

## Australian Church History

I'm sure many of us remember how boring history was when we were in school. Surely it must have been the most useless subject on the curriculum. Who cares about what happened 1,000 years ago, 100 years ago, even 10 years ago? What difference does that make to me today?

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Those of us who have increased a little in years since then, however, tend to develop an interest in history. My theory is that as you get older you accumulate some history of your own, so history generally becomes more interesting. But not only that, as your own mortality becomes more obvious to you, you begin to wonder about the events that shaped you into the person you are today, and shaped the society we live in today.

There is a certain truth to the saying that "*Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it.*" We learn much about where we come from, what shapes us, how to avoid the mistakes of the past, and how to do things better in the future from studying history.

Actually, there is much value in the study of history. From the perspective of a Christian, history shows us how God has worked down through the ages. My own personal favourite period of history is the Reformation period in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, with characters like John Huss, Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox. God did amazing things through these men in the Reformation to bring the Word of God to the masses, deliver millions from the bondage of religion and law into the pure grace of God, and restore Jesus Christ to the pre-eminent position in the Church.

Close behind the Reformation period, is the rebirth of Pentecost and the associated revivals in the last 100 years or so. And particularly the Pentecostal history in Australia. So this morning, my message consists mostly of a very brief history of Christianity in Australia, with a slightly deeper look at the birth of Pentecostalism here and the impact it has had. I am in debt to Dr Barry Chant for much of this information today.<sup>i</sup>

Did you know that, as boring as we might find history, God is not bored by it. In fact, through much of the book of Deuteronomy,

the Israelites were exhorted to remember their history in order to avoid making the same mistakes their ancestors had made thus come under God's judgment. Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7 consisted mostly of a history lesson for his hearers. Which, incidentally, he got killed for. The whole Bible is a history of what God has done, or a history of what God will do in the future.

*(Deut 6:1) "Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, (2) that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. (3) Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.*

*(Deut 6:7) You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*

*(Deut 6:20) "When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?' (21) then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. (22) And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. (23) And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. (24) And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. (25) And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.'*

## **Australian Christian History**

Australia's Western history only goes back a little over 200 years. Captain Cook was not the first European to set foot on

Australian soil. He was preceded by Dutch explorers Willem Janszoon in 1606 and Dirk Hartog in 1616. There are also reports that a Portuguese ship was shipwrecked at what is now Warrnambool in 1522.

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We are a young nation relative to most of the Western world. South Africa goes back over 100 years before Australia, and the Middle East and Europe go back thousands of years. Still, there is valuable and interesting history in our short time as a nation.

Australia was first claimed by Captain Cook when he landed in Botany Bay in 1770. The first Christian service in Australia was conducted by the Rev Richard Johnson, an Anglican minister, in the new town of Sydney on 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 1788, followed by the first marriage a week later, and the first communion service the following week.

Because Australia was birthed as a penal colony for convicts, the early ministers had the unenviable task of being both judge who meted out the death penalty to a criminal, and evangelist who then went the next day to share the good news with the condemned man before his execution.

Melbourne itself was established in 1835 by John Batman. Christian services commenced almost immediately. The first church service was held in 1836 on the banks of the Yarra by Dr Alexander Thomson, a Presbyterian minister. He was followed by Rev James Clow in late 1837 who led the budding congregation briefly. Clow was the first person to take up a landholding east of the Dandenong Creek. He bought a parcel of land in the south-east of Melbourne in the area now known as Rowville, and called his homestead Tirhatuan. Golfers amongst us may be familiar with the Tirhatuan Golf Course on Stud Rd at Rowville, named after his homestead.

Clow was succeeded by James Forbes, who founded Scot's Church which is on the corner of Russell and Collins St in the city. He held their first service in 1837 before they built the church in 1841. Forbes was also instrumental in the establishment of Scotch College and Royal Melbourne Hospital.

If you go for a walk through the city of Melbourne today, you will see some magnificent examples of church architecture. Scot's

Church is one of my favourites. It has the towering steeple that is a common feature of so many of the old cathedrals in Europe.

Other early churches here in Melbourne are St Paul's Cathedral, the Anglican church opposite Flinders St station which started construction in 1880, St Patrick's Catholic Cathedral built in 1858, and St Michael's opposite Scot's Church built in 1866. There are also a number of beautiful old churches scattered around the suburbs and in country towns. While many of them have suffered greatly from declining attendance over the years, they still speak to us of people whose hearts were totally dedicated to serving Jesus Christ and spreading the Good News.

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It is interesting to consider the difference between these old churches and modern church building architecture. The old buildings tend to have stained glass windows showing scenes from the Bible, high vaulted ceilings and towering steeples. Modern churches tend to be much more practical (and inexpensive, relatively) than these. Have you ever taken the time to reflect on the differing philosophies that bring about these radically different styles?

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Today we have an abundance of churches, spanning practically every spectrum of Christian doctrine, belief and practice, as well as a number of cults. Virtually every major denomination is represented here in Australia.

Lutherans trace their origins to Martin Luther and the Reformation in 1517. The first Lutherans in Australia settled South Australia in 1838.

The Anglicans can trace their history back to King Henry VIII in 1534.

Presbyterians go back to John Knox and the Reformation in Scotland in 1560.

Baptists go back to the 1600s, beginning in Australia in 1831. Catholics claim to go right back to the Apostle Peter. The first Catholic priests arrived in 1820.

Others have a more recent history. The Salvation Army, for example, goes back to the slums of London in 1865, and had its first meeting in Australia in 1880 in Adelaide.

There are also a number of home-grown denominations, beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first home-grown denomination was the National Revival Crusade, later renamed the Christian Revival Crusade, which was started by Leo Harris and Thomas Foster in 1945.

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Christian Outreach Centres started in Brisbane in 1974. They now have churches as far afield as Chile and Iceland.

The Uniting Church began in 1977 with the merger of many of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches across the country.

Christian City Church, (now known as C3) was started by Phil Pringle in Sydney in 1980. They are now an international group.

Possibly the best known home-grown example is Hillsong which started as an AOG church in 1983, and is now Australia's largest church with a membership above 20,000, and is a denomination in its own right, with others churches worldwide.

Today there are nearly 30 churches in Australia with a weekly attendance over 1,000, representing at least 11 different denominations. Melbourne is represented by CityLife and Crossway with more than 5,000 members each, Careforce, Planetshakers and Enjoy with around 3,000, and several AOG churches of around 2,000 or more.

We live in a nation where we are free to practice our faith without fear of persecution. Some of the denominations represented in Australia today were born in an atmosphere of heresy, apostasy and brutal persecution.

We owe these denominations a great debt today. They have all played a part in our own history to some extent. Some have been guardians of the Word of God through dark times. Some have suffered greatly to bring a long-forgotten Truth of the Word back into the forefront of Christian thinking and doctrine. Some have re-emphasised the need for social activism and care of the sick, the poor, the defenseless and the needy. Don't be too critical of them just because we think we have our theology and practice worked out better than them. Rather, we should acknowledge our great debt to them.

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## **Australian Pentecostal History**

The story of the Pentecostal movement in Australia is a fascinating one.

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It is a story that teaches us that we influence people far beyond our own narrow circles, and influence generations beyond our own.

A gentleman by the name of John Alexander Dowie is generally acknowledged as the father of modern Pentecostalism. While he never spoke in tongues himself, he had a powerful healing ministry, which was acknowledged in the newspapers of the time. He spent some time in Melbourne in the 1880's pastoring two churches in Collingwood and Fitzroy before moving to the US to establish a Christian community called Zion City just outside Chicago. Zion City had no pubs, no theatres, no gambling dens, no doctors, no chemist shops, and smoking and drinking were banned. It was recognized as one of the healthiest communities in the US.

Dowie was a man of contrasts. He was so admired by many Australians that hundreds of them left their homes to join him in Zion City. But he was also reviled and abused by angry mobs in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide when he returned to minister in Australia in 1904, and had to flee for safety. Unfortunately, the power he held within Zion City went to his head and he declared himself to be Elijah the Prophet and began dressing in robes like an Old Testament Priest.

He did, however, influence a number of significant people, one of whom was the great John G Lake, apostle to Africa, co-founder of the Apostolic Faith Mission denomination in South Africa and founder of the Healing Rooms in Spokane, Washington. Pentecostal pioneers and evangelists FF Bosworth and Raymond T Richey were also members of his movement.

The work also spread around the world, with 40,000 people attending Zion Tabernacles that had been established across the US, and as far away as China, Korea, India, Holland, Scandinavia and South America. Many of Dowie's followers became key figures in the Azusa Street revival.

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Some of the earliest Pentecostal manifestations in Australia occurred at Keswick Convention meetings. The Keswick Convention began in England in 1875 out of the Holiness Movement, and can count amongst its members Hudson Taylor of China Inland Mission, Andrew Murray, South African pastor and author who influenced Jesse Penn-Lewis, one of the key figures of the Welsh Revival, FB Meyer, and others. The Anglican Vicar of Caulfield started the first Australian Keswick Convention meetings in 1878. Keswick Conventions are still held today in Belgrave, but they have long since rejected Pentecostalism.

In 1901, American evangelist RA Torrey visited Australia. More than 20,000 people were converted across Australia as a result of his preaching. 15,000 people tried to squeeze into the 8,000 set Royal Exhibition Building. 1,700 prayer meetings were started in Melbourne.

One of Torrey's converts was Percy Smith, who owned the Federal Hotel Coffee Palace, a hotel that didn't serve alcohol, on the corner of Collins and King Street. He held Bible study and prayer meetings here, and also in the Assembly Hall of Scot's Presbyterian Church.

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The first organised Pentecostal church in Australia was Good News Hall, which started in 1909 in North Melbourne. It was led by a woman, Ma Lancaster, who had been preaching divine healing and the baptism in the Holy Spirit since 1904, concurrently with the Welsh Revival, and 2 years before Azusa Street. Whilst only a small church of around 100 people, they sent missionaries to aboriginal communities in outback Australia, and also to Japan.

In 1912, a WA Buchanan was converted at Good News Hall. He later travelled with Smith Wigglesworth, who visited Australia in 1921 at the invitation of Good News Hall. Buchanan's wife took sermon notes which were compiled into the book "Ever Increasing Faith."

During the Great Depression, this small church also took it upon themselves to provide food and clothing for hundreds of men, women and children, every day.

Good News Hall also brought out Aimee Semple-McPherson who had a powerful healing ministry, and who established Angelus

Temple in Los Angeles. Angelus Temple became the foundation of the Four Square Gospel Pentecostal denomination that currently has Jack Hayford as its most prominent member.

Both Wigglesworth and Semple-McPherson preached to thousands, with amazing signs and wonders at every meeting. Newspapers reported the healings and miracles with enthusiasm. Their meetings became so popular that the Wirth's Olympia circus site had to be hired to cater for the huge crowds. Still people had to be turned away. Wirth's Olympia stood where the Arts Centre now stands.

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Both these preachers chose to distance themselves from Good News Hall after some time over concerns about doctrine. They wouldn't be the last to declare they had no connection with Good News Hall. Good News Hall was not necessarily wrong in their doctrine, but was vague in some areas, and refused to clarify their statement of belief beyond what was published.

It is important to remember that these people were pioneers, and as such had none of the checks and balances that come from having others of similar beliefs around to compare doctrine with and sharpen their iron against. The truth of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit had been virtually lost for centuries, and only began to be sought again in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Hence, we should be careful not to be too critical of them.

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The 2<sup>nd</sup> Pentecostal church was called "Southern Evangelical Mission" and founded by Robert Horne, who had been involved in the Keswick Conventions. One of his visitors was an American named AC Valdez who heard the voice of God say "Arise and go to Sunshine." Valdez had no idea what this meant, but later discovered that it was the name of a Melbourne suburb, so he caught the train there. As he arrived at the new church, he was greeted by Charles Greenwood, who said, "Come inside brother. I knew you were coming. Valdez spearheaded the Sunshine revival in 1925.

The Sunshine revival began in a newly completed weatherboard building in Martin St, Sunshine. A group of people had been praying since 1916 for revival. The leader was a 20 year old Australian named Charles Greenwood. AC Valdez arrived in Australia the day Sunshine Gospel Hall opened. He spoke at Good

News Hall, then at Southern Evangelical Mission before getting his word from God about Sunshine. He began preaching, and had immediate impact. While he didn't speak to as many people as Wigglesworth and Semple-McPherson, he had a greater long term impact. This building is nowadays a Scout Hall.

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Valdez planted a church in 1926 which met in Prahran Town Hall. They called it the Pentecostal Church of Australia. One of its elders was Charles Greenwood. Leo Harris, founder of the Christian Revival Crusade, was converted under Greenwoods ministry in 1928. Another early pastor was J Ellis, who had been a follower of John Alexander Dowie.

Shortly after, the church bought a theatre building in Richmond for £6,000, which they raised in one service. They renamed it Richmond Temple. Within 3 years, attendance reached 300 people. It is still a church to this day, now being an Assemblies of God church and the local headquarters of Youth Alive.

In 1926 Good News Hall had a South African evangelist by the name of Frederick Van Eyck join them. They decided to link up with Apostolic Faith Mission denomination in South Africa. Apostolic Faith Mission had been started by John G Lake, one of Dowie's followers. Good News Hall became the local headquarters of the Apostolic Faith Mission and had 20 churches as members.

Van Eyck moved to Queensland, pastoring a church there until he was accused of improper behaviour with one of the young ladies in the church. He returned to South Africa in disgrace shortly after, and the Apostolic Faith Mission in Australia never recovered. Good News Hall was the original vine from which most modern Pentecostal churches in Australia drew their early life.

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Another early Pentecostal church was the Apostolic Church. This began out of the Welsh Revival of 1904. Two brothers, Daniel and William Williams felt that God was seeking to restore the office and role of the Apostle and Prophet to the Church. Interesting, considering the modern emphasis of NCMI, New Frontiers, and others on the place of the Apostle and Prophet in the Church.

The church started formally in Australia in 1931, and a campaign was held in the Melbourne Auditorium in Collins St in which 700 people were saved, many were baptised in the Holy

Spirit, and there were some outstanding cases of divine healing. In 1933, they purchased an old Salvation Army building in South Melbourne and opened the Coventry Street Temple, which could seat 1,300 people.

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Today many of the Pentecostal churches and denominations birthed in Australia have international reach and influence, some such as Hillsong have had significant influence.

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Humanly speaking, we can trace the earthly existence of the Pentecostal movement in Australia all the way back to John Alexander Dowie in 1877. Many early Pentecostals acknowledged their debt to Dowie, a man who 'prepared the way for further steps of faith.'

Dowie, for all his faults, was a man who sought God to make real His promises in the Word about healing, even though it was all but forgotten and explained away by the rationalists of the day as myth and superstition. He was a man with the courage to stand alone to see God be true to His Word.

But the real reason the movement exists is because God sovereignly decided the time was ripe to re-establish the truth about divine healing and the truth of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit.

As He has in every age, from Abraham through David, on to John and Peter and Paul, Augustine, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, Spurgeon, and right down to our day, He has found people hungry for Him. People hungry for His Word; people hungry for His glory. Hungry enough that He was able to fulfill His will for their day and age through them.

My question to you today is; "Are you hungry for God? Hungry enough for God to fulfill His sovereign will through you? And if not, will you ask Him to make you that hungry person?"

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<sup>i</sup> For much more, go to [www.barrychant.com](http://www.barrychant.com)

