

Tracing the Roots of Pentecostalism

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like a mighty rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. There appeared to them tongues as of fire, being distributed and resting on each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to speak” (Acts 2:1-4).

About one decade later, according to Acts 11:15, the apostle Peter spoke of the above incident as the “BEGINNING.” Something had happened for the first time, something new, something phenomenal. It was not the end. It was not a goal that was reached. It was a beginning of a life, of a ministry, of the acts of the Holy Spirit, not in the church but through the church. It was a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. But they had only spoken in tongues. Is that all there is to the day of Pentecost? Thank God there is much more.

The book of Acts relates the history of what followed after this “BEGINNING.” Peter tells his brethren in Jerusalem that what Jesus did in the beginning He was still doing. He was still baptizing in the Holy Spirit, just like He did on the day of Pentecost (Acts 11:16). “They heard them (the Gentiles) speaking in other tongues and magnifying God” (Acts 10:46). Was that all?

That was all on the day of Pentecost. That was the beginning for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. So this is the beginning for Gentile believers in Caesarea. It is often called the Gentile Pentecost, but it was not on the day of Pentecost. It was only the ministry of the same Baptizer into the same Spirit with the same consequences. He had crossed the national or racial barrier, and for the first time non-

circumcised Gentiles were accepted into the fellowship of the church, because "God gave them the same gift as He gave us [the Jewish people]" (Acts 11:17).

From the time that I came to know the Pentecostal or apostolic movement in South Africa as a boy, I have witnessed miracles of all kinds and have had the privilege to share in some miracles. But the overall miracle is the fact that from very small beginnings I have seen a movement grow against the worst opposition and the cruelest accusations from the historic churches, to where it has become one of the most powerful Christian movements in the land.

My first journey beyond the shores of Africa was in 1937. I saw the Pentecostal movements in the United States and Canada and Europe suffering misrepresentation as we did in South Africa. As editor of all publications in my own Pentecostal church I was able to make contact with movements all over the world. When the historic churches rejected those who dared to believe in a 20th-century Pentecostal experience the movement launched out in a missionary program and began to enter fields where there were no Christian churches at all. By far the largest number of members in these movements came from no-church or un-churched people. If the early apostolic church suffered from persecution from the Jews, the 20th-century movements suffered the persecution of the historic Christian church.

The historic institutions always rejected renewal, so that the renewal movements became new churches, with an emphasis on some or other truth or truths that had become neglected or overgrown by traditions of men. When I observe how such truths that had been completely rejected for about 50 years are now being reconsidered and accepted by a new generation, I come to the conclusion that many renewal movements through the ages have been similarly rejected and opposed. Therefore, I find it very difficult to accept the writings of most historians through the centuries.

The only way that a church can assure itself of its own apostolicity is to test its correspondence with the Christianity of the first century. Do the doctrines of the church stand out obviously in the New Testament, or must they hang on slender little phrases removed from their context in Scripture? Do the religious experiences of the church correspond to those of the early Christians, or is there only mental assent to the spiritual happenings of the first century? Can the basic positions of the Church be preached by laymen, or does an understandable explanation require highly trained clergy? Has the claimed return to apostolic theology reproduced the dedicated, evangelistic spirit of the early church? Has it produced a missions outreach with any possibility of carrying out the great commission of Christ?

“The Pentecostal Christians of this century believe that they have returned basically to the New Testament patterns of doctrine, religious experiences of the apostles are constant standards that should not change, and that, although the Church’s methods, organization and general approach to the world may vary somewhat according to local cultures, the principles of apostolic practice should characterize the church of every age” (Womack).

The first generation in the early church did not have a creed to preach. They were witnesses to a living encounter with the living Christ. They knew that God had revealed Himself to the world through His Son Jesus Christ. They knew that Jesus was crucified, buried, and the third day rose from the dead to atone for the sins of men. They knew that He had ascended on high and had fulfilled His promise to baptize in the Holy Spirit to make them powerful witnesses of His power through the Holy Spirit.

First-century Christianity was more a state of being than a doctrinal system. Doctrine grew out of experience of the church. The Baptism in the Holy Spirit was experienced before it became a teaching of the church. The early church did not

present to the world a set of dogmas about Christ, but a firsthand witness of a personal acquaintance with Christ. "Throughout the history of the church, whenever Christian identification resulted from instruction without personal experience, the church has departed from apostolic patterns" (Womack).

By confessing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repenting of sins a first-century person was born into the family of God. He then declared publicly to the world that he was now a Christian by being baptized in water. Thus separated from the world, he was baptized in the Holy Spirit to be empowered to be a witness of Jesus Christ. Holiness became his way of life, prayer his constant communication with heaven, worship his public expression to God, evangelism his burning passion and heaven his goal. Christianity was his state of being and his way of life, and he committed himself to its propagation.

There is abundant evidence in the New Testament writings that the apostles agreed that there would be no other gospel than the one they proclaimed. They were prompted by the Holy Spirit to write the fundamentals of the gospel as well as to preach them publicly.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Although if we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel to you than the one we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). Paul obviously considered the apostolic doctrines as the final revelation of Christian truth. In fact he warned the Ephesians not to be "tossed here and there by waves and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the trickery of men" (Eph. 4:14).

The apostles foresaw that there would come deceivers and heretics, but they condemned any change in the original gospel as "wells without water" (2 Pet. 2:17). They expected the Lord to return in their own day, and did not anticipate the long centuries of slow change that would drain the church of its

vitality and replace apostolic doctrine with human tradition.

It is clear then that the apostles very definitely believed that the early church characteristics would form the patterns for the church in all subsequent ages. Both Jesus and His apostles were in agreement on this subject and the entire New Testament reflects this viewpoint throughout its pages. This is also reflected in the writings of the second-century fathers who clearly believed that the only true expression of Christianity is that received from Jesus Christ and taught to the world by his apostles.

Church history reveals the sad fact that throughout most ages the church has not followed the apostolic patterns.

If the patterns of the early church are the only true expression of real Christianity, then the church should make every effort to return to these patterns.

Novel as the idea may be for some of today's Christians, it was exactly this truth that brought about the Pentecostal Movement early in the 20th century. When earnest church members began to realize that their churches were not like the one portrayed in the New Testament, they began to seek and pray to receive the same baptism in the Spirit that empowered the early church.

The Pentecostal movement seeks to be a true expression of that early church life, coming forth once again after all these many centuries of coldness and barrenness. It may not be perfect (any more than the early church was perfect) but it drinks from the wellsprings of spirituality that began in Jesus Christ and sprang forth in a mighty torrent of life on the day of Pentecost. At the beginning of His ministry Jesus cried, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37-38). Then from His throne He promises an eschatological renewal and says

to John, "Look! I am making all things new. ... It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the spring of the water of life to him who thirsts. ... and I will be his God, and he shall be My son" (Rev. 21:5-7).

Is it important that any man should accept this drink of living water? Indeed it is. For Jesus told the theologian of Israel that unless a man is born again he cannot SEE the kingdom of God (John 3:3). The apostle Paul who was a theologian before he became a Christian must have written his own experience when he told the Corinthians, "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

One can find very little in ancient writings that was written by those who had the experience. We have to rely on secondary information from those who wrote about the experience of others, yet not knowing what it was all about.

This total dependence on secondary sources has deprived us of any opportunity to make a reliable estimate of the authenticity of the evidence and of the credibility of what that evidence states. In short, "The study of medieval charismatic phenomena through secondary sources is as futile and unrewarding as an attempt by a young man to make love to his sweetheart through the efforts of an interpreter" (Stan Burgess).

"Our knowledge of medieval charismatics will continue to be very limited by the inadequacy of the primary records. While our information on the Roman tradition can be enlarged by a careful examination of unpublished manuscripts, even this effort could not be expected to yield much data about the laymen or the lesser clergy. An investigation of certain heretical groups and of the Anabaptist sects might be more profitable" (Stan Burgess).

My first encounter with Protestant leaders and councils came in the early '50s. In 1952 I met Bishop Leslie Newbigin at Willingen, Germany, at the International Missionary Council.

I found him to be most charitable and understanding. I assured him that Pentecostalism was not Protestantism nor a split in Protestant churches. It was an entirely new movement based on "experience of the second birth and the baptism in the Holy Spirit." It has no quarrel with Protestant or Roman Catholic systematic theology. The only challenge they present is to "practice what you preach."

Soon after this appeared Bishop Newbigin's classic work on the true ecumenical spirit, *The Household of God*. He then wrote: "May it not be that the great churches of Catholic and Protestant traditions will have to be humble enough to receive it in fellowship with their brethren in the various groups of the Pentecostal type, with whom at present they have scarcely any fellowship at all."