

STUDY 9

READING: REVELATIONS 14:6-13

I saw an angel flying overhead with the everlasting Good News to spread to those who live on earth—to every nation, tribe, language, and people. The angel said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the time has come for him to judge. Worship the one who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs.”

Another angel, a second one, followed him, and said, “Fallen! Babylon the Great has fallen! She has made all the nations drink the wine of her passionate sexual sins.” Another angel, a third one, followed them, and said in a loud voice, “Whoever worships the beast or its statue, whoever is branded on his forehead or his hand, will drink the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured unmixed into the cup of God’s anger. Then he will be tortured by fiery sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the lamb. The smoke from their torture will go up forever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast or its statue, or for anyone branded with its name.” In this situation God’s holy people, who obey his commands and keep their faith in Jesus, need endurance.

I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: From now on those who die believing in the Lord are blessed.” “Yes,” says the Spirit. “Let them rest from their hard work. What they have done goes with them.”

GOD’S DEALINGS WITH THE (ABORIGINAL) NATIONS.

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 living¹.

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 blessing and judgement. The pain that a people suffer is God’s judgment to turn us from idolatry and bring us back to himself, these judgements then become the means God uses for covenantal blessings.

The Spirit of God has been awakening individuals and communities throughout Australia's colonial history. The convention movement was part of this process from its humble beginnings in relative obscurity in the Eastern states until the formation of the AEF. Then in 1982 at the same time that AICC was forming on Elcho Island a convention was held at Warburton Ranges in WA. It attracted over two thousand Aboriginal people². This was a time of large scale revival led entirely by Aboriginal people. But it was not alone and just as God was working from opposite sides of Australia and brought about the AEF so he was working on the north coast at Galiwin’ku on Elcho Island, Warburton Community in the Western Desert of WA and Yarrabah on the East coast in Queensland. Not only did God show himself unconstrained by geography but he is unconstrained by denominational differences; he worked in the context of independent missions, Church of Christ, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting church structures to forge his living Temple among Aboriginal Australia.

THE BLESSING AND CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS CHURCH

Europeans often have difficulty accepting Aboriginal culture because of the negative stereotypes which have formed our understandings. Sometimes we have known more of what, to Europeans, is the dark side of Aboriginal culture, than the light or positive side³. We have never appreciated

¹ C. Hoff, *Koonibba*, 1926, 3.

² John Harris, *One Blood*, 1995, 871.

³ C. Hoff, *Koonibba*, 1926, 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. John Harris in his book *One Blood*, 1990, 41, records comments of the surgeon of the first fleet: ‘Aborigines seemingly enjoyed uninterrupted health and live to a great age’. See also Josephine Flood, *Archeology of the Dreamtime*, 1995. It appears that food and water were in ample supply even in the harshest of desert conditions.

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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 skill⁴, 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 stressed relationships and human identity.

In regards to the practise of church we often have 'Welcome to country' or "Acknowledgment of the original owners", For the opening of a new church or a dedication we might have a Smoking ceremony. Fusion ministries holds a water sharing ceremony at the beginning of the Easter March here in Adelaide.

The Elcho Island revival gave the general Aboriginal community an increased self-confidence and renewed political impetus and brought to the fore Aboriginal leaders such as Rev. Dr Djinyinini Gondara, Bishop Arthur Malcolm, Canon James Leftwich, (Father) Patrick Dodson. Plus various ordained denominational leaders such as Rev Graham Paulson; 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, such as the Pt Augusta and Alice Springs Conventions. A great deal of international ministry has occurred with increased numbers of Aboriginal people going to Israel, Europe, Africa and Asia. 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 can be a painful process⁵ sometimes circumscribing the nation's seemingly unrestrained use of natural resources.

MARY GRAHAM SPEAKS TO US

WEAKNESSES IN THE CURRENT SITUATION

Limited resources for remote area congregations; Bibles, Sunday School material, text books, in English and/or local language, technology such as OHP, DP, screens, safe storage from weather, pilfering, vandalism and vermin.

Limited literacy skills in English or local language for many communities; due to changing Government policies and forced mixed language communities.

Limited funds; missionary failed to teach about tithes and offerings. Giving could be practised on an individual or community basis via incomes, Government payments or royalties.

Isolation both geographical and social. Mission occurs by way of evangelistic trips to other communities and ministry trips to major city centres are sometimes arranged by mission or denominational personnel. However, apart from these notable exceptions there is a general lack of interaction between mainstream congregations and Aboriginal Fellowships.

Imposed Western Structures. These can cause a sense of frustration, inadequacy and failure.

Emphasis on indigeneity can result in a denial of our universal christian heritage and a repeat of the theological pitfalls of the past.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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.⁶ They were able to say 'the Holy Spirit came on us as it did on them at the

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 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'.

⁶Gondara. Let My People Go. & Nungalinya College, Occasional Paper Number 46.

beginning'. By speaking to the people through their Aboriginality and giving the fullness 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'* (Romans 8:31-33), *'Hence we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?'*(Hebrews 13:6). The European church would have been well advised to see the Elcho Island revival in light of the Day of Pentecost of Acts 2 and respond 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 (Acts 10:34f) because God was making for himself one new people which would encompassed the cultural diversities of all peoples (Colossians 3:10).

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 twenty three ordained Aboriginal pastors and approximately twenty six evangelist and numbers over six thousand communicant members from eleven tribal groups⁷. With each of these movements, the Aboriginal people developed a growing awareness of their lack of control of their own land⁸.

LAND RIGHTS

Spiritual revival brings with it a revival in self-image or dignity,⁹ 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 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?*¹⁰

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'.¹¹

The blessing of revival are 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 believers can take heart. This is Australia's experience. Our black history causes us to face our national identity with great humility. God has reminded us through the

⁷ Facts gleaned from personal interviews with Lutheran officials and official Lutheran publications.

⁸ John Harris, *One Blood*, . 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'.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ John Harris, *One Blood*, 1990, 860.

¹¹ Exodus 19:5

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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.

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.

Rev 21:22- 22:7

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place." "Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book."