

CHURCH TRENDS

Barry Chant analyses some exciting – and disturbing – trends in the Christian church.

History is prophetic.¹ To understand the future it is necessary to have some understanding of the past. Young men see visions of how things are and what they could be; old men dream dreams of how things were and what they might have been. Reflective dreams about the past help us to formulate prophetic dreams about the future.

1 SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

In observing changes in the Australian Church, it is valuable to note those things that never change. For a start, *people are the same*. The most fundamental human needs of the twentieth century are identical to those of the first century. Just as they did then, we eat when we are hungry; we wear clothes when we are cold; we bear and raise families through loving procreation. We feel the emotions of fear or joy or hope or love or excitement or sorrow. We rise to great heights of achievement; we plunge to dark despair. We laugh, we cry; we suffer, we rejoice; we live, we die.

The devil is the same. He still rages like a roaring lion seeking to kill, to steal and to destroy (1 Peter 5:8; John 10:10). Pride, envy, bitterness, hatred, greed, anxiety, destruction and hostility are as much his tools today as ever they were.

God is the same. ‘I the Lord do not change,’ was the word of God through Malachi (3:6); ‘the Father... does not change like shifting shadows’, wrote James (1:17). The Westminster Confession declares it strongly: ‘There is but one only, living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection... immutable...’

The world is the same. Mountains and gorges stand in the same places; the oceans span the same great earth-crust-valleys; rivers flow in similar courses to those they have traced for generations.

Sin is the same. In all its sinister, seductive forms, it still bewitches the hearts of men of women. We stand in need of cleansing and forgiveness as desperately as any earlier generation.

Whatever we perceive to be the trends of the future, we must recognise that some of them will be identical to those of the past. The promises and precepts he gave to the pioneer Christians in the Roman Empire are equally relevant to believers today.

There is much seeking after novelty nowadays. But our need is not for a new gospel or a new message. It is, as it has always been, for the old gospel, the old message. Paul set a great precedent when he wrote to the Corinthians. It was not some new revelation that he encouraged them to believe, but the same message which he had brought to them in the beginning—

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain (1 Corinthians 15:1f).

On this message, their faith was founded. It was here they had ‘taken a stand’. Paul did not try to bring them an update, a revised version, a new program. He was very careful to remind them of the unchangeable basics on which their faith was built – ‘that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures... this is what we preach, and this is what you believed’ (1 Corinthians 15:3-11).

There is one unchanging message from which we dare not deviate – the message of Christ crucified and raised again from the dead. No matter who we are or where we are, we need that message. It is always relevant and always sufficient.

Paul’s last sentence in the passage quoted above is interesting. It is almost defiant. ‘This is what we preach and this is what you believed.’ In other words, nothing has changed and nothing will change. This is what we said then and this is what we say now.

2 WHICH CHURCH IS WHICH CHURCH?

When we talk about future trends of the Church it is helpful to define which church we mean. When Jesus sent letters to the seven churches of Revelation (chapters 2 and 3), he

gave a distinctly different message for each church. Although they all existed at the same time and in the same geographic area, what the Lord said to each of them differed markedly in emphasis and content.

Now this may seem like a contradiction to what we said above about God's word to the Church remaining the same. It is true that the word of God to our fundamental needs never changes. But churches, like individuals, are at different levels of maturity and spirituality and must be addressed accordingly. While the message is the same as ever, the application of it varies according to the situation.

So what Jesus told the Ephesians, for example, was markedly different from his message to the Laodiceans. The church at Ephesus was basically dedicated, stable, hard-working and mature. It really had only one major fault – and it was a major one – it had forgotten the first flush of love. The Laodiceans, on the other hand, had failed in many ways. They had been ensnared by their own prosperity and materialism. They were comfortable in their faith – they had not denied it, but neither were they fighting for it. Their spirituality was insipid. Clearly, the Lord gave a specific instruction to each church which applied the Word according to their condition.

What are the significant church trends today? Well, that depends. Is the church large or small? Growing or declining? Liberal or evangelical? Charismatic or conservative? Catholic or Protestant? Introverted or extroverted? Episcopal or presbyterian? Liturgical or 'free'? The words of the Lord today to a renewed Roman Catholic church, for instance, would obviously be in stark contrast to his message to a luke-warm Pentecostal congregation. The word of God to each local gathering of believers is necessarily individual and discrete.

This is why, in John's vision, the risen Christ appears among seven individual golden lampstands, not one seven-branched menorah. Each church is signified by a separate lampstand needing its own oil and giving its own light (Revelation 1:12,20). So because the Lord may have a unique and specific message for each assembly, we must do what the seven churches of Revelation are told to do – 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Revelation 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).

There has been much disappointment in the lives of many ministers because they have tried to emulate the methods of certain successful leaders. But unless the conditions are similar and they are similarly gifted and in a similar state of personal, spiritual, intellectual and social maturity, failure and disappointment are almost inevitable.

If each local congregation were to listen for the word of the Lord for its particular role and mission, we would all have different instructions, but we would have the correct instructions for us! Often, because it appears that one congregation has heard a good word from the Lord which has blessed it and caused it to grow and mature, we assume that the same word will produce the same results in another church. It may – but it may not! There are many variables. When we try to impose the Lord’s word for one congregation on another, we may actually be working against God.

3 THE UPS AND DOWNS OF CHURCH LIFE

So what is currently happening in the Church in Australia? There are many trends, only a handful of which can be considered here.²

The Australian population generally grows by about 8% every five years. This means that a local church of 100 members only has to increase by two people per annum to exceed population growth. Sadly, most denominations have failed to accomplish even this. According to the last census (1996), only Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals and Seventh day Adventists managed to achieve this modest goal (See Table 1).

Table 1 Denominations as a percentage of the Australian population

Name	1954	1986	1991	1996	% change 1991-1996
Anglican	37.9	23.9	23.8	20.66	-2.87
Baptist	1.4	1.3	1.7	1.65	5.4
Brethren	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.12	-3.35
Catholic	22.9	26.1	27.3	26.82	4.17
Churches of Christ	0.9	0.6	0.45	0.42	-1.52
Jehovah’s Witnesses	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.47	11.51

Lutheran	1.3	1.3	1.5	1.4	-0.36
Orthodox	0.8	2.7	2.8	2.78	5.02
Pentecostal	N/A	0.7	0.9	0.98	16.00
Presbyterian	N/A	N/A	N/A	3.78	-7.72
Salvation Army	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.41	2.42
Seventh Day	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.29	8.92
Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian	21.3	11.8	12.5	N/A	N/A
Uniting Church	N/A	N/A	8.2	7.46	-3.80
Islam	N/A	0.7	0.9	1.12	36.19
Buddhist	N/A	N/A	N/A	1.12	42.93
Population					6.18

Based on figures supplied by Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996 Census

Given that these figures are based on census data, it could be argued that they simply reflect a pruning of dead wood – a recognition of the fact that many people have only a nominal faith; that their loss has made no actual difference to the strength of the churches concerned; and that in reality the new figures reflect a more accurate picture.

A more helpful guide may be that of church attendance. The 1998 Australian Community Survey found that 20% of Australians claimed to attend church at least once a month. Another 20% said they visited a church at least annually. In other words, one in five Australians claims to be a regular church goer. This is actually a very high figure. Putting it differently, the number of people who attend church weekly is about the same as the number who attend an Australian football match at least once in a year.³

What is interesting is that the overall figures are not significantly different than they were 100 years ago.⁴ At no time during the 1800s, did more than half the population ever attend church regularly. In fact, the church buildings could not have contained them all. According to Broome there were 70,000 Anglicans in Sydney, but only 9,000 seats in churches in 1901.⁵ Piggin argues that in South Australia in 1901, there were only enough seats in church buildings for 45% of the population.⁶ Jackson estimates that in 1851 in Victoria, about 14% of people attended church, a figure which rose to 34% in

1881, although this figure varied even from suburb to suburb, and from denomination to denomination.⁷ Bollen suggests that church attendance was 35% in 1870, 30% in 1880 and 28% in 1890.⁸

The attendance figures for Pentecostal churches are impressive. The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) indicated that there are more Pentecostals in church on a given Sunday than Anglicans, which makes Pentecostals the second highest churchgoers in the country.⁹ This has been the result of astonishing growth. The Assemblies of God (AOG), for example, grew from around 7000 people in 1973 to 88,560 in 1991 – a 1200% increase.¹⁰ The movement as a whole increased by 87.9% from 1976 to 1981 and by nearly 50% from 1981 to 1986.

Similarly, the last two decades have seen the emergence of a number of Pentecostal mega-churches. If we could awaken a Pentecostal Rip Van Winkle from the 1930s and take him to one of these churches today, he would be overwhelmed. Such churches have never been seen before in the Pentecostal movement – and rarely in any other Australian Protestant movement either. The largest is probably the Hillsong Church in Sydney's Hills district which boasts 7000 attendees each weekend. Other mega-churches include the Paradise Assembly of God church in South Australia; the Christian Outreach Centre in Queensland; the Richmond Assembly of God Church in Victoria; the Christian City Church in Sydney; and the Riverview Church in Western Australia, all of which have thousands of members.

In his book *The Apostolic Revolution*, David Cartledge argues that this phenomenon is directly attributable to the emergence of apostolic leadership.¹¹ It was when the Assemblies of God recognised not only the validity but also the necessity of the ministry of apostles and prophets that their explosive expansion occurred. There is no doubt that visitors to these burgeoning 'New Apostolic' churches come away with an impression of exponential growth. Sociologically, it may be argued that these new apostolic leaders are reflecting the work of entrepreneurs and highly-endowed practitioners in the commercial world. But this does not take away from their extraordinary feats and the effectiveness of what they are achieving.

But a cautionary note is needed here. The mega-churches create such a powerful image of massive expansion that the actual on-the-ground struggles of the movement overall may be ignored. The reality is that the average size of Pentecostal congregations is just over 100.

In 1981, according to a survey conducted among member churches of the Australian Pentecostal Ministers' Fellowship Steering Committee, the average congregation numbered 109. Ten years later, according to the same source, the number was 142.2.¹² Figures supplied by the Assemblies of God in 1991 suggested the average size of their congregations was 142.6. In 1995, the APMF reported an average size of 122. A year later, the NCLS recorded that Pentecostal congregations averaged 114 in size.¹³ This was significantly larger than the average attendance for Protestant churches (69) but considerably less than Catholic attendance (365). Pentecostal assemblies are clearly doing better than most Protestant congregations, but overall, still reflect a number that an average pastor can manage.

Although some groups showed an apparent upsurge in the 1991 census,¹⁴ a general decline in church attendance has been steadily occurring for nearly a quarter of a century. Interestingly, in spite of the surge of the 70s and 80s, Pentecostal expansion has also slowed – and slowed dramatically (see Table 2). From 87.9% to 16% is a significant deceleration. Some diminishing in growth rates is not unexpected, of course, as it is virtually impossible for a new movement to sustain the percentage expansion of its halcyon pioneering days.

The more serious issue is that the *numbers* have also declined. As movements grow, even though the percentage rate is reduced, the actual increase in numbers usually continues to grow. In the case of Pentecostalism, both the percentage rate of growth and the raw numbers have both declined. According to census figures, the actual numbers of people added to the Pentecostal movement from 1991-1996 (24,101) was 28.6% *less* than the number for 1976-1981 (33,755).¹⁵ The reality is that if the growth rate continues to slow, Pentecostal churches will also find themselves struggling to equal population growth. Add to this the fact that there were in 1996 more Muslims and more Buddhists in Australia than Pentecostals and the situation becomes even more serious.

As these data are all based on figures established five years ago, it is arguable that there has been a change since then. Hopefully, this is the case. Sadly, there seem to be few obvious signs that this is so.

Table 2 Comparative percentage increase of selected denominations, 1976-1996

	Percentage increase 1976-1981	Percentage increase 1981-1986	Percentage increase 1986-1991	Percentage increase 1991-1996
Australian Population	7.5	7.0	8.0	6.18
Pentecostal	87.9	48.0	40.7	16.0
Anglican	1.6	-2.3	7.9	-2.87
Baptist	9.3	3.4	42.2	5.4
Catholic	8.7	7.3	13.3	4.17
Uniting	-3.7	-5.3	17.37	-3.8

Based on figures supplied by Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996 Census

There are several possible reasons for the slow-down in Pentecostal progress. The most obvious is the virtual disappearance of the charismatic movement. During the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of members of mainline churches switched to Pentecostal churches.¹⁶ In recent years, the charismatic movement has languished and the flood has become a trickle.

Second, while the Pentecostal front door is wide open and many people crowd through it, the back door is usually open, too. According to the NCLS, just over half (54%) of those who participated in the 1991 survey were still in the same church in 1996.¹⁷ The rest comprised 'switchers' from other denominations (28%), newcomers (10%) and new young adults (8%). On the other hand, another 15% 'switched out' to another denomination, and 17% 'drifted' – in other words, were apparently lost to the church altogether.

To put it differently, for every two who transferred in, there was one who transferred out. And for every convert won, there were two members lost. Some Pentecostals dispute the

interpretation of these figures, arguing, with good evidence, that many of the alleged ‘switchers’ in were nominal Christians who were in fact converted in the Pentecostal church. Thus the figure of 28% should be reduced and the figure of 10% increased.¹⁸ The overall picture remains unchanged, however. In round figures, on the basis of available data, it seems clear that *for every four people who join a Pentecostal congregation, three leave.*

Third, it is only possible to speculate the reasons for this alarming turnover. It seems that this is partly the spirit of the age. Whereas a generation ago, people always shopped at the same grocer’s shop, always used the same bank branch, always went to a local cinema, supported a local sporting team and worshiped at the same local church, today, we tend to go where we can obtain the best bargain or enjoy the most lively entertainment. Modern transport, and more recently the use of information technology, have made it possible to transverse the city and, if we choose, the world, to get what we want. The very nature of Pentecostal worship, with its emphasis on an experiential encounter with God, encourages people to seek out the churches that offer the most in this area.¹⁹

The NCLS found that people left Anglican and Protestant congregations for the following

- Moved to a new area (36%)
- No longer felt they belonged (14%)
- Needs changed (14%)
- Style of worship (14%)
- Unhappy with minister (12%)
- Disagreed with teaching (11%)
- Too much conflict (7%)
- Married (4%)
- Other (17%)

reasons—

In terms of Pentecostal churches, anecdotal evidence suggests that most of these reasons apply. The comment is frequently made by former Pentecostals that they returned to a mainline church because the teaching was more substantial and more biblical, and they

were weary of what they perceived as Pentecostal hype.²⁰ Many who transferred from a mainline church to a Pentecostal church twenty years ago to hear the preaching of the Word have now returned to their home churches for the same reason.

4 IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

Historically, Pentecostals have seen themselves as very different from the world. Both Wesleyan Holiness and Keswick sanctification were strong tributaries for the early movement.²¹ They were not of the world and were proud of it. The world and its ways were to be despised and rejected. God had chosen them for a better path. God's judgement was impending on those 'Christ-rejectors' who had time to celebrate but no time to worship. 'They are a feasting, drinking, dancing, theatre-going, smoking crowd, going on as though God was going to allow them to go on forever,' wrote pioneer leader Sarah Jane Lancaster.²² She wanted no part of it.

The last quarter of a century, however, has seen a major change. Whereas Pentecostals were once content to meet in small, back-street halls and to live a simple life-style, today there is often a strong emphasis on not only adopting the ways of the world but in outdoing them. This is not to say that sin is no longer recognised as sin, but that it is now commonly taught that prosperity and success, for centuries seen as signs of worldliness, are the marks of Christianity.

Such attempts to impress are understandable after years of being marginalised by society, and there is a sound argument for encouraging people to lift their vision and expand their faith-horizons, but there are real dangers that in trying to match the world we will become like the world. Shakespeare's Hamlet pointed out that the role of actors was 'to hold as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' and to 'imitate humanity'. But churches are not theatres and preachers are not actors. Our role is not to imitate humanity but to inspire it. And we do this best by cultivating the differences between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, not the similarities. Triumphalism and prosperity do not sit comfortably with the subjects of God's kingdom.

Of course, the reality is that the church at large and Pentecostalism in particular are basically ignored by the world. Years ago, Studdart Kennedy pointed out with terrifying

realism that if Jesus came to Birmingham – or Sydney or Melbourne – we would not crucify him, we would just ignore him –

For men had grown more tender
 And they would not give him pain;
 They only just passed down the street
 And left him in the rain.

It would be interesting to know how many Australians even know that Pentecostalism exists.²³ Years ago, I was chairman of some major conventions which were daily attended by thousands of people – over ten thousand in 1986. It was sobering to be reminded that on any given winter weekend seven or eight times that number were likely to attend one football match in Melbourne. Pentecostals still only number 0.98 per cent of the population. When public statements are needed from the church, it is Anglican and Catholic archbishops who make them.

5 THE NEED FOR SOLID FOUNDATIONS

When Pentecostalism began, there was a clear-cut doctrinal position. The movement was solidly evangelical, with a strong commitment to Scripture, and a profound belief in the necessity of being baptised in the Holy Spirit with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues.

In the last three decades, this position has been eroded. The emergence of the charismatic movement and later the so-called ‘third wave’ movement diluted and compromised that position. The differences may be represented as in Table 3.

Table 3 Pentecostal, Charismatic and Third Wave positions on baptism in the Holy Spirit

Group	Synonymous with conversion	Discrete from conversion	Tongues as initial evidence	Subsequent evidence
Evangelical	Yes	No	No	Walk in the Spirit
Pentecostal	No	Yes	Yes	Use gifts by faith; walk in the Spirit
Charismatic	No	Yes	Yes but could be another gift	Use gifts by faith; walk in the Spirit

Third wave	Possibly	Possibly	Possible? Or another gift? Or none?	Use gifts by faith; walk in the Spirit
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What this means is that whereas Pentecostals had a definite position on being baptised in the Spirit, this is not the case with the Charismatic and ‘Third Wave’ movements. The result has been a generally loosening of the once clear-cut position on tongues. Even in Pentecostal churches there is a diminishing conviction of the necessity of tongue-speaking. The 1996 NCLS reported that only 90% of Pentecostals approve of tongues.²⁴ While, as might be expected, this is still significantly higher than that for other churches (cf Baptist, 37%, Presbyterian 17%), the reality is that for many Pentecostals, tongue-speaking is no longer a necessity.

History demonstrates that revival movements which begin with a strong theological conviction tend to survive and flourish as long as they stay true to that conviction. Obvious examples are Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, the Baptist churches and Wesleyanism. If Pentecostalism is demonstrating a trend away from its initial conviction of the primacy of tongues as initial evidence of being baptised in the Spirit, it may be showing signs of the erosion of its *raison d’etre* and hence of its ongoing impetus.

From my observation, there is undoubtedly a weakening of the Pentecostal position in this area. In churches I have visited, ad hoc surveys have shown clearly that a significant number of the members have not spoken in tongues. A greater number, who may have done so once, do so no longer. The long-term effects of this are yet to be seen. This trend has been accompanied by a decline in the public use of tongues and interpretation and prophesying by members of the congregation – all of which are rarely heard in contemporary local Pentecostal churches.

A corollary of this is the general loosening of doctrinal integrity in Pentecostalism. While there is little documentary or statistical data that can be applied here, anecdotal and clinical experience is overwhelming that sound doctrine and clear hermeneutics are not regarded as a priority by many Pentecostal pastors or people. It is not uncommon to attend ministers’ conferences, for example, where there is a strong focus on experience,

on practical methodology, on ‘secrets’ of success, on congregational growth, on fund-raising and even on evangelism, without this focus being anchored in sound biblical theology. It is hard to escape the impression that correct doctrine is really unimportant as long as one is ‘successful’ – which usually means growing a large church or drawing large crowds or conducting exciting and inspirational meetings.

Pentecostalism sits comfortably with post-modernism and its eclecticism. In a post-modern world when each man’s truth is as good as another’s, doctrinal integrity and theological consistency are not priorities.

Part of this is the result of inadequate theological training. Early Pentecostal leaders like Sarah Jane Lancaster, F.B. Van Eyk and Philip Duncan were lucid, well-read, intelligent people, with sharp minds and a clear grasp of Scripture. But they were not theologically trained. Generally, they were suspicious of theological seminaries, fearful that they would put out the fire of the Holy Spirit.²⁵ This attitude prevailed through most of the twentieth century. Today, many Pentecostal pastors have had only minimal formal ministerial training. Of one Pentecostal denomination, for example, with 300 ordained ministers, it is unlikely that more than one in four has any formal Bible school training. Of the rest, only around one in five has theological degrees and only around one in five has tertiary degrees in any field.²⁶ It is not unreasonable to assume that similar figures would apply to other movements as well.

There has been an upsurge in the number of Pentecostal Bible Colleges in the last quarter of a century and this situation will no doubt change. The formation of the Association of Pentecostal and Charismatic Bible Colleges of Australasia in May 1991, has helped to raise standards, as have government accreditation requirements. However, of the forty or more Bible Schools in Australia, only four currently offer courses at degree level.²⁷ There are also grounds for believing that some schools have sought accreditation primarily to secure the benefits of Austudy for their students, rather than in a quest for academic integrity.²⁸

A glance at history demonstrates clearly that major and lasting reformations and revivals in history have come, not so much from the churches, as from the halls of learning. With the Reformation, Methodism and the Great Awakening, it was educated leaders who

defined and developed the movements. John Wyclif, Jan Hus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Hugh Latimer, John Wesley, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards were all scholars. And all were instrumental in promoting major and lasting redirections for the Church. It is not commonly known, for instance, that Wesley not only wrote a journal and many publishable sermons, but also text books on Latin grammar, English grammar, mathematics and science. And Jonathan Edwards is still regarded today as perhaps the greatest theologian and philosopher of his day.

If Pentecostalism is to survive, it will need similar input. The handful of accredited colleges mentioned above will have a major role to play here. Further, there is a growing body of Pentecostal scholars both overseas and in Australia whose voice is being heard more clearly and whose influence will be more telling in the years ahead.

6 MUSICOLOGY OR THEOLOGY?

There is another significant and rarely recognised trend which has implications that are both exciting and frightening – the musification of the church.

It has always been the case that songs, unlike sermons, can be readily repeated. A congregation who would protest hotly if their pastor preached the same message four weeks in succession, have no objection whatever to singing the same songs for much longer than that. In fact, they will ask to sing them again and again. We can't always blame them: to be honest, any songs may be more enjoyable than some sermons! But the consequence is that music, rather than exposition of Scripture, often has the most profound and lasting influence on Christian life and behaviour.

Some of the great Wesleyan hymns, for instance, have been major tools of teaching and encouragement over the years. What could better describe the wonder of the gospel than Charles Wesley's, 'And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?'

Similarly, modern writers like Norman Clayton ('Now I Belong to Jesus'), Jack Hayford ('Majesty') and Graham Kendrick ('Amazing Love') have only added to the power of the gospel through their compositions.

But it's not just what happens in church. Now, for the first time in history, through tapes, CDs, videos and radio, we can listen to those songs over and over again during the week

as well. Whereas we hear the proclamation of the Word of God only once, we hear some songs innumerable times. We may spend little time in prayer or reading the Scripture, but we may pass hours every week absorbing Christian music. Of course, we can also listen to preaching on tape, and many people do. But it would be fair to argue that we only play a teaching or preaching tape when we intend to give it our full attention. Music can be played any time, and it often is.

The implications are both exciting and troubling. There are questions that must be asked. Is contemporary Christianity being shaped more by what we sing than what we teach? Are musicians now determining our belief-systems? Are younger Christians being raised on musicology rather than theology? Is the musification of ministry a *fait accompli*?

If the response to these questions is affirmative, this is not necessarily a cause for alarm. If the songs concerned are biblically sound, musically and poetically excellent, encouraging and inspiring, it is good that they are listened to repeatedly and even better, learned by heart. In fact, as Robin Mark has pointed out, the use of CDs and tapes has given us a marvelous means of spreading the gospel and making disciples through music.²⁹

On the other hand, there are possible negative connotations. Good preachers spend years in theological study and training; they pray much before ministering the Word; they labour with passion and intensity over their messages. But a song composed in only a few minutes, with little content, may have a much greater influence.³⁰

Sadly, contemporary Christian songs are often biblically and theologically shallow. Alison Clark has clearly shown that during the 1980s and early 1990s, there was a sharp and marked decline in the number of songs specifically portraying the gospel. After an examination of nearly 2000 compositions, she concluded that whereas in the 1950s, some 50% of songs made specific reference to either the cross or the blood of Christ, by the early 1990s, the percentage had dropped to a mere 19%.³¹

This trend can be observed as a subtle development over the last five decades. A vastly over-simplified view³² of the last fifty years suggests that the most popular Christian songs could be classified as follows—

Decade	Theme	Examples
1950s	Witness and Testimony	Since Jesus came into my heart Blessed assurance Jesus Saves Christ for me
1960s	Radical discipleship	Pass it on I have decided to follow Jesus Just a closer walk Hallelujah
1970s	Celebration through Scripture in Song	Oh sing unto the Lord a new song This is the day Great is the Lord Jehovah Jireh
1980s	Praise and Worship	Majesty I exalt Thee I love you, Lord Give Thanks
1990s	Personal aspiration and blessing	Jesus, Lover of my soul Refresh my heart As the deer

For all its commendable qualities — sincerity, passion, fervour, earnest desire — has the recent emphasis on personal needs been a cause for concern? Have we drifted from a focus on the finished work of the cross to the unfinished work of our personal holiness? The shift has been subtle. Whereas in the 1950s the themes were patently based on the gospel taught in the New Testament, by the 1970s and 80s this was not so clear. Many were Old Covenant in their theology. So we pleaded with God to bring us nearer to him, ignoring the fact that he has already brought us near through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13). Or we prayed for a clean heart, overlooking the fact that our hearts have been made clean through Jesus (John 15:3; Hebrews 9:13f). Or we yearned to enter the holy place and live in God’s presence, forgetting that Christ had already

accomplished this for us (Hebrews 10:19f). Or we sang about fighting battles that have already been fought — and won! (2 Corinthians 2:14; Colossians 2:15).³³

Couple this with a post-modernistic disregard for absolutes, and the subsequent shoddy theology of many songs, and the dilution of the gospel of grace was complete. It is difficult to find contemporary Christian songs which are only about Christ or the gospel. Too many are experiential or self-centred in their focus. They refer to Jesus, perhaps, but often in the context of successful living or personal happiness. There are many exceptions, of course, but the fact that even a few such songs exist is a matter of concern. Clark offers evidence that this trend is being reversed. But there is still a long way to go.

7 THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

There is no substitute for the proclamation of the Word of God. When we put anything else in its place, we are departing from the essence of the gospel. There is one fundamental principle of Biblical interpretation and ministry that, if properly grasped and adhered to, will save us from many a dangerous bypath.

What we preach and teach must be *universally applicable*. First, our message must be *universal in time*, and hence applicable to any group of believers at any time in human history. Second, our message must be *universal in space*, that is, it must apply to all believers everywhere.

Paul uses the phrase ‘the whole counsel of God’. These few words say it all.

There are many other observable trends in the Australian church today. In this chapter, I have focused on those that particularly apply to the Pentecostal movement. I am a Pentecostal by conviction. I believe Pentecostalism offers the best contemporary expression of biblical Christianity. It is clearly here to stay – and it is still a young movement. During the 20th century, it came of age. It will be interesting to see what it accomplishes during the next.

QUESTIONS

1. Are people really still the same? Or are there in fact significant differences? If so, what are they and how should they be addressed?
2. How compatible is the message Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15:1ff with what is being taught in your congregation?
3. If the Lord has a different message for each local church, what is he saying to your local church right now?
4. To what extent are the 1996 figures for church growth true of 2001? What is your impression? Why?
5. Is there really a New Apostolic Reformation? Why or why not?
6. To what extent do you think Pentecostal churches have moved away from their original position? Why?
7. To what extent do you think there is a need for Pentecostalism to establish a sound theological base?
8. Concerning contemporary Christian music, what are its positives and its negatives?
9. What do you think of the principle outlined at the end of this chapter? How does it apply to topics such as a pre-tribulation rapture, the so-called 'prosperity gospel' and praise and worship?

RECOMMENDED READING

D.Cartledge, *The Apostolic Revolution* Chester Hill: Paraclete, 2000

B.Chant, *Heart of Fire* Unley Park: Tabor, 1984

K.Chant, *Better than Revival* Kingswood: Ken Chant Ministries, 1994

A.Clark, *What are we singing?* Sydney: Tabor, 1995

P.Kaldor, J.Bellamy, R.Powell, K.Castle and B.Hughes, *Build My Church: Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches* Adelaide: OpenBook, 1999

P.Kaldor, R.Dixon, R.Powell et al, *Taking Stock: A Profile of Australian Church Attenders* Adelaide: OpenBook, 1999

P.Hughes, *The Pentecostals in Australia* Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996

C.Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* Carol Stream, Ill: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996.

¹ See S.Piggin, 'God in History: Some Thoughts on the Recovery of a Useful Christian History,' in *Lucas* #1, November 1987, p.13.

² Some important trends not considered here include the prayer movement, the networking of local churches, and, to some extent, the new apostolic movement.

³ P.Kaldor, J.Bellamy, R.Powell, K.Castle and B.Hughes, *Build My Church: Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches* Adelaide: OpenBook, 1999, pp. 7,19.

⁴ It is of interest that the highest recorded attendances were in the 1950s in the post-war era.

⁵ R.T.Broome, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Protestant Christianity in NSW Society, 1900-1915* Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980, p.37.

⁶ See S.Piggin, 'Revivalism: The Holiness Movement and Millennialism, 1875-1899', unpublished paper, 1993, p.16.

⁷ H.Jackson, *Churches and People in Australia and New Zealand 1860-1930* Wellington: Allen and Unwin, 1987, p.104.

⁸ Bollen, J.D., *Protestantism and Social Reform in NSW, 1890-1910* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1972, p.185.

⁹ P.Kaldor, R.Dixon, R.Powell et al, *Taking Stock: A Profile of Australian Church Attenders* Adelaide: OpenBook, 1999, p.85; P.Hughes, *The Pentecostals in Australia* Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996, p.84, back cover. It should be noted that the NCLS figures were based on returns from only four participating Pentecostal denominations.

¹⁰ D. and G. Smith, *A River is Flowing* St Agnes, SA, 1987, p.83.

¹¹ D.Cartledge, *The Apostolic Revolution* Chester Hill: Paraclete, 2000, pp.139ff. It is interesting that Cartledge does not actually quote the overall AOG statistics, preferring to concentrate on the emergence of the several mega-churches.

¹² These were surveys I conducted personally, the results of which have been incorporated with the APMF minutes.

¹³ Kaldor et al (eds), *Build My church* 1999, p.26. Indications are that from the beginning, Pentecostal congregations have been of similar size. See B.Chant, *Spirit of Pentecost: the origins and development of the Pentecostal Movement in Australia, 1870-1939* Unpublished thesis, Macquarie University, 1999, p.558.

¹⁴ This was probably the result of a changed method of gathering data. In 1996, for the first time the names of several major denominations were listed for the first time so that all respondents had to do was tick the relevant box. If they belonged to another denomination, they had to write in the name. This evidently advantaged the major groups.

¹⁵ The 2001 NCLS survey and the 2001 census may well produce data which demonstrate a different pattern but at the time of writing the published results of these findings are at least twelve months away.

¹⁶ Reliable statistics for this phenomenon do not exist, but there is abundant anecdotal evidence.

¹⁷ Comparative figures for other denominations were – Anglican 81%, Baptist 67%, Churches of Christ 63%, Lutheran 88%, Reformed 82%, Salvation Army 73%, Seventh Day Adventist 84%, Uniting 83%.

¹⁸ Assemblies of God pastor David Cartledge argued this at the 2001 meeting of the APMF Steering Committee in Surfers' Paradise, 13 March 2001.

¹⁹ See Chant, 1999, for a study on the place of experience in the development of Australian Pentecostalism.

²⁰ From personal experience in itinerant ministry in mainline churches.

²¹ See Chant, 1999, pp.103-206.

²² *Good News* January 1933, p.13.

²³ In July 2001, a journalist described both Pentecostal and charismatic churches as 'sideline affairs' – Janelle Carrigan, 'Spirits in the material world,' in *Sunday Life!* Sydney, 15 July 2001, p.6.

²⁴ Kaldor et al (eds), *Taking Stock* 1999, p.85.

²⁵ S.J.Lancaster, *Good News* 12:8 September 1923, p.14. See B.Chant, *Heart of Fire* Unley Park: Tabor, 1983 and Chant, 1999, pp.80f for further discussion of this point.

²⁶ This is an estimate based on available figures for the CRC Churches International, May 2001.

²⁷ Harvest Bible College; Heritage College; Southern Cross College and Tabor College.

²⁸ Austudy is an Australian government allowance for tertiary students enrolled in government-accredited courses.

²⁹ Personal communication, 27 April 2000.

³⁰ Of course, the reverse may also be true. Some songwriters may labour and pray more over their compositions than some preachers do over their sermons.

³¹ A.Clark, *What are we singing?* Sydney: Tabor, 1995, pp.75ff. This is an important piece of research and merits close study.

³² This chart is based almost entirely on my personal memory of these years. Naturally, there are many exceptions. But as a summary of the most popular *themes* of each period, I think the chart is fair. Although some songs were written in earlier years, I have noted them in the decade where I remember them being most popular. Obviously, there is also overlap between decades.

³³ For a different perspective on the effect of the emphasis on worship see John Piper, 'Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation' in D.Moo (ed), *The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997, pp.167ff.