Revival In Brazil

Statistical background

The Brazilian Assemblies of God is by far the largest organised Pentecostal denomination in the world today. It had about 20 million members and regular attenders in the early 1990’s. It had about ¼ million in 1957. It had about 12% of the total population of Brazil attending its churches in the early 1990’s. About two-thirds of all the Assemblies of God people worldwide are in Brazil. (There are other very large Pentecostal groups in Brazil called Christian Congregation, God is Love and Brazil for Christ which had 11,950,000 members and regular attenders between them in the early 1990’s.) (All these figures except the 1957 figure and the two-thirds figure were obtained from Patrick Johnstone’s “Operation World” 5th edition, O.M. Publishing, 1993, page 128.) The Brazilian A.O.G. and other Pentecostal groups listed above have also grown rapidly since the time of the above early 1990 figures.

A few comparisons may be of interest. About 200,000 in 4 months were converted in the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905. Of these about 80,000 were gained by the non-Conformist Protestant Churches. A survey a few years later found 20,000 or ¼ of the converts to these non-Conformist Churches had backslidden and no longer attended church. ¹ A non-Conformist church is a Protestant group which is not the official church of the nation. In the Great Awakening in the United States in the mid-1700’s associated with Jonathon Edwards and George Whitefield, estimates of converts who were not previously churchgoers range between 25,000 to 50,000. ² This was out of a total population in New England of 300,000.

The only larger Pentecostal group in the world today is in Communist China. There are between 50 to 100 million Christians in China – most of whom are Pentecostals. But note these are not an organised denomination. The 50 to 100 million Christians in China form about 4-8% of the present 1.3 billion Chinese population. We often hear of revivals in South Korea and Argentina. But note Patrick Johnstone found only 4.5% of the South Korean population were Pentecostal or Charismatic in the early 1990’s and 5.63% of the total population of Argentina were Pentecostal or Charismatic in the early 1990’s. These are good figures, but much less than the 15.6% of Pentecostals and Charismatics that Patrick Johnstone stated were in Brazil in the early 1990’s. (Non-Pentecostal/non-Charismatic Evangelicals in South Korea formed 16.6% of the total population in the early 1990’s.)

The Assemblies of God is by far the largest Australian Pentecostal denomination. In 1991, it had about 88,560 members and affiliated regular attenders. This was about 0.51% of the total Australian population of 17,284,000. In 1991, the Australian A.O.G. had 621 churches compared to the 85,000 churches belonging to the Brazilian A.O.G. The total population of Brazil was about 150 million in 1990 – about 9 times the total Australian population in 1991. In 1997, the Australian A.O.G. had 117,000 members and affiliated regular attenders. This was about 0.63% of the total Australian population of 18,524,155. This 0.63% figure is obviously

less than 1%. 3 So in six years of the so-called “Decade of Harvest”, the largest Pentecostal denomination in Australia grew by only 0.12% more than the growth of the total Australian population. Also note most of the growth in between 1991-1996 in all Pentecostal churches in Australia, including the A.O.G. was through transfers from non-Pentecostal churches. 28% of Pentecostals were transfers from other churches while only 10% were new converts who were previously non-churchgoers. 4

Social background

Brazil is an exceptionally immoral country. The yearly Mardi Gras results in thousands of unwanted pregnancies. These children are often abandoned on the streets after a few years. They become street kids. Adultery and sex before marriage abounds everywhere. Brazil is one of the centres of occult and spiritualism in the world. Millions of nominal and churchgoing Roman Catholics practice spiritualism and witchcraft also. Brazil is a sports-mad nation also. For example, soccer is treated like a religion.

Evangelism

The following points come mostly from my discussions and correspondence with an Australian A.O.G. missionary to Brazil from who left there in 1996 and Dr Bernhard Johnson – recently deceased senior evangelist of the Brazilian A.O.G.

The Assemblies of God Churches in Brazil place an enormous emphasis on evangelism. They take very seriously the Great Commission expressed in Jesus’ words in Mark 16:15: “…Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” The Brazilian Assemblies of God churches teach all new converts that their main ministry is evangelism. Believers obviously fulfil other ministries also, but all of them aim to incorporate personal evangelism into their daily living.

In their apprenticeship-style progression in leadership, a person becomes:

1. firstly a deacon
2. then an evangelist
3. then an elder
4. then a junior pastor
5. then a senior pastor. The above system ensures all elders, junior pastors and senior pastors understand and have experienced much preaching of the Gospel in evangelistic ministry. This avoids the common problem in the Western world where many Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic elders and pastors do little evangelism, instead concentrating almost solely on pastoral care, counselling, teaching, musicals and so on.

Ephesians 4:11-13 shows one of the ascension ministry gifts is evangelism. So some ministries will be called by God to concentrate solely on preaching the Gospel to the lost. But

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3 Australian population figures are from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. A.O.G. figures are from their “New Horizons, 5-9 May 1997 Magazine.
note in 2 Timothy 4:5, Paul told Timothy – the senior pastor at the Ephesian church – to do the work of an evangelist. Also, observe Acts 18:24-28 records Apollos – a teacher in the early church – did not just confine his ministry to churchgoers: “Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.” Verse 26 here says Apollos spoke boldly in the Jewish synagogue about Jesus Christ. Verse 28 says Apollos in public vigorously refuted the Jews and proved from the Word of God that Jesus truly was the Christ. Here Apollos in his own way was sharing with unbelievers about Jesus Christ.

Matthew 10:2-7 and Acts 2:14-47 show the ministry of an apostle also involved preaching the Gospel to the unsaved. Silas was a prophet (see Acts 15:32), but his ministry also involved evangelism (see Acts 16:10 – note “us” here included Silas).

The two main emphases in evangelism in the Brazilian A.O.G churches are personal witnessing and planting churches. Every member and converted regular attender is continually encouraged to trust God to find ways and means to witness personally to unsaved people. This is one of the main priorities of their prayers and lives. New converts are taught to begin immediately to evangelise their unsaved loved ones and friends and to look continually for new people to befriend and share Jesus Christ with in a loving caring but uncompromising way.

All Brazilian A.O.G churches continually aim to plant new preaching points and churches in other places. For example, the main A.O.G church in the city of Campinas has planted 200 churches in this city and over 15 churches in surrounding towns. When these statistics were gathered, Campinas had 1 million people – only one-fifth of the population of Sydney in Australia. Preaching points begin in places like rented small shops. When a congregation is established, they then build a wooden structure and later a brick building. The mother churches send tradesmen and labourers to build these wooden and brick structures. This saves much money.

Some pastors look ahead and buy cheap residential land in new residential areas, so they will not have to pay higher prices later when these places become full suburbs. Each of the daughter churches are financially helped with some day-to-day running expenses until they can support themselves. Theses daughter churches rarely, if ever, close down. Also, the daughter churches continue to have a close bond with their mother churches even after becoming fully self-supporting. The pastors and other leaders of the daughter churches go back to the mother church once a month for a teaching meeting, discussion of church discipline and so on. Most daughter churches have between 50 to 300 members, not including affiliated regular attenders. Brazilian A.O.G churches also hold mini-crusades off the back of trucks and other types of open air meetings. But they do not find these as effective as they used to be.

Evangelists such as Bernhard Johnson, who died in early 1996, held large scale evangelistic crusades where a strong emphasis on turning from known sin and surrendered faith in Jesus Christ as both Lord and Saviour occurred. Bernhard saw many marvellous healings and miracles in such large crusades. But he did not focus mainly on these like some other less
effective evangelists do. Over 1,800,000 people made public decisions to receive the Lord through Bernhard’s ministry. This is awesome when one realises he did not preach an easy believism false “gospel”.

Many Brazilian A.O.G churches have Christian radio programmes and some even have their own television programmes. These do not involve soft-sell, marketing technique-type evangelism like many Americans practice, but simple presentations of the complete Gospel message accompanied by a call for trusting faith in Jesus Christ accompanied by a turning from known sin. The Brazilian A.O.G churches regard the type of evangelism done by many Americans and other Westerners, in which turning from known sin and surrendering to Jesus’ Lordship is not emphasised, as being an example of whimpish compromise.

Brazilian A.O.G churches believe any person who does not experience a real (though obviously imperfect) change at conversion, is not really converted. They totally oppose the Western easy believism “gospel” which says someone can be saved by supposedly accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour but not Lord and without having an accompanying turning from known sins in their hearts.

**Sunday services, close relationships and personal Bible-study**

Sunday night services concentrate heavily on evangelism. As a result, the Brazilian A.O.G churches very rarely have healing lines or prayer lines about personal needs on Sunday nights. They do teach their people the importance of trusting God for healing and the provision of real needs. But Sunday night services do not focus on these things. Preaching the Gospel to the lost and salvation lines are the emphasis on Sunday nights. The main emphasis is on seeing the lost saved, not personal blessings and needs.

Communion is held once a month on a Sunday morning. On other Sunday mornings, there is no service except for children’s Sunday school. Brazilians are very social people so they tend to have close relationships with many people in their local church. Most Brazilian A.O.G church members regularly read their Bible in personal study each week.

**Preaching to unbelievers**

Their preachers rarely attack the Roman Catholic Church in public. But they do Biblically challenge false Catholic doctrines without necessarily mentioning the Catholic Church. Also, they preach much from Bible verses which show unbelievers they are sinners. They mention the specific sins of the unsaved while trusting the Holy Spirit to convict them of these and of their need for Christ as Lord and Saviour.

**Prayer**

The Brazilian A.O.G churches have a great emphasis on prayer. They have a church prayer meeting every Wednesday night and an all-day prayer meeting every Thursday. The Thursday days of prayer are mainly for the ladies, since most men work at secular jobs throughout the day. The women come in for a number of hours each and pray for the lost and for other key issues. Most of the women members of the church attend these Thursday days of prayer.
The Brazilian A.O.G churches do not hold other ladies meetings, so the Thursday days of prayer are in many ways the weekly ladies meeting. The people all pray out loud together. If sometimes one person leads in prayer, the others continue to quietly pray or shout “Amens” or “Hallelujahs” at appropriate times. The Brazilian A.O.G churches love very noisy church services in which all attenders participate much. The Brazilian A.O.G pastors often say much of the spiritual vitality in their churches originates in the Thursday prayer days. The Wednesday night prayer meetings are usually not as well attended as the Thursday prayer days. Also, once a month, Brazilian A.O.G churches hold an all-night prayer meeting. Attendance at this varies from church to church.

Friday night practical Biblical doctrine teaching

All Brazilian A.O.G churches have a two hour service on Friday nights. This service involves 1 hour teaching by the pastor on key Biblical doctrines and how these relate to living the Christian life in a practical sense. For example, they would be taught on the full meaning of repentance, faith, our position in Christ, holy practical living, their responsibilities in relation to serving God in the local church and so on. Also, usually on Tuesday nights, Brazilian A.O.G. churches have new converts’ classes.

Faith, conversion and known sin

The Brazilian A.O.G places an enormous emphasis on teaching their people about relying and trusting in God in all areas of their lives. This includes depending on God to evangelise the unsaved. It also involves relying on God for finance, employment, health and all other matters. But the Brazilian A.O.G does not like the self-centred, materialistic versions of these teachings.

When evangelising or witnessing, all Brazilian A.O.G evangelists and lay people emphasise lovingly to the unsaved that one key aspect of conversion is turning in our hearts from known specific sins. The Brazilian A.O.G leaders stress that those who do not turn in their hearts from their known sins at their supposed “conversion” are not really converted. The Brazilian A.O.G does not teach believers can reach some stage of sinless perfection in this life. But they heavily emphasise the old Pentecostal teaching that by the power provided through the death of Jesus Christ, believers can resist every known sin which tempts them. The Brazilian A.O.G. leaders oppose the idea a person can be totally controlled by the flesh year after year and still be saved.

When preaching to or teaching believers, Brazilian A.O.G pastors emphasise their need to turn from specifically named sins. The pastors do not just talk about sin in general, but in love name many specific sins from which believers need to turn.

Weaknesses of the Brazilian Assemblies of God

No Christian group is without fault. The Brazilian A.O.G is no exception. For example, there have been squabbles between some of the leaders of the larger mother churches. In some places, outward turning from sin has not been matched by an accompanying emphasis on
inward turning from wrong motives. Also, in a few matters one can find some pastors who have made some man-made laws.

But despite this, the Brazilian A.O.G is putting into practice many Biblical principles that many churches in other countries either ignore or underemphasise or merely talk about but rarely do. It is amazing but many churches in Western countries are not interested in this Brazilian revival – one of the greatest revivals in history. In fact, this revival has lasted far longer than either the Great Awakening or Welsh Revival did.

**Bernhard Johnson – one of the greatest evangelists in the 20th Century**

Bernhard Johnson died in early 1996. For decades, he had been the leading Assemblies of God evangelist in Brazil. He had been raised in the United States as a boy. His father went as a missionary to Brazil in 1957, taking the family with him.

Bernhard had been also the President of the Brazilian Extension School of Theology which trained thousands of A.O.G. pastors and workers. He had a base in San Jose, California from which he gained support for the work in Brazil from American A.O.G. churches. He also had a television programme in the U.S.

After their first furlough as missionaries, Bernhard and Doris Johnson returned to Brazil to launch a mass crusade ministry to reach the multitudes immigrating to the urban areas. Bernhard held 225 major crusades in Brazil. As stated earlier, at these crusades over 1,800,000 public decisions for Jesus as Lord and Saviour were recorded. In 27 years, they conducted crusades in 31 countries with crowds reaching up to 200,000 in a single service. God allowed them to preach in World Pentecostal Conferences in London, England (1976) and Nairobi, Kenya (1982).

Numerous times over the years, members of occult-spiritualist groups in Brazil threatened to murder Bernhard if he continued preaching the Gospel in their country. He did not allow such real threats to stop him preaching about his wonderful Lord.

The below is from Bernhard Johnson’s letter to me dated October 3, 1994:

“I appreciated hearing from you. I will be glad to give you more information regarding the work in Brazil. In fact, I will answer your questions below.

1. When our new converts receive the Lord Jesus Christ in our churches or in a crusade, it is expected, immediately, that they marry the person they are living with. If they are not living with anyone, but are maintaining an adulterous affair or are engaging in fornication, that they stop immediately. They are given this instruction in the new convert classes. These classes usually take place weekly. After our crusades are completed, we have a little booklet for them to study. They meet with the pastor in an instructional class each Tuesday for a period of six weeks. These matters are discussed at that time.

2. In a new converts class the people are taught about pornography, smoking, drinking, swearing, sexual immorality, etc. Because of the cultural system of the country, the pastors speak to the converts about these subjects. It is true that the Holy Spirit can convict them, but most of our new converts that come out of voodooism, witchcraft and immoral lives also must be taught by the pastors. We strongly feel that it is the churches’ obligation to instruct these new converts in the ways of the Lord. Not only to encourage them to love God, but to love all of the brethren and to back away from sins which some of them have just considered just a normal way of life.

3. The Brazilian Church and Assemblies of God pastors in Brazil take the following stand:
   - They have a very strong stance against gambling.
4. The church has been very much against television in the past, however, in the major cities it is hard to keep it under control. Those who can afford it usually have televisions, so the pastors will instruct converts in being selective in their viewing.

5. As far as my preaching is concerned, of course, I place a heavy emphasis on accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. I place a very strong emphasis on a new life and the authority of the blood of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit to enable a person to live a clean new life. On the day of Pentecost, the day the church started, Peter emphasized the need of repentance. We still need to emphasise repentance today. I feel this is very necessary because most people ministered to today, not only in Brazil, but even here in the U.S. and other overseas countries, do not have a real knowledge of what the Word of God is all about because of their background. I feel it is important that we emphasise the love of God and that Jesus paid the price for sinners on the Cross, but that we also give them guidelines as to what they need as far as repentance is concerned, turning away from their evil ways and walking in new life. I believe that the evangelist and the preacher have the obligation to do this, and then expect that the pastors instruct them further. My messages, when I preach in crusades, are mainly salvation emphasis. I seek to zero in on man’s needs and the reality that men need to know; first that all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God, secondly, that Christ provided a means of escape and a lifeline for sinners, and thirdly, that man can be saved. In other words, I seek to base my message on Romans 3:23, Romans 5:8 and Revelation 3:20. Ours is the decision. Only we can open the door to our heart. I can assure you, Graham, that I confront the sense of witchcraft, Mardi Gras and immorality in a prophetic sense, definitely letting people know that they cannot please God by committing these things. In my messages, since I do speak to large public gatherings, I do not seek to emphasize, openly, the Catholic practices to wage war against them. However, there are some occasions, while you are speaking of death and eternal life, that you can’t help but to mention purgatory and other doctrines of the Catholic church.

I hope this will answer your questions.
Sincerely in Christ,
Bernhard Johnson
Missionary-Evangelist"

Brazilian society is saturated with immorality, witchcraft and occult. Probably their television programmes reflect this. Maybe this is the reason for the earlier strong anti-television stand taken by many Brazilian A.O.G. pastors.

Below are comments from Bernhard’s letter to me in August 30, 1994:

“What a hunger for the Word of God! It is good to be involved in His Work. You were asking about church discipline in the country of Brazil; by far, church discipline is stronger in Brazil than in the United States. They are extremely strict. Discipline involves being brought before the entire church body. You are placed under discipline from anywhere between a month to six months according to the sin or offense. To be reinstated in the church you must be brought before the body once again.

Men can be disciplined for smoking or any sexual involvement. To be committed in a church body means to really lay your life open. The strong emphasis is witnessing, winning souls and discipling people.”

May the Church in the rest of the world learn from those particular emphases of the Brazilian Pentecostals which are soundly in line with the teachings of God’s Word.
Study Questions

1. Record the statistics about the size of the Assemblies of God in Brazil.
2. Describe the attitudes and/or practices of the Brazilian Assemblies of God in relation to:
   a) evangelism
   b) Sunday services
   c) preaching to unbelievers
   d) prayer
   e) and practical Biblical doctrine teaching on Friday nights.
3. List the main points about the Brazilian A.O.G. which evangelist Bernhard Johnson wrote in his two letters.