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Review Article of Visions of Apostolic Mission: Scandinavian Pentecostal Mission to 1935

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Review Article

Visions of Apostolic Mission: Scandinavian Pentecostal Mission to 1935

David Bundy, 2009

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William K Kay

This new book by David Bundy is a wonderful piece of scholarship. It is essentially a doctoral dissertation on a large-scale covering Scandinavian Pentecostal mission from its origins up until 1935. The book begins with an introduction to global Pentecostalism, Scandinavian mission, historiography and sources. Bundy's expertise in the Swedish, Norwegian and German languages allows him to delve into magazines, letters, articles and other documents normally closed to English-speaking scholars. As result we gain access to a marvellously rich literature and a set of inter-related events and missions that have been invisible to many of us for many years. The book outlines Pietist, Methodist, Baptist and holiness sources and shows how these different streams within Christianity created various missionary models, the most important of these being that of William Taylor (1821-1902), the mould-breaking Methodist preacher, organiser, pastor, theorist, evangelist and world traveller who championed independent self-supporting missionaries. These missionaries did not need the imprimatur of an accrediting agency or board but were able to follow their call wherever it led with the result, of course, that such missionaries clashed with a cautious ecclesiastical establishment even as they set an example of what could be done by bold and persevering faith.

The 19th-century holiness revival in Norway and Sweden prepared the ground for Pentecostalism, a preparation that was supplemented by contact with the International Holiness and Healing Conference in London in 1885 and the Welsh revival of 1904. British and American writings and ideas made their way to Scandinavia. John Wesley was known and admired; the work of Hudson Taylor was appreciated; William Booth was partially emulated; William Boardman, A J Gordon and Charles Finney were studied.

Thomas Ball Barratt (1862-1940) grew up in the Methodist Church and Bundy is to be congratulated on giving us what is effectively one of the best biographies of Barratt in existence, particularly in accounting for his work as a missionary in Kristiania (now Oslo) and his attempts to raise money for it in the United States in 1905-1906. Barratt learned through the frustrating and humiliating experiences of his trip how ecclesiastical politics could impede missionary success. The Norwegian Church continued to beg for money from its American bishops but its American bishops were reluctant to release finance. When Barratt arrived in United States he found himself unable to access the congregations that might have supported him while being prevented by the Norwegian hierarchy from returning home. He was stuck in New York in a no man's land created by an episcopal power struggle and neither able to go forward nor back. In this financially desperate and psychologically fraught situation he heard of the Azusa Street revival and, after prolonged prayer, experienced baptism in the Spirit and speaking in other tongues.

He reported his experiences in the periodical, *Byposten*, that he had launched and then returned to Norway where his preaching brought refreshing and revival which, predictably,

was resisted by the Methodist bishops and criticised by the popular press. There was no stopping Barratt, though. He travelled to Germany, Great Britain and other parts of Scandinavia. He became a well-known public figure and attempted to organise a spiritual alliance to support mission and to shape emerging European Pentecostalism through the European Pentecostal Leaders Meetings and the International Pentecostal Council. His intention was to create a loose network of supporting churches from different countries which would collaborate to send out missionaries and finance. When the Pentecostal Missionary Union was formed in 1909 in Britain, Bundy believes that Barratt's larger vision was betrayed by the nationalistic narrowness of Alexander Boddy and Cecil Polhill.

Meanwhile Pentecostalism grew in Sweden, partly as result of roving preachers like Andrew Johnson-Ek, who had been a participant in the Los Angeles revival and was able to bring first-hand accounts of those events. There were long-standing mission organisations in Sweden, and some of these, as in Örebro, became Pentecostal in outlook and were able, through their publications, to solicit funding. Equally, O L Björk (1873-1950) the Baptist Pentecostal pastor and teacher, promoted Pentecostal mission through his publications. The relationship between missionaries and bureaucratic mission boards who controlled and directed overseas mission was at first accepted by Barratt and the man who became increasingly influential in Sweden, Lewi Pethrus (1884-1974). The system generated a measure of interdenominational cooperation even as different organisations were competing for money from roughly the same group of churches.

Even without a re-thinking of missionary philosophy, changes on the ground in the status and configuration of a Pentecostal churches in Norway and Sweden had a knock-on effect upon missionary structures. In the late 1920s there was worry that missionary organisation in Denmark was becoming impacted by an exaggerated belief in the importance of apostolic and prophetic ministry as taught by the Welsh Apostolic Church of D P Williams. After Barratt had visited North America and England 1927-1928 and seen the result of Pentecostal organisation, he returned determined to seek a different direction. He was unimpressed by the spirituality of American Assemblies of God and believed that the original revival had degenerated into dead denominationalism. After discussion with Pethrus, Barratt changed his entire missionary strategy: rather than supporting mission boards that controlled the flow of funding and activity on the field, he switched back to the notion of missionaries being supported by individual congregations that were only loosely connected with each other. This was radical congregational mission where each pastor and each congregation might have one or more missionaries that they supported and cared for. Such a model inevitably brought him into conflict with existing missionary boards and, in some cases, with missionaries themselves who were presumably worried that their financial sustenance would be cut off. After a year of conflict Scandinavian mission was re-conceptualised in 1929. Parachurch activities were deemed unacceptable and missionaries overseas were expected to found churches that were not accountable to their funders. This was a model that gave power to pastors of large Scandinavian congregations among whom, of course, Barratt and Pethrus were leading examples. By 1939 the Filadelfia Church of Stockholm had 41 missionaries so that, after the model had transitioned, missionary work continued unabated.

As a consequence of this study of Scandinavian mission, the extent of its reach is revealed. By 1925 there were Scandinavians in India, Brazil, Congo, China, Russia, Siberia, Estonia, Austria and Argentina. The contribution of Swedish, Norwegian (and to a lesser extent Finnish) churches to global Pentecostalism is extensive and under celebrated in the English-speaking world. Moreover a valuable account of the spiritual journey taken by the young

Lewi Pethrus is also included in this book. All this is exceedingly well referenced with the result that future scholars will be able to turn to Bundy's footnotes as a starting point for their own quests. It is not an exaggeration to say that, despite working within the unifying parameters of his Scandinavian focus, Bundy has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of Pentecostalism as it unfolded across the world in the 20th century.

Having said this, the book is not beyond criticism. The survey of previous scholars of Pentecostalism can be questioned. It is surely untrue to suggest that David Martin sees Pentecostals as fundamentalists (p. 7). On the contrary he sees them as successors to the great tradition of Methodism. Equally, the discussion of North American Pentecostal scholars as having provided an unbalanced account of Pentecostalism (pp. 133f) is somewhat contradicted by the care that Bundy has taken to show how the movement and preachers operating within the English-speaking world made an impact upon Scandinavian Pentecostals or proto-Pentecostals. Perhaps most questionable is his characterisation of Alexander Boddy and Cecil Polhill as nationalists who hijacked Barratt's idealistic notion of a spiritual alliance supporting generalised mission. While it is true that Boddy and Polhill supported British entry to the 1914-18 war and that neither was a pacifist, it is also the case that Boddy published in *Confidence* articles showing that his support was based upon the notion that Britain should keep its treaty obligations to Belgium (Nov 1914, p. 204). This was not a war that Boddy wanted. He saw the German invasion of Belgium like that of the village bully beating a small boy and, over all this, was laid an eschatological expectation of the coming of Armageddon (Feb 1915, p. 26). I might also question the notion that Polhill and Boddy set up the Pentecostal Missionary Union with nationalistic motives (p. 231): some of these arrangements were entirely practical and intended to reflect the languages which missionaries were capable of speaking. A missionary organisation composed of polyglot missionaries would have been a nightmare to organise.

In conclusion, David Bundy is to be congratulated on a major work of scholarship and his book deserves to be read all over the world by those interested in mission and in Pentecostalism.