

PENTECOSTAL BEGINNINGS IN TRAVANCORE, SOUTH INDIA

A. C. George

The task of writing a history of the Pentecostal movement in India is indeed a complex one for various reasons. One major reason is the lack of adequate and reliable sources. Like any other Pentecostal movement, Pentecostalism in India began at the turn of the twentieth century, but unlike the story of other countries, there is very little documented history. The first generation that experienced the Pentecostal fire with the phenomenon of glossolalia is gone. For any reconstruction of the history of early Pentecostalism in India, one has to depend on accounts given by second and third generation Pentecostals to whom the legacy of faith has been transmitted by the early recipients of the Pentecostal fire. When the fragments of information are gathered and pieced together—after subjecting them to a process of testing, comparing, and evaluation—it is possible to come up with some bare outline of history. This is what the author has attempted to do in this article.

It must be stated clearly at the outset that there is no attempt here to give a history of the beginning of Pentecostalism in India. The purpose of this article is to give a rough sketch of the beginning of the Assemblies of God in the southern tip of India known in history as Travancore or the Malabar Coast.¹ But this can be done only against the backdrop of the Pentecostal beginnings in that area. The focus will be on the persons and events that God orchestrated to produce a movement from which the Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal groups emerged. In order to place the movement in its historical and religious context, it is also necessary to give a capsule summary of the story of Christianity in the southwestern coast of India. The article will also touch upon some of the

¹ The southern tip of India is known in historical documents as Malabar or Malankara. That area is called Kerala in today's political maps of India. The State of Kerala was carved out of two small kingdoms, namely, Travancore and Cochin, after India obtained its independence in 1947.

salient features of the Pentecostal movement in the early period of its history.

I. The Historical Setting

Pentecostalism in Travancore was not born in a vacuum. On the contrary, it came out of a church that could boast of almost two thousand years of Christianity.

It is strongly believed that long before the western countries came under the influence of the gospel, Christianity was planted in the soil of South India. Traditions connect the beginning of Christianity with St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. According to most accounts, St. Thomas came to the southwestern Malabar coast of India in 52 A.D. and planted seven churches there.²

After appointing elders in each of the churches mainly from Brahmin families, Thomas went to the east coast and established a few churches there also. The Brahmins, upper caste Hindus, speared him to death in 72 A.D. and his body was buried in a mount in Mylapore (modern Madras) which is now known as St. Thomas Mount, a place of pilgrimage for peoples of all religions. Even though the St. Thomas tradition is extremely strong among the Christians of Kerala, its historicity cannot be proved because of the absence of contemporary evidences. There is, however, proof that Christianity existed in India from the fourth century A.D. There is evidence that the church in India was represented by John, "Bishop of Persia and Great India" at the Nicean Council held in 325 A.D. and that this bishop was one of the signatories in the "Acts of the Council of Nicea."³ This evidence, coupled with the archaeological evidence that there were commercial contacts between India and the Roman Empire in the first century, suggests that Christianity in India may be as old as Christianity itself.

It may seem strange that even though the church was planted in the Indian soil long before many nations and ethnic groups heard the gospel for the first time, it did not take deep roots there for centuries. It remained as a dormant church, lacking the dynamism to impact non-

² Earl E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 82.

³ F. Hrangkhuma, "The Church in India," in *Church in Asia Today*, ed. Saphir Athyal (Singapore: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1996), pp. 393-439 (400).

Christians. The weakness of the church is evident from the fact that the church adopted many Hindu customs and practices.⁴ Western travelers like Cosmas, the Alexandrian monk of the sixth century, and Marco Polo, the Venetian traveler of the thirteenth century, made references to the church in India in their travelogues. Among other things, they speak of the St. Thomas tradition and the condition of the church like "scattered sheep." Marco Polo even spoke of seeing the tomb of St. Thomas. A much more fascinating truth we learn about the church of this period is that they were connected to the Patriarch of Antioch and controlled by the bishops consecrated by the Patriarch.⁵

One thing that needs to be stressed is the fact that the Indian church did not have any western connection until the arrival of the Portuguese and the subsequent Jesuit Mission pioneered by Francis Xavier and others in the sixteenth century. But the church of the Malabar Coast had strong connections with the Syrian Church whose headquarters was in Antioch. This was precipitated initially by two migrations of Syrian Christians to the Malabar Coast. The first was in 345 A.D., when three to four hundred Christian families from Mesopotamia migrated to the southwestern coast under the leadership of Thomas of Cana. The second migration took place in 833 A.D. It is probable that these Christians brought with them their priests to look after their spiritual affairs. In course of time these Syrian Christians succeeded in bringing the Indian church under the domination of the Syrian Church and in monopolizing the pepper trade.⁶ That all the priests and bishops had to be consecrated and sent by the patriarchal bishop called *Catholicos*, who was headquartered in Mesopotamia, speaks of the extent of the Syrian control over the Malankara Church. Besides, the Metropolitan of India always had to be a Syrian.⁷ When Islam stamped out Zoroastrianism and Christianity in Persia, the Indian Christians were forced to turn to the Patriarch of Antioch for help and guidance. The Syrian connection continues even today within a section of the Syrian Christians of Kerala whose allegiance is to the Patriarch of Antioch.⁸

⁴ A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grover Press, 1959), p. 343.

⁵ Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 343.

⁶ Hrangkhuma, "The Church in India," pp. 400-401.

⁷ Hrangkhuma, "The Church in India," pp. 400-401

⁸ Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 343.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, following Vasco de Gama's successful voyage to India in 1498, changed the face of Indian history as well as the history of Christianity. The Portuguese monopolized the European trade in the sixteenth century but later the Dutch, the Danes, the English, and the French entered the scene as competitors. Of all the foreign powers that entered India with trade interest, only the Portuguese did notable mission work under a system known as the "Padroado."⁹ One of the greatest missionaries of this era was Francis Xavier, the first Jesuit missionary to India, who became instrumental in establishing Catholic Christianity among the fishing community of the southeast and southwest coasts of India. He laid the foundations of Christian education and worship among these converts.¹⁰ In addition to the Jesuits, several Catholic orders including the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the Capuchins were actively involved in missionary enterprises.

The Portuguese, who discovered the Syrian Christians of the Malabar Coast, were happy to learn that there was a Christian community in India. Once they learned that there were notable differences between them and the Syrian Christians, they tried to absorb the Syrian Christians into Catholicism. Alexis de Menezes, the Portuguese Archbishop, made an effort to bring the Syrians under the umbrella of the Pope through a historic synod known as the Synod of Diamper held in 1599. The compromise lasted only 54 years. In 1653 the Syrian Church revolted against the Catholics in what is called "the Coonen Cross" (crooked cross) incident. Nearly one third of the Syrian Church returned to their older tradition and affiliation with the Patriarch of Antioch.¹¹ A reform within the Syrian Church produced in 1879 a group called the "Mar Thoma Syrian Church." The Mar Thoma Church is more evangelical than the Syrian Church (which is also called the Syrian Orthodox Church) and is governed by bishops (metropolitans).

The Protestant wing of Christianity was established in India only in the beginning of the eighteenth century. The first Protestant mission in India was established in Tranquebar through the efforts of Ziegenbalg

⁹ "Padroado" was a system entrusted to the Portuguese kings by the Pope to evangelize the heathens wherever the Portuguese set up their trading colonies. The system included the right to the kings to send bishops, priests, and missionaries to the foreign lands.

¹⁰ Hrangkhuma, "The Church in India," p. 403.

¹¹ Hrangkhuma, "The Church in India," p. 403.

and Plutschau who were sent by Frederick IV of Denmark.¹² This mission flourished in the eighteenth century but owing to various reasons started declining at the beginning of the nineteenth century and ceased to exist by 1847 when it was taken over by the Leipzig Mission.

The outstanding contribution of this mission was Ziegenbalg's translation of the Bible into the Tamil language. It has the distinction of being the first Bible in any Indian language. A hundred years later, William Carey, "the father of modern missions," chose Serampore as the base of his mission and gave to the people of India the whole Bible or portions of the Bible in nearly forty languages.¹³ True to his motto, Carey attempted "great things for God" and his mission in the northeastern part of India opened the opportunities for other missions to enter India.

It needs to be pointed out that the era of modern missions which began in India with the arrival of William Carey coincided with the British rule in India under the East India Company. While it is true that the British brought to India much western civilization, they did not patronize missions directly because of political reasons. However, the policies of the East India Company were later relaxed through the efforts of people who had influence on the British parliament. This paved the way for the creation of an Anglican episcopate in India, which in reality meant that missionaries could come and work in the company's territories.¹⁴ Several missionary organizations like the London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), and the Basel Mission entered different parts of South India. Of these, the Church Missionary Society interacted actively with the Syrian Christians of Malankara and influenced internal reforms within the church. The CMS played a big role in changing the face of Christianity in South India by establishing educational and philanthropic institutions and distributing the scripture in Malayalam. Numerous other missions were also active in different parts of India laying the foundations for educational, medical, and other types of humanitarian work. However, the vast majority of the Christians were in South India, especially in the Malankara (present day Kerala) region. And it is among these Christians that the early Pentecostal fire came to produce a movement that spread rapidly to other

¹² Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), p. 1315.

¹³ C. B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (Madras: Christian Literature Service, 1983), p. 155.

¹⁴ Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 1315.

areas. How this happened and what it produced is the subject matter of this article.

II. The Antecedents of the Pentecostal Revival

The turn of the twentieth century marks the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement around the globe. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was experienced by Agnes Ozman and other students at Charles Parham's Bethel Bible College at Topeka, Kansas and the Pentecostal revival that started in Azusa Street under the ministry of William J. Seymour and similar awakenings in Europe and other parts of the world were part of a global phenomena that produced strong Pentecostal churches wherever the "fire of the Spirit" fell.¹⁵ A careful study of the background of these revivals will show that revivals do not begin by chance, rather they are the product of intense preparations, prayer and waiting on God. This is also true of the revival fire that was lit in Malankara in the beginning of the last century.

The Pentecostal movement that created ripples in South India began as an indigenous movement. It was not until later that revival movements in the west impacted this indigenous movement. Gary McGee, noted historian, observes,

Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like movements in India preceded the development of 20th century Pentecostalism in North America and Europe by at least 40 years. Apart from the revival under Edward Irving in the U.K. in the early 1830s, the most prominent revivals of the 19th century characterized by the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit occurred in India. When modern Pentecostalism began there in 1906, it developed independently from the influence of similar revivals in the West.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Stanley H. Frodsham's account of this global phenomena in his book, *With Signs Following* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1941).

¹⁶ Gary B. McGee "India: Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like Movements (1860-1910)" (an Unpublished Article, c. 1999, Used by Permission), 21 pp. The same information is also found in Gary B. McGee, "India: Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like Movements (1860-1910)," *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard van der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

The antecedents of the Pentecostal movement in Travancore can be traced back to certain revivals that broke out in different denominations like the CMS and the Mar Thoma Church. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed powerful revivals: one in 1860, another in 1873, and a third in 1895. In all of these revivals people experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with diverse manifestations including glossolalia. However, the recipients of these experiences did not know that they were speaking in unknown tongues as a result of the baptism in the Holy Spirit as taught in the Book of Acts.¹⁷ This was due to the fact that the Bible was an unknown book for many and there was very little teaching by the clergy on spiritual matters. It needs to be pointed out here that the first Malayalam translation of the Bible, the efforts of Benjamin Baily, did not come out until 1841. The New Testament in Syriac—the liturgical language of the Syrian Christians—was made available to the clergy of the Syrian Church in 1818 but the laity had no benefit from it since they did not know Syriac.¹⁸ Baily's Malayalam Bible became very popular in Travancore and became one of the major factors of the revival that touched that state in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.¹⁹

Another major influence that led to the revival was the New Testament style preaching by native preachers and foreign missionaries²⁰ who had been actively engaged in preaching and evangelism in South India. The availability of the Bible in two major South Indian languages—Tamil and Malayalam—breathed new life into the Christians of this area. The Christianity of the Malabar Coast, until then, was a mere formality. It could be characterized by traditions, ceremonies, and annual festivals honoring the saints of the church.²¹ Theologically the Malankara Church had embraced Nestorianism through the influence of the Persian Church and held that once an infant is baptized, he or she becomes a member of the church and all that is needed afterwards is the faithful observance of the sacraments of the church. But the Bible brought a new

¹⁷ L. Sam, *Pastor A. C. Samuel: A Brief Biography* (Trivandrum: Bethel Assembly Publication, 1983), p. 10.

¹⁸ The liturgy of the Syrian Orthodox Church was in Syriac but it was transliterated into Malayalam so that the laity could use it in their services.

¹⁹ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram* [History of Kerala Pentecostals] (Kottayam: Good News Publications, 1994), p. 26.

²⁰ In the early days of missions, the term "missionary" was used exclusively for foreign missionaries and it was a convenient term to distinguish them from their national coworkers.

²¹ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 26.

understanding of Christianity. Biblical preaching by lay preachers and even some leading clergies of the Malankara Church produced an awareness of the shallowness of religion practiced by the Malankara Christians. That in turn created a desire to study the Bible and apply biblical truths to daily life.²² A leading figure God used to bring about reforms within the church was Mathews Mar Athanasius, metropolitan of the Syrian Church. He encouraged the laity under him to start prayer meetings and Bible study. He also organized special meetings for the preaching of the word of God in all the churches in his diocese. For this, he often brought in preachers from the neighboring State of Tamilnadu.²³

Those whom God used as revival preachers from Tamilnadu included Ammal Vedanayagam, Aroolappen, David (who became popular in Travancore as Tamil David), David Fenn, and several others. These preachers traveled through various places and preached in many churches of the Syrian Christians and awakened the people to the reality of deeper Christian life. It is not possible here to highlight their ministry, but at least the impact of one of them must be mentioned.

Carl T. E. Rhenius and Anthony Norris Groves who were Anglican missionaries, sent by the CMS, trained John Christian Aroolappen of Tirunelveli as a catechist.²⁴ Aroolappen happened to read about the revivals in the United States, England, and Ulster in 1857-59 and was greatly moved. He started praying for a similar revival in his own land. Little did he realize then that God would use him to spread the flames of revival in his own place as well as in Travancore. On March 4, 1860, revival broke out in Tirunelveli. Surprisingly, it happened among a group of people who were not anticipating anything miraculous. And none of the missionaries who had brought the light of the gospel to that area was present in that meeting.²⁵ Gary McGee describes as follows,

The phenomena in the revival included prophecy, glossolalia, glossographia, and interpretation of tongues, as well as intense conviction of sin among nominal Christians, dreams, visions, signs in the heavens, and people falling down and /or shaking.²⁶

²² Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 28.

²³ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 27.

²⁴ McGee, "India: Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like Movements," p. 2.

²⁵ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 27.

²⁶ McGee, "India: Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like Movements," p. 2.

A decade later Aroolappan brought the revival message to many CMS congregations and the congregations of the Syrian Christians of Travancore. This produced a revival there that lasted for several years. Prominent among the leaders of this revival were Koodarapallil Thommen and Yusthus (Justus) Joseph, a Brahmin convert who became a CMS priest. Yusthus Joseph's ministry attracted thousands of people because of the operation of the charismatic gifts: visions, prophecies, revelations, and others. However, when the prophecy that Christ would return six years after May 1875 was not fulfilled, he was branded as a heretic by the CMS and consequently his Revival Church began to decline and his followers came to be called Six Years Party (also called the Five and a Half Years Party).²⁷

The impact of the revival meetings, conducted by the men mentioned above plus a host of others, was that a section of the clergy and the lay people within the traditional Syrian Christians of Travancore longed for reforms within the church. The leading clergy who spearheaded the reform movement were Mathews Mar Athanasius and Thomas Mar Athanasius, two able leaders of the church. They tried to lead the church on the path of reform emphasizing the reform formulas: "Grace alone, Christ alone, Bible alone and Faith alone."²⁸ When their effort failed to bring about the desired changes within the church, they and their followers left the mother church to form a new church which is now known as the Mar Thoma Church. This separation took place in 1889. However, some of the believers who advocated more radical reforms—e.g., believers' baptism by immersion, the priesthood of all believers, separation from worldly attachments and amusements—separated themselves from the Mar Thoma Church to establish the Brethren Church. This new movement, also called Separatists by others, attracted people from the CMS and Basel Mission. It is worth recording here that V. Nagel, who was originally a German missionary sent by the Basel Mission and working in Kerala, embraced the Brethren faith and became an ardent propagator of that faith. He learned the Malayalam language well and composed several Malayalam songs that are still popular among the Malayalee Christians. Nagel's friendship with Gregson, a Keswick missionary in Travancore, led the latter, Gregson, to the Brethren faith. Consequently Gregson had to sever his relationship with the Keswick movement. All of these events created ripples within

²⁷ McGee, "India: Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like Movements," p. 3.

²⁸ T. P. Abraham, "The Mar Thoma Church: An Historical Sketch," Marthomachurch@yahoogroups.com (Feb 15, 2001), p. 3.

the Mar Thoma Church, but they laid a strong foundation for the Brethren group. The movement began to spread to different parts of Kerala.²⁹ We might say the stage was set in Travancore for the Pentecostal movement of the twentieth century.

III. The Beginning of the Assemblies of God in Travancore.

The view that history is a record of past events is a secular one. The Christian perspective of history, whether it is the history of the church or the history of the world, is quite different. It views history as the actions of God to accomplish his plan and purposes for humanity. And God does use humans to perform his work in the world that he has created and over which he is Lord.

The Assemblies of God in Travancore did not come into existence with some organizational structure until 1929, although the Pentecostal message and experience came to Travancore at least two decades earlier. The spiritual awakening that came to Travancore in the latter part of the nineteenth century had made it a fertile field to embrace the Pentecostal message. In God's providence, he used a variety of individuals, both foreign and national, to do an unprecedented work in Malankara, that had already had the gospel for many centuries. The story of the Assemblies of God in South India is the story of individuals that God used to spread the Pentecostal doctrine and establish churches in the region. Therefore, it is necessary to mention briefly the life and activities of some of the pioneers, who are only representatives of scores of people who became instrumental in laying the foundation of the Pentecostal movement in the State of Travancore.

1. George Berg

The first one to bring the clear teaching of Pentecost to South India was George Berg, an independent American missionary of German descent. Using Bangalore as his base, Berg worked in different parts of South India beginning in 1901. He was not a Pentecostal missionary at that time. In 1908, Berg returned to the United States and was baptized in the Spirit at the Azusa Street Mission and spoke in tongues. The same year he returned to India and worked in and around Bangalore.³⁰ He

²⁹ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 29.

³⁰ McGee, "India: Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like Movements," p. 11.

came to Travancore for the first time in 1909 as speaker at the Brethren convention held at Kottarakara. The Brethren believers were not prepared to accept his Pentecostal doctrines. The following year when he spoke at the same convention, he was severely criticized by the other missionaries such as Noel, David and Arthur who were also speakers at that convention. Consequently he was forced to work independently, and organized meetings and Bible classes in different parts of central Travancore. Many were saved and attracted to the Pentecostal truth through his ministry.³¹

When Berg came to Travancore in 1911, he was accompanied by Charles Cummins, an Anglo Indian evangelist who was drawn to the Pentecostal doctrine through Berg. Together they worked in several places in Travancore: Thuvayoor, Punthala, Venmony, and Elanthoor, to mention a few. The results were amazing. Members of an independent prayer fellowship at Thuvayoor, led by Paruthuppara Oommen, embraced the Pentecostal truths. Berg's subsequent visits and ministry in Travancore caused many people to get saved and filled with the Holy Spirit. The believers of Thuvayoor church took their responsibility seriously and evangelized their neighboring villages such as Mannady, Kunnathoor, Poruvazhi, Kadampanad, and others, and established Pentecostal churches that are still in existence today. A notable achievement of Berg was his leading a young Marthomite preacher named Mathai, popularly known as "Panthalam Mathai," to the Pentecostal experience. Mathai received the baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1912 and became a powerful instrument in God's hand to spread the Pentecostal faith not only in many parts of Travancore, but also in Tamilnadu, Mangalore, and Pondicheri. Literally thousands of people were led to the Pentecostal faith through his ministry. One of them was K. E. Abraham who became the main founder of the Indian Pentecostal Church of God, a leading Pentecostal group in India today.³²

2. Robert F. Cook

Another American missionary who played a major role in the establishment of Pentecostal churches in Travancore and other places in South India was Robert F. Cook who received the Pentecostal baptism at the Azusa Street Mission in 1908. A prophecy came to him through a Pentecostal preacher that God is anointing Cook to "preach the gospel to

³¹ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 31.

³² Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 32.

the poor" (Luke 4:18) confirmed his own conviction to become a missionary. When George Berg spoke about the great needs and opportunities for evangelism in India at a Pentecostal camp meeting held in Los Angeles in 1912, Robert was greatly moved and decided to go to India as an independent missionary.³³

Robert Cook came to India in October 1913 together with his wife Anna and their two daughters, Blossom and Dorothy, to work as independent "faith missionaries." They lived in the South Indian city of Bangalore and started working in association with Berg. Soon he was able to start an English worship in Frazer Town. The death of his wife Anna in 1917 shattered him, for she was a great asset to his ministry. His prayer for a dedicated partner like Anna was answered the following year, when he met and married Bertha Fox who was working in India as a Methodist missionary.³⁴

Cook's first visit to Travancore was in 1914 when he began a "gospel tour" in the southern states of India along with Cummins, the Anglo Indian co-worker of George Berg. He conducted successful meetings at Thuvayoor and adjacent places. Many were saved and some were healed. The miraculous deliverance of a woman possessed of evil spirit at Thuvayoor on the first day led many to believe in the power of the gospel. After four days of meetings there, Cook baptized sixty-three people and this was his first baptismal service in Travancore.³⁵

Between 1914 and 1921 Cook visited Travancore several times to conduct meetings, but his base was in Dodda Ballapur, a town not far from Bangalore, the present capital of the State of Karnataka. The response to the gospel was encouraging, even though he had to face opposition in places like Adoor and Kottarakara. In 1921 he made two trips to Travancore to conduct special meetings in Kottarakara, Adoor, Thuvayoor, and others. Many were saved and baptized. Miraculous healings were frequent and many were attracted to the meetings. Consequently doors were open to preach in other places. Cook's baptismal services attracted hundreds of spectators. These baptisms were conducted in ponds or rivers, in contrast to the infant baptism of the Syrian Christians which was always inside the church. The result was that the nucleus for several churches was formed in all those places. His meeting in Punalur drew many Muslims to hear the gospel because of the

³³ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 37.

³⁴ Robert F. Cook, *A Quarter Century of Divine Leading in India* (Ootacumund, South India: Ootacumund & Nilgiri, c. 1939), pp. 44-45.

³⁵ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 38.

miracles that happened there. The Muslim community of Punalur gave Cook and his associates the name "angels," because of the miracles.³⁶ Seeing the tremendous response to the gospel in Travancore, Cook decided to move permanently to Kerala. In 1922 Cook moved to Kottarakara with his family and stayed in a small rented house to continue the work in Travancore. The next twenty-eight years Cook and his wife Bertha labored tirelessly in Travancore establishing many churches in different parts of Travancore.

It was mentioned earlier that Robert Cook came to India first as an independent missionary. In 1919 he decided to join the Assemblies of God (AG), USA. For the next ten years he worked with the denomination. During this period he had a group of charismatic and committed young native preachers as his co-workers. Among them were: A. K. Varghese, K. E. Abraham, A. C. Samuel, A. J. John, T. M. Varghese, P. V. John, Panthalam Mathai, and several others. All of them became outstanding leaders of different Pentecostal groups later. Their joint efforts resulted in the establishment of scores of churches in Travancore. As an AG missionary Cook was able to raise funds from the United States to buy property and build churches in many places. He also founded a Bible school in Mulakuzha in 1928, Mount Zion Bible Institute, for the training of national ministers.³⁷ However, the following year Cook separated himself from the Assemblies of God, taking with him all the churches under his supervision. He worked independently until 1936 when he joined the Church of God headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee, USA.³⁸ Needless to say that the loss of congregations and property was a heavy blow on the Assemblies of God church in Travancore. But the AG leadership, not wanting to get involved in litigation in the interest of God's kingdom, decided to move to other areas of Travancore and concentrated on the work.³⁹ The later history of the AG shows that God honored that decision and enabled them to plant hundreds of churches in Travancore and other parts of Malayalam District. Today the Malayalam District of the South India Assemblies of

³⁶ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 43.

³⁷ Sam, *Pastor A. C. Samuel*, p.12.

³⁸ Charles W. Conn, *Like a Mighty Army* (Cleveland, TN: Church of God Publishing House, 1955), pp.236-37.

³⁹ L. Sam, "A.G. Charitra Rekhakal" [Historical Records of A.G.], in *SIAG Malayalam District Council Souvenir* (Punalur: Malayalam District Council, 2000), pp. 21-33 (25).

God alone has over 500 churches, three Bible schools and more than 700 ministers.⁴⁰

3. Mary Chapman

The first AG missionary to come to South India to spread the Pentecostal message was Mary Weems Chapman, a veteran missionary who has served in Africa.⁴¹ In 1904, she received the baptism in the Spirit in a glorious manner as she was praying alone in her room. Prior to her coming to India as a missionary she had also experienced miraculous healing in her body through fasting and prayer, even though doctors were not able to help her. With an unshakable faith in the Lord and his word, Mary Chapman embarked on a ship in 1914 to come to India to do the Lord's bidding. She was fifty-eight years old when she landed in Madras, the southeastern seaport of India.⁴²

Mary Chapman traveled extensively to different parts of India holding evangelistic meetings in Bombay, Poona, Dhond, Bangalore, and others and finally settled in Madras as her base. Chapman traveled to Travancore and Tamilnadu to spread the Pentecostal work. The need and urgency of the work in Travancore prompted her to move to Trivandrum (southern part of Travancore) in 1921. Through her influence, Miss Aldwinkle, an independent missionary, joined the AG fellowship. Chapman and Aldwinkle concentrated on the work in southern Travancore and established Pentecostal work in several places. During this period Robert Cook was working in Kottarakara. In 1923 Spencer May, a British AG missionary, came to Travancore to work with Chapman. They started the *Pentecostal Trumpet*, the first Malayalam Pentecostal magazine. When the Cook family went on furlough in 1924, Spencer May moved to Chengannur to look after the work in central Travancore.⁴³ The following year Mary Chapman also came to Chengannur to provide relief to victims of a flood that caused great suffering to many people. Following this she went to Kollam (Quilon) for a brief period and finally came to Mavelikara and labored there until she was called to her heavenly home on November 27, 1927.

⁴⁰ Sam, "A.G. Charitra Rekhakal," p. 88.

⁴¹ McGee, "India: Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like Movements," p. 11.

⁴² Mathews P. John, "The Missionary Lady Who Loved India," *Maruppacha* 4:8 (April 20, 2000), pp. 4-7 (4).

⁴³ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 61.

Even though Chapman only labored in Travancore for about ten years, she was able to lay a solid foundation for the AG work in there. She inspired many young workers to do faithful ministry for the Lord of the harvest. During her furlough in the States in the year 1921, several of her friends in her homeland tried to persuade her to stay back and rest as she was getting older. But her mission in the land of her calling was a greater concern to her than her own personal health and comfort. Her reply to her friends reveals her singleness of purpose and commitment to the Masters' service: "If young people are not able to go, old people ought to go to India to spread the gospel there."⁴⁴ Later, God gave her a band of young partners in Travancore as her coworkers. C. Mannasseh, A. J. John, P. V. John, and K. E. Abraham were all her partners in the ministry.

In 1924 William M. Faux, Foreign Missions Secretary of the AG (USA) came to Travancore to conduct revival meetings. Seeing the need and prospects of the work in Travancore, he recommended that a missionary be commissioned and sent to Travancore to found a Bible school for training future workers. The young man chosen for this task was John Burgess who arrived in Travancore in 1926. Chapman and Burgess worked together in Mavelikara. The AG church that was formed in Mavelikara is the first AG church in the whole State of Kerala. The founding of Bethel Bible School in Mavelikara in June 1927 was a new milestone for the AG mission, for it was the first AG Bible school founded outside the United States. After being shifted to several places and operating in temporary buildings, Bethel Bible School was finally relocated in 1949 to a beautiful place on a mount in Punalur. Having started with twelve students in 1927, Bethel Bible College, as it is called now, has become one of the premier AG Bible colleges in India. It has a well-developed faculty and a national principal today. Over the years "Bethel" has trained hundreds of workers for God's kingdom. It is playing a major role in planting churches throughout Kerala and other parts of India. It is bilingual offering courses in Malayalam and English, and provides theological training up to the master's level. The labors of John Burgess and his wife Bernice in developing Bethel will always be remembered. Isaac Mathew, the present vice principal says, "Burgess has the unique distinction of being the founder of Bethel."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 60.

⁴⁵ Isaac V. Mathew, "Theological Education in the Malayalam District of A.G.," in *SIAG Malayalam District Council Souvenir* (Punalur: Malayalam District Council, 2000), pp. 53-55 (53).

Mary Chapman, with whom Burgess worked for a short period in Mavelikara, not only witnessed the founding of Bethel Bible School, she also taught the first batch of students for a few months, however her death only enables her to serve in this capacity for a brief time as mentioned above. John Burgess conducted the funeral service and her body was interred in the AG cemetery in Mavelikara the following day. Chapman was loved and respected by the national brethren, which is evident from a letter written by C. Manasseh, her faithful coworker in South Travancore, when he received news of Chapman's death, "We are deeply grieved by the departure of our dear mother in the Lord. She was a burning light but was extinguished suddenly."⁴⁶ Mary Chapman's contribution to Pentecostalism in Travancore will always be remembered.

4. The Role of the National Ministers

It has been mentioned earlier that all western missionaries worked with national workers who had charisma and commitment. Some of them were brought to the Pentecostal experience through their contacts with the missionaries. However, it is wrong to suppose that missionaries alone were responsible for the spread of Pentecostalism in Travancore and elsewhere. The truth is that without the help and partnership of the national brethren, they would not have accomplished what they did. The nationals who associated themselves with the missionaries helped them in a variety of ways: as translators, managers, editors of magazines, supervisors of constructions, and above all as evangelists, pastors, and coworkers. Many miracles took place through their ministry and Pentecostal churches started mushrooming in all places wherever they labored in association with the missionaries or independently. This is true of all workers such as K. E. Abraham, Panthalam Mathai, A. J. John, P. V. John, C. Manasseh, A. C. Samuel, and T. M. Varghese, to mention a few. In the course of time God raised these men to top level leadership to lead the Indian churches on the path of Pentecostalism. Robert Cook, Spencer May, Mary Chapman, John Burgess, and others who came later depended heavily on the nationals for cooperation, counsel, and assistance in every phase of the work. Without the nationals there would be no Pentecostal history in South India.

When Robert Cook left the Assemblies of God in 1929, some of his Travancorian coworkers continued their association with him. One of them was K. E. Abraham who had received the Pentecostal experience in

⁴⁶ Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 60.

1923 at the home of C. Manasseh, an AG pastor who was spreading the Pentecostal message in the southern parts of Travancore. Abraham narrates his own experience,

While we were praying, Bro. Manasseh laid his hands upon my head and prayed. All of a sudden I experienced the passing of a current through my body. By the power of the Spirit my body began to shiver...I was overwhelmed with joy and began to praise God.... My tongue so moved that I was unable to praise God in my mother tongue...following that I spoke again in tongues.⁴⁷

After working with Cook and his national fellow ministers for several years, Abraham separated himself from Cook and concentrated on the building up of indigenous churches. He felt that association with western missionaries would jeopardize the growth of these churches. In course of time God used Abraham to found the Indian Pentecostal Church, which is one of the largest Pentecostal churches in India today.⁴⁸ And he is well remembered as an "apostle" that God raised to provide leadership to that movement and to bless literally thousands of people through his ministry in India and overseas.

The work of the AG reached a "take-off stage" with the founding of Bethel Bible School under the leadership of John Burgess and several coworkers from Travancore, as mentioned earlier. God used the national "brothers," as they addressed each other, to plant churches and spread the Pentecostal message all over Travancore. It is not possible to give a resume of all those who were used of God in the growth of the AG work in Travancore. Nonetheless, two names need to be mentioned in particular: C. Manasseh and A. C. Samuel.

Manasseh is regarded as a pioneer of AG work in the southern Travancore. Born in 1876, he was brought up in a Hindu home at Paraniyam, twenty miles south of Travancore (Thiruvananthapuram), Manasseh became a Christian through a vision from God. He served as a volunteer evangelist with the London Missionary Society for sometime, but was excommunicated from that church due to his reform ideas. God orchestrated events in his life to bring him into contact with Miss Aldwinkle, a Pentecostal missionary stationed in Tanjore. That led him into the Pentecostal faith. He was baptized in water and later received the Spirit baptism. Soon he started preaching in his own native place.

⁴⁷ Habel G. Verghese, *K. E. Abraham: An Apostle from Modern India* (Tiruvalla: Rhema Publishers, 2000), pp. 33-34.

⁴⁸ Verghese, *K. E. Abraham*, p. 15.

Miracles of healing and exorcism were manifested in his ministry. This opened the door widely for Manasseh to move to different places in the southern districts of Trivandrum. The nucleus of the first AG church was formed in Konniyoor in 1922 when Manasseh's brother David and his family were baptized in water. God used Manasseh to sow the seed of the gospel and spread the Pentecostal truths to Melpuram, Kaliyikavila, Marthandom, Kulachal, and several other places. When Mary Chapman moved to Trivandrum, Manasseh was the leading worker in that area. They worked closely together in South Travancore. From 1922 to 1938 Manasseh was the pastor of the Melpuram church. He died in 1938. Still the seeds that he scattered resulted in the establishment of many churches in the Trivandrum-Kanyakumari area. The area where Manasseh labored most is now called the Southern District of the South India AG. Presently this district has over 250 churches and preaching points as well as a well-established Bible college called Southern Bible College.⁴⁹

Another servant that God chose to build up the AG work in Travancore was A. C. Samuel. His parents were members of the Brethren Church. They prayed for a long time to have a son and vowed to God that if he would give them a son, they would dedicate him for the Lord's work. Samuel was born in 1900 as an answer to their prayer. His parents brought him up in the fear of God from his early childhood. One of his childhood experiences is worth mentioning here. As usual his mother told him the story of Jesus who did not have a place to "lay his head" (Luke 9:58) to put little Samuel to sleep. Later in the night his mother was surprised to see him lying awake on the floor in the corner of the room away from his mat and pillow. When his mother asked him why he was not sleeping on his mat, he answered, "No one gave Jesus a place to rest. Let Jesus take my mat and pillow. I will sleep on the floor."⁵⁰ His godly mother used the opportunity to tell Samuel that Jesus does not need our mats, but he wants to live in human hearts. Samuel was only six years old at that time.

The above incident is indicative of Samuel's tender heart and openness to God. In 1914 he was saved and three years later he dedicated himself to the ministry. For a while he was actively involved in the youth wing of the Brethren Church in Travancore known as Youngmen's Brethren Christian Association. This gave him an opportunity to be a witness for the Lord in his native place and other places. When George

⁴⁹ L. Sam, "A.G. Charitra Rekhakal," in *SIAG Malayalam District Council Souvenir*, pp. 21-33 (23).

⁵⁰ Sam, *Pastor A. C. Samuel*, p. 25.

Cook started his work in central Travancore, young Samuel was attracted to the Pentecostal faith. In 1924 when William Faux came to Travancore as the Foreign Missions Department's representative to conduct special meetings in Travancore, Samuel received the baptism in the Spirit in one of those meetings.⁵¹ Soon he started working with Cook in several places in Central Travancore, along with his close friends K. C. Oommen and K. E. Abraham. This resulted in the establishment of several Pentecostal churches in central Travancore. From 1927 he pastored a church at Anjilithanam. Most of the members of this church were from backward communities, but Samuel, a Syrian Christian, loved his flock dearly and identified with them in their poverty and suffering. A baptismal service that Samuel conducted in 1929 at Anjilithanam was memorable. After the baptismal service Samuel preached to the crowd that had gathered to see the Pentecostals' baptism. After his message he asked those spectators, "If any of you would like to be baptized also, please come forward." Two Syrian Christians, Varghese and Kurien, came forward and in spite of the opposition from the crowd, they were baptized by Samuel in the same pond. Following this, many Syrian Christians of that locality accepted the Pentecostal truths.⁵²

When Robert Cook founded the Zion Bible School at Mulakuzha in 1928, Samuel joined that school and completed his training there, thereby becoming one of the first alumni of Zion. Samuel continued to work in central Travancore and became successful in establishing several churches in that area.

Feeling the "Macedonian call" in his spirit, Samuel moved to Trivandrum in 1932 to preach and plant churches in southern Travancore. The miraculous healing, that came to a Hindu named Kunjuraman when Samuel prayed for him, opened the door for the ministry widely. Kunjuraman changed his name to Paul and later became an AG evangelist. Many Hindus were attracted to the gospel through the miracles that happened in the ministry of Samuel. This paved the way for the starting of several churches in the Trivandrum area. Bethel Assembly at Nalanchira was the first AG church constructed in the Trivandrum area.

Pastor Samuel's contact with the AG began when he met Martha M. Kucera, the AG missionary to the Trivandrum area. Miss Kucera came to India in 1928 and had been working in Trivandrum and nearby places before Samuel came to Trivandrum. Their initial contact led to Samuel's

⁵¹ Sam, *Pastor A. C. Samuel*, p. 12.

⁵² Saju, *Kerala Pentekostu Charithram*, p. 88.

becoming an AG minister.⁵³ Their joint efforts resulted in the formation of many churches.

Pastor Samuel could be described as the "first man" in relation to the AG work in South India. He was the first Indian to be ordained by the AG leadership as he was ordained in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1935. He was also the first General Superintendent of the Malayalam District (1947), the first Indian to go to USA to represent the AG churches in India (accompanied by pastor C. Kunjummen, the District Secretary), the first Indian to be elected as the Assistant Superintendent of the South India AG (SIAG) (1947), and the first national superintendent of the SIAG (1957). He also held several other positions. But it was not "success and honor" all the way. Numerous were the sacrifices he had to make and afflictions and shame he had to endure for the cause of the ministry. Samuel finished his race in 1970 when the Lord took him to his heavenly abode.

Pastor Samuel was a man of character and integrity. He was a compassionate shepherd, a gifted leader, a "Barnabas" who encouraged many young ministers, a good organizer, and a man of God who was loved and respected by both nationals and western missionaries. Paying tribute to pastor Samuel, Ernest Sorbo, AG missionary who labored with him for many years in Trivandrum spoke, "There came a man sent by God, and his name was Samuel."⁵⁴

The history of the AG in South India is the history of the dedication, toil, and sacrifices of many notable servants of God. George Berg, Robert Cook, Mary Chapman, Martha Kucera, C. Manasseh, A. J. John, John Burgess, and A. C. Samuel are but a few examples of the many who obeyed the heavenly calling and did their utmost for the growth of God's kingdom in this part of the world.

IV. Some Observations

It may be appropriate to conclude this article with a few observations and comments. An analysis of the impact and growth of Pentecostalism in Travancore shows that several factors contributed to the rapid spread of the Pentecostal truths in Travancore. In the writer's opinion, the following factors were crucial.

⁵³ Sam, *Pastor A. C. Samuel*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Sam, *Pastor A. C. Samuel*, p. 73.

1. The Presence of the Miraculous

The ministry of the pioneers, both western missionaries and nationals, was accompanied by many miracles of healing and exorcism. This was quite evident in the ministry of Robert Cook, Mary Chapman, A. C. Samuel, and many other Pentecostal pioneers. Healing often opened the door widely to establish churches. In a report sent to the United States in 1914, after completing a preaching tour of a southern District, Robert Cook wrote, "Devils were cast out, sick were healed. Many came out of darkness, forsaking their idols to worship the living God. I baptized 22 believers in water."⁵⁵ This was typical of what happened in many places.

2. The Priority of the Word

The word of God was given prominence by the Pentecostals. The Bible was read in the homes and in the churches and carried by believers to the meeting places, in contrast to the "mainline" churches that followed a liturgy and did not make use of the Bible. In the earlier days of Pentecostalism in Travancore, a Pentecostal believer could be easily identified by the "black book" (because of the black leather binding) he or she carried. Believers often carried banners with scripture verses as they marched through the streets. The word of God was proclaimed loudly at convention places, house meetings, and even at baptismal ponds. Truly the Bible was regarded as the norm for faith and conduct.

3. The Solidarity of the Believers

What was true of the apostolic church that "all the believers were one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32) was also true of the first Pentecostal believers of Malankara. Their cottage meetings, "monthly" fellowship meetings, and conventions were good examples of their solidarity. The modern means of transportation was not available then and people had to walk for miles to reach the monthly meeting places or convention places. The desire to meet and fellowship with their fellow believers was so great that they did not mind walking ten or fifteen miles to reach the meeting places. Their fellowship was also expressed in their sharing of goods with the less fortunate believers.

⁵⁵ "Robert F. Cook and Wife, South India," *Christian Evangel* (Dec. 12, 1914), p. 4.

4. The Spirit of Missions

Those who came out of the mainline churches of Travancore into the Pentecostal faith were driven by a holy passion to reach out to the unsaved and bring them to God's kingdom. Often when one member of the family was saved and filled with the Spirit, the other members also followed the same path, sooner or later, because of the witness and prayer of the believing community. The believers tried to be witnesses for the Lord in their "Jerusalem" as well as distant places. This motivated the Pentecostals to conduct open air meetings and organize gospel tours to spread the good news of salvation.

5. A Sacrificial Life

The missionaries who came as pioneers in the first quarter of the twentieth century had to sacrifice a great deal—comforts, conveniences, financial security, and several other things. Robert Cook, Mary Chapman, and several others had to live initially in houses made of mud with thatched roof, without electricity, running water, and other basic needs. They traveled in "bullock carts" to go to places with the message of salvation. The story of many of the Travancorian preachers was also not different. K. E. Abraham, A. J. John, and P. V. John left their secular jobs to obey the Lord's call and went through privations and sufferings of various kinds, but all of them suffered joyfully being "constrained by the love of Christ" (cf. 2 Cor 4:14).

6. "Faith Mission"

Nearly all the early missionaries who came to India were "faith missionaries" in that they had no pledge of support from any mission bodies or individuals. They looked to God alone for their support. The missionaries who came to India in the 1910s and 1920s had very little support from their organization. Noel Perkins speaks of the early AG missionaries' hardships, "Pentecostal missionaries went forth to the most remote areas they could reach.... Almost without exception they lacked adequate financial support."⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Noel Perkin and John Garlock, *Our World Witness: A Survey of Assemblies of God Foreign Missions* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1963), p. 28.

The situation of the national evangelists and pastors was no different. They lived in "faith homes," the precursor of the parsonage, and lived a "faith life" meaning they trusted in God to supply every need. And God often met their needs through unexpected sources. Both missionaries and national workers could tell many wonderful stories of God's provisions.

7. The Training of Ministers

Ministerial training was a major concern for the AG missionaries from the beginning. This was in accordance with the stated missionary objectives of the general council held at St. Louis in 1921. Training native workers was the means to take the gospel to "neglected areas" and to establish "indigenous churches." The missionary objectives included the statement: "It shall be self-propagating and self-governing native churches."⁵⁷ It was in keeping with this policy that Bethel Bible School was started in 1927. The graduates of this Bible school became evangelists, pastors, and cross-cultural missionaries to other parts of India.

The above are only some of the major causes of the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism in Travancore. Further, what made Pentecostalism a recognizable force was the power of Pentecost that was poured out upon those who earnestly sought the face of God. The Holy Spirit himself did the work of cleansing, reforming, and building up lives that were broken by sin. Apart from the dynamic operation and ministry of the Holy Spirit, no Pentecostal church would have been established in Travancore, Tamilnadu, or any other part of India. The Spirit of God transformed hundreds of ordinary men and women and used them in an extraordinary manner to fulfill their role as witnesses to proclaim the good news and to plant churches wherever they went in the powerful name of Jesus.

This is the story of the first generation Pentecostals of Travancore. They are dead and gone, but the echoes of their testimony can still be heard. The new generation of Pentecostals will do well to listen to these voices and walk in the paths their fathers walked.

⁵⁷ Perkins & Garlock, *Our World Witness*, p. 42.