

Book Review

Pentecostal Churches in Transition: Analysing the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia

Shane Clifton

(Boston, MA: Brill, 2009) 249 pages

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Shane Clifton provides a theoretical model for doing ecclesiology using the history of the Assemblies of God Australia (AGA). His purpose in writing is to assist the Church to reflect upon her self-understanding, nature, and mission during times of transition and/or paradigm shift when “it is necessary to discern what is being gained, and what (if anything) is being lost in the process of change.”¹ Recent changes in AGA ecclesiology prompted this book (based on his Ph.D. dissertation).

Chapter 1 presents his methodology; chapters 2-4 consider three major periods of ecclesial transition. Chapter 5 maps issues to be navigated if the AGA hopes to remain faithful to its heritage and mission.

Clifton begins by arguing that ecclesiological methods should not be restricted to “idealist forms” such as *communio* ecclesiologies that model the church on the triune nature of God.² While ecclesial ideals from Scripture are foundational, this approach leads to conclusions abstracted from church history and praxis. Analyzing only the divine perspective, idealist forms fail to account for the church as a human institution with social and cultural trends and transitions throughout history, even within the history of the biblical text itself.

Clifton proposes a “concrete socio-historical” approach to doing Pentecostal ecclesiology. First, he explains how history should be used by the ecclesiologist to present a critical narrative that “recognises perspectives and interests, agendas and polemics in its sources.”³ Second, his “concrete socio-historical” ecclesiology is grounded in the discipline of sociology. He explains his method of theological engagement with the social sciences. Using the question, “Which sociology?,” Clifton launches into his explanation of social theory and the technical terms used throughout the book. Complexity is recognized in the preface: “Readers who find they are struggling to understand this material might wish to skip forward to the narrative and analysis of subsequent chapters” (p. viii). However, the reader will not fully appreciate the insightful analyses at the end of each chapter without knowing his theory of dialectic social development, its language, and conceptual framework. To his credit, he provides a helpful diagram that sets it out.⁴ The advantage of this socio-historical ecclesiology is that it promotes analysis of concrete situations without the baggage of predetermined conclusions. I will attempt to review highlights avoiding the technical language.

In chapter 2, after examining the “glocalized”⁵ story of early Australian

Pentecostalism's ecclesial development, he concludes that the universal democratized experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit shapes ecclesiology. The independent Free Church structure is led by women and men. Baptism in the Holy Spirit generates an egalitarian culture, and female leadership requires reflections about church authority and structure. The fourfold gospel also transforms the individualism and independent spirit of voluntarist movements (Wesleyan holiness, restorationist, faith healing, faith missions) into a unified Pentecostal identity and culture that develops unity at the social level. Early anti-organizational views of the church ("an organism, not an organization") and attempts at "non-doctrinal unity" are sorely tested and proven unworkable. By the end of this period, there is a transition from Faith Mission to church, not just as the mystical body of Christ, but as an organization. The Apostolic Faith Mission collapses over doctrinal and leadership issues, and the northern churches form the Assemblies of God, Queensland in 1929.

As part of Clifton's analysis of this period, he critiques Margaret Poloma's negative evaluation of the institutionalization process.⁶ Poloma assumes an early pristine Pentecostal experience that results in many women ministers. Ordination is understood to relate to spiritual gifting. She blames the institutionalization process for fewer ordained women, but Clifton argues that early Pentecostalism was anything but pristine, distorted by individualism, and subject to disputes and divisions: "inadequately balancing change with cultural ideals and social structures that ensure integration and harmony."⁷ He posits the decline in ordained women to the influence of the fundamentalist/liberal debate that gains prominence in the early twentieth century. Pentecostals see

themselves as believers who affirm the fundamentals of the faith and are unable to escape the fundamentalist rejection of women in ministry, but institutionalization actually embeds the rights of women to equality in ministry. Clifton agrees with Donald Gee that institutional forms provide an efficient means to meet recurrent needs within the community. The Apostles ensured "the continuance of the revival by 'government'."⁸

In chapter 3, Clifton narrates how the social needs of the growing Pentecostal community necessitate further ecclesial developments. Within the AGA, democratized polity developed during the 1930s to the 1960s, and he analyzes three major trends. First, institutionalizations of missional activities occur. Revivals, built around strong leaders during this period, die out with the person. Exercise of charismata is reinforced when institutionalized into social structures (Bible Colleges) and through cultural propagation. Second, Clifton addresses local church autonomy and inter-ecclesial relationships. He grounds ecclesiology in the assembly of the local church with an "ascending" vision where the universal Church is the communion of local churches, each manifesting the full spiritual reality of Christ's Holy Spirit. Local autonomy is limited by mutual submission for the sake of preaching the fourfold gospel to the world. However, ecclesial sin distorts these relationships, as seen in the internal and external schisms of this period, but cooperative partnership of pooling resources into centralized structures proves essential for accomplishing the mission of the church. Nevertheless, even the centralized structures of the AGA circumvent mutual submission, at times, and stand against the freedom and diversity of local churches in their unique contexts.

Both here and later, Clifton critiques David Cartledge's view of this period as one of "low growth"—dubbing it the "forty years in the wilderness."⁹ Cartledge attributes the movement's later growth to changes in church authority structures from ineffective democratic systems to leadership by God appointed apostolic ministries (in the late 1970s onward). Clifton concludes that Cartledge's descriptions of the period following the AGA formation is not accurate, thereby bringing into question his thesis. However, Cartledge's view that conflict was rife is well taken, except the causes are neither democratic systems nor centralized institutionalization *per se*, but rather evidence of individual and ecclesial sin that is part of the concrete history of all church movements.

In chapter 3, Clifton analyzes the priesthood of all believers and the role of the pastor. He emphasizes that a special call to ordained ministry does not contradict the priesthood and prophethood of all believers, but rather supports it. Pentecostal bodies differentiate the universal experience of the baptism in the Spirit and a particular anointing or gifting for a specific function. The Pentecostal pastor has an important leadership role in facilitating, modeling, and encouraging the charismatic expressions of all believers. He mediates the grace of God's real presence through his or her exercise of the charismata, which includes preaching the divine Word to the assembly. These God-ordained roles encourage all believers to minister spiritual gifts to each other (priesthood) and speak the prophetic word of God to their particular and diverse contexts (prophethood). Thus, all believers are missionally engaged and creating contextually relevant churches. In this period, Pentecostals are social conservatives in theology, but social radicals when driven by the priority of mission.

In chapter 4, he narrates the revolutionary transition in AGA ecclesiology flowing from Charismatic, Word of Faith, and the church growth movements between the 1960s and the present. During this period, the AGA adopted American-style Executives with a centralized structure (1965-1975). Unfortunately, an increasing divergence between pastors and Executives developed over doctrinal, personal, and local autonomy issues. In the 1977 conference, T. L. Evans, a supporter of the Charismatic and church growth movements, was elected as General Superintendent and led the movement for the next twenty years. During his tenure, Evans changed the AGA constitution (1979), deleting authority from the Executives and returning them to the local churches. He remained the General Superintendent, but returned to pastoring full-time, rejecting the American institutionalized model. Consequently, the AGA church experienced explosive growth.

The AG New Zealand (AGNZ) and pastors such as Frank Houston greatly influenced the development of the AGA. Playing a large role in this transition is AGNZ, which readily embraced the Charismatic renewal (with its ecumenism and liberal lifestyles)—even as it did the "Latter Rain" revival of the 1950s. Houston, the General Superintendent of New Zealand, moved to Australia and became the New South Wales State Superintendent. He and his son, Brian, impacted AGA ecclesiology by promoting the Charismatic renewal, church growth principles, and, especially, by restructuring both local and national church government.

Houston, who does not believe in congregational government, appointed elders and allocated each with church government responsibilities. He also structured his church without congregational

membership; instead, believers are “partners.” Only the elders and senior pastor are members. He claims that the biblical priority given to apostolic authority and function of elders justifies this change, but practical concerns of pastoring a large congregation are at work as well. Newly planted churches begin to adopt this model.

Clifton emphasizes how this move away from congregational democracy occurs at the same time that the national AGA strengthened local church autonomy. The combined effect greatly enhanced the authority of the local pastor. Today, almost all AGA Executives are pastors of mega-churches. With the rejection of centralized structures, the mega-churches are given a particular mission field to oversee. These churches also began their own Bible Colleges, leaving the national Commonwealth Bible College to languish—until David Cartledge, a mega-church pastor, was appointed President. As such, he changed the name to Southern Cross College and returned it to national prominence. Nevertheless, the issue remains: what is the place of a national college in a local church movement?

In chapter 5, Clifton uses the scale of values to critique religious and personal transformation, social change, the move away from Democracy with mega-churches, and the lack of women in leadership. He concludes that current polity fails to produce mechanisms for leadership accountability, which allows the post-charismatic AGA to take non-propositionalist approaches to doctrine. In turn, this gives rise to the priority of experience and pragmatism, rejection of critical thinking about theology, and allows a cultural transition to the prosperity “gospel of blessing” and its attendant rejection of immanent premillennialism. All these issues, and more, must be addressed if the AGA hopes to create and sustain churches faithful to their Pentecostal heritage and mission.

Reading this book is like looking into a mirror and seeing double images of Pentecostalism—both local and global. It is a good supplemental text for theology courses. Church scholars around the world could profitably use Clifton’s concrete socio-historical ecclesiology as a method for analyzing their respective national movements.

¹Shane Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition: Analysing the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2009), 5.

²Trinitarian perichoretic (mutually indwelling) fellowship of the three divine persons models the true church’s unity and diversity, submission and mutual self-giving.

³Neil Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 6, quoted by Clifton, 15.

⁴Clifton, 19. He uses at least ten key technical terms to conceptualize his social theory: limitative *integrators* in the *scale of values* such as *vital, social, cultural, personal, religious values*; *transcendent operators* in both the *creative vector* and *healing vector* of change. Social development occurs by transformation of *integrators* by *operators*.

⁵*Ibid.*, 27. The intersection of the global and local contexts.

⁶Margaret Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

⁷Clifton, 71.

⁸Ibid., quoting Donald Gee, "Can this Pentecostal Revival be Maintained?" *Glad Tidings Messenger* (March 1938).

⁹David Cartledge, *The Apostolic Revolution: The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets in the Assemblies of God in Australia* (Sydney: Paraclete Institute, 2000), 117.