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## Donald Gee: Sectarian in Search of a Church

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by Brian R. Ross

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*Dr. Ross, a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, prepared this study as a paper to be read to the Canadian Society of Church History during the Learned Societies' Meetings at the University of Toronto. The name of Donald Gee was well known in many Christian circles during the later phases of his ministry, and Dr. Ross, who has had experience of the Pentecostal movement from the inside, traces the progress of this Pentecostal leader from separatism to ecumenicity.*

TALK of "church" and "sect" usually wins a ready interest, for the key words introduce a complexity of theory and opinion concerning the development of Christianity and several select groups within Christianity. One such group, currently the focal point of continued attention, is Pentecostalism. Scholars have sought out the ethos of this sectarian movement, attempting to offer factors explaining its sustained and sometimes phenomenal growth. But will it inevitably display the features of denominationalism? Will it follow the pattern of previous sectarian movements? With these questions in mind we will trace the career of a Pentecostal sectarian in transition. I should like you all to meet Donald Gee.

A native of London, Donald Gee (1891-1966) was raised within English Congregationalism. Converted at the age of fourteen, he first encountered the distinctive feature of Pentecostalism six years later. Months of growing interest in glossolalia were finally climaxed in March, 1913 when Gee accepted by faith the promise of a personal baptism in the Holy Spirit. Two weeks later,

when praying all alone by my bedside before retiring, and when once again finding no English adequate to express the overflowing fullness of my soul, I found myself beginning to utter words in a new tongue. I was in a condition of spiritual ecstasy, and taken up wholly with the Lord. . . . Increasing glory now flooded my soul. . . . My whole Christian experience was revolutionized. I was no longer seeking here and there for spiritual satisfaction—I had found.<sup>1</sup>

Before long, he also found himself confronted by the first World War. His 1916 decision for conscientious objection introduced a series of severe trials, as Gee experienced the blunt and cruel hatred especially reserved for the despised "conchie". By June of 1920, however, Donald Gee had gained new acceptance as the minister of

<sup>1</sup> Donald Gee, *Pentecost* (1932; Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1969), pp. 8-9.

Edinburgh's only Pentecostal assembly. A successful ministry followed, one which served as the preface to another career, that of an itinerant Bible teacher. From 1928 to 1939 Gee literally travelled the globe spreading the good news of Pentecostalism's distinctive message, the good news *Concerning Spiritual Gifts*.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, he became the international pastor to an extensive revival, teaching its members, defending its distinctives, informing its participants. He lived in a Pentecostal world, preaching a Pentecostal message, serving Pentecostal ideals and striving after Pentecostal goals.

World War II ushered in a different role, one of vice-chairman for the United Kingdom's Assemblies of God fellowship. With the end of war and the advent of the first World Pentecostal Conference in 1947, Gee assumed a new task. As editor of the World Conference's official organ, simply designated *Pentecost*, Donald Gee became the one figure ideally situated to receive the focal attention of the movement's international interest. Issued quarterly, *Pentecost* published for nineteen years and provided Gee the vehicle by which he could remain at the very cutting edge of all things "Pentecostal". His editorial abilities were aligned with educational responsibilities from 1951 to 1964, when he served as the principal of the Pentecostal Bible College just outside London. Involved in the task of training future leaders, and interested in the expanding ministry of international Pentecostalism, Gee was led to second thoughts concerning the movement's work and witness. His earlier sectarian world was opened to new challenges as he detected the imperatives confronting Pentecostalism. As he matured personally towards churchmanship, Gee encouraged Pentecostalism to respond in kind.

When Donald Gee approached Edinburgh in 1920, Bible in hand, he was impressed to note that it was a city of churches; indeed, at certain locations they seemed to have been stacked "three and four together". He had come, nonetheless, with the expressed purpose of founding yet another congregation, because "the call of God was in the soul".<sup>3</sup> There was more to it than just that, however, and the thirteen adherents who first attended Gee's store-front shack were encouraged to do a spiritual work which would set them apart from and above "the churches". Grounded in a biblical faith, and empowered by a baptism of divinely spiritual power, they were intended by God to be extraordinarily different. Gee was thankful that God had called these new adherents out of their existing denominations,

<sup>2</sup> Gee's most popular work, the book offers a gift by gift treatment of I Corinthians 12: 1, 8-11, has been republished several times and is currently available from Gospel Publishing House.

<sup>3</sup> Gee, *Concerning Shepherds and Sheepfolds* (1930; London: Elim Publishing Co., rev. 1952), p. 16.

“. . . out of worldliness, out of formality, out of lukewarmness, out of half-heartedness . . .”<sup>4</sup>

Worldliness, formality, lukewarmness—these were the telling sins plaguing the Church. It had perfect decorum; its music was impressive beyond doubt; gifted preachers performed from heavily endowed pulpits; reverence in divine worship and proper order in public services rendered “the churches” impressive, by most standards of measurement. Gee openly wondered, nonetheless, how the Church could carry on while devoid of that one “vital element”—life. He was openly thankful to be part of God’s new programme, whereby the dulling routine of a decaying formalism was being replaced by life, openly manifested in spontaneous scenes of Pentecostal blessing.

Like his colleagues around the world, Gee was absolutely convinced that this fellowship constituted part of a divine “latter rain”.<sup>5</sup> Without reservation he participated in and promoted the creation of the Pentecostal sect, citing a biblical argument to facilitate his point.

It was none other than Jesus who first established the fact that new wine could not be put into old wine skins. Gee considered this an “unalterable principle”.<sup>6</sup> And yet this had been precisely the error of the fellowship’s earliest Anglican leadership, in attempting to introduce the excitement of Pentecostalism into the stale ritual of the existing Church. It was, in fact, like pouring “. . . the new wine of Pentecostal experience into the old bottles of formalism”.<sup>7</sup> It did not work; Gee knew it could not work—a “double disaster” was produced.

Many, alas, lost the Wine and are today utterly dried-up compared to those glorious months of Divine Intoxication which they experienced when the Spirit first fell upon them in Pentecostal fulness. We do not write critically or unkindly, we only feel the need of showing the sure working of the principle, and thus saving others from equal loss. In other cases, where the testimony to a new and fuller experience was forced upon the “old bottle” of some existing church, it usually produced nothing but endless discord and dissension until the bottle was burst amid scenes too painful to recall.<sup>8</sup>

The principle, then, was unalterable; it was also inevitable. Quakers, Methodists and Salvationists had all faced the same step and now it was Pentecostalism’s turn. Unalterable and inevitable, the principle was also very essentially sectarian, being little more than an open justification for naked divisiveness in the Church. Gee was

<sup>4</sup> Gee, *Why “Pentecost”?* (London: Victory Press, 1944), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> A reference to the Old Testament prophecy in Joel 2: 23.

<sup>6</sup> Gee, *Wind and Flame* (Croydon: Heath Press Ltd., 1967), p. 75 (originally published in 1941 as *The Pentecostal Movement*).

<sup>7</sup> Gee, *Pentecost*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Gee, *Concerning Shepherds and Sheepfolds*, p. 15.

well aware of the consequences of his position. He not only recognized the charge of divisiveness but attempted to defend Pentecostalism from it.

There are times when division is a sign of life, and union a sign of deterioration and death. The ultimate and essential spiritual unity of the Body of Christ is not affected by outward division caused through varying testimonies to varying experiences. The unnecessary wails often heard concerning "so much division" arise very often only because folk do not see deeply enough, and imagine that there is no unity except that which is outward and organized.

Let it be frankly admitted that the tendency to divide may often be an indication of virility of spiritual life rather than stagnation, especially if it be on points of doctrine or practice. The very intensity with which men are feeling spiritual things, the great interest which they take in them in times of Revival, are usually the root causes why young Spiritual Movements are often torn by ceaseless internal division. Steps toward "Union" among older bodies of believers, though vaunted as great spiritual conquests, are often in reality only a sign of decay. It is possible to "freeze" together!<sup>9</sup>

Divisiveness was justified, then, for it was a sign of life, that "vital element" which constituted the very heart of all essentially Christian conduct. This life was all the more impressive when compared to the signs of death which permeated "the churches". This life was the essence of God's "new wine"; Pentecostalism was God's "new bottle". In twenty devotional booklets and two hundred brief journal articles, during eight years of pastoral ministry and throughout a decade of international Bible teaching on four continents, a sectarian Donald Gee enforced the sectarian ethos of a Pentecostal movement with a sectarian message, because that message was burning in his soul.

Throughout the first two decades of his ministry Donald Gee was a sectarian, but he was a sectarian with a difference. The "difference" was a thoughtful honesty which enabled Gee to fix his gaze beyond the superficial spirituality of the movement, detecting its errors and openly admitting its excesses. It was this "difference" which eventually isolated his potential for churchmanship; it began to emerge in the 1940s. Services resembling a spiritual "free-for-all" were belittled, as were freelancing young individual evangelists. Cheap, "happy" evangelism was pronounced "nauseating" for its display of worldly publicity in the promotion of revival. Meanwhile, much of what Pentecostals sang was simply an insult to the intelligence. What Gee called "imitation" was the fellowship's most damning error, however—that deliberate, calculated manipulation of pseudo-spirituality finding expression in spurious, forced tongues speech which was nothing but a "vile travesty of the real" and "rubbish".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 75-76.

<sup>10</sup> Gee, *After Pentecost* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1945), pp. 22-23.

This sectarian with a difference stood apart from his colleagues. While they interpreted "the signs of the times", called for Christ's speedy return and preached about "worldliness", Gee kept busy facing difficulties. In 1945 he observed, "I love to face difficulties; that is the way we learn".<sup>11</sup>

From this love to face difficulties there emerges the picture of a man prepared to force upon himself a confrontation with even the most searching of inquiries. Reminded of that "certain disputer" who had cultivated the reputation of being a big man on a little point, but a little man on a big point, Gee openly wondered about Pentecostalism:

Are we rising to the challenge of the hour by concentration on things that really matter? Or are we showing the pettiness of our souls and the smallness of our vision by still fussing about little issues that are of no fundamental importance or lasting value? . . .

Among the multitudinous issues and interests that come upon us as Christians, are we actuated by a due sense of the relative importance of things? Do we make mountains out of molehills? Is our eye clear, our heart pure, our mind enlarged by the Spirit of Christ?<sup>12</sup>

Another question haunted Gee: "Is our Modern Revival Deep Enough?"

"When I get home from these joyous meetings I usually do some thinking. And when I settle down before God and think over these things which have stirred my heart very deeply, I ask this question more and more; the more I see the more the question forces itself upon me, Is our modern revival deep enough?"<sup>13</sup>

Gee received his answer in the years immediately following 1945. With the cessation of hostilities in Europe, Gee anticipated a major thrust of Pentecostal growth. In particular, the British Assemblies of God seemed uniquely equipped to lead that nation in a programme of spiritual renewal. The task, however, was never completed and Gee experienced bitter disappointment as his own fellowship failed to capitalize on its opportunity. Abroad, he knew a second disappointment as international Pentecostalism failed to achieve unity at the first World Pentecostal Conference at Zurich in 1947. Intended by Gee and its organizers as a forum at which Pentecostalism could inaugurate a unified witness and programme of cooperation, Zurich produced little more than a modicum of cooperation amid heated debate over method and motivation.

Defeated by open hostility at Zurich and in despair over sectarian mediocrity at home, Gee was at least afforded the opportunity

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Gee, "Mountains or Molehills?", *Redemption Tidings*, XVIII (Aug. 14, 1942), 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Gee, *After Pentecost*, p. 50.

of raising his own voice to the international fellowship via *Pentecost* journal. The inside back cover of *Pentecost* became the most openly honest and perceptive page in all Pentecostal literature. It was on that page that Donald Gee, from 1947 until 1966, displayed the mind and attitude of a sectarian in transition.

A maturing Gee, who had participated actively in three decades of Pentecostal excitement, began to entertain second thoughts concerning its results. For all their talk of "anointing" and "power" Pentecostal churches too often failed to display the effects of such divine favour. For example, year after year Britain's assemblies had met in regional Day of Prayer rallies designed as a focal point of interest and fellowship. These were inevitably times of great blessing, as distinctively Pentecostal scenes involving tongues and tears followed. Those in attendance from the smaller assemblies often looked to these larger sectional rallies as a source of strength and encouragement; their very size brought a refreshment of spirit which alleviated the sameness created by repeated attendance at most local churches. Gee aptly observed, however, that ". . . year after year the same men and women from the same little assemblies participate in these powerfully emotional occasions, and then return to the same little meetings up and down the land—that year after year register no numerical growth at all."<sup>14</sup> What was happening to all the "power"? Was it, after all, a genuine exhibition of genuine blessing?

The verdict kept recurring in a maturing Donald Gee's mind that the revival was not deep enough. He was beginning to see Pentecostal enthusiasm for what it really was.

Pentecostal enthusiasm always has something of rebellion in it—rebellion against formalism, rebellion against tradition, rebellion against intellectualism, sometimes rebellion against almost any form of order and government. And the rebels are very much afraid of losing their liberty. One of their favourite texts is—"Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty".<sup>15</sup>

Liberty—yes; signs and wonders—yes; but a maturing Gee was reminded that signs and wonders were divinely incidental. They were intended to confirm the Word, and it was the Word which would remain after all Pentecostal claims to enthusiasm and liberty had run their course. The sectarian Gee had lauded "the book". A sectarian movement had emphasized the supernatural and continually expected the spectacular. But Donald Gee had come to realize that "To shout 'Hallelujah' is not enough. Young men and women

<sup>14</sup> Gee, "Can it be doubled?", *Redemption Tidings*, XXVII (June 22, 1951), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Gee, "Unpopular Bible Study", *Redemption Tidings*, XXXIV (Aug. 29, 1958), 14.

are asking for a *thoughtful* ministry of the Word. . . . It is the preaching of the *Word* that the Spirit uses.”<sup>16</sup>

Gee had come to realize, as well, the absolute necessity of Pentecostal statesmanship. The movement, after all, was gaining increased recognition as a constituent member in the evangelical community. On a wider scale, there was talk of a “third force”. Remembering earlier days when the fellowship had suffered open ostracism (and had reacted with mutual ostracism), Gee could chortle that the movement had even become “coveted spoil” for the World Council of Churches. There was a very real sense in which the struggling sectarian fanatics from the wrong side of the ecclesiastical track had “arrived”. Gee was determined that they should arrive properly equipped to lead the Church in its re-discovery of the Spirit.

The Pentecostal churches, by their special testimony to the baptism in the Holy Ghost and fire as a present experience for Christians, believe they have something to offer of urgent importance and value to the whole Church. They ask forgiveness where their testimony has failed by its incompleteness and method of presentation. They pray for themselves that God will give them yet mightier outpourings of the Power that fell at Pentecost.<sup>17</sup>

Notice that it was to the “whole Church” that this offer was extended; Gee’s earlier references to “the churches” vanished as he came to realize with increasing force the impact of Jesus’ prayer that “they all may be one”. He was convinced that a proper role in fulfilling Christ’s prayer would involve the movement in the task of Pentecostal statesmanship. His colleagues were just as convinced that such action would constitute the compromise of Pentecostal standards. Accusations of such compromise were hurled at Gee, beginning in 1954.

The occasion was something as innocent as Gee’s cooperation with the Billy Graham London evangelistic crusade. Graham was evangelical, but not avowedly Pentecostal. “A few ardent Pentecostals”, as Gee described them, knew that cooperation with Graham was a mark of compromise. Gee marvelled at their “colossal ignorance” of events in the broader stream of Christian endeavour. He was appalled by their inability to detect the wider responsibilities of being truly “Pentecostal”. Above all he deplored that spirit of easy sectarianism which allowed for spiritual contentment in isolated “cosy denominational corners of our own exclusive Group”. Cooperation with Graham could be accomplished “Without compromising one jot of our distinctive testimony . . . I do not believe that sound denominational loyalty is inconsistent with inter-denominational co-operation in great affairs like Evangelism that are

<sup>16</sup> Gee, “Remote or Realistic?”, *Pentecost* No. 68 (1964); all references to *Pentecost* editorials can be located on the inside back cover of the number cited.

<sup>17</sup> Gee, “Pentecost and Evanston”, *Pentecost* No. 30 (1954).



the business of every true Christian." And as a parting blow he offered, "And I think, also, that I am still Pentecostal".<sup>18</sup>

Observers began to wonder, however, after Gee and David du Plessis attended a World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission gathered at St. Andrews in 1960. There followed an announcement later that year that Gee had been extended an invitation to the World Council of Churches' meeting in New Delhi, as an "official observer" from the Pentecostal World Conference. The final straw came as Gee openly expressed his intention to accept the invitation.

It must be appreciated that ever since its inception, Pentecostals had offered nothing but disparaging comments concerning the World Council. Gee was a solitary exception:

. . . the radical attitude of some extreme fundamentalists who see nothing in the World Council of Churches but a movement towards anti-Christ is deplorable and does little service to the truth. The violent and abusive language that has been used in some obscurantist quarters has been a disgrace. Deep, and sometimes bitter, as our theological differences may be, we lie and do not the truth if we do not confess to a consciousness that among these brethren in the W.C.C. there is a real love for Jesus Christ and a sincere faith in Him as Saviour and Lord. . . . We may hold aloof from the World Council of Churches, but we ought not abuse it as an instrument of the Devil. The rather we wish it well in all that it is seeking to do to fulfil our Lord's prayer that "they all may be one".<sup>19</sup>

Veiled approval of World Council aims was one thing; open attendance at their meetings as an "official observer" was quite another. British and especially American Pentecostals were outraged, and in the strongest terms possible Gee was advised to cancel any commitments to which he might have agreed. With great reluctance, he declined the invitation.

The topic of compromise refused to die, however, and when an American Pentecostal leader addressed the 1961 World Pentecostal Conference in Jerusalem, he expressed an opinion enthusiastically welcomed by his audience. In words easily laid at Gee's door, Thomas Zimmerman proclaimed: "These are not days for compromise. . . . God has raised us up as a separate people. Let us not surrender our identification."<sup>20</sup> Widespread approval erupted in repeated applause—these are not days for compromise.

Gee responded with a blistering editorial in which his intentions were obvious as he inserted the American's clarion call.

<sup>18</sup> Gee, "Billy Graham in London", *Pentecost* No. 27 (1954).

<sup>19</sup> Gee, "Pentecost and Evanston", *Pentecost* No. 30 (1954).

<sup>20</sup> See *The Sixth World Pentecostal Conference* (Toronto: Testimony Press for the Conference Advisory Committee, 1961), p. 55; see also A. Gilbert, "Pentecost Among the Pentecostals", *Christian Century*, LXXVIII (1961), 794-96.

It is a popular rallying cry for our incomplete loyalties to use some such phrase as "these are not days for compromise". True, but compromise with whom, and with what? These are not days for compromise, but they are days for deep searchings of heart, and perhaps for reassessment of some things we have cherished in easier days, when we could afford the luxury of denominational strife and division, with all its resultant weakening of our resources, and causing of stumbling-blocks before the world. The Spirit of Christ will lead us to examine very carefully the things that separate us from our fellow Christians.

An ability to discern loyalty to the fine fundamentals of the faith remains one of the evidences that we are walking according to the Spirit of Truth. We are prone to judge by secondaries. . . . [We] excommunicate those who have not signed on our dotted lines. We want all men to be "WITH US" rather than "FOR" the Son of God. Heresy-hunting is often a mark, for the discerning, of a receding fullness of the Spirit. We persecute, and we are persecuted, for things that are only relatively important. Yet we pride ourselves we are fighting the battle of the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

This was the mature Gee at his best. This was his answer to the constant carping about compromise. Here was his assessment of Pentecostalism's past. Here was his reply to those who engineered the countless petty divisions within the worldwide fellowship. What a telling summation of so much that had passed, and been applauded, as an integral feature of the ongoing struggle to make Pentecostalism great! "We persecute, and we are persecuted, for things that are only relatively important. Yet we pride ourselves we are fighting the battle of the Lord."

The sectarian was left far behind as a maturing Gee moved in search of a Church. The sectarian had warned of "arid intellectualism"; the statesman held open the challenge of loving God with the mind. The sectarian, like other Pentecostals, reminisced about the good old days; the statesman pondered "the next fifty years". The sectarian ridiculed a social gospel, but the statesman offered this verdict:

The "saving of souls" does not absolve us from all concern with common justice among men. To become just a little too other-worldly and unpractical is always the temptation of those who share in deep personal spiritual experiences and movements. Often the explanation is found in pure, but unbalanced, zeal for "separation". Sometimes it is an escape from unpleasant and difficult reality.<sup>22</sup>

The sectarian, finally, had ridiculed "the churches" in their stale formality. The statesman had come to realize, however, that "... there is a necessity for all new enthusiasms to become integrated into a regular pattern of things, . . . Regular habits in acts of worship and the regular order of services in an assembly of believers are not signs of a cooling of love for Christ and the Gospel. They are rather the wise expression of obedience."<sup>23</sup>

21 Gee, "What Manner of Spirit?", *Pentecost* No. 57 (1961).

22 Gee, "The End of Acts 2", *Pentecost* No. 14 (1950).

23 Gee, "A Pentecost that Abides", *Pentecost* No. 63 (1963).

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What he called "Pentecostal statesmanship" was really Donald Gee's search for churchmanship. Gone was the talk of new wine and old wine skins; gone was the grasping insecurity of sectarianism. The mature Donald Gee, who had "arrived" with an understanding of his own time and of his movement within God's time, knew that Pentecostalism could also "arrive" with a vital contribution to the Church. It is this mature Donald Gee, a sectarian in transition, who offers valuable instruction to all Pentecostals, classic, Catholic and otherwise. It is this mature Donald Gee, a Pentecostal in search of a Church, who offers an intriguing study to all churchmen interested in a ministry of the eternal Spirit.

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