

## **pentecostal postmodernity?**

*an unexpected application of grenz's  
primer on postmodernism*

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PETER T. WEILER

¶ This article is the first of a series that analyses contemporary Pentecostal theology as a cultural expression. I want to define the conceptual framework within which a number of subsequent articles will assess the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity, as this shift presents itself in a research corpus of contemporary Pentecostal writings.

¶ To this purpose, and using the conclusion of Grenz's *Primer on Postmodernism* (1996) as a basis, I identify four parameters of Pentecostal postmodernity: post-individualism, post-rationalism, post-dualism and post-noeticentricity. I come to the conclusion that Pentecostalism is not simply religious modernity. My research corpus affords many examples of popular Pentecostal writings also giving room to other, long-dormant pre-modern values and ideas.

¶ (Each of the five issues that are raised in this article—post-individualism, post-rationalism, post-dualism, post-noeticentricity, as well as pre-modernity—will be treated in greater detail in future articles. It is the purpose of this first article to provide the thematic-methodological framework for latter articles.)

### **popular theology and culture**

¶ Among the many vehicles travelling along the Australian religious highway, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement is among the fastest and furthest travelling. In the face of wide spread religious apathy and a national decline in atten-



dance in other denominations, Australian Pentecostalism has been able to expand from a tiny base in the late 40s to the point where a recent article in *The Bulletin* (April, 1996) numbers present-day national membership of the movement at 250,000. Philip Hughes, a leading ecumenical researcher of church statistics in Australia, has attempted a description of what has taken place in an unpublished paper (Hughes 1997):

In 1961, there were 16,572 Pentecostals according to the Australian census. In just thirty years, they grew to over 150,000—while most other denominations declined in numbers. Today, according to my calculations, there are more people meeting in Pentecostal churches on Sunday than there are meeting in Anglican churches—probably over 200,000. Only the Catholic congregations would exceed them in size. The Pentecostals have achieved that growth with little direct input from immigration.

The phenomenon is part of a massive shift to Pentecostalism on a world wide scale where things of an even greater magnitude have taken place.

¶ What keeps the Pentecostal vehicle travelling at such speed in Australia? In the course of preparing my dissertation, I have spent considerable time looking under one particular Pentecostal vehicle's hood in order to find out what drives it. The comparative scarcity of up to date academic material on the topic made it necessary (or, as I would rather see it formulated, afforded the opportunity) to take many of my readings directly from the wealth of popular Pentecostal 'theological' literature. I regard it as an opportunity because the Pentecostal movement has always been much more proficient at expressing itself at the popular level than at the academic or institutional level. For instance, the methodological question should be asked: What is more representative of contemporary Pentecostal views: Joyce Meyer's *Battlefield of the Mind* (1996), which according to information available to me has sold 600 copies in three months through one local denominational book shop alone, or Duffield and Van Cleaves's *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (1983), which took the better part of six months to track down even one copy in Australia. Hence, the conclusions I achieved in this article are based on what I have encountered in popular literature.

¶ Through a close reading of a corpus of contemporary Pentecostal literature, I have come to the conclusion that, apart from possibly being more in tune with

the Holy Spirit (as its propagators like to see it), it is also possible to demonstrate how Pentecostals have been at least equally adept at tuning into and flowing with the spirit of the age—and this latter spirit is thoroughly post-modern. In this way, I want to highlight how pervasively Australian Pentecostalism manifests significant characteristics of postmodernity.

### quest for the postmodern gospel

¶ Much has been published on the issue of 'postmodernity', and so a closer definition of the term at this stage seems in order. Fuery and Mansfield suggest the following definition:

Postmodernity—Various an attitude to the modern, or a period of history after the modern. While accepting modernism's contempt for tradition and liberal humanism, postmodernism sees the modernist project as dead, dangerous or outmoded. It defines modernism either as the period of commitment to radical novelty or the rationalisation of society, economics, and culture. (Fuery and Mansfield 1997: 206)

In this context it might be of value to expand the argument a little by noting that the connection between Evangelicalism and modernity has previously become widely accepted (cf. Marsden 1984). This matter is taken up by Stanley Grenz in his *Primer on Postmodernism*:

Evangelicalism shares close ties with Modernity. A child of the Reformation, pietism, and revivalism, the evangelical movement was born in the early modern period. North American evangelicalism reached maturity in the mid-twentieth century—at the height of the modern era. (Grenz 1996: 161)

In his book, Grenz discusses Evangelicalism and its relationship to issues like the postmodern world-view and the postmodern philosophers in some detail. On the basis of this discussion, he begins to look at the kind of theological shifts to be made in order to guarantee that the traditional evangelical message remain relevant in the Postmodern age. In his hypothetical discussion of a 'postmodern gospel', Grenz comes to the conclusion that it would need to be characterised by a number of post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic and post-noeticentric elements (Grenz 1996: 167-68).



¶ The underlying motivation of Grenz's book is obviously to reform Evangelicalism. Significantly, he does not even mention Pentecostalism. This seems to me to be a major oversight, because even at the most superficial level it is quite startling to observe how many aspects of Grenz's hypothetical 'postmodern gospel' fit the Pentecostal mindset almost congruently. In this way, I argue that the postmodern gospel that Grenz anticipates for has already become reality in the burgeoning Pentecostal movement.

¶ If such a proposition were true, it would put many of the differences and controversies between Evangelicals and Pentecostals into a new perspective. As we all know, many of these arguments are difficult to come to grips with on the basis of pure theology, let alone exegesis. I would argue that this is so because many of these controversies and differences are as much the product of cultural forces. Once the cultural context is taken into consideration, a number of phenomena that have always been difficult to explain suddenly fall into perspective.

### grenz among the prophets?

¶ To come back to the original line of argument and to apply it to the corpus of popular Pentecostal theology that I have been working on over the last couple of years: Where do I see the most obvious touching points between Grenz's 'postmodern gospel' and contemporary Pentecostalism?

#### *Post-individualism*

¶ According to Grenz (1996: 167), a postmodern gospel will be post-individualistic, in the sense of being community-based as well as community-oriented. Indeed, the Pentecostal is often not the reformation pilgrim, battling the world, the flesh and the devil in his or her grim struggle onwards to the Celestial City. Nor is he the Evangelical, who is being sanctified by a rational interaction with the Word. More typically, modern Pentecostals often see themselves as a member of a Spirit-filled fellowship. As such, they feel they are

#### **weiler: pentecostal postmodernity?**

involved—together with the greater body of Christ of which they see themselves to be a part—in a spiritual battle against the forces of darkness.

¶ There are a multitude of aspects where this post-individualism directly affects even the Pentecostal institution. The local congregation usually networks with all sorts of spiritual warriors, prophets, healers, evangelists and a multitude of para-church organisations who operate nationally or multinationally. Outward shows of patriotism notwithstanding, the nation state—a central tenement of modernity, if there is one—is not of central relevance to the Pentecostal world-view. Argentina begat 'Pensacola'; 'Toronto' impacted worldwide; Benny Hinn fills greater halls at shorter notice here in Australia than any national religious figure. Nor is this traffic exclusively one way: the Australian Tim Hall, for example, has outreaches in Pakistan that attract thousands.

#### *Post-rationalism*

¶ Also in line with Grenz's suggestion (1996: 169), Pentecostalism is already thoroughly post-rationalistic in its charismatic outlook. To a far greater degree than is the case elsewhere, it is often the celebration and the presence of the Holy Spirit that holds the center stage at Pentecostal meetings. The proclamation and rational exposition of doctrine that is so important both in traditional Evangelicalism and the Reformed tradition has not disappeared, but it is less central. 'The Word' is still handled—and one has the impression that it is handled almost ritually at times—but it is usually served up in an environment rich with charismatic phenomena which make it more 'alive'. Two recent meetings to which I was invited to may illustrate this point.

¶ One was a meeting run by the 'Gold Coast Prophets', a fellowship started and led by its very own Prophetess and at present not affiliated with any denomination. The four hour service started with a full hour of 'on fire', enthusiastic (to say the least) singing. This was followed by an offering, the most recognisably traditional part of the liturgy. There followed a one and a half hour sermon which relied more or less equally on experientially deducted insights, prophecy and a rather free-wheeling exegesis of biblical passages. The last part of the service was wholly given over to administering spirit-filled prayer and



personal prophecies to a long line of seekers, most of whom ended up being 'slain in the spirit' in the process.

¶ While the Gold Coast prophets might be called a fringe group and therefore unrepresentative, the next meeting to take place at the headquarters of Christian Outreach Center, Australia's second biggest denomination. It showed remarkably similar patterns: ecstatic worship for fifty minutes; a rather long homily concentrating on and leading up to offering; administration of spirit-filled prayer, giving rise to many unusual manifestations; concluding with around a third of the seven hundred plus crowd undergoing the new Pentecostal sacrament of 'doing carpet time'. This second service only lasted about three hours, mainly because a formal sermon was dispensed with altogether.

¶ The point I wish to make is not that either of these two meetings should have been held in any other way. Rather, I would like to come back to Grenz's argument and point to the degree in which 'post-Toronto' Pentecostalism welcomes and promotes the charismatic regularly and almost sacramentally. The two meetings took place at almost opposite poles of the Pentecostal spectrum: the first in a rented community hall, the second in the sanctuary of a Mega-church. Some of the popular literature that makes up my research corpus comes from the other side of the world. Even so, wherever we look, rationalism is not part of the movement's inner workings. Instead, in many places an atmosphere of Pentecostal post-rationalism seems to pervade, in the form of an openness to charismatic manifestations and a variety of spiritual gifts: prophecy, words of knowledge, 'anointings', healing, etc.

#### *Post-dualism*

¶ Grenz's (1996: 171) calls for a post-dualistic and therefore more holistic emphasis (holism in the body-soul-spirit sense). Many of Evangelicalism's most finely tuned doctrinal tenets have been incorporated into Pentecostal theology, and are adhered to with remarkable conservatism in most Pentecostal circles. However, my research corpus affords a rather large body of applied theology as well as testimonies which demonstrate the degree to which Pentecostalism constantly strives to engage the whole person at a variety of levels.

#### *weiler: pentecostal postmodernity?*

¶ Exactly as Grenz himself postulated (1996: 172-73), Pentecostalism for all intents and purposes has already learned how to integrate the emotional-affective (e.g. through ecstatic worship, spiritual warfare and deliverance sessions), the bodily-sensual (e.g. through the laying on of hands, 'Toronto'-style experiences, the emphasis on physical and emotional or 'inner' healing) and the intellectual-rational (the doctrines which are still around but now travel more in the back-seat, as it were). At the most superficial level, this can often mean that becoming a Pentecostal takes on the outward form of a life-style choice: the recently converted youth abandons his AC/DC collection and 'gets Praise'; with young women, out goes the leather mini skirt and in come the flowing robes. Especially within the framework of the Pentecostal Mega-church, a multitude of well established ministries and networks exist that offer, and indeed promote, the acquisition of a Pentecostal lifestyle for the whole person (children's churches, small group attendance, creativity groups, marriage ministry groups, food co-ops, sports clubs, businessmen's organisations—the list could be extended almost at will).



#### *Post-noeticism*

¶ Finally, Grenz sees a need for a postmodern gospel to be post-noetic and therefore practice- and experience-orientated (1996: 172). Accordingly, rather than concentrating on an ever-increasing accumulation of knowledge about the Bible, for example, or an ever more compellingly crafted rational theology, a postmodern approach would be expected to highlight the more experience-based and practice-oriented aspects of Christianity.

¶ Indeed, who would deny that Pentecostal orientation strongly tends towards such practical and experiential concerns. This can express itself in various ways. One instance where this post-noetic orientation becomes very obvious is in Pentecostal leader selection. Pentecostal leaders can often do without academic credentials, yet they cannot lead without demonstrable 'charisma' (in both senses of the word). This perspective comes through very strongly in the popular Pentecostal literature's treatment of their church leaders, past or present. What ties the literary treatment of these leaders (from Smith Wigglesworth onwards) together is that they have been and continue to be able to demonstrate their 'Spirit-given anointing' in a consistent way. They are 'doers'



at least as much as they are thinkers. The emphasis is not so much in what they achieve theologically but in what they achieve practically. Supernaturally empowered, they heal the sick, found churches, raise up ministries that span the globe. In a future article, I will demonstrate in detail how this pervasive Pentecostal post-noeticentricity centers the movement in its orientation towards the pragmatic.

### pre-modernity and postmodernity

¶ I want to make it clear that it is not my intention to claim that Pentecostalism is religious postmodernity pure, simple and unadulterated. Such a statement would be too simplistic. There is at least one other, strongly antithetical, force at work in Pentecostalism. In this context, it is of interest to note that David Lyon outlines the following three (not necessarily mutually exclusive) responses to postmodernity: resignation to the postmodern; reassertion of the modern; and reaching back to the pre-modern (Lyon 1994: 74-75). On the basis of my research into contemporary popular literature as it emanates from contemporary Pentecostal culture, and applying Lyon's argument to this sort of popular Pentecostal theological literature as a genuine cultural expression, I would argue that signs abound in contemporary Pentecostalism that it has come to embrace its very own peculiar mixture of postmodernity and pre-modernity.

¶ The argument could, of course, be put forward that Pentecostalism is simply presenting more or less conservative Evangelical theology contextualised in a slightly different way. The claim could also be made that both the gospel and the Bible are either 'products' of a pre-modern age, or, on the basis of their inspired nature, stand 'above culture' in Niebuhr's sense (Niebuhr 1951). However, to make such an argument would, in my view, miss an important point. Whereas I would certainly agree that the Bible stands above culture, its interpreters, be they Evangelicals or Pentecostals, most certainly do not. And indeed, dealing with the popular literature as it is actually sold through Pentecostal book shops, one is soon confronted with phenomena which are rather hard to explain if Pentecostals are simply 'Evangelicals speaking in tongues'.

¶ If we were to extend Marsden's argument that traditional Evangelicalism feels rather comfortable within the world view of modernity, it is not a great step to connect to this argument the realisation of how intensely Evangelicals' relationship to their religious experience is couched in a conceptual framework that is acceptable to this modernity, or is even a product of modernity (including individualism, rationalism, dualism, noeticentricism). Having done so, it subsequently becomes possible to point to certain differences between the atmosphere in which Evangelicals live and the world views current among Pentecostals. Two examples should suffice.

¶ Firstly, there are several books in my corpus—and some of them were among the big sellers at the denominational book shop which I researched—which contain eyewitness reports of men and women who claim to have actually visited either Heaven, or Hell, or both places. The point is that they have not only lived to tell the tale, but have written books about their experiences, found publishers for their books, and Pentecostal book shops to sell them. One bestselling author, Rick Joyner in *The Final Quest* (1996), recounts lengthy conversations between himself and the resurrected Christ in Heaven. Baxter makes similar claims in her *Divine Revelation of Hell* (1993). Jesse Duplantist frequently converses with the resurrected Jesus in his account, *Heaven—Close Encounters of the God Kind* (1996).

¶ Secondly, the intense spiritual warfare dimension that pervades much of the literature is another aspect of Pentecostalism that does not really sit well with either postmodernity, as it is currently defined, nor with modernity, even Evangelical modernity. Accounts of the demonic, as well as the ways and means to counter its influence through spiritual warfare methods are present throughout the literature. My corpus also affords quite a few titles that are specifically devoted to the subject: for example, Godwin's *Witchcraft in the Church* (1997), Gibson's *Evicting Demonic Intruders* (1993), Savard's *Shattering Your Strongholds* (1994) and Hickey's *The Next Generation Blessings* (1995).

¶ Other examples could be found—signs and miracles, impartation theology, etc.—but it is neither my intention nor would it be possible thoroughly to discuss the implications of this aspect of the literature here in detail. Suffice it to say that such literature it is not willingly sold at the local Baptist book shop,



nor, presumably, would a discussion of its contents go down very well in conservative Evangelical circles. This is not because Evangelicals do not believe in and actual Heaven or Hell. Nevertheless, being indebted to the world-view of modernity, Evangelicals tend to be vaguely uncomfortable (or actively sceptical) about such reliance on the experiential as well as about the all pervasive presence of the supernatural.

¶ To Pentecostals, however, the experiential as well as the supernatural are not only welcome, but essential. I would argue that this openness stems from a different and more critical relationship to the values and conventions of modernity. Perceiving modernity to be exhausted, or having never been fully initiated into the rites of modernity, they are easily able to reach back to pre-modern concepts and experiences.

### conclusion

¶ As the first of a series of articles devoted to contemporary Pentecostal theology and culture, this article defines a conceptual framework within which to assess the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity, as this shift presents itself in a research corpus of contemporary Pentecostal writings. I have defined and applied four parameters of Pentecostal postmodernity: post-individualism, post-rationalism, post-dualism and post-noeticentricity. However, in spite of its many postmodern allusions, Pentecostalism is not simply a postmodern movement. More often than not, Pentecostal postmodernity relates to the form and not the content, the style in which it is presented and not the message itself. The research corpus affords many examples of popular Pentecostal writings giving room to pre-modern concepts and experiences in a postmodern guise.

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