CHAPTER ONE

THE JDS DEBATE AND DEBATERS

1. Introduction

This chapter is designed to serve three main purposes. First, it develops a rationale, already briefly mentioned in the introduction, for the importance of this research, especially for Pentecostalism, by demonstrating that JDS teaching’s theological ‘home’, the Word-faith movement, is influential, that the JDS teachers under review are themselves significant to the Word-faith movement, that JDS teaching is important to these teachers, and that it needs to be considered by Pentecostals because of the potential influence of JDS teaching on Pentecostalism. The second aim of this chapter is perform some ‘personal introductions’. Brief biographical information about the three JDS teachers under review, E.W. Kenyon, Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland, will be offered. Thereafter, significant critics of JDS teaching will also be introduced, as will the theological and sociological clusters into which they can be grouped. The third aim of this chapter is to introduce themes. JDS teaching and its theological context itself will be briefly presented, though of course later chapters of the book will offer far greater detail than that given here. Criticisms of JDS teaching will also begin to emerge.

In order to achieve these aims, the chapter consists of eight sections. First, section 2 considers the ecclesiastical context of JDS teaching by describing that section of Christianity where it flourishes most: the Word-faith movement. It considers the Word-faith movement as a whole, its growing influence and its relationship with Pentecostalism. Next, section 3 introduces the three JDS proponents whose teaching on the subject is reviewed in this research. Their relationship both with the Word-faith movement and with JDS doctrine is examined. Thereafter, section 4 offers a preliminary survey of JDS teaching itself, placing it in its theological context, and mentioning the variety that exists between the versions of the three teachers, and among other JDS teachers. Later sections consider the contributions to the debate about JDS teaching
from those who do not hold to it: section 5 introduces significant categories of debater; sections 6 to 8 consider major debaters individually, in three groups under the headings ‘growing opposition’, ‘dissenting voices’ and ‘mediating positions’. Finally, section 9 concludes the chapter by summarising its findings and considering its implications for the rest of the book.

At this point, ‘JDS teaching’ requires definition. For the purposes of this work, it is any teaching that fulfils two criteria. First, it states in so many words that Jesus ‘died spiritually’, refers to the ‘spiritual death’ of Christ, or uses precisely equivalent terminology. Secondly, it uses such phrases in accounts of salvation history in general and Christ’s death in particular that bear some sustained resemblance to at least some of the distinctive teaching of Kenyon, Hagin and Copeland. Thus, for instance, the exposition by Billy Graham (1918–) of Christ’s death is not regarded as JDS teaching on account of his writing the “awful suffering of Jesus Christ was His spiritual death”,⁹ because Graham’s overall teaching on the subject does not reflect Kenyon’s, Hagin’s or Copeland’s distinctives. It must be conceded that this working definition creates two potential difficulties. The first is that, in characterising Kenyon, Hagin and Copeland as JDS teachers, it creates a definition based on circular reasoning. This turns out not to be problematic, however, for these three all share in a clearly distinct view of Christ’s death, and have already been designated JDS teachers by a variety of commentators. The second potential difficulty is that an arbitrary distinction between ‘JDS teaching’ and ‘not JDS teaching’ is created, whereas in fact a spectrum of perspectives is discernible, in which different authors offer increasingly diluted versions, until hardly any ‘JDS’ element is to be seen. As the primary focus of this project is on just three teachers, whose versions of JDS teaching are not dilute, this arbitrariness is also not in practice problematic.


¹⁰ Throughout the book, except where the context demands, the present tense is used of authors known to be alive at the time of writing, the past tense of those already dead, and the present tense when both living and dead authors are referred to.