

'Wind and Fire'

- *Spiritual journeying into the 21st century*

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Ablaze with the Spirit

During the twentieth century a completely different strand of church and spiritual life unfolded within the worldwide Christian community. It stood in marked contrast to the ecumenical movement, in the way that it moved from among ordinary people and small groups to influence the whole church infrastructure. This distinctive phenomenon was the quite remarkable outpouring of God's spirit, not simply in revival but as a way of life. It was referred to variously as either 'pentecostal' or 'charismatic', but what became clear was that it was not an identifiable denomination or group. It had a distinctiveness and expression of faith that was as clear as the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches yet it flowed over into each of these groups and was it made up of many denominations.

The outpouring of the Spirit was certainly not new to the ages of the church; neither was the phenomenon of 'speaking in tongues' nor the other gifts of the Spirit. They had been recorded from time to time down through the Christian centuries. And in more recent times the great 'awakenings' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had certainly experienced them, with the Moravians, Methodism, the Salvationists, Moody, Torrey and Finney all acknowledging them.

At the end of the nineteenth century from the company of Methodists and Salvationists there had grown the 'Holiness movement', which taught both 'entire sanctification' and 'the baptism of the Spirit'. This is the womb from which 'pentecostalism' was born.

Roots of Pentecostalism

In 1900, the principal of the Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, Charles Parham, set his students to discover the biblical evidence for the experience of the 'baptism of the Spirit'. At the end of the exercise the unanimous conclusion of the student body was that; the spiritual experience was biblical as a distinct event separate from conversion and was always evidenced by 'speaking with tongues'. It was in fact this unique linking of 'experience and tongues' that gave the 'pentecostal movement' its distinctive character. Having made this observation the students at the college spent nights in prayer in anticipation of the blessing. Then on the evening of 31st December 1900, a student named Agnes Ozman, remembered the biblical precedent for 'laying on of hands'. She asked Parham to lay hands on her and pray for her to receive the blessing, which he did and at 7.00pm she was overwhelmed by the Spirit and began to speak in tongues. The other students followed. A few people had the same experience in other places, but Christians largely shunned it. By 1906 only about 1000 people in the whole USA had been 'baptised in the Spirit' as far as we know.

1904 saw the Welsh Revival in Tonypany under the ministry of Evan Roberts. It had been the result of a growing global commitment to prayer for world revival. The news flashed around the world, stimulating further prayer that it would happen elsewhere. 1905 saw



written contact between Evan Roberts and a Frank Bartleman in Los Angeles; the latter was encouraged to wait on God in prayer. In 1906 Frank Bartleman met a black minister, W J Seymour, in Los Angeles; Seymour had been a student at another of Charles Parham's Bible Colleges in Houston, Texas. Seymour had been locked out of the small black church he had recently started to pastor because they discovered that he believed in 'tongues'. He appeared to be the most unlikely agent of God; he had only one eye, he was poor and disheveled, but he was wide open to the Spirit of God.

In 1906 Seymour began to hold meetings in 214 North Bonnie Brae Street, Los Angeles; many were 'baptised in the Spirit'. But due to growing numbers and complaints about the noise they moved to 312 Azusa Street. This was a derelict livery stable, which had also been used variously as a Methodist Church and a lumber yard in the past. Yet for three years it became the centre for a movement of the Spirit of God that reached to all the corners of the globe. People simply came to meet with God; there appears to have been little preaching, meetings lasted through the night. Hundreds came from Europe and around the world to find out what was happening; they went away with the vision and the baptism of the Spirit. Others wrote or sent handkerchiefs to be prayed over. Not everything that happened was necessarily of God, there were some false prophecies; but it was the launching pad for the move of God's Spirit in this century, which was ultimately destined to touch the lives of millions in every part of the globe.

Pentecostalism spreads

Thomas Barrett was a British born Methodist who had settled in Norway, he had come to New York to raise funds for their mission to Oslo. He raised no money, but heard of Azusa Street. He made written contact with them and was told to 'watch and pray' for the baptism of the Spirit; at 5.00pm Sunday 7th October 1906 'the fire fell'. Barrett returned to Norway and began to publicly minister about the new experience; crowds flocked to hear and huge numbers responded. He was soon ministering in Germany, Sweden and Denmark. In 1908 Barrett had an invitation from Plymouth Brethren missionaries in India, to share what God was doing. The year before they had experienced a spontaneous and indigenous outpouring of the Spirit in which illiterate Indian girls prayed quite unknowingly in fluent English.

In March 1907, Alexander Boddy, vicar of All Saints Church, Sunderland, was so moved by what he heard of Thomas Barrett's ministry that he visited Oslo. As a consequence he invited him to Sunderland that August. This was the first time the 'pentecostal' message had been brought to Britain. Special meetings began each night lasting into the early hours of the morning. The reverberations were felt throughout the nation. Annual Whitsun conventions began to be held in Sunderland, which also had an enormous impact. At the 1914 Convention the speakers were: three from America, four from Germany, one from the Tibetan border, one from India, one from Africa, one from Holland, two from Ireland and two from London. This was clearly a microcosm of what was happening at this time. This era of 'pentecostalism' brought many influential individuals to the fore. One worthy of mention was Smith Wigglesworth the Bradford plumber; not simply because of God's power in his ministry, but because he is an important link between two eras of the movement of God's Spirit. Hungry for God, he heard of the Sunderland meetings and on going experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. As a consequence he began a ministry of healing that was to become legendary and would take him to every part of the world. As

we shall see he was also to be a significant agent in the beginnings of the 'charismatic' movement.

The 'pentecostal' movement inevitably drew many people from the established churches as well as through evangelism and began to grow in size. The early 'pentecostals' had no desire to begin a denomination and simply wanted a network of fraternal relations between leaders. However, the whole nature of the movement was such that it was open to be exploited by insincere individuals and for error to creep in. In recognition of both these facts and in an attempt to control the danger of error, and to establish order, official Pentecostal denominations are established:

- The Assemblies of God in 1914
- The Apostolic Church in 1918
- The Elim in 1926

Of course, subsequently, many other groups in many parts of the world became part of the movement.

WIND AND SPIRIT

Breath and life

The Pentecostal movement, like so many others suffered with the events of the two world wars. As a consequence the denominations became established and the witness and experience of the movement ceased to flow as freely among other Christian groups. In the post-war era a second and much more influential movement of the Spirit took place. It was a continuation of what happened in the early decades of the twentieth century but reached into established denominations and church structures, as well as forming whole new groups of its own.

Roots of the charismatic movement

This movement of God's Spirit was born out of the confluence of a number of quite distinct sources. Each influence brought important characteristics to the movement: -

- **The Pentecostal influence:** in 1936 David du Plessis, the General Secretary of the Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa was confronted by Smith Wigglesworth who burst into his room and prophesied forcefully over him that, "... you will bring the message of Pentecost to all the Churches". The next year in the USA Charles Price, the Pentecostal evangelist confirmed the prophecy. In 1947 David du Plessis began this ministry in earnest, it was to take him to the historic churches and even to the WCC. Many others over the years were dissatisfied with the constraints that the Pentecostal denominations were placing upon them, sensing that God had much more, they added important fuel to what the Spirit of God was doing and saying.
- **The New Testament Church influence:** this came largely from young leaders in the Plymouth Brethren who were hungry for the power of the Spirit that characterised the New Testament; rather than the dead dispensationalism which had overrun the denomination. The patriarchal figure of G H Lang drew many of



them; he was someone with a vision of the 'kingdom of God', though always resistant to the 'tongues movement'. 1941 saw David Lillie come into an experience of the Spirit and move from his local Brethren assembly. With a companion, who had a Pentecostal background, they founded a fellowship at Topsham, near Exeter, in Devon; later they moved to nearby Countess Weir. He became a significant catalyst for much that was to become the accepted shape of the 'charismatic movement'. He explored the concept of the New Testament church and what such a style of church might be like.

- **The Revival influence:** throughout the 1940's there had been worldwide prayer for revival; the increased longing of thousands. In 1951 there was the remarkable spiritual awakening in the Isle of Lewis in Scotland, under the ministry of Duncan Campbell. In 1953 the East African revival broke out at Ruanda in Zaire; this raised the hopes of many even further. This desire for revival led many more to seek God. There were revival prayer groups throughout Britain, and many other parts of the world. These became a seedbed for so much that was to happen.

Charismatic movement spreads

The proper beginnings of the 'charismatic movement' in the twentieth century are generally accepted as being Easter Sunday morning in 1960; with the events surrounding Dennis Bennett, the Episcopal minister in Van Nuys, California. On that occasion he quietly and clearly shared how he and his wife had come into the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues through the influence of a godly Pentecostal couple. There was considerable uproar as the event was grasped by the media; it was reported in 'Time' magazine and Bennett was forced to resign from that church. However, he went on to have great influence at a new church in Seattle that he and his wife moved to. This was the spark that ignited a whole new era.

During the years of 1958, 1961 and 1962 a series of conferences, organised by David Lillie and Arthur Wallis, were held in Britain. They were significant for many reasons, but most of all because of their emphasis on the vision of the church in God's purposes; a broader emphasis than the more individualistic message of the Pentecostal churches. It was also important because of the significant individuals they drew together from different streams and backgrounds, from the Plymouth Brethren, the Apostolic and other Pentecostal denominations, from the Holiness movement, plus Anglicans and many others.

The year 1963 saw the beginning of the 'charismatic movement' proper in Britain. The initial emphasis was the 'baptism of the Spirit' and 'tongues'. No branch of the Christian community was left untouched; every historic denomination had to face the implications. Sadly, many groups resisted the message; there were splits and the inevitable emergence of new groups. In the wake of the 'experience', the wider issue of 'God's purpose for the church' was receiving wider discussion and exploration. Members of the 'historic' churches that embraced the charismatic message used the word 'renewal' to express their experience and vision. They believed that the purpose of the wind of God's spirit was to revitalise the churches. Others wanted to see a whole new order of churches emerge.

From the excitement of the 'charismatic experience' there arose a whole new movement who believed that, while there was a need to be 'renewed' and that it was important to 'recover' those things from the past which the church had let slip through its fingers, God nevertheless had an even greater purpose for his people. This was not only in worldwide evangelism, but also in actual organisation and function, in a way that it was believed was still to be discovered because it had never been known before. Therefore everything was seen as 'birth pangs' rather than 'death throes'.

The whole 'charismatic movement' became a global phenomenon, touching every Christian group in some way or other. In 1990 it was estimated that there were nearly 300 million 'charismatics' worldwide, having tripled in a single decade.

Charismatic Catholics

One of the most exciting developments within the whole 'charismatic movement' was its effect upon the Roman Catholic Church. The events of Vatican II (1962), which brought a whole new breath of fresh thinking into the Catholic community and spiritual excitement and expectation among many, could not have been more perfectly timed. By the autumn of 1966, at the Catholic university at Duquesne in Pittsburgh USA, a group of lay teachers who were involved in social action, human rights and the peace movement, acknowledged their lack of spiritual dynamism. They met with people like Steve Clark and Ralph Winter from Michigan. They had been reading 'The Cross and the Switchblade'; the story of a Pentecostal pastor working with street gangs and addicts in the slums of New York with its message about the power of the 'baptism of the Spirit'. Reading and praying together led each of these young Catholic leaders into this experience personally. Others received their testimony in Notre Dame University; and so it spread. It took root in Europe where it found considerable support from Cardinal Suenens of Belgium. The global effect of the movement was almost incalculable. From prayer groups in parishes it spread like a fire around the world. As an example of the impact it was estimated that in 1990 about a fifth of all the Catholics in America, some 10 million, called themselves 'charismatic'.

World on fire

It has been estimated that the year 1999 saw some 2 billion Christians worldwide; this was about 35% of the world population¹; compared with 30% in 1900. This demonstrates that the twentieth century was an age of commitment to mission and evangelism in the face of huge global population growth. Despite the upheavals of war, revolution and unprecedented social change the church built on its nineteenth century heritage and saw the gospel spread with remarkable impact in every corner of the globe. The means of mission were multitude:

- There was, at the heart of everything, the simple and faithful witness of ordinary people to Jesus, often in hostile circumstances.
- There were those who went to cultures and continents different from their own; initially they tended to be western and white but increasingly they were from the two-thirds

¹ Peter Wagner in 'Target Earth'



world with some 36000 non-western cross-cultural missionaries worldwide by the end of the 1980's, it was estimated that by 1995 the majority of Christian missionaries were from the two-thirds world.

- There was the use of all means and mediums available; books, tapes, films, radio, television and so much more. The patterns of mass evangelism, used so effectively in the 'great awakenings', were developed by individuals like Billy Graham who since the late 1940's preached the gospel to more people than anyone in previous history and saw millions of conversions. This pattern was followed by many with some 2500 mass evangelistic campaigns a year worldwide at the end of the century.

Of greatest significance of the twentieth century was the emergence of a truly 'universal' church. There was also a clear shift of gravity from western nations to those of the two-thirds world: -

- In 1900 the worldwide church was 80% white; by 1999 Christians numbered more than half the population in 223 nations of the two-thirds world, reducing the number of white peoples in the global church to 40%;
- In 1900 some 83% of the total world population of Christians were found in northern nations, by 1980 nearly 50% of all Christians were found in the two-thirds world and by 1985 some 66% of all evangelicals were in non-western countries.

At the end of the twentieth century the church in the west was declining in the face of its struggle with secularism. The story of growth in the landmasses of Asia, Africa and Latin America was an exhilarating sign of continued and increased manifestations of God's presence and power.

- **Asia** has half the world's population and by 1999 made up two-thirds of the human race; with only about 2% being Christian. Nationalism, Communism and secularism all vied for influence. The religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shinto and Islam were all firmly rooted in continent. Added to this, urbanisation had shaken traditional rural life, culture and values. All of these factors made a big impact on the story of the church in its struggle to grow in Asia. Nevertheless, Asia had more Christians than the whole of Europe and North America together; there were remarkable examples of the impact of the gospel:

- In Indonesia, and in Kampuchea before the Kymer Rouge tore the nation apart in 1974, there were astonishing examples of revival;
- In Korea there were phenomenal examples of church growth; with 10% church growth against a population growth of about 2.5%;
- In the Philippines evangelicals experienced 10% growth per year, with an expectation that the church would double every 10 years;
- In eastern Asia there were in excess of 80 million Christians; 80% of whom were 'charismatic' in their experience;
- In China, with a quarter of the human population, Christians faced terrible persecution; the Boxer rebellion, Japan's invasion in the second world war, and from 1949 the impact of Communism with the intense 'Cultural revolution' between 1966-1968. Nevertheless, estimates put the size of the Chinese church at the end of the twentieth century between 50-100 million strong.

- **Latin America** had revolution in its blood. During the twentieth century revolution was not for independence nor national identity, but pursuing social justice. It was said that Latin America saw the drama of the gospel being played out against a backdrop identical to that of Jesus' day; 'imperialism, tyrants, puppets, arrogant soldiers, corrupt tax collectors, religious leaders jealously protecting their interests, violent revolutionaries and monks who hide in the desert'. However, the church grew beyond all expectations:
 - In the late 1940's there were sporadic spontaneous spiritual movements, quite independent of foreign control;
 - In the late 1950's an evangelistic programme called 'Evangelism in Depth' was used in both Guatemala and Bolivia with enormous success. It had as its slogan, 'Latin America will be for Christ', which caught the imagination of Christians across the continent. It seemed an impossible dream, but by the 1960's it saw Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and others increase the total Christian commitment by 10% annually; doubling church membership every ten years;
 - In the 1990's Guatemalan evangelicals aimed to make up 50% of the population;
 - In Costa Rica evangelicals increased over 100% in a four year period
 - In Brazil the 24 million evangelicals outnumbered those in western Europe;
 - By the year 1999 some 20% of the total population of Latin America are thought to be made up of evangelical Christians.

- **Africa** had been part of the church since New Testament times, though missionaries had only brought the gospel to most of the continent during the last 300 years. Islam dominated the north, while in central and southern Africa the majority of the population was still animist. The tides of tribalism and nationalism put enormous pressures on the continent, and the Church, often seen as an agent of foreign exploitation, had to discover its 'African identity'. During the second half of the century the continent saw remarkable response to the gospel:
 - In Nigeria in the early 1970's the 'New Life for All' programme, adapted from the hugely successful 'Evangelism in Depth' from Latin America made an enormous impact upon the nation; sometimes seeing up to 3000 people at a time trust Christ. The church became so strong that there were political tensions between Christians and Muslims;
 - In the Ivory Coast, Ghana and Zaire there were great outpourings of God's spirit;
 - In Zaire the evangelical church grew at 7% per year.

Towards 2000

There is no doubt that the date 2000 concentrated the human mind globally. The anticipation surrounding this date took on symbolic form; it was more than ending a century, it was inaugurating a new millennium. Hopes and expectations ran high. For many Christians there was a strong eschatological feeling; there were over 70 plans for the evangelisation of the world by that date. Among the religious and secular alike there was a mixture of both expectancy and anxiety. From the point of view of the church there were certainly two themes to identify.



- **Revival of religion:** Some secular thinkers had argued that religion would disappear by the end of the twentieth century, all the signs were that quite the reverse would be true; there was a worldwide spiritual revival taking place among all religions and within all cultures. From a human perspective there could be a number of reasons for this:
 - The effects of momentous social and political change was encouraging people to look for reassurance in the spiritual;
 - The effects of secularism were driving people to explore spiritual values;
 - The effects of nationalism encouraged individuals to explore their ethnic faiths;
 - The effects of western cultural influence turned many towards a fundamentalist approach to their faiths.

Some were looking for a more personal expression of faith while others wanted a more authoritarian structure; both can be identified.

- **Cults** were growing fast, with both the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventists doubling their numbers between 1965 and the 1990s, the Mormons raised their world membership to 6.2 million between 1987 and 1990;
- **New Age** influence reached far beyond those directly involved; two-thirds of Americans had practised ESP; 42% attempted to contact the dead, companies spent up to \$4 billion per year on New Age consultants and \$150 million is spent on New Age books, tapes and music;
- **Islam** had 900 million adherents worldwide and was growing at a rate of 2.7% a year to 1200 million Muslims by the year 1999. It was predicted that by 2015 Islam will be the second largest religion in the USA through evangelistic outreach and being theocratic they are pressing for legal, political and institutional changes wherever possible;
- **Hinduism** had 690 million followers among the world population and were growing at 2.3% per year; they numbered 859 million by 1999;
- **Buddhism** had 359 million devotees by 1999, with a growth rate of 1.7%; an increasing number were in the west;
- **Judaism** had only 20 million members by 1999 and growing at 1.1%, parts of Judaism were experiencing a revival with renewed hopes for the imminent coming of the Messiah.

This resurgence of spirituality opened many doors for the church, but there was also a real price. More countries were closing their doors to missionaries, about four a year; but closing doors could also be revolving doors to those who had faith. Added to this persecution of the church was growing worldwide. The number of Christian martyrs who died in 1986 was 10 times the number that died in 1900. The persecution of Christians was greatest where there was fundamentalism, especially in Islamic countries. So as the church moved towards the year 2000 it was increasingly a persecuted church.

- **Challenge of mission:** In 1990 the world population was estimated at 5.3 billion, by the year 2000 it was be over six billion. Some estimate that by 2030 the world population will be 7 billion, others argue that because of the number of young people of prime childbearing age now alive the world population will double by that date. The church in 1999 was about 2 billion strong. Against the background of global population growth the

future of the percentage impact of the gospel upon the population of the whole earth is difficult to predict in purely human terms. Estimates are anything from 31% to 35% of the world population in the early part of the twenty-first century.

While remarkable church growth is taking place worldwide, when this is set against the astonishing 'demographic explosion' in the world population, the long term trend is challenging:

- The global population out of touch with Christians has risen from 329 million in 1491 to 1.2 billion by 1999; proportionally this is a fall from 79% to 23%, but every year a further 146 million new people come into existence with 45 million of them beyond any contact with Christians;
- Some 23% of the earth's population are completely ignorant of Jesus and the gospel;
- Some 97% of all Christians are out of contact with non-Christians;
- Some 91% of all foreign missionaries are targeting populations who have had some contact with Christianity;
- Fewer than 10% of missionaries are working among the 2.2 billion people living in the 12000 unreached 'people groups' in which there is no church; this is half the world's 'people groups';
- These 12000 unreached 'people groups' speak over 5000 different languages and have wide cultural differences; only about 8000 of these 12000 groups have so far been targeted by missions but the resources must still be forth coming;
- Some 95% of all Christian activity benefits only the Christian world;
- Some 99% of all Christian discussion and writing addresses only Christian interests;
- Some 99% of all Christian income is spent to benefit itself;
- Some 66000 people die each day without ever having heard of Jesus; that is 46 every minute.

CONTOURS AND HORIZONS

Panoramic perspective

The waves of the ages and the tides of time break at our feet. We stand at a point where history touches hope within the purposes of God. From a rocky cleft, a prophetic eyrie, we have tried to take in a panoramic view of the landscape of salvation. From our vantage point we have surveyed the terrain of world history from its origins in the mists of time, through the ebb and flow of civilizations, to the complexity of its present form.

We have not viewed it through secular eyes; searching for those random forces that are believed to weather the ages, or the neutral fertility that is thought to spawn cultural achievements. Ours, in contrast, has been the focus of faith that sees the whole from an entirely different perspective. We have seen the same mountains, foothills and valleys. The same complex tapestry of events, with the ebb and flow of nations, the tides of society, but in a different light and against a far broader backcloth. For us the shadows and the highlights fall in different places. The contours and the currents have a quite different significance. At every stage it is the seemingly unimportant people of God who remain, and are persistently the unique feature.



Mapping the landscape

Learning to map salvation landscape is not easy because at root we are dealing with the mystery that lies at the heart of the purposes of God. But it has not been just guesswork; within the biblical text itself there are clues in the way that the prophetic historical writers have dealt with their story. The way the Spirit guided them to understand the significance of their times presents us with keys to help us read all times. If we are sensitive and humble the same Spirit who guided them will enlighten us. Broadly there are three main perspectives that guide our endeavour:

- **Chronological:** this follows the linear flow of events through time and progressive and contrasting cultures; it notes both cause and effect, continuity, change and development as they occur;
- **Exponential:** this identifies the increasing and gathering momentum of events in terms of geographical expansion; social impact and spiritual effect;
- **Hermeneutic:** this provides an interpretation to the significance of events; both those identified by general historians and those of direct spiritual significance, the stages of unfolding revelation.

Reading the rhythms of time against the counterpoint of eternity is a constant challenge to both individuals and the church. There is a need to return again and again to the story; to hear, to learn, to understand and to apply.

Vision to vision

The whole purpose of taking in the view of the landscape of salvation is to try to identify where we stand at this actual moment in the divine perspective of things. It is recognising that the whole of salvation history is relevant to me *now*. Its presence gives me perspective *now*. Its experience gives me understanding, guidance and resources upon which to draw. The lessons at every stage of God's activity in history are relevant *now*. My personal walk with God *now* is a microcosm of the macrocosm of salvation landscape. We know that 'the highway to God's city runs through our heart'. This of course is the constant experience of the people of God; whether local, national or universal, at *this* moment in time.

From our particular vantage point we look back over everything that has been and endeavour to interpret it; but at the same time we are also like Moses on Mount Nebo (Dt 34:1-4), looking forward into the promised land. We know that we can possess it if only we keep true to the lure of the Spirit and follow the Lord with a whole heart (cf Num 14:24). As we look back to the past and understand, we should be inspired to look forward with insight and enthusiasm committed to bringing into fulfillment everything that has been unfolding throughout the centuries. The moment now rests at our feet. The events of the past reach forward into the future. The vision unfolded throughout the age's points towards tomorrow, but is for us to use *today*.

'I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the tower;
I will keep watch and see what he will say to me ...
And the Lord answered me and said:



“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,
So that a runner may read it.
For still the vision awaits its time;
It speaks of the end, and it does not deceive,
If it seems slow, wait for it;
It will surely come, it will not delay”.
(Habakkuk 2:1-3)

In surveying salvation landscape three broad themes emerge; they set the clear framework for all the detail. These themes proclaim that:

- God is king: controlling the tide of history;
- God has called: drawing the people of destiny;
- God is truth: leading the adventure of discovery.

Alpha and Omega

God is king. That fact declares that the landscape of salvation is being hewn out of the sovereignty of God. History may appear bounded by time; but in fact it is birthed in eternity. The rule of God is the single cohesive factor of human history; it is not ‘matter’, ‘chance’ and ‘human endeavour’. The clear declaration that ‘The Lord reigns’ is ultimately the one supremely significant fact (cf Ps 93:1-2; 96:10-13). It is he who measures the oceans in his hand, who marks off the heavens with a span, and to whom the nations are but dust on the scales. It is God who brings the rulers of the earth to nothing (cf Isa 40:12, 15,17,21-22). This is the only true perspective against which to view the panorama of world history, the tides of time being the medium of revelation and salvation.

Salvation history is not one particular interpretation of history; it is the *only* true interpretation of history. Of course only God knows its absolute nature; our reflections are limited by our humanity reflecting what he has allowed us to know. Nevertheless, we can be confident that what he has revealed is sufficient to play our part in fulfilling his purposes.

So God is in control; and the story is the story of ‘the God who acts’, revealing his character, displaying his judgments, revealing his word. He is moving within, and beyond, human tides and the times, clearly drawing history to his conclusion. In spite of our personal freedom God is moving the events and pieces of history towards a cosmic ‘checkmate’. He, and his people, are like the wind whose ‘origin and destiny are unknown’ because they are born of the Spirit (Jn. 3:8). Frequently God moves silently, often behind the scenes, but on other occasions dramatically revealing his purposes. Even then it is only those with spirits that harmonise with his Spirit that recognise the significance of the act.

History flows from eternity to eternity, yet it is shot through with a dynamism and purpose that is highlighted by the paradox of time. The whole of history is eschatological; origins and events may be fascinating in themselves but they only have meaning in their end. History has this all-pervading forward thrust that springs from the heart of God and reaches into the heart of God. It gives meaning, creates momentum and draws all things



after it and towards it. History has no meaning without eschatology. God's promise of judgment is the assurance that all the distortions of history will be straightened out, all potentials realised, all hopes fulfilled, all evils destroyed. One of Satan's masterstrokes has been to blur the church's understanding of God's end time purposes. 'Last things first' remains the vital principle.

Centrality of Jesus

The all-pervading sovereign purposes of God, largely hidden from human understanding, are incarnated in the person of Jesus the Messiah. He is the pivotal feature in the landscape of salvation. Before him, everything looks towards him, the source and focus of hope. In him the power of the age to come has been released, dealing with the root of rebellion, sin. Since the incarnation everything is interpreted in the light of him. The dynamism of the Spirit and the hope of Jesus' consummation of all things at the 'parousia' is the force that has been shaping history up to this moment, and will continue to do so into the future.

The centrality of Christ is the critical factor in interpreting salvation history. Amid all the variety and diversity of events, among the people of God and on the broad plane of history, everything must be weighed in terms of the extent to which they match, and relate to, God's revelation of himself in Jesus. Everything that is true and significant is drawn together in him. Everything that is repelled by Jesus stands under God's judgment, even if initial appearances may suggest otherwise.

In Jesus God has given to us the model of how individuals should live, and the themes and values by which the church grows as his body. He is to be the trig point from which all readings and directions are made. He stands as the landmark guiding every journey. He offers to be the destination of every traveller.

Irresistible tide

The unfolding of salvation history is the story of an ever-increasing forward movement of the people and purposes of God. Throughout the story there has been a constant forward movement by 'pulsations of advance'. It is not that ground has never been lost; quite the contrary as we know. But in spite of that fact the advance has been irresistible and increasing. The most natural way to illustrate the phenomenon is to liken it to watching the tide rising on to a beach. The waves surge forward and then retreat; but each surge takes the water further up the shore than the last time and each retreat is a little less. So it has been with the people and purposes of God. It has been said that 'each major advance of the church has carried it further into the world than the one before it, and each recession has been less severe than the last'. The amazing fact is that even the darkest hours in the story of the people of God have often proved to be very significant:

- In the sixth century exile of the biblical period, God scattered the Jews as an act of judgment, but as they settled around the Middle East they established communities and synagogues which by the New Testament era had done much to prepare the pagan world of the Mediterranean and beyond for the gospel;

- In the sixth century recession of the early middle ages, the majority of the northern European barbarians were converted, this created the geographical centre for Christianity for most of the subsequent centuries.

There have of course also been a great many lost opportunities that have frustrated or retarded the advance of the church:

- The church failed to take the opportunity to build upon the response to the gospel which the Nestorians opened up in China;
- The church failed to be a faithful witness among the Arabs that led to the rise of Islam, their violence towards Muslims in the crusades established deep enmity.

The power of renewal, amongst the people and purposes of God, when situations appear to be in their death throes, is continually breathtaking. We constantly see examples of revival, reformation, and renewal. Amidst death and frustration the seeds of whole new possibilities and opportunities have almost always been present.

The process of advance has not been uniform. It has taken place on different fronts, at different times and due to different reasons. God has used a whole mixture of forces to spread the truth and advance the gospel:

- It has progressed into the world through commerce, conquest, migration, exploration, ideas and radical change;
- It has sometimes moved with changes and has at other times spawned changes; particular environments have affected the progress forward in different ways;
- It has usually clothed itself in the culture and ideas of its time in order to communicate; sometimes to the detriment and distortion of its message but always leaving an impact.

Cultures that have in the past been vehicles of the gospel have passed away, but the message and its effect on lives has remained and the Christian faith now reaching more people than ever before. It has now spread across the earth's surface. It is the most widespread faith in the world, and yet still a minority of the world population is Christian; so much more remains to be done.

If one takes an even broader view, it is quite impossible to evaluate what the full impact that the gospel upon the world has been. In terms of politics, economics, education, science, the arts, social welfare, and so very much more, the environment it has created, has been a means of blessing to millions of people who have never acknowledged its truth. We can only guess at how God's Spirit and truth have enriched so many lives in practical ways without their realising it. The social impact of salvation history is a profound example of God's extravagant goodness towards men and women. We only see 'in part' but one day we will see and understand the whole awesome picture. At the moment our observations are a mixture of both fact and faith.

People of destiny

God has called. Salvation history is made up of the responses of individuals to the call of God as it echoes through time, from eternity to eternity. What we have seen as the story



has unfolded is an ever swelling multitude of people, a company of increasing millions in all ages. They come from ever-divergent races and different cultural environments. God began by calling one original person; Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). He will conclude with an innumerable multitude of called-out ones:

After this I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9-10)

What began as a small trickling spring, became a river then a flood, and is now becoming an ocean. Down through history the flow has often been frustrated, but people and events that have tried to dam it have in fact only created circumstances that have built up its power. When finally the force of truth and life has finally broken through, it has continued with vastly increased force and quite overwhelming effects.

No golden age

One profoundly liberating truth that the landscape of salvation presents us with is that the best is yet to come! God's people frequently fall into the trap of wistfully thinking that some earlier era in salvation history must have been an ideal period in which to live; some 'golden age' that they have missed. Some 'dream time' we ought to be striving to get back to. This is a powerfully seductive illusion. The truth is that the past is but a shadow of what is to come. Of course we can look back at different times and wonder what it would have been like to live then. Every age has had its unique and exciting features; but it has also had its failures. Our times are exciting as any in history, and yet still the challenge to fulfill the purposes of God remains. Let us be inspired by the past, obedient in the present and eager for the future.

A remnant

One of the teasing paradoxes of salvation history is that from among the teeming millions of humanity, we can, on one hand, identify the people of God, while on the other hand who the the people of God really are remains a mystery. This enigma is present because throughout everything the principle of the 'remnant' is working. The remnant are those who give themselves wholly to God; they are the physical embodiment of the truth. These are the people through whom advance has come, but who are they? Where are they?

Some individuals and groups are identifiable; but many are unknown, or what we know about them is distorted. At the moment there may well be individuals and groups whom we regard as irrelevant, but time may well show them to be vitally significant in what God is doing. We can always identify some of the remnant, but we can never fully identify all of them in their entirety. The fact that the remnant is such a foundational concept should make us humble and beware of dogmatism and intolerance. It is human nature to always want to believe that God is especially using groups that are particularly like us; they surely are the faithful ones! This of course may not be untrue. But other people, who may express their faith in quite different ways, for other reasons, are probably also very



important and significant. God is the judge and will be the judge. It is a central fact in getting both our interpretation of salvation history and understanding of the present correct.

Another point the 'remnant' concept emphasises is the role of the individual person in God's purposes. Here again is a paradox. There have been some wonderful individuals in the whole unfolding story, but God's purposes are with a whole people, the company of believers. Nevertheless, when the people of God need direction he invariably raises up a particular person. Individuals have the ability to make a way forward for the people [eg 'Shofet': 'one who obtains right for the people']. However, the fact that God chooses to use individual people in no way erodes the principle that God's purposes are with a company of people. We must remember that it is 'God's call', not the 'weight of numbers', that is the significant thing. Our story has touched a few people by name; thousands upon thousands more of our brothers and sisters are as yet its unspoken heroes. They have left their eternal footprints in the sands of time, and one day their true contribution and worth will be known. Many humanly wise people have laughed at the gospel; they are gone. Thousands of people, of whom the world thought nothing, have left their mark to eternity. These are those of whom 'the world was not worthy'.

Throughout everything the persistent question remains. It is not, "Will God fulfill his purpose" but "Will I be a part in it?" The remnant person is an overcomer.

God is building

God's purpose is to proclaim the gospel 'to all creation' (Mk 16:15), 'to make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19), that 'his will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6: 10). His purpose requires a corporate, harmonised expression of his body that has come to 'mature stature' (Eph 4:13). This can present real practical difficulties and problems:

- We have to build from within a fractured situation;
- We have to build with quite different people, each of whom believe they are right.

The people of God have been at the point we find ourselves many times before, but few have gone beyond; radical movements have always degenerated into 'denominations'. God may use tribulation to achieve his purposes in his people, but how much better it would be if they were to respond and move through in love to fulfill his desire. This being so what are some of the practical steps we can take to make a way ahead:

- Recognise that God is wanting to take his people beyond this present point;
- Remember to put the purposes of God before personal hope and ambition; even in God;
- Recognise where and with whom God is working and what he is doing; become involved;
- Remember to put yourself in relationships where you are sharpened by others;
- Recognise that God builds with relationships; 'knitted hearts', love, trust and respect, above everything else;
- Remember that it is, "Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord";



- Recognise the implications of being the colony and citizens of heaven.

We must never forget that God's purposes are open to all those with the character to take them. The difficulties and obstacles that appear to prevent us from taking them are the very things that will shape our characters to enable us to do it if we have the determination to try.

Adventure of discovery

Contours of truth

God is truth. Truth springs from the very source of the being of God. Truth is the foundational stratum that runs throughout salvation landscape, shaping it and undergirding the whole. Truth is not a set of abstract propositions; it is the values and qualities that make up the character of God. It defines the shape into which God's people are to grow. There is nothing passive about truth; it is living and vibrant, expressing itself in a thousand unique ways. Truth moves through time and history expressing itself in an elemental way. It is always full of surprises:

- **Truth is like 'earth'**: it is organic; the medium in which life germinates, it can be cultivated and harvested or it can be neglected and be covered by weeds. It can even be covered over with tarmac or concrete and left for dead; yet it is always there, waiting to be rediscovered, to be dug up afresh to become a source of life and fruitfulness.
- **Truth is like 'air'**: it is enveloping; it surrounds us enabling us to breathe. Its origin and destiny are both unknown. It can blow like a gentle zephyr or it can storm as a hurricane. It is a source of power and energy that can destroy all obstacles in its path, or be caught in the sails of a yacht or windmill to great effect. Its steady relentless effect will erode the most resistant surfaces.
- **Truth is like 'fire'**: it is consuming; it is constant in its essence, yet unpredictable and changing in its expression. It can gently smolder or it can rage with wild abandon. It can cauterise and heal, it can burn down and liberate, and it can shine out like a beacon giving direction and illuminate dark recesses. It is the gentlest and the most savage expression of God.
- **Truth is like 'water'**: it is saturating; its liquid form moves into any and every area in which it can find space. It washes and cleans. It brings irrigation and fertility wherever it flows. When it finds resistance it will often carve a subterranean pathway for itself, reemerging when the conditions are right. On other occasions it will build up pressure behind a dam, either allowing its energy to take new forms or exploding the obstacle in its path.

Truth is deep, awesome and resonant. Truth is wild, powerful and unpredictable. Truth is gentle, nurturing and life giving. Truth is the energy of origins and destinies. Truth is the essence of the life and character of God.

Structure and truth

There is something about the human temperament that makes people want to build structures that will somehow contain or preserve truth. The simple fact is that this is



impossible. Structure in community is vital, but it can only exist to *serve*, not preserve, truth. Truth by its very nature is dangerous; we simply have to live with this fact. We can neither tame it nor contain it; only live in it. Because truth is like a fire, the structures we build will either extinguish it through lack of oxygen (like a candle under a jam jar), or it will burn them down to the ground (like a match set to tinder)!

The ultimate blasphemy in structure building was the papal monolith of the mediaeval era; for all its high sounding belief that everything was being done to the glory of God. But no individual or group is free from the temptation and danger of doing something similar. If our structures are static rather than mobile, dogmatic rather than pragmatic, fixed rather than flexible; then we are in danger. Remember that it is truth that is absolute not structures. Remember the 'tabernacle'; there is a basic principle here. We are pilgrim people; we must ever be on the move, radical in attitude and ever thrusting through into new frontiers. We are rooted in God, not time and space. The historic expressions of God's people, in themselves, have no shape in the ultimate expression of the people of God. We must take of the good things discovered and press on.

The acid test is where our security lies. Is it found in forms and structures; in what is familiar and comfortable? Or is it found in the living vibrant creative being of the one who is the truth?

Discovering truth

Another vital principle that is revealed by our surveying the landscape of salvation is the fact that each generation must discover truth afresh for itself. Truth is a fire that must be rekindled and ignited in the hearts of each new generation. All the deposits of the previous generations are there for them to draw upon, in fact this is their birth right as children of God; but they must make it their own. Having rediscovered truth, each individual and generation must remind it for themselves, apply it anew, carve it with imagination and push forward with it into untouched frontiers. It is God's heart to renew all who have a heart for him; growth out of springtime and harvest. As a new generation we must work:

- To 'recover' afresh what we have lost through neglect in the past, but also to 'discover' what has not yet been experienced out of all that God has in store and available for us;
- To 'restore' what has fallen into disrepair, but also to 'explore' all the astonishing possibilities that the people of God have yet to embrace;
- To affirm what is 'permanent' when it comes to truth, but at the same time work to 'experiment' creatively with truth.

God wants us to put it to the test; to search out by trying it, to experience it, to discover. God wants us to be creative in our actions and our communications. He wants us to discover the eternal and unchanging quintessence of truth, while at the same time exploring its freshness and ever-vibrant depths.

Unfolding revelation

Parallel to the unfolding of salvation history is the steady uncovering and deepening of our understanding of truth; which we call revelation. At each stage in the story God reveals as



much of his character and purposes as we have the capacity to bear. This activity climaxes in the person of Jesus; but also continues on, in him through the work of the Spirit, into greater depths of truth.

In the patterns of the past we can understand the future, but we must also hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. There is always more for us to see and to discover. John Robinson, the pastor of the church in Amsterdam, which the 'Pilgrim Fathers' left in 1620, said to his departing congregation:

"I charge you before God, and his blessed angels, that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus. If God reveals anything to you by any other instrument of his be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry. For I am truly persuaded the Lord has yet more truth yet to break forth from his holy word ... I bewail the condition of those reformed churches that have come to a halt in religion and will go no further than the instruments of their reformation ... this is a misery much to be lamented."

There is a constant need for teaching and training in what has been learnt and discovered. Our progress forward must be on the basis of 'revelation' and not simply human 'reason'. We must develop a whole 'kingdom consciousness'; that exciting awareness of the challenge of the life of Jesus made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, we must be aware that there are very human reactions, which can threaten our progress forward in God:

- An unwillingness to be taught what truth is;
- An unpreparedness to be changed by truth;
- A desire for personal ambition rather than the kingdom;
- A desire for security rather than adventure and discovery.

To be part of God's unfolding story of truth is to possess the pearl beyond price. As our story has shown in the lives of our brothers and sisters it is something worth living for and dying for. Remember that our future always flows out of our present; therefore God wants us to start from where we are *now*. We can be certain above all else that God will match our faithfulness and obedience with his unfailing faithfulness.

New horizons

When Kenneth Latourette reflected on the whole history of the expansion of the Christianity he said, 'Our story is told. It is not completed ... it pauses with a comma, for it still goes on...'

"I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men (maturity) shall dream dreams (insight, interpretation), and your young men (vigour, strength) shall see visions (stirring zeal)' Joel 2:28.

"There have been great and glorious days of the gospel in this land; but they have been small in comparison of what shall be" (James Renwick martyred 17th Feb. 1688).



“God has had but little takings of the world yet, but he will have before he has done”. (Thomas Goodwin 1600-1679).

“Is there any event predicted by scripture to take place in history of which one can say with any certainty that is as yet unfulfilled? In considering this question I came to believe that there is at least one event, namely, a great revival, which is both promised and, as yet, unaccomplished” (Iain Murray 1971).

“As we approach the twenty first century, we have the opportunity to be proactive instead of reactive, creatively and compassionately responding to the world in which God has placed us. We have an opportunity to move the church into a leadership position in a time of unprecedented change. We have the opportunity to advance God’s kingdom in some partial ways now - in anticipation of Christ’s return when all things will be made new” (Tom Sine 1991)

“It is our unfaithfulness, our negligence and unbelief, our law and carnal sins, that retard the chariot of the Redeemer. The Bridegroom cannot come until the Bride has made herself ready. Let the church be in earnest after greater holiness in her own members, and in faith and love undertake the conquest of the world, and she will soon settle the question whether her resources are competent to change the face of the earth” (J H Thornwell 1812-1862).

We conclude with the words with which we began our exploration of salvation landscape:

“We are living at the very frontiers of existence. We stand with the future open before us, un-lived, full of promise and possibility. Yet behind us lie thousands of years of history through which God has been moving, leading his people, unfolding his purposes bringing us to this present moment.”

The promise of a certain and incredible future lies before us. The challenge is for us to be up and doing in Jesus’ name. In the power of the Spirit our cry and prayer should be, “Your kingdom come!”

Questions

1. Make your own overview of ‘Salvation Landscape’. What stands out most for you? What do you think presents the greatest challenge to the church at the end of the twentieth century?
2. Of all the individuals we have studied, whose story has made the greatest impact upon you and why?

Reading & Resources

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