have land on Burial Ground Road for a hospital where he could help more children like the one in the back seat.

Two weeks later, Mark unexpectedly received word that he had been granted a 99-year lease on the land he sought. The man he picked up was the one official who could cut through all the red tape.

One act of compassion opened the door for thousands to be ministered to. It's the same in your life or mine. And it's what has marked the Assemblies of God for this past century: a heart for God, a heart for people! Mark's story is one among multiplied thousands. What door will open because you have heart?

So here we are—100 years young! A growing, thriving body of believers still striving to fulfill the vision of our founders “to do the greatest work of evangelism the world has ever seen” with humility, hunger and heart.

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