PENTECOSTALISM AND THE POSTMODERN WORLDVIEW*

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The world is changing and so are the paradigms through which it is understood. We are said to live in a 'postmodern', 'post-industrial', 'post-Enlightenment', 'post-Christian', 'post-scientific', 'post-Newtonian' age. The old is giving way to the new: a new world order, a new economy, a new age, new forms of management, new styles of leadership, new avenues of communication, and a new hermeneutic. In virtually every arena of society it has become axiomatic to describe these changes as fundamental paradigm shifts and to attribute them to a change in the dominant worldview. What are these paradigm shifts and emerging worldview, and how are they producing changes in the way we perceive the life and mission of the church?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the interrelatedness of Pentecostalism and the so-called postmodern worldview. Some have observed characteristics of Pentecostalism which they conclude make it the probable dominant expression of Christianity in the postmodern age. At least one outside observer sees the movement as a prototype of the coming era and seems to be calling on it to provide more leadership in

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solving the problems of the world. Inside the movement, scholars have focused on the connection between postmodernism and Pentecostal hermeneutics. While there is not a consensus in approach, these Pentecostal scholars are calling for the movement to utilize its growing influence by helping to shape the pattern by which Christians interpret the Scriptures. It is the position of this paper that both visions are premature because they ignore broader issues in the relationship between Pentecostalism and postmodernism. What follows is an attempt to provide a broad basis for understanding the place of Pentecostalism in the postmodern world.

The first section of the paper constructs a model for understanding the concepts of worldview and postmodernism, critiques a leading theory of the emergence of a postmodern worldview (the one offered by systems science), and projects a probable description of the systemic worldview which is emerging. The second section of the paper attempts to describe the dominant characteristics of a Pentecostal worldview and

1. H. Cox, 'Why God Didn't Die: A Religious Renaissance Flourishing Around the World—Pentecostal Christians Leading the Way', *Nieman Reports* (The Nieman Foundation at Harvard University) 47.2 (Summer 1993), pp. 6-8, 47-49. Elsewhere Cox has written, 'At its best, Pentecostalism attacks not only the demonic political and economic systems that keep God's children in bondage, but the core of distorted values and misshapen worldviews that sustain these oppressive structures', 'Some Personal Reflections On Pentecostalism', *Pneuma* 15.1 (Spring 1993), p. 31. See also his extensive personal observations and conclusions found in *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

2. Murray Dempster stated that 'In the annual meetings of the Society for Pentecostal studies over the last decade, no topic has been investigated with greater frequency or intensity than the topic of hermeneutics'. Notice the title of his introductory article 'Paradigm Shifts and Hermeneutics: Confronting Issues Old and New', *Pneuma* 15.2 (Fall 1993), p. 129. Some of the conference papers were printed in the society's journal. In fact, *Pneuma* published at least seventeen articles on hermeneutics during its first sixteen volumes (1979–1994). The Fall 1993 issue was devoted to the topic, with four response articles being offered in the Spring 1994 issue. Timothy Cargal's article made explicit the issues behind the interest in the topic, 'Beyond the Fundamentalist–Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age', *Pneuma* 15.2 (Fall 1993), pp. 163-87.

3. It should be noted that this effort to relate postmodernism to Pentecostal hermeneutics is not without its critics. For an insightful debate consider R.P. Menzies' response to Cargal's article, 'Jumping Off the Postmodern Bandwagon', *Pneuma* 16.1 (Spring 1994), pp. 115-20.