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Pentecostals and the Bible

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Summary

This paper examines the views of classical Pentecostal ministers through an original data set. It places this examination within an historical and theological context by surveying key features relevant to the relationship between Pentecostalism and the Bible. It contrasts ministers who hold an inerrant and those who hold an infallibilist view of the Bible.

Introduction

Pentecostalism emerged out of the matrix of holiness and revivalist culture within the United States. In Britain its emergence was related to the evangelical edge of the church, whether this was established (Anglican) or nonconformist (for instance, the Salvation Army), though there were also elements of Keswick holiness adding to the acceptability of an experience-rich religious movement.

In relation to later Pentecostal attitudes to the Bible we can identify three other theological and social factors. First, the 19th century textual battles over the validity of both the Old and New Testaments came at a time when evolutionary biology was also beginning to make its mark. The Graf-Wellhausen hypotheses regarding the composition of the Pentateuch was followed by deconstructions of the Life of Christ (Renan and then Strauss) which, in England at any rate, were kept at bay by the scholarship of the Cambridge trio of Hort, Westcott and Lightfoot.¹ Nevertheless the *Lux Mundi* essays of 1889 contributed to a questioning of the main outlines of Christology and therefore of traditional Christian doctrine.

These textual battles, which had a nationalistic dimension to them, helped to divide the Christian world. Liberal scholarship in Europe emanated from the industry of highly competent German scholars. Because British universities simply did not have as many Chairs of Theology as were in existence in Germany, the sheer volume of German scholarship overwhelmed the more conservative British output. In the United States, where the education system was being built up and regulated at the end of the 19th century, scholars began to establish their own tradition, particularly within an education system that was much more the product of the denominational and philanthropic giving than was the case in Britain or Germany. We might simplify this analysis by saying that liberal scholarship came from Germany and that conservative scholarship came from the United States and that both forms of scholarship were to be found in Britain.

Debate over the validity and veracity of Scripture – even if it took place a long way away and within academic circles - impinged on Pentecostal consciousness. George Jeffreys referred to the ‘higher’ critics, meaning those who operated from a complex methodology within a university setting, and the ‘lower’ critics, meaning those who took a hostile dispensationalist position. So the second factor concerned the lower critics or dispensationalists should have been the natural allies of Pentecostals because both shared respect for the authority of Scripture itself. The dispensationalists, in a movement that itself has complex origins dating back to the Albury Circle (from 1826; see Patterson, 2003) and to the work of J. N Darby (1800-92), managed to cut salvation history, and therefore the bible itself, into various discrete stretches of time in which God’s dealings with the human race were conducted on different covenantal bases. Although the dispensationalists or lower critics took a variety of positions, many were averse to any suggestion that miracles might be found in the modern era. The baneful work of Benjamin Warfield provided an argument that miracles had ceased

¹ F J A Hort (1828-92), published with Westcott an edition of the Greek New Testament in 1881; B F Westcott (1825-1901), respected scholar, bishop of Durham, and involved in the production of the RSV; J B Lightfoot (1828-89) Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge supreme grammarian and textual critic.

once the canon of Scripture was closed (Ruthven, 1997). Consequently, any claims for modern prophecy, tongues or healings must be spurious and, indeed, were probably indicative of the coming of the anti-Christ (2 Th 2.9).

Connected with this debate and symptomatic of it was the publication of *The Fundamentals* between 1910 and 1913. These books, funded by wealthy layman, established five points as 'essential and necessary' doctrines of the church: (1) the original autograph of Scripture is inspired and without error, (2) the virgin birth, (3) the 'satisfaction' theory of atonement, (4) the physical resurrection and (5) the miracles of Jesus. *The Fundamentals* were circulated just before the outbreak of World War I and an estimated 3 million copies were printed. The style of argument, the content of argument and the presumptions behind the argument could not but feed into Pentecostal thinking since, only a year later, in 1914, did American Assemblies of God constitute itself.

Third, mass primary education in both the United States and in Britain was firmly established by the end of the 19th century (Boyd, 1964). Rapid urbanisation and industrialisation generated a need for an educated workforce. Basic literacy and numeracy could be taught within primary schools. This had the effect of producing conditions under which mass circulation texts like newspapers could flourish even though it also produced an attitude to training that appears to us today to be mechanical. Primary education relied upon rote learning, memorisation enforced by corporal punishment and authoritarian interpretations of history and literature. Early Pentecostals, many of whom had only received primary education, were therefore naturally prone to accept similarly authoritarian interpretations of the Bible. This was part of the mindset of the age and not a reflection on the intelligence of those who established the classical Pentecostal denominations.

Origins and debates within the UK

The best record of the concerns of the Pentecostals within the United Kingdom is to be found in the pages of *Confidence*. Here the discussions of the Sunderland Convention were recorded in detail. The attendees were concerned about spiritual gifts in congregations, eschatology, the ministry women, the basis of healing although the Pentecostal movement. But they did not have any real discussion about the authority or the validity of the Scripture itself.

When, eventually, Pentecostal denominations emerged as they did in quick succession after 1907 (Apostolics 1910, Elim 1915, Assemblies of God 1924), the bases of unity were to be found in tenets or fundamental truths. They did not follow the Anglicans whose basis of unity resides largely in the bishop who is traditionally the source of, and defender of, orthodox doctrine. Rather it was the text of the bible itself and an established interpretation of the text that provided the foundation for cooperation and fellowship. Moreover, once this interpretation had been reached, it became logical and necessary to set up training institutions where Pentecostal ministers might be taught what they needed to believe. All the classical Pentecostals followed this pattern and bent their energies to ensuring that fundamental truths and Pentecostal distinctives were vigorously and systematically taught to their own aspiring ministers and missionaries.

As the period between the two world wars elapsed, debates about Scripture in Britain were far less complicated and ferocious than they were in the United States. Gradually, however, liberalism broke into British universities. Within Pentecostal circles, there appear to have been no real discussions about inerrancy or the difference between inerrancy, which must

presume word-for-word accuracy, and infallibility, which implies that there are no mistakes in Scripture but without actually focusing upon the individual words themselves. Although some of the more educated Pentecostals like C L Parker (Kay, 2000: 108) might draw a distinction between the inerrancy of the original autographs of Scripture and the human mistakes that might creep into the process of historical transmission and translation, these considerations appear to have been aired only rarely.

Oliver Barclay (1997) paints a picture of the weakness that had infected evangelicalism by the 1930s.

‘The theological establishment was so-self-confident and aggressive that theological students who did not conform were frequently subjected to ridicule by fellow students and often by their tutors... the result was that most of those who started their courses as apparently solidly evangelical finished up having lost their ability to preach the plain teaching of the Bible as the Word of God’ (page 13).

Such an erosion of faith was particularly damaging to young men training for the ministry within a university setting. These young men were largely Anglican. There were few, if any, Pentecostal ministers with theology degrees at that time. And, on university contexts, the best measure of evangelical influence can be found by looking at the size of the Inter Varsity Fellowship. It only comprised 1.7% of its age group in the 1930s, a figure that may be compared with the altogether more healthy level of 32% if had reached by the 1990s (Barclay, 1997: 20). But, at the time, evangelicals seemed due to become extinct, and their scholarship was almost non-existent. The weakness of evangelical scholarship had an effect that can be discerned with hindsight: there was no intermediate block of scholarship between a fundamentalist orientation and a liberal orientation; there was no middle ground. Pentecostals were bound to find themselves within the more fundamentalist camp, even if, in Britain, fundamentalism never appears to have entered the bloodstream in the same way that it did in the United States.

Another factor relevant to Pentecostal understanding of Scripture stemmed from the practice of New Testament prophecy. The Apostolic Church in Bournemouth began, through its publication *Riches of Grace*, to publish the actual words of prophecies given at its meetings (Kay, 200: 18). These prophecies were presumed to have the same status as canonical Scripture. All other Pentecostal groups quickly shrank from such an outrageous position. Yet the very fact that some Pentecostals thought that the Sunday morning utterances of Pentecostal prophets might be on a par with those of a Isaiah or St Paul raised awareness about the importance of the written text of the Bible as a source of theological judgement. Pentecostal groups had already affirmed their belief in the authority of Scripture within their fundamental truths: the issue of contemporary prophecy simply increased appreciation of this authority.

Post 1945

The post-war era was marked in Britain by the desire to rebuild society. ‘Secondary education for all’ was a government slogan following the 1944 Education Act and, when it became government policy, this had a knock-on effect on all forms of post-school training, including that offered by the churches. The old style of bible training that simply built on simple primary education had to be replaced. Secondary education was less authoritarian, more rational and more flexible and ministerial training had to reflect this change.

The end of the war coincided with the arrival of commercial air travel on a large-scale. The mission field opened up again and this, together with the desire to renew congregational life, give impetus to the training of Pentecostal ministers. Donald Gee became the Principal of Kenley in 1951 and inaugurated a new era that began to modernise the curriculum.

Within Europe as a whole the training of Pentecostal ministers continued to take place outside the degree-awarding system. Degrees could only be awarded by universities and, in Britain, universities required a royal charter. Up until the late 1950s only about 6% of the population received any kind of BA degree, and masters degrees and doctoral degrees were proportionately rarer. Within older British universities, particularly Oxford, Cambridge and Durham, an Anglican ethos might persist. In Germany, theological departments might require the approval of a local bishop before being allowed to appoint staff. Similarly, Lutheran scholarship was entrenched in Scandinavian universities. The result of this was that the training of Pentecostal ministers occurred outside the sphere of academic scholarship but within the Pentecostal sphere of training colleges that, increasingly, began to make use of evangelical commentaries and thinking.

In the 1960s the charismatic movement burst into life. In Britain many of its early adherents were Baptists, Anglicans or Methodists who would have been better educated than the early Pentecostals. Some had received degree-level training and, by osmosis, their influence would have encouraged an increasing openness to scholarship within Pentecostalism.

This openness was encouraged within Britain by the founding of new universities after the 1960s and an increase in the numbers of people passing on to higher education (Robbins 1963)². In the 1990s British secular universities began to accredit courses offered at Pentecostal and evangelical colleges. Once this began, large numbers of evangelical and Pentecostal young people saw little purpose in attending a secular university to receive theological training. At the same time, and partly because they were deprived of evangelical students, theological departments began to close within universities and, where new departments *were* established, these often followed a religious studies format that avoided theology. Thus by the end of the 1990s much of the numerical strength of theological training began to pass to denominational contexts, including Pentecostal contexts

The accredited new courses offered by the Pentecostal colleges benefited from the climate of religious pluralism that accepted the equal validity of all religious positions and none. Pentecostal history, revival, theology and other distinctives could be taught without restriction. And, at the same time and as part of this expansion, faculty members within Pentecostal colleges began to seek higher education for themselves and many took degrees at MA and doctoral levels with the result that their staff were as well qualified as those within secular universities.

Method

The sample

The study reported on here makes use of a postal survey by questionnaire of Assemblies of God, Elim, Apostolic and Church of God clergy. All these denominations publish an annual yearbook listing their ordained clergy. Distinctions are made between ministers who work in the UK and missionaries who work overseas. For the purposes of this study, overseas

² Robbins Report, published by HMSO in 1963. It proposed the creation of 60 new universities.

workers were excluded. All other workers, active, retired, itinerant and pastoral were included.

Although the denominations use different governmental structures, there are broad similarities between their operations. In each instance support for the current study was obtained from the appropriate Executive Councils or General Superintendents. Each questionnaire was completed anonymously, but was identifiable by means of a numerical code. This allowed follow-up letters and phone calls to be directed to ministers who failed to respond. Altogether 1631 ministers were within the scope of the target population and each one received at least one questionnaire. In total 930 usable replies were received, a response rate of 57%.

The total sample comprised 930 ministers divided between 907 (97.5%) males and 23 (2.5%) females. There were 242 (26%) respondents aged under 39, 586 (63%) aged between 40 and 64, 86 (9%) over 65 years, and 16 of undeclared age. The sample, then, was predominantly male and middle aged.

About 16.7% of the total sample have obtained bachelor degrees and only about 3% have postgraduate degrees.

The questionnaire was made up of a great variety of questions including a set containing statements of belief to which ministers had to respond 'agree strongly', 'agree', 'not certain', 'disagree' and 'disagree strongly'. For the purposes of analysis 'agree strongly' and 'agree' were conflated and it is this percentage that is recorded in table 1.

Results

Table 1 gives the results of the survey showing the percentage of ministers in each denomination who accepted each statement.

Table 2 compares inerrantists and infallibilists. T-tests were computed to contrast mean scores on selected items. In each case the differences between mean scores reported here are statistically significant.

Discussion

Table 1 shows that nearly all the ministers believe that the Bible is the 'infallible Word of God' but that a much lower percentage takes an inerrant position. In each denomination between 30 and 37% of ministers does not agree with the inerrant position. The two items together indicate that ministers draw a distinction between infallibility and inerrancy. Although there may be little real difference between the meaning of the two words, the ministers make a distinction and they probably do so on the basis of their familiarity with the fundamental truths of the denomination. Whereas denominational truths traditionally make use of the word 'infallible', this is not the case in relation to inerrancy. For example, British Assemblies of God sees the Bible as 'the infallible, all sufficient rule for faith and practice'. It concentrates on an outline of the Godhead, the Person of Christ, the way of salvation and the role of the Holy Spirit but it does not pile up a sequence of phrases and texts to underline the verbal accuracy of the Bible. The reasons for this must surely be historical. When the Pentecostal denominations were formed, the issue of the accuracy of the biblical text was not at the forefront of their minds. Biblical authority was axiomatic. It was enough to say, as was said by the British Assemblies of God fundamentals, that the Bible was the 'inspired

Word of God'. What mattered to them was the defence of the contested doctrine of the baptism of Holy Spirit following the new birth.

As subsequent debate and dispute took place in the 1920s and 1930s between liberals and modernist within the United States, the question of inerrancy became paramount among conservatives. By the end of the century a large minority of British Pentecostal ministers, whatever their instincts, clearly retreated from an inerrant position even while they were happy to accept the infallibilist position taken by their founding fathers.

The preference for different versions of the Bible is almost certainly reflective of the accommodation between the various Pentecostal groups and contemporary culture and this, in itself, is linked with the average age of ministers. So while the Apostolics and the Church of God give strong support to the Authorised Version, Elim and Assemblies of God have moved much more confidently to the New International Version.

The creationist position is widely accepted among Pentecostals but, again, a large minority rejects it. Nearly half of Elim ministers do not find it accords with their own beliefs. The responses to this item imply that these ministers are generally conservative in their interpretation of Scripture *even though none of the sets of fundamental truths endorses creationism as a necessary belief*. We may suggest that the majority acceptance of creationism follows from the generally conservative mind-set of Pentecostal ministers while noting the less literalist position of the large minority.

The item relating to the order of end-time events is indicative of the willingness of these ministers to be agnostic about eschatology. Whatever the precise fundamental truths of their own denomination, a majority percentage of Elim and Assemblies of God is unwilling to agree that a definite conclusion is found in Scripture; beliefs in this doctrinal area must be in a state of flux. Oddly, this admission may have other implications. If, in some doctrinal areas Pentecostals are prepared to adduce certainty from biblical texts but, in others, they are willing to admit to that this is impossible, is certainty as important as it seems?

Table 2 demonstrates consistent differences between inerrantists and infallibilists. In each case inerrantists evaluate speaking in tongues more highly. In each case inerrantists show themselves to be more opposed to the ministry women. They are less likely to endorse equal opportunities of ministry women, to agree that women should preside over Communion services, to baptise and are more likely to have endorse the view that women should obey their husbands.

Similarly inerrantists are more authoritarian in relation to church activities. They are more insistent on Sunday evening attendance, on tithing, on abstention from alcohol, on Sabbatarianism and on avoidance of gambling. They are also more inclined to believe that congregational meetings should be structured.

Inerrantists are also more likely to be creationists and to endorse the nature miracles of Jesus. They are also more likely to have firm eschatological views and to disagree with the proposition that the Bible is unclear about the order of end-time events.

Finally, inerrantists are more likely to believe that medicine is a God-given blessing and that physical healing is provided within the atonement.

The consistency of differences on separate items between inerrantists and infallibilists points to deep-seated differences between these two groups, even though they coexist in each of the four classical Pentecostal denominations. We may put this another way by saying that inerrantism is part of a worldview in which authority and the supernatural are cardinal points of reference.

Conclusion

Arising out of the historical reflections and the empirical data, three main conclusions can be drawn. First, there is a reasonable connection between social change, particularly social change that involves major alterations to the basic educational system within any society, and the kind of training for ministers that is likely to be offered. When training was built upon a primary education, it was likely to reflect the pedagogical style of that sector of education. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that what surprised the students who are taught by C L Parker in the Hampstead Bible School in the 1920s and 1930s was that he conducted a type of Socratic discussion with students (Kay, 1990: 127). This was very different from the unimaginative lecturing that characterised the style of other lecturers. But Parker was one of a few graduates within Assemblies of God at the time. Subsequently, once secondary education became universal in Britain, ministerial training was bound to alter again.

In the same way that ministerial training reflected the education system on which was built, the fundamental truths of the various Pentecostal denominations that were formed in the first part of the 20th century reflected the concerns of the people who came together to found the new groups. Although the fundamental truths cover many of the main points of evangelical doctrine, they also ignore many others and their emphasis arises from the particular temptations and trends of the founding era.

Second, there is a difference between the inerrantist and the infallibilist position on the Bible. This difference is evidenced not only by the quite different pattern of figures given in table 1 but also by the significantly different mean scores on numerous items given in table 2. Although we might argue that the infallibilist position is more liberal, these ministers still score highly on the different items concerning miracles and eschatology -- it is just that the inerrant group score even more highly. The cluster of the differences between the two positions might be used to argue that we are dealing with a particular worldview among the inerrant group, a worldview that is strong in its belief in male authority and church authority and, of course, biblical authority.

Third, the strong inerrantist position may be understood sociologically and psychologically as well as theologically. If any individual or group is going to stand against the consensus within society, it must have a strong rationale for doing so. The authority of Scripture, especially as supported by the authority of the church, provides this leverage. The ability to withstand cultural pressure enables inerrant Christians to be true non-conformists. On the other hand, it must also be true that this ability to withstand social pressure may lead to the dogmatism, rigidity and an unwillingness to accept any change at all, even when this change is for the better.

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Table 1: Percentage of ministers agreeing with selected items³

	Apostolic	Assemblies of God	Church of God	Elim
I believe that the bible is the infallible Word of God	99	99.5	100	99.2
I believe the bible contains no verbal errors	67	65.8	70.8	66.3
The Authorised Version of the Bible is best	46	19.5	34	10.5
The New International Version of the Bible is best	24	29.4	10	29.5
I believe that God made the world in six 24 hour days	67.4	70.3	65.3	55.6
The Bible does not make the order of end-time events clear	24	56.4	32.7	64.4

³ The categories 'agree' and 'agree strongly' have been conflated in this table.

Table 2: Inerrantists and infallibilists compared

Item	inerrantist	infallibilist
To speak with tongues is a calming experience	4.07	3.94
To speak with tongues is a holy experience	4.19	4.02
To speak with tongues is an exciting experience	4.20	4.02
Speaking with tongues in meetings should be encouraged	4.10	3.82
To speak with tongues is an encouraging experience	4.52	4.39
Speaking with tongues brings life to the church	4.17	4.01
There is a Christian experience called baptism in Spirit	4.82	4.70
Women should have equal opportunities for ministry	3.45	3.62
Women should not preside at holy communion	2.24	2.07
Women should not baptise	2.36	2.18
Women should obey their husbands	4.27	4.11
All Christians should attend Sunday evening meetings	4.05	3.92
All church members should tithe	4.70	4.58
Christians should not drink alcoholic beverages	3.26	3.02
Christians should not buy or sell on Sundays	3.49	3.26
Christians should not gamble	4.61	4.46
Services with the congregation should be structured	3.84	3.67
The tithe belongs to the local church	4.51	4.39
I believe that God made the world in six 24 hour days	4.15	3.83
I believe that Jesus really walked on water	5.00	4.93
I believe that Jesus really turned water into wine	5.00	4.93
Jesus will return to the earth again in the future	4.93	4.86
I believe that there will be a millennium	4.54	4.31
The church will be taken from earth before the millennium	4.12	3.95
The Bible does not make the order of endtime events clear	3.07	3.31
I believe modern medicine is a God-given blessing	4.40	4.24
Physical healing is provided by Christ's atonement	4.37	4.18