

Pentecostalism in Finland

The precarious beginning

The article presents the arrival of the Pentecostal movement into Finland. It is argued that a totally incorrect picture of the early years of Pentecostalism in Finland is conveyed if it is limited to the activities which took place in Helsinki in 1911-12 and the movement that emerged from there, as previous research has done. Without the earlier revival in Ostrobothnia and other activities in various parts of the country, the Pentecostal movement would not have been as successful as it was at the beginning of the 1910s. Barratt's visit to Ostrobothnia meant that new life was breathed into the dormant spiritual movement. In other places, the Pentecostal revival could connect to other kinds of preparatory activities. This is one of the factors explaining why Barratt achieved such a great success and Pentecostalism was received so positively in the early 1910s.

THE PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT IN FINLAND had a somewhat peculiar beginning. In earlier scholarly examinations, such as W. A. Schmidt's 1935 work *Die Pfingstbewegung in Finnland*, the arrival of Pentecostalism in Finland is described as having taken place in 1911 with T. B. Barratt's first visit to the country. To a great extent, this view has also been the prevailing one among the Pentecostalists themselves. Thus Pietari Brofeldt, in his reminiscences of the early days of the movement, which were published during the 1930s in the journal *Toivon Tähti* ('The Star of Hope'), writes only of the revival in Helsinki in 1911. However, during the course of my research I have arrived at another view, which I will present in brief in what follows. First of all, however, something must be said about what the Pentecostal movement is, and how it should be defined.

The features characteristic of the Pentecostal movement, or the Pentecostal revival as it was first called, are baptism in the Holy Spirit and *glossolalia*, or speaking in tongues. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is a spiritual experience based on the events of the original day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, when the disciples saw tongues of fire that alighted on each of them so that they began to speak in other tongues. The experience of speaking in tongues has occurred throughout the history of Christianity and has been associated with various kinds of ecstatic movements. The established churches have often opposed these movements and their ecstatic features. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century, movements which included *glossolalia* among their practices emerged in several places; for example, Irvingianism in England and the Holiness movement in the USA. In Finland, too, speaking in tongues is mentioned as one of the ecstatic phenomena to be found within the Lutheran revival movements as early as in the late 1700s.

The great rise in *glossolalia* occurred, however, in Los Angeles in 1906 as part of the revival associated with a famous meeting held in Azusa Street. This revival movement spread at an exceptional pace and was known all over the world only about a year later. Revivals, the origins of which in one way or another are connected to the events in Los Angeles in 1906, can justifiably be referred to as being part of the Pentecostal revival and later often of the Pentecostal movement.

The American Pentecostal revival soon travelled across the Atlantic to Europe and the Nordic countries. Instrumental in this was T. B. Barratt, who was a Methodist pastor in Oslo, Norway. He visited New York in 1906 in order to raise funds for his work in Oslo, but his efforts were not very successful. He came

into contact with the message of Pentecostalism in the autumn of 1906 in the USA and experienced a profound baptism in the Holy Spirit, followed by speaking in tongues. Having returned to Oslo, he started arranging intensive meetings for worship which included ecstatic elements. This attracted wide interest among the public and many travelled to his meetings – also from Sweden and Finland – which were frequently reported on in the papers. Within a year, the message of Pentecostalism had spread across the entire Nordic Region. It has to be mentioned that the Pentecostal message also reached the Nordic countries directly through returning migrants.

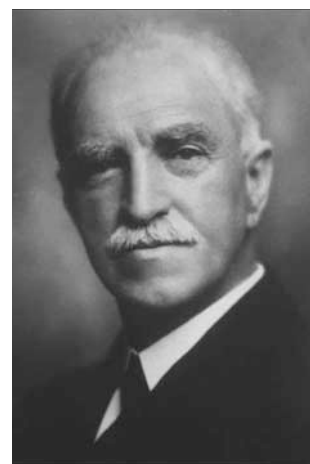
In Finland, it was primarily a revival group with Laestadian origins which sought contact with Barratt in Oslo. Members of this group invited him to Finland several times, but Barratt only managed to visit the country in 1911. Several meetings were then held in the Finnish capital and as a result of this first visit, a group was formed which gathered often to pray for effusions of the Spirit on behalf of the people of Finland. Barratt revisited Finland the following year and the revival can be said to have achieved its major breakthrough then. Therefore Barratt's first visit to Finland has by many been regarded as the actual beginning of Finnish Pentecostalism.

I commenced my research into the Pentecostal movement in 1968. I sent out an open questionnaire to all Swedish-speaking Pentecostal congregations in Finland and asked older members to answer the questions eliciting a description of the beginnings of their local movement. I received a number of very valuable answers. In addition, I carefully studied the revivalist magazines published at the time; of these, the *Missionären* ('The Missionary') in Vasa and the *Morgon-Stjärnan* ('The Morning Star') in Karleby were the two most important.

What immediately struck me was that both my informants and the magazines described a revival in the Vasa region with explicit references to the occurrence of baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Within the Vasa Kretsmission, a local branch of the Covenant Church, a revival emerged with preachers such as Johannes Henriksson and Theodor Sundström. Another avid advocate of the new movement was Hugo Sjöblom in Vasa. The magazine *Missionären* published Barratt's appeal to 'open up for the Holy Spirit' as early as 1907.

Two so-called 'preacher sisters', from Sweden, were active within the context of this revival move-

ment in 1908. These women, called Greta Andersson and Anna Blom, are said to have arrived in southern Finland in 1907 and to have been active there for a short time. Even a preaching expedition to St Petersburg is mentioned. However, they did not achieve any great success in the southern parts of the country. In early 1908, they were active in the



T. B. Barratt.

Vasa region, where they preached and achieved great popularity within the Vasa Kretsmission. At the annual meeting of the Covenant Church in Vasa in March 1908, Greta Andersson is said to have preached and emphasised the 'need for God's children to be baptised in the Holy Spirit and fire, without which we are not suited to be true disciples of Jesus and carry out the work of God'. According to a summary published in the *Missionären*, the meeting was the 'most blessed' to have been held and particularly the testimony of the Swedish 'sisters' had been 'affecting'; 'the testimony of the Swedish sisters Andersson and Blom contained Spirit and fire', the magazine wrote.

During the spring of 1908 there were increasing numbers of reports of the influence of the Holy Spirit upon worshippers. One account reads as follows: 'The fire of the Holy Spirit is currently burning as never before in the villages of Österhankmo, Wästerhankmo and Wassor in the parish of Kweflaks. Several people in those places have undergone baptism in the Holy Spirit. The devoted children of God enjoy a glorious existence particularly in both of the Hankmo villages and they rejoice of blessed fulfilment in the Lord.' Several cases of speaking in tongues are reported. One man is said to have received the gift of speaking in tongues in an unknown language and to have sung two verses of a known song, which he subsequently interpreted. One of the very first to have received baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gift of speaking in tongues through the activities of the Swedish preacher sisters was Signe Henriksson, wife of the preacher Johannes Henriksson in Vassor. She recounts that the prayer weeks organised were very lively and that many people spoke in tongues.

The revival mainly spread in the area where the local Covenant Church was active. The Swedish preacher sisters Anna Blom and Greta Andersson continued their work mainly within the Wasa Kretsmission during 1909. Several other people also participated in the activities. The message of the Holy Spirit spread among the Baptists, too. One Baptist speaker who played a pivotal role in this was Alfred A. Herrmans in Pedersöre. He reports that he received his baptism in the Holy Spirit on 6 January 1908. Josef Alarik Lindkvist was another who advanced the Pentecostalist message among the Baptists. In Jakobstad, Jakob Lillkvist, Herman Hjelm, and Ernst and Sanfrid Mattsson were engaged by the new ideas.

At the end of the decade, the new movement had spread from Vasa to as far north as the region around Karleby. It had followers among both Baptists and members active within the Covenant Church. It is difficult to estimate the total number of people who experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Nevertheless, they amounted to at least twenty or thirty.

Because of the strong connection between the revival in Ostrobothnia and the Pentecostal revival in Sweden, and by extension also that in the USA, there is no doubt that the new movement in Ostrobothnia during this period must be seen as the actual beginnings of Pentecostalism in Finland. This is also clearly shown by Jouko Ruohomäki in his doctoral thesis, which was presented at the University of Eastern Finland in the spring of 2014, and where he to a large extent quotes my work.

However, we must ask why this first beginning has not been noted earlier by researchers, and how this state of affairs might have come about. As we will see, there is an explanation for this.

In late October and early November of 1909, a week of Bible study and prayer was held in Vassor, in the parish of Kvevlax. People from several villages had gathered for the occasion. The spiritual atmosphere at the meeting is described as very positive. One of the most enthusiastic attenders was Karl Karlsson Klemetz from Vassor. He is said to have started behaving in an increasingly strange manner towards the end of the prayer week. He was subject to marvellous visions and was prophesying. Having uttered many prophetic words on the evening of 2 November, he went out alone into the darkness. He did not return during that night or the next day. Only on the following day did the others start looking for

him, and he was then found to have drowned.

It is more or less impossible to trace the actual course of events. Accounts vary depending on the person providing them. At the time, the incident was characterised as a scandal. Those who were unappreciative of the new revival found a reason for attacking the movement and pointing to its negative consequences. The two preacher sisters were accused of having misled Karlsson. It was said that one of them had even tried to bring Karlsson back from the dead. They were also claimed to have refused Karlsson's relatives' requests to take him into their care when they had observed that he was no longer in full possession of his senses. A very strong opposition to the new movement and the Swedish women developed and they subsequently had to leave the country.

The free church movements disowned the spiritual revival, as did the general public. The travelling free church preacher Carl Dahlström wrote in the newspaper *Vasabladet*: 'They [the preacher sisters] arrived here of their own accord from Sweden in 1907, and have since then succeeded in leading astray people in the countryside who are lacking in judgement and are spiritually immature, regardless of private and public warnings.'

What is curious in this context is that in his novel *Det norrfångna landet* ('The Northern Country', 1920) the author and educational pioneer Hugo Ekhammar (a pseudonym for Hugo Johannes Ekholm) depicts an incident similar to the drowning accident that occurred in Vassor in 1909.

Gustaf Näsman, who participated in the prayer week in Vassor, writes about it in *Missionären* in 1909. He describes the spiritual experiences which occurred during the meeting as being very positive. The behaviour of Karlsson had confused him. However, he understood that Karlsson 'loved Jesus more than ever before; his association was of a heavenly kind'. When Karlsson had gone missing, the others believed him to be in 'the hands of the Lord' and expected him to return soon. Näsman's interpretation of the incident is that it was a kind of accident. Alfred A. Herrmans, who was also present at the time, regarded the episode as the consequence of a momentary mental derangement, or purely accidental.

Regardless of what actually happened, the incident proved to be a catastrophe for the new movement. The entire revival was, so to say, 'hushed up', and most people did not want to talk about it. This is probably one of the main reasons why early research

on Pentecostalism in Finland did not uncover this first revival. The Pentecostal movement itself has also been somewhat reluctant to acknowledge the occurrence of the revival in the region around Vasa as the beginnings of Pentecostalism in Finland. The fact that it took place within the Swedish-speaking minority of the country might also have contributed to its marginalisation.

Since the activities of the new movement were thwarted as a result of the scandal in the autumn of 1909, there was a gap preceding the development of the revival which took place in 1910 and 1911. It was then, as was mentioned above, that T. B. Barratt made his first visit to Helsinki in the autumn of 1911, and a Pentecostal revival began to emerge there. During his two visits in 1912 the revival also grew strongly where he travelled in Ostrobothnia. As described above, the seedbed for a spiritual revival had, however, already been prepared 4–5 years prior to that, which is a clear explanation for the success of the Pentecostal movement in the 1910s.

To summarise the facts presented above; it can be claimed that a totally incorrect picture of the early years of Pentecostalism in Finland is conveyed if it is limited to the activities which took place in Helsinki in 1911–12 and the movement that emerged from there. Without the earlier revival in Ostrobothnia and other activities in various parts of the country, the Pentecostal movement would not have been as successful as it was at the beginning of the 1910s. Barratt's visit to Ostrobothnia meant that new life was breathed into what was an already existing but dormant spiritual movement. In other places, the Pentecostal revival can be connected to other kinds of preparatory activities. This is one of the factors explaining Barratt's achievement of such great success and why Pentecostalism was received so positively in the early 1910s. ■



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