

## Book Review

*Peace to War: Shifting Allegiances in the Assemblies of God*

**Paul Alexander**

The C. Henry Smith Series 9 (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009) 426 pages

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“Military service is incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ . . . a Christian cannot fully follow the teachings of his Lord and Master if he engages in armed conflict”<sup>1</sup>  
This declaration represents the uncompromising attitude of the General Council of the Assemblies of God (AG) during the emergence of WWII. However, it also appears in a polemic context amidst shifting allegiances from an absolutist and Bible-supported pacifist position adopted in 1917 to an essentially uncontested pro-combatant position in 1967. In *Peace to War*, Paul Alexander not only sets out to tell this story but also tenders a passionate plea for Pentecostals to revisit their pacifist heritage.

Early Pentecostals applied their pacifist impulse as an integral ethical element of their “down to the roots” theology. They capitalized upon theological encouragement from numerous publications of Friends and Holiness Christians including the Quaker-turned-Pentecostal, Arthur Sidney Booth-Clibborn (1855-1939). Eschatological urgency, an enthusiastic focus upon evangelism, and the life and teaching of the non-violent Jesus led these Pentecostals to their unrelenting conviction. In spite of opposition from the American populace, the young AG maintained a majority peace ethic through WWI and the tenuous years before WWII. At the advent of WWII, the official

position remained intact, but also witnessed the waning of its momentum.

Alexander narrates the gradual and complex dissolution of the pacifist impulse. First, he links the decline with the rise of patriotism. Whereas early Pentecostals held to moderate patriotism, succeeding generations succumb to nationalism; the cumulative effect of WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War, Gulf War 1, 9/11, Afghanistan, and Gulf War 2 creates a culture of war whereby not only the average American but also constituents of the AG embrace a perilous blending of God and country. Second, Alexander traces the impact of a hasty alignment with Evangelicals. He locates Pentecostal invitation to and acceptance in the newly formed National Association of Evangelicals (1942) as a critical event that fuels an insatiable patriotic spirit. According to Alexander, 65,000 AG soldiers in WWII (note: the ratio of combatants to non-combatants remains difficult to ascertain) may rank as the primary reason for invitation of Pentecostals to the Evangelical table. Third, Alexander equates the fatal blow with acquiescence to individual conscience. Pentecostals surrender to pragmatic realism. Since the military serves as a vast mission field and Pentecostals become employed in military chaplaincy, the drift away from pacifism becomes inevitable.

In his final chapter, Alexander turns from historian to theologian and locates ultimate dissolution of the pacifist position with the AG failure to ask: “What about Jesus?” As history will not correct itself, Alexander suggests an answer not by way of individual conscience or numbers, but by a return to the Scriptures. In view of the fact that the AG retains a high regard for the authority of Scripture as “the authoritative rule of faith and conduct” (the first of the denomination’s 16 Fundamental Truths), Alexander finds the AG failure to examine the Scriptures astonishing. He notes that AG proponents dare not leave ethical questions concerning abortion and homosexuality to personal choice. Regarding Spirit baptism, he offers poignant rhetoric: if “‘initial physical evidence’ has significantly less biblical support than non-violence..., could tongues as initial physical evidence also be a matter of conscience rather than of biblical interpretation?”<sup>2</sup> Given the impossibility of such scenarios, Alexander implores Pentecostals to search the Scriptures and discover afresh the non-violent story of Jesus and Acts as an insistent critique of racial, economic, and socio-political acculturation.

Readers may not agree with Alexander’s conclusions, but his work deserves a wide readership. *Peace to War* is a riveting story by a quintessential theologian. Alexander chronicles the risks and consequences of

conscientious objection alongside a shifting and accommodating worldview. His keen awareness of Pentecostal history is matched by critical theological and exegetical insight. He dialogues with formidable scholars including Pentecostals such as William Menzies, Walter Hollenweger, Jay Beaman, Murray Dempster, and Joel Shuman, as well as non-Pentecostal sympathizers like Glen Stassen (Foreword), John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. With prophetic candor, Alexander calls the AG to foster careful thinking and dialogue in hope of a fresh renewal of the *crucifist* life, that is, discipleship as the way of the cross. He writes first and foremost to Pentecostals unaware of and/or in disagreement with the early Pentecostal practice of non-violence.

*Peace to War* should also serve the broader Christian community. Readers from historic peace churches (note the Anabaptist publisher) will not only be surprised at a Pentecostal peace heritage, but be challenged to reflect upon their potential for “drift,” the careless loss of an integral distinctive. Given the current global crises, readers from all traditions should find it stimulating to think deeply about their individual and collective response to war. Finally, *Peace to War* is well-suited for numerous undergrad and graduate courses such as Pentecostal and/or American religious history, theology, ethics, and sociology/philosophy of religion.

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<sup>1</sup>*Pentecostal Evangel*, October 12, 1940, 13.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Alexander, *Peace to War: Shifting Allegiances in the Assemblies of God*, The C. Henry Smith Series 9 (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009), 340.