

Why do we do things like that in church?

The Pentecostals

29.08.2004

Five blindfolded South American Indians had to feel an object, and compare what they felt. One said "I felt something like a carving of wood... smooth, long and tapered to a point." The second said, "I felt a thick hairy hose. It felt like a leg missing its bone." The third said, "That's strange, I felt a very thin hairy hose, which felt as if it had many bones through it, and it had a bushy bit on the end." The fourth said, "I felt a huge round body, with hairy, creased skin." and the fifth said "Wow, I felt a very thin body, almost like a rolled out bit of pastry." Describing an elephant varies according to what part you feel or see.

As I come to the fourth in our series, I am aware that Pentecostals are the hardest to define. That is in part due to its variety, but also due to the nearness of this movement to us in time. It is still growing and adapting and changing. So I have tried to step back and see its major aspects, but if I miss something that you love to love, or love to hate, please remember the elephant.

Since the 1960s people want less formality in schools, work etc. Every tradition is questioned. Relationships are more fragile, and loneliness is the blight of our large cities. People crave warmth and friendship. Television tells us that products buy us friendship and acceptance so we yearn for the technology, but it often isolates us more in our technological, instant society.

This informal, friendly and immediate thrust has also affected the church. More churches are warming up, desiring friendliness and less formality, drawing features from the Pentecostals.

The friendliness and informality was present in the early church. Acts 2:42-47 describes it as warm and friendly, growing in fellowship, teaching, praying and sharing. It was not a formal, unchanging, pew sitting religion. God blessed them as they reached out, and thought of new and fresh ways of talking to people about Jesus.

But many churches this century had formalised

into routine, cold, lonely places. Ministers ministered, and people spectated. Some worked, doing choir, flowers, cleaning, Sunday school teaching, money raising etc, but ministry belonged to the clergy.

But in 1906, a new movement began in earnest when William J Seymour preached in a revival in Las Angeles. Against the hatred of racism, blacks, whites and Mexicans came together into one church.

Pentecostal churches spawned from that. The most popular Pentecostal denomination is the Assembly Of God. But its influence has spread more widely.

In the mid 1950's some mainline churches embraced Pentecostal beliefs, and in the mid 1960's many Roman Catholic churches started turning charismatic.

Pentecostalism was Protestant. It accepted justification by faith alone, the Bible is God's word, and the priesthood of all believers. And it owed a debt to the Pietists' holiness movement in the Keswick Conventions, who taught that Christians can reach a blessed state of sinless perfection on earth. This brought a distinction between blessed and unblessed Christians. Pentecostals also taught a "second blessing" for Christians.

The first blessing comes as you trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. But the second blessing comes with a second baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Only when you receive the Spirit will your dead Christianity be alive.

Until the 20th Century, most Protestants believed you receive the Holy Spirit when you accept Jesus Christ. However, as the Pentecostals read Acts, they saw the 4 times when the Holy Spirit came on people in a unique way. Instead of seeing each as beginning a new phase in God's plan described in Acts 1:8, to grow from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the whole world, they saw them as the normal experience

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of the Holy Spirit coming at a different time to accepting Jesus. They claimed all true Christians MUST speak in tongues.

Tongues is a gift from the Spirit, but it is not the only one, and 1 Corinthians 12:10 says it is certainly not for every Christian. 1 Peter 4:10 says every Christian is gifted by God to serve each other. Ephesians 4:11-12 *Christ gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.* So Christians were encouraged to be active in church life, discovering their gifts and using them.

They stressed that Christianity is not a spectator religion. They put into action the priesthood of all believers. All believers are ministers for God. After the widespread minister dominated responses from the Puseyites, vitality returned to lay people.

And that is why some ministers encourage people to do pastoral visiting, run Bible Study groups, be administrators in churches, and do all sorts of things once thought of as only done by the minister or his wife.

And life in church is also returning because they have also caught the Pentecostal expectation that God is alive and active today.

He is not asleep nor only working in "natural" means. Our supernatural God is with us, and never leaves us. His Spirit is alive and real.

The cross was not just a fact of history, it is our life, our salvation and our joy.

And the cross was the triumph of God over Satan. In Christ we have the victory. Satan became more sinister and present in their teaching. We have to fight against him in a spiritual warfare. Christians are engaged in a cosmic battle. The devil is trying to destroy us, and we have to prevail, using the gifts and power God gives. They have stirred Christians to regain the sense of the supernatural and the

spiritual struggle. Evangelicals spoke about it as a legacy from the Puritans, but many were content to live in a world which we rarely sees God's action.

Pentecostals stressed "Expect the unexpected from God".

Evangelicals lived as if we knew exactly how God worked. We did not expect surprises from His Spirit. Our debt to the Pentecostals is a renewed vision of God at work in our lives, renewed joy in Him, a much needed revitalising of church music, a friendly informality, and a releasing of lay people into ministry. But that is not all. For there are still at least two other debts we owe them.

The first is an accent on prayer. With fresh eyes on the Bible, they saw God desiring us to ask Him for all our needs. They saw God's fantastic responses in the past. So they prayed in a way which was foreign to many. They boldly prayed for things we would never dream of asking. and God answered them. In some ways, their trust of God outshone more conservative evangelicals because they trusted God for greater things. Our prayers are answered with YES, NO, NOT YET or SURPRISE. The last answer is one we had forgotten.

However, many of them could not see God at work in the mundane. And many failed to see God at work through suffering. Even though the New Testament repeatedly says that we grow through suffering, their victorious Christian living clashed with the mundane, the suffering, and the evil of this world. And their faith wavered in those times. Modern charismatics are learning from evangelicals, and vice versa.

The final debt we owe them is one which evangelicals thought they were strong in, yet they have been shown new and exciting methods. That is in evangelism. They spoke about their love for God and how the Holy Spirit changed their lives. Their witnessing stressed their testimonies.

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Christianity has become much more personal again. It is not just a story from history, but it is a life changing meeting with God. They did not just have to bring their friends to hear an evangelist. God is alive to them, and they shared in a more personal way than a speaker. By sharing of what is real, people often listened.

Pentecostals excelled in this work, especially with people the traditional churches found difficult to reach. They reinforced that Jesus is the Son of Man who came to seek and save the lost, a doctor, to help the sick.

For them, church is not a time to read books, but to sing, pray and move. People are friendly and seemed concerned for you. Church services are more attuned to the modern culture.

There are traps within the Pentecostal movement. Three of the more readily seen ones are: [1] cutting the many historical links with how people have put the Bible into action in the past, so they are more likely to fall into avoidable traps. [2] Care is needed with their excessive emphasis on hearing God speak in other ways than through the Bible, and the supreme place given to speaking, singing or praying in tongues. [3] Their zeal for God has at times lacked the wisdom needed for on-going growth and stability.

Time will show more clearly where more of their traps are.

However there are many good emphases which have also filtered from the charismatic churches into more conservative ones. Our church here is benefiting from some of them.

I want us to grab hold of the excitement that God is alive and active. That he gives each one of us gifts so that we can all minister in our own way, not just leave it for the clergy. That God cares for the lost, not just for the sheep in church, so that we're to care for and reach out to people who live around us. and that church is alive, relevant and open for people to join with warm and friendly lovers of God, who are

growing in fellowship, teaching, prayer and sharing.

That is the final sermon in this series of church history. As you consider what you do and what you want to do in your walk with Christ, keep an open mind. Simply because someone does things differently does not make them wrong. We all need to let the Holy Spirit keep applying God's word to our lives, so that we can grow in Him.