

Pentecostalism

By Mark Conner (October 2009) ¹

CityLife Church, formerly known as Waverley Christian Fellowship, began in 1967 under the leadership of Richard Holland. CityLife has Pentecostal roots and continues to value and practice many of the distinctive aspects of Pentecostalism.

The Pentecostals are a relatively new section of the Christian Church. For many years they have been considered to be outside mainstream Christianity; but, more recently, due to their phenomenal growth, they have begun to be noticed and heard. Here in Australia, they are the fastest growing of all the churches and their wider influence in society is increasing.

In the past century, Pentecostal Christianity evolved from a small group of believers to a worldwide movement with an estimated 588 million adherents.² This incredible growth is unprecedented in the historical development of Christianity. Although the participants in this movement at the time of its inception at the turn of the twentieth century were on the margins of society,³ the expansion of charismatic experiences has now pervaded all parts of world Christianity. In the last 5 percent of Christian history, Pentecostals have become a major global force in Christendom, second only to the billion Roman Catholics in the world.⁴ Pentecostalism has also influenced various sectors of mainstream Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox faith and has prompted the birth of a neo-Pentecostal movement, a Charismatic Renewal movement⁵, and a Third Wave movement, forming somewhat of a global culture and in the words of researcher, Harvey Cox, “a religion made to travel.”⁶

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² Todd M. Johnson, Peter F. Crossing, and Bobby Jangsun Ryu, *Looking Forward: An Overview of World Evangelization, 2005-2025* (a special report for the Lausanne 2004 Forum on World Evangelization, Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2004), 9.

³ Modern day Pentecostalism traces its roots to events that took place in 1906 in Los Angeles, USA. A self-educated Afro-American preacher, William Joseph Seymour, gathered a small group of poor Afro-Americans and experienced what they considered to be a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the following year, thousands of people flocked to this new group and went away, taking with them this new experience of God's activity. Within a few years, similar movements occurred in other places and within a decade, Pentecostalism arose in many places around the globe. An eyewitness account by one of the leaders, Frank Bartleman, is documented in *Azusa Street* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1980).

⁴ Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Peterson, *The Globalisation of Pentecostalism* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 1999), vii.

⁵ The terms “Pentecostal” and “Charismatic” are often used interchangeably. Although they do have features in common, there are some differences, though even these are at times ambiguous. One difference is theological. Pentecostals believe in a work of grace at or subsequent to salvation in which Spirit baptism is evidenced by speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*). Charismatics, however, do not always advocate the necessity of a second work of grace or the evidence of speaking in tongues as an affirmation of Spirit baptism. The second difference is ecclesiastical. “Pentecostal” describes someone participating in classical Pentecostal denominations while “Charismatic” would describe people outside these classical denominations, whether they are within mainline denominations or are part of an independent group.

⁶ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 102.

Pentecostalism in Australia began in the early 1900s.⁷ Though influenced by people from overseas, it was not founded by them and has not depended on them.⁸ Over the last century, the Pentecostal churches in Australia have emerged as one of the fastest growing religious communities in Australia. In his landmark study on the Pentecostals in Australia back in 1996, Philip J. Hughes declared that nationwide the Pentecostals outnumbered almost every other religious group in actual church attendance.

There are a large number of different Pentecostal groups in Australia. The largest Pentecostal denomination is the Assemblies of God.⁹ Other significant Pentecostal denominations include the Apostolic Churches,¹⁰ the Christian City Churches,¹¹ the Christian Outreach Centers,¹² the Christian Revival Crusade,¹³ and a number of large independent Pentecostal “mega-churches”¹⁴ such as Riverview Church in Perth and CityLife in Melbourne. Numerous other smaller Pentecostal denominations and independent churches also exist.¹⁵

Though holding a similar theology and philosophy of ministry when it comes to the ministry of the Holy Spirit,¹⁶ the Pentecostal churches are very diverse and autonomous. They also have no singular voice to the community. In addition, they still are not considered mainstream Christianity by some people, despite their amazing growth and size.

⁷ For a detailed account of the first Australian Pentecostal church, the Good News Hall, and other Pentecostal developments in Australia at this time, refer to Barry Chant, *Heart of Fire* (Unley Park, South Australia: House of Tabor, 1984), 34-60.

⁸ The Pentecostals are the only major religious group that has developed within the last two centuries that has not been brought to these shores by immigrants. Pentecostalism grew here in Australia in its own unique way at a similar time to its development overseas. Pentecostalism is described as “a movement without a man,” that is, without an outstanding founder such as a Martin Luther, John Calvin or John Wesley. Vinson Synon, *The Twentieth-Century Pentecostal Explosion: The Exciting Growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal Movements* (Altomonte Springs, FL: Creation House, 1987), 189.

⁹ The Assemblies of God (AOG), now called the Australian Christian Churches, was established as a national body in 1937. This Pentecostal denomination has over 1200 churches, with the largest being the Hillsong Church, located in Sydney and led by Brian Houston. For a detailed history of the AOG in Australia refer to David Cartledge, *The Apostolic Revolution: The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets in the Assemblies of God in Australia* (Chester Hill, Australia: Paraclete Institute, 2000).

¹⁰ The Apostolic Church has its origins in the Welsh Revival of 1904 to 1905.

¹¹ The founder and president of Christian City Churches in Australia is Phil Pringle, who is also the senior pastor of the largest Christian City Church in Australia, located in the north shore of Sydney, a congregation of over five thousand people.

¹² The Christian Outreach Centres, originally founded by Clark Taylor in the 1970s, are now led by David MacDonald, former senior pastor of their largest church in Brisbane.

¹³ Leo Harris founded the Christian Revival Centres in 1945. Today their national president is Bill Vasilikas who is based in Adelaide, South Australia.

¹⁴ A “mega-church” is usually defined as a church with over two thousand people attending each weekend. Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, 2007), xviii.

¹⁵ For a detailed outline of all Pentecostal groups, refer to Philip J. Hughes, *The Pentecostals in Australia* (Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996).

¹⁶ For a good overview of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, see Barry Chant’s book *Empowered by the Spirit* (Sydney, Australia: Barry Chant, 2008).

Strengths

I see a number of strengths in the Pentecostal faith tradition. Here are a few of the main ones. Obviously, these strengths aren't limited to Pentecostals nor do all Pentecostal churches necessarily exhibit them.

1. **The Holy Spirit.** The Pentecostal expression of the Christian faith presents God as someone who is not only known by faith and through the Scriptures but who wants to interact with each believer on a daily basis. Pentecostals teach that God wants a personal and intimate relationship with each believer and that this occurs through prayer (including the use of spiritual language or 'speaking in tongues'), hearing God's voice, and ministry to and from other believers. Ministry in Pentecostal churches focuses not on just attending a church service or on hearing a sermon but on allowing the Holy Spirit to move in a person's life to bring about change and growth.¹⁷
2. **Passionate Worship.** Pentecostals enjoy expressing themselves at church gatherings through joyful praise and intimate worship. Voices are raised, hands are lifted up, and there is a sense of celebration and vibrancy to singing times.
3. **Evangelistic Fervour.** Pentecostals believe that the Spirit has filled and empowered them to be witnesses for Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8) and to fulfil the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). They are passionate about personal and corporate evangelism as well as church planting and foreign mission work. Compassion for the poor and the needy is also a growing characteristic of Pentecostal churches.
4. **Prophecy.** Pentecostals believe that God still speaks today – to individuals and churches. This is not at the authoritative level of Scripture but all prophecy is to be taken seriously, tested, then responded to appropriately (1 Thess.5:19-22).¹⁸
5. **Faith for the Miraculous.** Pentecostals believe that God still does miracles today, including healing the sick and setting people free from things that hold them back from their full potential in Christ. They pray for God to intervene into human situations bringing about positive change.
6. **Cultural Relevance.** Most Pentecostals understand that although the message of Christianity and the gospel never changes, the methods and means of communication must change with each new generation in order to remain culturally relevant. Examples of cultural relevance include choice of musical style, focus on youth and children, a more contemporary communication style, contemporary facilities, and the use of technology.
7. **Compassion for the Poor and Marginalised.** Modern-day Pentecostalism began among people from the lower socio-economic strata of society, including uneducated people and marginalised races. Although, this has changed somewhat in the West, with other church movements and denominations being stronger in this area, it is encouraging to see the more recent emphasis on God's heart for the poor and needy amongst Pentecostals.
8. **Visionary Leadership.** Many Pentecostal churches are led by leaders with strong sense of vision and an ability to communicate that vision to motivate people to action. They are willing to take risks to advance the cause of Christ in the world. Many Pentecostal churches are in a pioneering and

¹⁷ For a good overview of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, see Barry Chant's book *Empowered by the Spirit* (Sydney, Australia: Barry Chant, 2008).

¹⁸ For a good overview of the gift and ministry of prophecy, see Ernest Gentile's book *Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1999).

expansion mode (a focus on “let’s create the future”) rather than a maintenance mode (a focus on “let’s preserve the past”). In Pentecostal churches, authority tends to be vested in specific individuals, such as the senior pastor or leadership team, rather than in formal structures or bureaucratic policies. The pastor is seen as the leader of the church rather than merely an employee. In fact, congregational trust often is placed more in the senior leader than in a specific board of directors, elders or committee.¹⁹

Weaknesses

I also see a number of weaknesses in some of the Pentecostal movement. Obviously, these not all of these weaknesses are limited to Pentecostals nor do all Pentecostal churches necessarily exhibit them.

1. **Extreme Prosperity Teaching.** Many Pentecostal churches have embraced the prosperity gospel which promises riches for those who love and obey God. One of the main problems with this teaching is the ‘give to get’ mentality which is so opposite to the nature of God. He loves and he gives unconditionally - with no strings attached. If we choose to give to God or to the poor in order to gain our own personal prosperity, something is wrong with our motives.

I believe that we should live generous lives, giving to the work of God and to those in need - simply because we love God and we love people. We should not give in order to get back for ourselves. Yes, there is often a by-product of personal blessing that comes with generosity but that should not be our motive or our goal.

If you define ‘prosperity’ as ‘having your own needs (not ‘greeds’) met and enough extra to give away,’ then I believe that it is God’s will for everyone. We should all work towards that. However, there are much more important things than money and possessions. The kingdom of God has a different value system. It is made up of love, peace, and joy ... and these things are found in the Holy Spirit, not in material possessions. In fact, Paul tells us that the love of money is at the root of all evil (not money itself, but the love of it). The issue isn’t whether we have stuff but whether our stuff has a hold on us. Of course, poverty is not better or more spiritual than prosperity. There is nothing pretty or desirable about poverty. That’s why so many people are working around the globe today to make poverty history.²⁰

2. **Autocratic Leadership Style.** Some Pentecostal pastors, due to the honour and the freedom given to them, can develop an authoritarian and hierarchical leadership style. Although it is without doubt that strong leadership ability is a key factor in the growth and effectiveness of many Pentecostal congregations, sometimes this can also lead to a lack of appropriate accountability. Governance structures tend to be more relational than formal, and boards and teams of elders are usually led by senior ministers who see the board or eldership as their team and as working for them. Some even have staff and family members as board members, potentially blurring the accountability lines and not providing adequate separation between proposal creation and proposal review. In addition, if Pentecostal pastors see themselves as above criticism and see people who question various matters as rebellious, then dysfunction usually develops and there is an eventual drift out of the church of hurt and disillusioned people. When authority is abused, much damage can be done.

I believe that it is essential to embrace a servant and empowering leadership style. Appropriate accountability at all levels of leadership is also very important and should influence the way leadership and governance policies and practices are shaped. There needs to be a culture of openness to

¹⁹ To further explore the importance of strong leadership in the church, see Peter Wagner’s book *Church Quake* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1999).

²⁰ For further thoughts on a Christian’s response to world poverty, see Ronald J. Snider’s book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville: TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

feedback and constructive criticism in church communities. Also, team ministry should be taught and practiced.

3. **Shallow Bible Teaching.** In the early days of Pentecostalism, academic or theological training often was frowned upon. Seminaries were seen as “cemeteries” due to their lack of emphasis on the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. Even today, many Pentecostal pastors do not have more than a basic theological training. Unfortunately, this can lead to sermons that are high on inspiration but low on biblical content. Teaching can tend to be somewhat shallow and at times allegorical. Also, 'proof texting' is a common occurrence.²¹

I believe that there needs to be a good balance between the Spirit and the Word. We need both the passion and energy of the Spirit and the safety and security of the Scriptures. We also should be committed to ensuring that teaching team members are well-trained in interpreting the original meaning of the Scriptures and then applying them appropriately to our contemporary context.

4. **Elevation of Personal Experience.** Some Pentecostal churches and preachers rely heavily on personal revelation (“God told me ...”). Personally, I believe that no personal experience or revelation is to be taken as more important or authoritative than the inspired Scriptures. All of these subjective matters need to be tested by the Word of God and considered in the light of how God has moved in and among his people throughout church history.
5. **Elevation of Charisma over Character.** Some Pentecostal churches are overly enamoured with charismatic personalities and spectacular spiritual gifts. I believe that all gifts are given for the purpose of serving for the benefit of the wider church and that the foundation of all ministry is to be a person’s character. Jesus said that we should test ministry by the fruit of their life not by the gifts or talents they exhibit.
6. **An Unhealthy Elevation of Speaking in Tongues** (or spiritual language). Some Pentecostal churches elevate speaking in tongues to such a level that those who have not experienced this gift are made to feel like second-class Christians. Other groups go to an even further extreme by saying that a person is not saved unless they speak in tongues. I believe that all Christians receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at conversion. Subsequent to this, I think that we should encourage all believers to ask for the baptism or infilling of the Spirit accompanied by a spiritual language, as I see this as an important aspect of the Christian life.²² However, we should not seek to pressure people nor look down on those who have not had this experience. I also believe that in church gatherings where unbelievers are present, appropriate discretion needs to be used in the public exercise of speaking in tongues (see 1 Cor.14:22-25).
7. **An Instantaneous ‘Zap’ Mentality.** Many Pentecostal churches place a strong emphasis on church meetings and on receiving a special touch from the Holy Spirit. I too believe in the importance of church gatherings and the special things God can do when we gather together. However, I believe that God’s presence is with us all the time and that we shouldn’t buy into a separation of the sacred and secular. God is interested in all of our lives. I also believe in the change that can occur when a person encounters God in a powerful way (an ‘encounter’) but I acknowledge that even this is part of a continual process of change and growth that occurs throughout all of life.

²¹ “Proof texting” is a phrase referring to the practice of taking one Bible verse and applying it to a personal viewpoint or contemporary situation without reference to the original meaning or context of the Scripture.

²² Jack Hayford’s book *The Beauty of Spiritual Language* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996) has some excellent teaching about this gift and its purpose in the life of a follower of Christ.

8. **End Time Hysteria.** Some sections of the Pentecostal church go to extremes when it comes to end time teaching, emphasising the imminent return of Christ and getting ready for the rapture. I believe that all followers of Christ should live in such a way that they are always ready for his return but also with the wisdom and foresight that Jesus may not come back in our generation. We are to occupy, or be busy, until Jesus returns. This includes being about the work of the kingdom, which includes matters such as creation care and social justice.
9. **Faith Healing.** Some Pentecostal churches teach that all people should be healed and when healing does not take place it is an indication of sin or lack of faith in the life of the sick person. This heretical teaching can cause great damage in people's lives. I believe that God does heal today and we pray for people to be healed. However, we recognise that sometimes people aren't healed. This does not mean that a person lacks faith or has sin in their life. We live in a fallen world and we are caught between the 'now' and the 'not yet' of the kingdom of God. Sin, sickness, and death were conquered by Christ but not yet do we see them eradicated from the world. We all await his return when the kingdom will come in its fullness and there will be no more crying, pain or death. Until then, we live in faith but we also recognise the reality of suffering in this present world, knowing that God's grace and comfort are more than enough for us.²³
10. **Extreme Focus on the Demonic.** Some sectors of the Pentecostal church have a strong emphasis on the devil, demons, deliverance, and spiritual warfare. Without wanting to neglect an appropriate awareness of the spiritual battle that we are in, I think churches should seek to adopt a more balanced approach where the major focus is on glorifying God, living in the Spirit, doing good, and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

These observations about the strengths and weakness of Pentecostalism are generalizations. However, they do have a common occurrence within the broader Pentecostal movements of churches. I think that more and more Pentecostal church should more intentionally maximizing the strengths while seeking to avoid the weaknesses of this movement.

Conclusion

A few final thoughts for my Pentecostal friends ...

I recommend that we continue to be unapologetic about our Pentecostal roots and its distinctive values, while clearly communicating the strengths and weaknesses we see in this movement and our response to them. Referring to ourselves as "Pentecostal" can be helpful for those Christians who are seeking a tribe to identify us with. However, we should all take steps to clarify our uniqueness. In fact, why don't we all make efforts to seek to model what potentially could be a more balanced and biblical brand of Pentecostalism without some of the baggage this movement has accumulated over recent decades.

However, let's not get overly caught up with the label "Pentecostal."²⁴ It is interesting to note that most denominations are named after a single issue: Baptists (baptism), Presbyterians (eldership rule), Methodists (Wesley's method), Salvation Army (evangelism), and Pentecostals (the baptism of the Holy

²³ For a practical theology of healing, see *Power Healing* by John Wimber and Kevin Springer (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1991).

²⁴ The word 'Pentecost' literally means 'fifty'. I believe in the coming and experience of the Holy Spirit that occurred at the feast of Pentecost after the ascension of Jesus, but the actual name has lost a lot of its meaning, especially in the public arena.

Spirit). Maybe it's time we all modelled a broader and more balanced approach rather than be labelled by a single doctrine.

Finally, let's continue to seek to pattern our beliefs and practices after the teaching of Jesus and the apostles as recorded in the New Testament. May we all experience a fresh Pentecost as the Spirit empowers us once again for kingdom purpose!