Interview with Rev Dr Barry Chant
President, Tabor Bible College
held at CSAC, 5 April 1994

mh: Barry, can we talk about being an historian of pentecostalism in Australia. There are obvious sources of your interest, but would you like to tell me how you got interested in this branch of history in the first place?

Chant: That's a question which is hard to answer - as to how I got interested. I guess I just did. I don't know that there was any special sequence of events that led to that, except my own interest in history through having studied history at University, and then through doing Christian history. I should say that, initially, some of my pentecostal peers in the 1960s were not enthusiastic. It is interesting that some were most helpful. When I asked to interview some of the old timers, I found that some people really went out of their way to help me find the information. Some of the older folk, however, were guarded. Pastors and leaders in my own movement couldn't understand why I was so interested in the past when the present and the future were what was important. Who worries about the past, after all?! To some extent I was sympathetic about that because some of the things that they remembered from the past weren't all that good. They wanted to forget them. And then I found that, because I belonged to a pentecostal denomination, the Christian Revival Crusade at that time, I found that when I went to leaders in the Assembly of God churches, they didn't want to show me their books. They didn't want to give me access: I was only in my early twenties, they didn't know me, they were very guarded.

That, looking back now, was a major problem, because had I been able to access that information then, it would have made life a lot easier now. When I go back and try and get the information now, a lot of it has disappeared. Either the people who knew the stuff have died, or in some cases the records have just been lost. Over the last thirty years, lots of new church buildings have gone up, things have been shifted, old halls have been demolished, papers have been thrown out. So even where records did exist, sometimes they have been lost. Even then, though, it was difficult, because the early pentecostal movement was such a spontaneous thing, mainly meeting in private homes and hired halls. Secretaries tended to stash stuff in the shed out the back, or under the bed somewhere at home - of course, then, a few years later a new secretary is appointed, and sometimes papers get handed on and sometimes they don't. I have had several heartbreaking stories where people have said, 'I had all the stuff, but I handed it on to the new secretary, and who knows where it is?' Such is the case at Parkes, last year - the man who had been secretary for thirty years or so had kept everything. He's now in his seventies, and when he retired he handed over everything to a younger man, and they don't know where the stuff is. It got put in the church, and someone apparently threw it out. Of course, Parkes is one of the oldest pentecostal churches in the country - so they are the frustrations.

So there were a few difficulties in the early stages, and there still are. Of course, now, a lot of the early pioneers have died who were alive in the 1920s and 1930s, which is the era that I am researching. So I am now talking to children who were alive in the 1920s and 1930s, but of course they were only eight, nine, ten years old, and their memories are child's perspectives. These are not to be rejected, but they didn't always know what was going on behind the scenes.

mh: When you started to write in this area, you were very much on your own...

Chant: Yes, and on my own in all sorts of ways. I didn't know much about writing history. I had studied history, and I had read other peoples' books, but I hadn't really thought about methodology particularly. I knew that I had to try and be objective, so I tried to do that - with moderate success, I think. But I didn't know anything about relating this history to other church histories, and seeing things in context - I just wrote the story of Pentecostalism without any serious reference to what was happening in the other churches. There was no real point of comparison. I had people read the manuscript, but they weren't historians, they were pastors. They read it from a pastoral perspective, and so they said, 'you can't say that', or 'you mustn't say this.' So I modified it a bit. Not enough - I nearly got taken to court after the first edition for something I said about one bloke who happened to still be alive. I discovered that it is alot safer writing history about dead people than about the living! The families can still get upset, of course - it is difficult, and of course any historian who is writing modern history faces that. That's difficult, because you want to be objective, and you want to tell the truth, but you think 'well, I'd better not say that!'

mh: Has the 'aloneness' changed since then?

Chant: Oh yes, it is much different now. Everywhere I go now, if I want to interview people, the pastors open the door and say, 'here are the names and addresses.' They are very helpful now. I think now that there isa much greater appreciation. Thirty years ago, in the 1960s, a lot of people were still alive who remembered the 1920s and 1930s quite clearly, and who had been involved and so they didn't see any need to write it down because they knew it all. Now, very few people are alive were active as adults in that period, and the leaders are very ignorant about what happened in the 1920s and 1930s, and so there is much greater interest to find out what did happen in those early days. I think there is a willingness to learn from some of that. I suppose, partly, it is also because I am much better known now, and I have established a bit of credibility - not just as an historian but in the work that I do. I think people trust me now, and they know that I am not just out to 'row my own boat', whatever the metaphor is. So I find the doors are open almost everywhere to me now, so that does make things easier. Unfortunately, so many things have been lost. Somebody suggested at the conference a couple of years ago that I might even talk about writing pentecostal history, and I thought 'well, everyone knows about history'. But now I think about it, there probably have been some interesting things happen to me that don't normally happen. For example, Good News Hall was the first pentecostal church established in Australia, by Janet Lancaster. Her daughter, Leila, married Alec Buchanan, who became one of the first pentecostal pastors in the country. A few years ago, Alec died, and his wife survived him by about a year ago. One day, her nephew, a pastor named Fred Lancaster went to see her. He said, 'Aunt, I would just like to come and spend some time with you.' And she said, 'Why?' He said, 'Well, you must have a lot of memories and records that might be worth recording.' She said, 'Fred, I didn't know you were interested.' He said, 'I am interested.' She said, 'But I didn't know you were interested.' He said, 'But I am interested, can we make a time when I can come and see all the stuff you've got?' She said, 'But Fred, I didn't know you were interested.' He realised that something was wrong, and said, 'Why are you saying that?' She said, 'All day yesterday I spent the whole day going through our papers, and I burnt almost everything that we had.' She thought "nobody's interested in this stuff, I've had it in my room for years' - [we missed it by] twenty-four hours. She burnt the lot. Fred has been one person who has been very helpful to me in my research. Everytime that I think of that story, I weep. I suppose it happens to other people too, but it is a particular problem of pentecostal history.

mh: Does the small size and interrelated nature of the pentecostal community effect what you do?

Chant: I don't think that it effects it now - it might have once. I generally find, now, that people are very anxious to talk about the family connections and the inter-weaving. That is one of the things that I appreciate is true of most small groups. They inevitably start with a lot of family connections. There is not close inter-marriage, but certainly there are plenty of cousins and second cousins and so on. So you can see that sort of spiritual heritage running down through the family line as well, which is an interesting thing. I haven't done a lot of work on that, but have numerous records of such things which I should put together one day. I don't think of it as a 'problem' - not now.

mh: Most people say that Christianity is an historicall religion. What sort of shape does that consciousness have amongst pentecostals?

Chant: It depends which pentecostals you are talking about. Some of the pentecostal groups are very inward-looking. They really are not particularly interested in what happens outside their own movement, and so it is quite difficult at times to get them involved in ecumenicial affairs. Some are quite different - Christian City Churches, for example, have a very open attitude. Phil Pringle, for example, chaired the Easter March over the weekend, and he is one who has been very oopen towards the whole church. But some of the pentecostal leaders are really not interested in the whole church. I don't really think that it is an 'only true church' attitude. They really see that they have a job to do. If you press them, they would resolutely deny that they are the only true church. But in practice, they have a job to do, and they want to do it, and they say 'we haven't got time for these other things, we've got to get on with what God has give us to do.' In all the pentecostal Bible colleges around the country, Christian history of some sort will be taught. It has been realised that it is the right and proper thing to know something about church history. But I don't think it has much effect, really.

mh: What sort of theology comes out of that?

Chant: It's a Biblical theology, in the sense that it is Evangelical: all pentecostals treat the Scriptures as of Divine authority, as God's Word. So it is a biblical theology, but I think that the lack of a wider perspective, of a lack of knowledge of both orthodoxy and heresy over the years, has resulted in - well, maybe 'gullibility' is too strong a word, but certainly an openness to heresy that might not be so obvious in other places. Heresy, that is, of certain kinds - this is a difficult one. Pentecostals, for example, are never going to be open to a heresy that denies the authority of Scripture, or denies the Virgin birth, or the Second Coming, or the Atonement. On those sorts of things, they are one hundred per cent sure. But there are a lot of fringe things in which they can get off into extremism - which usually involves a very literalistic interpretation of Scripture. In eschatology, for example, where there is a lot of speculation about the way that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled. In areas like 'demonism', there have been some very extreme cases of behaviour. It is in those really 'right wing' areas that they tend to become extreme. Of course, one has to say that pentecostals don't have heresy all on their own - on the other extreme, you have mainline churches where the heresies are far more severe, really. I was alarmed to hear the leader of a mainline church at a recent public gathering really presenting the gospel in a way that was absolute heresy. Biblically, it was simply not the gospel of our Lord

Jesus Christ. That sort of thing is far more serious than some of the more extremist things that pentecostals get into sometimes, yet this person belongs to a church which presumably has a very deep hold on its history. And they don't seem to have learnt much from it either!

Someone quoted to me a saying of Kenneth Scott Latourette the other day (and I do not have the reference for this so I cannot tell you whether it is true that he said it), to the effect that 'those churches which have held most truly to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ have had the most impact on the world.' I need to verify it, but if he said that, that is something that certainly, we should learn from history. From my knowledge, I tend to agree with him. Those churches which tend to preach Christ as the unique and only Saviour are the ones that grow, and generally, when churches lose that they tend to lose their effectiveness as churches. The pentecostals don't fall into that trap - and I get concerned about some of the things I see, some of the strange doctrines that emerge. But for all that, Christ is always central, and he is preached as the saviour and Lord, and in that sense, when people come to pentecostal churches they are presented with a choice. Either they are going to follow Christ or they are not, and they are usually presented very clearly with the message that becoming a Christian means repenting and believing and putting your trust in Christ alone. The same cannot be said for some other churches, which is a major problem.

mh: What do you see has been your role? How have you impacted on Australian pentecostalism?

Chant: You need to ask other people that. I really can't answer your question - I know what I have done, but what impact it has had I don't know.

mh: Heart of Fire was the first, and still is the only book, on the history of pentecostalism in Australia.

Chant: Yes, I have the distinction of having written both the best and the worst book on the subject! It is without equal, and without competition!

mh: How has that changed the basis from which people work? Obviously, people use that in almost every Bible college in the country...

Chant: I don't know that I can answer that either - I would like to think that it has had a good impact, that it has made people think a bit about where we are coming from and hence where we are going. But I really can't measure what effect it has had. I have met people who've told me that they found it interesting, thought-provoking: probably the major comment that I get is that people appreciate the honesty, that I haven't attempted to present a whitewash, and that I have tried to tell the story objectively. I hope that that's been helpful in helping pentecostals to recognise the fact that it is alright to confess your failings. There can sometimes be a bit of triumphalism in pentecostalism. But I know from people outside the movement, who have read it, that they have appreciated the fact that I have attempted objectivity. I know that when the book first came out, some of the first people that I talked to said things like, 'Oh, you're not going to put Fred Van Eyk in are you? What will people think if you put him in?' But the standard response from other churches has been, 'Oh yeah, we have those problems too. We know that you blokes haven't got it all to your own, we have had the same sorts of things happen. We appreciate the fact that you are courageous enough to say so.' Of the handful of mainline church people who have spoken to me about this, they've tended to think more highly of pentecostals than not.

To go back to your other question, 'what has been achieved?', let me say what we have tried to achieve. I guess what I have really tried to do - and this has not been a conscious aim, it has just been me, I suppose - is to present a Godly balance between a sensible approach to Scripture, yet at the same time an open-hearted approach to God and the power and God. I have tried to demonstrate that you can be a good scholar, you can interpret the Scripture with sound hermeneutics, but yet at the same time, experience miracles, speak in tongues, and enjoy the charismata. There is not a clash between those things - they can be integrated. Another thing that I have tried to do is encourage people, and I guess in writing history my aim, basically, is to be an encourager. In my teaching in the College, it doesn't matter what I teach, I always end up encouraging people- it doesn't matter what the subject is - sin, or faith, or love - sooner or later I end up trying to motivate and encourage people. I suppose the major thing would be unity - through the nature of Tabor College, which is a multi-denominational college, and through the conventions and seminars that we have conducted, I have tried to say 'Let's get together, let's not let our denominational tags, or even our strong convictions keep us apart.' I suppose that has been appreciated, because I have been invited to preach in churches of all denominations - not all churches of all denominations, mind you, but some churches of all denominations! They give me open doors. The intriguing thing has been that I have never had to compromise anything. I never shift from my own position one centimeter - they know who I am. I'm pentecostal, my doctrine is pentecostal, and I affirm that quite clearly. I'm considerate in the sense that I don't make those things issues, and I won't say them unless I'm given the freedom to. But I never deny them. I've never been asked to. I've found that you can have fellowship with people of strong and differing belief, but you can still work with them. That's been encouraging.

mh: The very idea of strong belief is anathema to Australians, though, isn't it? Doesn't that make an 'Australian pentecostalism' something of a contradiction in terms? I was listening to the radio the other day, and the announcer on the 'Australia All Over' program was saying how he was driving home from the show on Saturday night, and he drove past a church in Peakhurst which was 'chokka': 'It must have been Easter' was his conclusion. But there are churches which are full outside of easter - they just don't fit the mould. So how do we relate Australian identity and Australian pentecostalism?

Chant: Australians are hypocritical, really. It is though unfashionable to be fanatical about religion, or to have strong beliefs there, but you can be very fanatical about politics, or even about sport, and it's OK. There is a double standard there. The same guys who get upset when they see you getting a bit emotional about your faith, will go to the footy and jump and shout, or sit at home and throw things at the TV set, and think that is all part of being a good Aussie. There is a fundamental double standard there. It is true to say that Australians are generally edgy of over-enthusiastic religion, and yet when they get into it, Australian pentecostals are as fervent as anybody. Australians can be fervent and they can be enthusiastic. In fact, I like the Australian pentecostal movement compared with some I have seen overseas. There is a freshness about it, there is a vitality and an honesty about it, in the sense that most times you can't make Aussies carry on unless they really want to, and if they dance and sing and lift their hands, it is because they really want to do it, because they really do feel excited about their faith. I have been in some overseas pentecostal churches where the excitement has long since languished, or, alternately, where they are still going through the motions, but there is no reason for it any more. I think Australian pentecostalism still has a freshness and a vitality about it which is enviable.

It probably has a particular identity, but it is difficult to define. Compared to churches I have seen overseas, it has. I used the word 'freshness' before, and I think that is good. But I wouldn't say that it is better or worse than overseas movements. In Europe, the pentecostal churches I have visited seem pretty stodgy. Europe is traditional, anyway, in its culture, and even the pentecostal churches seem to reflect that dourness that sometimes seem to mark European culture. I would say the same of pentecostalism in England, but then there are some pentecostal churches in England which you would think were Australian - places like Kensington Temple, for example, are very fresh and very lively. You go to South America, and in terms of enthusiasm and fervour, they leave us behind - but again, that reflects a culture where vigorous and overt expression of emotion is 'right'. What is happening in Asia is fairly exciting too - I guess it is fairly young, but there are some pretty fresh, good things happening there too. It is hard to say. The more I talk about it the less I am convinced that you can define the differences?

mh: Would you say that Australia has contributed to international Christianity through its pentecostalism?

Chant: Yes. Australian missions have been very active. In Papua New Guinea, for example, the answer would be yes, indeed. Australian pentecostals have been responsible for a remarkable revival in New Guinea. In other places, like the Solomon Island, Malaysia, Indonesia, perhaps. In India, to some extent. As far as the northern hemisphere is concerned, they don't even know that Australia exists, let alone Australian pentecostalism. I have been to conferences, like the major planning conference while I was in England, where we were trying to work out who all the speakers would be. I would say, 'what about so and so - he's a good speaker', and I would name Australians. Of course, they didn't even think 'Australia': they thought 'England, Europe, North America', maybe South America, maybe even South Africa. Perhaps it is because of our small population. People in the north tend to forget that we are here.

mh: There are interesting ties, though, aren't there? John Dowie, for instance.

Chant: Well, yes, that is interesting. You can actually argue that Australia has in fact had a major influence in the early days. You're quite right. And then there is the Australian Baptist, Frank Ewart, who attended the original Hot Springs meetings which founded the Assemblies of God, before becoming a Oneness pentecostal. The Australian connection in Dowie's day is quite interesting. Dowie was born in Edinburgh, but comes to Australia as a boy, and the here begins his ministry in South Australia, goes to Sydney, then Melbourne, and from Melbourne goes to the States to set up the Christian Catholic Church in Zion, north of Chicago. That has a big effect in America as well as here. Many of the early pentecostals come out of Zion - people like Raymond Ritchie, Gordon Lindsay, John Lake, F.F. Bosworth, and some of the leading American pentecostals in the 1920s came out of Zion. Then Lake goes to South Africa, and in five years plants 600 churches. Out of Lake's meetings people come to Australia, and one of the earliest pentecostal meetings in Australia was touched off by a person who was saved under John Lake in South Africa. That was in Melbourne, where Dowie 'started', and so you have a sort of full circle. So I guess you could argue that the South African pentecostal movement owes much of its origins to Australia, and some of the American movement does too.