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The Pentecostals

DOUGLAS WEBSTER

REVIEWERS ARE WONT to describe books like this* as monumental or even magisterial. One reason is their great length, a rare thing in English theological publications; another is the enormous amount of detail and the large number of footnotes and references (90 on the first 15 pages). But this characterises continental writing. The present work was first written in German and published in Zurich in 1969. Undoubtedly it deserved an English translation and this is a good one. Three of the original chapters have been replaced by chapters on the British Pentecostal movement.

The author is a well-known Swiss scholar, brought up in a Pentecostal church, now a member of the Swiss Reformed Church. For some years he was on the staff of the World Council of Churches; he is now Professor of Mission in the University of Birmingham and the Selly Oak Colleges.

Everything anyone could want to know about the Pentecostal Churches is here. The first half is concerned with their history, the second with their belief and practice. The origin and growth of this remarkable movement is traced in the United States, Brazil, South Africa, and Europe, including Italy and Russia. Numerically and in terms of national influence Brazil is far the most significant. One church there estimates an annual growth rate of 80,000. One Pentecostal leader there has declared: 'Rome has brought to the world idolatry, Russia the terrors of communism, the U.S.A. the demon of capitalism; we Brazilians, nation of the poor, shall bring to the world the gospel.'

It is no more possible to generalise about the Pentecostal movement than it is to generalise about Africa. One of the major contributions of this book is to show how infinitely varied the movement is. The chapter on Russia is particularly valuable in this respect; it shows how

The Pentecostals. Walter J. Hollenweger. SCM Press. 572 pp. £6.75

the Russians have developed their own theology along rather different lines. The *Initiativniki*, the underground Pentecostals, have produced hymns which deal with such themes as technology and civilisation and have attracted some of the young members of the *Konsomol*. Their weakness in engaging in the dialogue with atheism is their naive biblicism in the face of scientific scholarship. This characterises most Pentecostal churches but Hollenweger notices some interesting exceptions, as for example in Indonesia, where fundamentalism is being transcended.

Other blind spots in the movement are honestly faced by the author, who himself is genuinely sympathetic. In the U.S.A. churches can make a great fuss about the need to speak in tongues but be entirely indifferent to the race problem. Many of these churches run on to the financial rocks through too much stress on the leader's personality cult. Some leaders are quite incapable of administering the huge sums of money which come into their hands, but others have used their resources wisely, especially in Brazil, without help in money or personnel from the U.S.A. Such churches are usually the healthiest. There are many taboos about sex and dress. 'With respect to the emancipation of women, the Pentecostal movement would prefer to leave women in the position that they have in the East.' Their place is in the home; career women are not favoured; rigorist ethics are deemed essential, but sooner or later it has to be relaxed and this in turn accounts for the emergence of a new Pentecostal denomination every twenty years or so, but 'the tragedy of Pentecostal ethics is that it is only ever relaxed with a bad conscience, as a concession to the flesh, to worldly lust'.

This book aims at correcting the commonly held view that most Pentecostals and their leaders are proletarians from the lowest strata of society. This is by no means the rule, and many of the pastors, especially those who began their ministry in other churches, have a middle class background. Nevertheless, it is asserted that 'the function of the Pentecostal movement is to restore the power of expression to people without identity and powers of speech, and to heal them from the terror of loss of speech'. With this it has been successful; the second wave of revival is claimed to be among managers in big business, scientists, scholars, artists and diplomats. There is a small section devoted to Pentecostalism in contemporary Anglicanism.

The second part of the book is full of information but somewhat less satisfactory than the first. It is more descriptive than theological. Trinitarian and christological doctrines are accepted without comment but the two main articles of orthodox christology among Pentecostals are the Virgin Birth and atonement through the blood of Jesus. Pentecostal theology and their understanding of the Church are derived mainly from the Acts of the Apostles; no attempt seems to be made to correct this or balance it with the rest of the New Testament and

notably the Pauline letters. The pattern of salvation is either two stage or three stage. The greater part of the movement accepts the former, i.e. conversion followed by baptism of the Spirit. The three stage groups insert sanctification between conversion (= regeneration) and baptism of the Spirit with speaking in tongues. The Pentecostal explanation of the traditional churches is that they are stuck between Easter and Pentecost. Speaking in tongues is regarded by the great majority of Pentecostals as the sure witness of Spirit baptism and its necessary physical sign, but there is evidence that some are moving away from this strict view. Dr. Hollenweger himself makes a curious statement on p. 337, affirming that Luke distinguishes between the reception of the Spirit and the reception of salvation. 'According to Luke, one can be a Christian without having received the Holy Spirit. For him the Spirit is something additional to salvation.' It is doubtful whether many (or even any?) New Testament scholars of repute would accept this proposition, and it is based on an interpretation of Acts 8 and the Samaritan episode which few would support. The footnotes indicate that the author is aware that recent theological writing (e.g. that of F. D. Bruner and James Dunn) strongly opposes such views, but clearly he has not given weight to their arguments which many would regard as overwhelmingly conclusive.

No one can read this book without admiration for the great care with which it has been compiled and the imaginative arrangement of the material. Unnecessarily detailed it may sometimes be but it is seldom dull. As an account of the Pentecostal movement on a global scale it may well be acclaimed as definitive and not likely to be replaced for a long time. Its weakness is in its theological assessment which is far from thorough and therefore disappointing. All informed Christians should know about the Pentecostals and what they stand for. They are a challenge to every other tradition and denomination. But what is found here needs to be supplemented by a biblical and theological critique which is not found here.