

The Blessing of the Australian Indigenous Revival

PREAMBLE

He is bold, yea mostly an ignorant man who essays to bring all natives under one heading. As the terrain differs, so do the tribes in their speech, customs, and mode of living.¹

This statement is as true today as it was in 1901 and it has caused me to approach my task with great apprehension. All the more so when I think of the character and quality of the Aboriginal leaders, among whom are many that are more qualified than I. However, by God's grace the lot has fallen to me and I have accepted it and been greatly blessed as a result.

GOD'S DEALINGS WITH THE (ABORIGINAL) NATION

In Acts 14:15–17:

God . . . made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matt. 5:45).

He . . . gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'in him we live and move and have our being' . . . 'for we are indeed his offspring' (Acts 17:25–28).

On this evidence we must say that God is no respecter of persons; He loved, and sent His only Son to die for the world. It was the Father's will that Christ should die as the propitiation for the sins of the world.

So there can be no doubt that Aboriginal and European Australia are equally loved by God and stand or fall according to His covenantal program of blessings and cursings. This means that the pain that a people suffer is God's judgment to turn them from idolatry and bring them back to himself, the covenantal cursings are in fact covenantal blessings.

¹ Hoff, C., *Koonibba* (Lutheran Publishing Co., Adelaide, 1926) p. 3.

THE CHURCH AND THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Aboriginal people (along with all humanity) are essential components of the image of God, and the Church among Aboriginal people is part of redeemed humanity as incorporated in the Body of Christ. This means that we are members of their humanity and they are members of ours, without either being required to stop being true to their created nature. As specific racial groups, we are to see our distinctions united in Christ. This is the meaning of Paul's words in I Corinthians 12:13 and Romans 10:12. Even those verses which seem to imply the denial of racial distinctions, such as Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11, are not saying that in Christ they are removed, any more than all gender distinctions are removed.² In fact if this were so, then both bondage and freedom would have to be removed, since there are neither slaves or free. Clearly the lesson is not that differences should not (or will not) occur, but that the differences are not significant in the Abrahamic Covenant. This is the meaning of Abraham's fatherhood of many nations in Romans 4:16 and 17.

A peoples' understanding of God's blessing is formed in the context of their culture, therefore different groups will rejoice in different aspects of the creational blessing. For example, when a European community is revived there will be a noticeable improvement in such things as work out-put, property maintenance and application to studies, because these things are the culturally determined norms by which we assess a person's moral standard. In other words, they are the things that our culture says are moral and good and are the values by which we measure spirituality (or humanity). But is this ethnocentrism a godly practice, are our values God-given norms, or simply personal and cultural prejudices to which we give divine sanction? (For example, we have elevated the old phrase 'cleanliness is next to godliness' to a papal bull.)

When Europeans speak of being made in the image of God, we tend to stress humanity's distinction from the rest of creation which the truth implies, rather than the more essential affinity which it proclaims. Even when the relationship to the Creator is under consideration, it is for pragmatic and not relational reasons (in other words, we try to explain the problems that are here rather than discover the unity that is there). For the European mind, humanity, as higher than the rest of creation, is more important than humanity as one with creation. And, because we want to break free from our bondage to time and space, our theology emphasises the things that separate us from it, such as the Fall and the subsequent alienation. This manifests itself in an emphasis on production as opposed to relationships, the garden becomes a paddock, and the command to go into all the world, multiply and subdue, is stressed at the expense of the command to care and replenish.

ABORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Europeans have difficulty in accepting Aboriginal culture because of the negative stereotypes which have formed our understandings. We have come to know far more of what, to Europeans, is the dark side of their culture, than the light or positive side.³ We

² Remember there is one mediator between God and humanity, the *man* Christ Jesus (I Tim. 2:5).

³ Hoff, *ibid*, p. 8, speaks of the tribal peoples as 'a community loving people . . . they are good natured, kind, carefree and always ready to share'. R. M. Williams wrote in his autobiography, *Beneath Whose Hand*, that the western desert people lived in a state of mental contentment (p. 29). He arrived at this conclusion after living and travelling with the people over a prolonged period. Harris in his book *One Blood*, p. 41, records comments of the surgeon of the first fleet: 'Aborigines seemingly enjoyed uninterrupted health and live to a great age'. See also Flood,

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have never appreciated the degree to which Aboriginal people have understood love, fidelity, trust, patience, quietness, long-suffering, tolerance, contentment, ready acceptance of others, close community life and respect for elders. We have not appreciated that they excelled in artistic and musical skill,⁴ sound teaching methods, and that their affinity with creation was not dualistic. As well as these things, most (if not all) traditional Aboriginal cultures, understood the principle of the shedding of blood for atonement and the concept of the 'kinsman redeemer'. Nor have we appreciated that, when Aboriginal people are renewed in the Spirit, their theological interest tends to be on those things that unite, both to each other and to creation. They stress relationships and human identity.

SOME RECENT HISTORY OF THE ABORIGINAL CHURCH

God blessed Australia when He revived the Aboriginal people, and this began when the Gospel was first revealed to the people by the Holy Spirit about twenty to thirty years after white settlement began. But until recent times revival was on an individual basis and always under European oversight. Since the 1960s, however, autonomy and the idiosyncratic nature of the Aboriginal Church has grown. The beginnings of this growth can be traced back to 1963, when the Methodist Church missionary Edgar Wells championed the rights of the Yirrkala Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory to control their own land.⁵ Soon after, the Mapoon people of North Queensland fought a similar battle against the government and mining companies, but were disappointed when the Presbyterian Mission failed to support them. The battle ended in November 1963 when armed police entered Mapoon, arrested the whole community and set fire to the people's homes, the school, the store and the church. The Presbyterians were in trouble again in the early 1970s, at Aurukun in the Gulf of Carpentaria.⁶

In 1974 a document was produced by Aboriginal Christian leaders, missionaries and Methodist officials, called 'Free to Decide'.⁷ This was the beginning of the truly indigenous church. Soon after this, the Whitlam Government established the Land Rights Commission which resulted in the Aborigines Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of December, 1976.⁸

In March 1981, an initiative of Premier Don Dunstan's came to fruition in South Australia, in the form of the Pitjantjatjara Lands Trust.⁹ This development, and a related growth in the Church among the Pitjantjatjara people, began in the 1950s with a strong Christian leadership emerging in the 1960s. By the 1980s, Church membership was approximately 500.¹⁰

Josephine, *Archeology of the Dreamtime*. It appears that food and water were in ample supply even in the harshest of desert conditions.

⁴ In traditional Aboriginal singing, the melody, rhythm, text, form, location, setting, and the ritual status of the observer all determine the message and meaning of the song. By changing the combination, and/or altering the pitch and/or intensity of any or all of the constituent parts, the performers influence the message conveyed.

⁵ Harris, *One Blood*, p. 832, and Wells, E., 'The Missions and Race Prejudice' in *Racism, The Australian Experience*, vol. 2, ch. 17.

⁶ After the Australian courts failed to provide justice for the people and after the Whitlam Federal Government, which discouraged investment from overseas, had collapsed, five Aurukun elders appeared before the Privy Council in London to plead, but lost their case.

⁷ Harris, *One Blood*, p. 898.

⁸ Mattingley, *Survival In Our Own Land*, p. 81.

⁹ Mattingley, *Survival In Our Own Land*, pp. 80-88.

¹⁰ Harris, *One Blood*, p. 884.

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The following quotes show the change in the Church among the Aboriginal Christian people.

Rev. Ron Williams, an Aboriginal leader of very high regard, once said to me:

Aboriginal people are the most evangelised people in the world.

Secular authorities stated in 1967 and 1970:

For all the effort and money that has been devoted to the conversion of Aborigines, whether in the city or outback, there have in fact been very few converts.¹¹

and

There is little evidence to show that its object of the conversion of Aboriginal people to Christianity has been achieved.¹²

But between the early 70s and the early 90s, God gave increase to the seeds that He had been planting amongst the Aboriginal people, with the result that in June 1996 a bureaucrat interviewed on TV was forced to acknowledge that:

Three in every four Aboriginal people in Australia are Christians.

By reviving the hearts of the Aboriginal people, God has shown how wrong the secular authorities of the 70s were.

THE REVIVAL

On March 14th 1979, a revival began on Elcho Island and quickly moved across Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. A similar experience occurred in August 1981, at Warburton Ranges in the central desert of Western Australia. Then at Yarrabah in North Queensland in June 1983, Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory in 1984, and Meningie in South Australia in the early 1980s. As well as these dramatic times, the Church in the Finke River Mission area (Hermannsburg Mission) has enjoyed continued steady growth without big rallies, conventions or mass revivals. There it is self-funded and now has twelve ordained Aboriginal pastors, twenty (plus) fulltime evangelists and numbers 6000 communicant members from eleven tribal groups.¹³ With each of these movements, the Aboriginal people developed a growing awareness of their lack of control of their own land.¹⁴

The Elcho Island revival heralded a significant change for the Aboriginal-European Christian Church. It was at this point that God's reviving process can be called the blessing of Pentecost for Aboriginal Australia.¹⁵ They were able to say 'the Holy Spirit came on us as it did on them at the beginning'. By speaking to them through their Aboriginality and giving the fulness of the Spirit, God showed that they were approved in Christ, they didn't need another cultural group to mediate the Gospel to them and their Aboriginality didn't need to be renounced. This acceptance gave the people great confidence, because 'if God be for them who could be against them';¹⁶

¹¹ Abbie, *The Original Australians*, p. 242.

¹² Davies, *Australian Society: Sociological Introduction*, p. 384.

¹³ Facts gleaned from personal interviews with Lutheran officials and official Lutheran publications.

¹⁴ Harris, *One Blood*, p. 82, 'The Methodist missions began training local preachers in the mid 1960s. Some of the missionaries have told me that this was in part hastened by the land rights controversy at Yirrkala which had emphasised to the mission that Aboriginal leadership was emerging in the secular world and that the Church should not lag behind'.

¹⁵ Gondara, *Let My People Go*, and 'Nungalinya College, Occasional Paper', no. 46.

¹⁶ Romans 8:31-33.

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‘Hence we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?”’.¹⁷ The European Church would have been well advised to see the Elcho Island revival in the light of the Day of Pentecost of Acts 2 and respond in the way Peter and Paul did in Acts 8, 10ff., and 19. On these occasions in Acts, it was not the first time that a member of the particular racial group became a believer, but it was the sign that God was now moving in a new way among the particular group. All barriers previously considered acceptable were no longer valid,¹⁸ because God was making for Himself one new people which would encompass the cultural diversities of all peoples.¹⁹

The Elcho Island revival gave the general Aboriginal community an increased self-confidence and political impetus. As their dignity and pride in their culture grew, so too did initiatives, such as Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (est. 1984),²⁰ Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship (1970), Bimbadeen Bible College (1979), Central Australian Convention (1985), and numerous other conventions, plus many similar initiatives in the secular field. There was also a very significant change in the ministry of Aboriginal leaders. Prior to the revival they were nearly all evangelists but after the revival they were nearly all pastors and teachers: for example Rev. Dr Djininyini Gondara; Bishop Arthur Malcolm; Canon James Leftwich; Father Patrick Dodson; plus various ordained denominational leaders; commission chairpersons; directors of Church and government agencies. Also since the late 1970s many mission and outreach programs have been initiated and organised by Aboriginal people, for example, the annual Pt Augusta and Alice Springs Conventions. A great deal of international ministry has occurred with Aboriginal people going to Israel, Europe, Africa and Asia. For example, Pastor Rodney Minniecon went on ten overseas evangelistic trips in a three-year period from 1992 to 1995. The revival has given the Aboriginal people a new confidence and has forced the European Church in Australia to take notice of their existence. This has been a painful process²¹ which has often circumscribed the nation’s unrestrained use of its resources.

This brief historical account shows the relationships between Aboriginal people generally, the Aboriginal Christians specifically, and national politics and land rights. This is due to the fundamental relationship between Aboriginals and the land.

LAND RIGHTS AND THE CHRISTIAN

Spiritual revival brings with it a revival in self-image or dignity,²² and this self-image is determined by the value system and world-view of the people. This means that the change which occurs in the people of one culture will be different from that of another culture. For example, when Europeans are revived they may focus less on real estate, but Aboriginals may focus more on land rights. Aboriginal people suffer greatly when the different ideas of what gives them dignity are not recognised. The following quote

¹⁷ Hebrews 13:6.

¹⁸ Acts 10:34f.

¹⁹ Colossians 3:10.

²⁰ Similar initiatives now appear in some other denominations. The Churches of Christ took the lead in 1941. However this was still a European structure with European members.

²¹ In ‘On Being’, May 1995, Denise Champion of Port Augusta said, ‘Non-Aboriginal people go through a mourning period. They see the history of Aboriginal people and have to learn how to deal with it’.

²² This is so because our inherent depravity has not destroyed our ontological majesty. To be revived in Christ is to be revived in an awareness of our true status as human beings.

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from an Aboriginal Christian lady demonstrates this:

How can we obey God if you take away our land? . . . How can we be good stewards of it if we only half own it and someone else can make decisions about it?²³

When land rights become a reality Aboriginal dignity begins to return.

Issues of land stir great emotions in both Aboriginal and European communities because of our idolatrous relationships with it. There can be no doubt that this idolatry is wrong, but the fact that we relate to the land is not wrong but is creational. Aboriginal land rights are the visible tip of this far greater human issue; the desire for a place in Eden. This desire relates to a person's identity, security, dignity and a sense of value and belonging. While in traditional Aboriginal religion this is understood in the environmental/law terms of the Dreaming. In fact it is our ontological bond with the land and has to do with the Dreaming of all humanity. It foreshadows the ultimate inheritance that is promised to all who eagerly await Christ's return, at which time humanity in Christ will say, 'the land is mine'.²⁴

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- (a) The revival has brought much blessing to the Aboriginal people; however, rather than being accepted by white Australia and specifically the Christian community, the Aboriginal people find themselves in the invidious position of having to justify their existence as people and as Christians and argue for their own culture.
- (b) It is one thing to tell people that their lives are in God's hands and He is directing their paths, when they have a rich past, a satisfying present and a bright future. But it is quite a different message when told to people who come from poverty, who live in poverty and whose future is bleak. And yet it is these judgments that assure us that it is time to 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God'.
- (c) The land rights/dignity/identity issues inform most of the Aboriginal-European interaction and dominates the theological works upon which the fledgling Church among Aboriginal people is building.
- (d) The Holy Spirit deals with the affinity which traditional people have with their environment. He has taken them from totemism and placed them on the true foundation of the will and program of God. He revives them so that they no longer perpetuate myths about spirit-beings, but in God's grace they can serve Him. All this happens in God's time.
- (e) The blessing of God on the Aboriginal people has been more obvious since the Elcho Island and Warburton Ranges revivals, but it is by no means limited to these times and places.²⁵ Having been revived, the Aboriginal people confront us with decisions which are made on the basis of a totally different criteria. Non-Aboriginal Australia can no longer stress the command to go, multiply and subdue, without giving thought to the equally relevant command to guard and care. The paddock can no longer be commercialized as a property to be used without restraint, because the Aboriginal people confront us with its creation as a garden; to be a home to be lived in.

²³ Harris, *One Blood*, p. 860.

²⁴ Exodus 19:5.

²⁵ Piggitt, Stuart, in 'Local Revivals in Australia', *Renewal Journal*. no. 2, Brisbane, 1993.

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- (f) The blessing of revival is always preceded and accompanied by the Father's acts of judgment, and these need to be considered seriously if we are to understand God's salvation plan. When these judgments are felt on a national scale and are received in the light of God's sovereign dealings with all nations, then all believers can take heart. This is Australia's experience, the nation has been blessed with a revival that has impacted on our materialism, and God has reminded us through the Aboriginal people that Australia has never been ours to plunder at will. God blesses His people with judgments to bring them back to Himself, the heart of the garden.

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*** Essential reading for those interested in the Church among Aboriginal people.