
Reviewed by David Bundy

Lewi Pethrus (1884-1974) dominated Swedish Pentecostalism for more than six decades. He was also a highly visible and eminently influential figure in Swedish national life. Considering his impact upon Pentecostalism, and the extensive archival and published resources available, it is unfortunate that he has not previously been the subject of scholarly reflection. This is in stark contrast to the extensive scholarly corpus addressing the life and work of Sven Lidman who was expelled from the Pentecostal tradition by Pethrus in 1948 in the latter’s effort to arrive at sole leadership in the movement.

Persons such as Pethrus pose a special challenge to historians and theologians. He produced an extensive bibliography. There are audio tapes, letters, sermons, books on a variety of subjects (all dated) as well as observations about him in Pentecostal literature from around the world. However it is generically “popular literature” or “folk theology.” Pethrus was certainly aware of some of the language and intellectual categories of classical academic theology and philosophy. However, adherence to canons of the academy was never a priority. Like Augustine, Wesley and other pastor/churchman/theologians, his goals were to communicate his beliefs and will as well as maintain control of his movement, often in the face of controversy. Therefore, consistency and precision were not virtues to which he aspired.

Carlsson demonstrates full awareness of these issues as they relate to the study of a folk religious leader such as Lewi Pethrus. The historiographical problems are more complex for Carlsson because of the decision to investigate Pethrus’ theological structures. The focus of analysis are Pethrus’ understanding of man, society and God. This is introduced by a very useful summary of Pethrus’ life and ministry, a discussion of the key political and religious conflicts, and a critical exposition of the larger theological framework proffered by Pentecostalism which provided the larger parameters for Pethrus’ own thought. The methodological problems receive attention in this first chapter.

The second chapter discusses Lewi Pethrus’ view of man. Carlsson argues that this can be described as a tension between “idealism” and “voluntarism.” The “idealism” refers to the radical orientation of humans toward “eternity” and transcendence. It is this which separates humans from the rest of the creation and provides the basis for Christian ethics and political activity. This is undergirded by strong convictions about the freedom of the will. In classical Arminian and Eastern Patristic terms, Pethrus insisted that each individual has the ability to choose the
course of life in the present and hereafter. The surrender of that will to God in the experience of "baptism in the Holy Spirit" provides the means by which the choice may be made congruent with the will of God.

In the discussion of society (chapter three) Pethrus is shown to have taken as a starting point the understanding of the free will and moral responsibility of the individual. This is shaped, in the absence of proper Christian framework, by alien forces of secularism, he believed that Sweden had degenerated from a Christian nation to a heathen nation because of the impact of secularism, Marxism, Freudianism and relativism. The Pentecostal Christian is to work to restore Christian values to the nation. Here a discussion of the Allan Tornberg controversy would have nuanced the analysis of Pethrus' commitments to political activism. Tornberg would probably have been elected to the national parliament from Stockholm except for Pethrus' plea, shortly before the election, in all media, for Pentecostals and others not to elect Tornberg, a fellow Pentecostal, to that body. It could be argued that Pethrus used his apocalyptic language analysis as part of a larger project of social control. This exception apart, Carlsson has done an admirable job of "decoding" Pethrus' apocalyptic language and its populist function. More attention to the historical outworking and social application of that language by subsequent scholars may help us understand better, Swedish Pentecostalism.

Chapter four discusses Pethrus' conception of the nature of God. Carlsson argues convincingly that God is to be understood as a function of the theories of man and society. God created humans because He needed them, but can only use them if they surrender their wills to Him. Only then does He have the instruments desired for the transformation, qua redemption, of the world. Special attention is given to the combination of aspects of kenotic christology with Spirit christology. This observation alone is worth a major investigation and may provide suggestions for constructive Pentecostal theology.

Carlsson's achievement in this volume is remarkable. He has developed a method of analyzing the contributions of a folk theologian and populist leader which allows the individual to be taken seriously. By presenting the interplay between printed (or oral) text and the details of Pethrus' life, he allows him to be seen both as a thinker and person. As a thinker, it is demonstrated that Pethrus did have a coherent theoretical framework which, while it was shaped and adapted in response to the vicissitudes of his experience, remained quite intact.

The volume makes another contribution through the bibliography appended. A detailed table of contents facilitates access. It is very unfortunate that an index, especially of names, was not included. A caveat: the English summary at the end does not do justice to the volume. It is awkwardly composed (translated?), and often misleading. These concerns, however, do not detract from the accomplishment of being the