



Pentecostal Founders
- John Dowie

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John Dowie (1847-1907) is one of the earliest pioneers of Pentecostalism. His teachings and his 'healing ministry' greatly influenced the founder of the modern Pentecostal movement - Charles Parham. (1) Parham would hold to many of the teachings that Dowie developed, especially in regard to healing. Dowie was one of the first to link disease with sin, bodily healing with the atonement, and the denial of the eternity of Hell. (2) He was one of the main pioneers of the new 'healing ministries' which were spawned at the turn of the 20th century.

Dowie is a vital player in the formation of the Pentecostal church at the beginning of the 20th century. *The history and doctrines of John Dowie are crucial to understanding how the new Pentecostal doctrines developed in the 20th century.*

Ministry and Life

John Dowie was born in 1847 in Edinburgh, Scotland. His father was a tailor and preacher. (3) In 1860, Dowie emigrated to Australia with his parents and settled in Adelaide, South Australia.

At age 21 (1868) Dowie returned to Edinburgh to study theology. At the University of Edinburgh he was influenced by the controversial theology of Edward Irving (1792-1834) who had been a student there. The Irvingites claimed to restore the offices of apostles and prophets as well as miraculous signs, including speaking in unknown tongues. The movement ended in apostasy, immorality and unfulfilled prophecies and they were reproved by the church at the time as heretics. After the last of their 12 'apostles' died, the movement dwindled. However, *many consider the movement a precursor of the modern Pentecostal movement.* Edward Irving died at the age of 42 and Dowie at the age of 59, even though they both believed that God would miraculously heal them.

After his studies Dowie returned to Australia and was ordained in 1872 as pastor of a Congregational church at Alma, South Australia. The next year he pastored in NSW at Manly, then Newtown (1873, 1875). (4) In 1876 Dowie married his cousin, Jane Dowie. (5) They had three children between 1877 and 1881.

In 1876 Dowie claimed he was healed of the plague, a Scarlet Fever epidemic in Australia which caused 8,000 deaths, including children. Dowie had developed an interest in faith healing, especially after witnessing the excitement and cures affected by George Stephen (1812-1894). Stephen claimed to have the gift of healing when ‘*by touch, breathing on affected joints, red flannel, ‘magnetised’ water in which his hands had been washed, and ordering away pain. Stephen was reputed to have lengthened short limbs and to have cured blindness, deafness, rheumatism, St Vitus dance and consumption; even cancers were cured by sending his will power each morning to patients up to 250 miles (402 km) away*’. (6) Yet Stephen suffered himself from ‘an internal affliction’ and after an operation he died in 1894. Of his nine sons and four daughters, only three sons survived him.

Dowie attracted attention in attacking local liquor interests and the publicity gained him some prominence. He left the Congregational system and for a time was involved with the Salvation Army. (7) In 1882, he was invited to the Sackville Street Tabernacle, Collingwood, Victoria. His authoritarian style of leadership soon led to a split in the church. Dowie was also fined and jailed for more than a month for leading people in ‘unauthorized processions’. (8)

Dowie now claimed God had commissioned him to preach ‘*the gospel of healing through faith in Jesus*’. In 1886 he claimed a vision telling him to carry ‘*the leaves of healing from the tree of life to every nation*’. (9) He came to believe that the medical field was to be avoided, and that people should abandon medicine and doctors and seek healing only from the Lord. Increasingly he came under pressure for his healing practices. Thus in March 1888 he left with his family for the United States via New Zealand. In New Zealand he conducted a series of meetings to promote faith healing, including one at Christchurch where a James Albert Abbott claimed to be instantly healed of his life-threatening afflictions.

Dowie established *The Christchurch Association for the Promotion of Healing through Faith in Jesus*, with Abbott as founding secretary. Abbott was to carry on Dowie’s ministry, but like so many of the

links between the Pentecostal pioneers, the same certain traits were made manifest. Abbott soon left New Zealand to pastor a church in Australia which then split. From then until his death he toured Australia, England and New Zealand using a 'magic lantern' (an early image projector) to show spiritism, British Israelism, conducting mind reading sessions, reading 'spirit personalities' and teaching phrenology (Phrenology is a discredited 19th-century pseudo science, that claimed to determine personality, character and intellect by measuring bumps and indentations on the human skull).

Amidst rumours of infidelity, Abbott later travelled with a female 'christian clairvoyant', Annie Turner. Annie was to make several false prophecies about the first world war. Abbott's ministry continued with an astonishing array of lies and exaggerations. He himself claimed he was a '*professor of botany, physiology, anatomy, theology and mental science*'. His life was full of false claims and immoral scandals. (10) Despite his teachings on divine healing, his second son died in 1894 at age 16 after a long illness. There was never any evidence of Abbott's original claim of having previous 'life threatening afflictions' to which he was supposedly healed of by John Dowie.

Meanwhile, in San Francisco, Dowie ran a mail order healing business. There he was confronted by legal problems with his healing practices. He then moved to Chicago and took advantage of the 1893 *World's Fair*. Having now multiple homes and businesses, including a publishing house and thousands of followers, he bought an extensive area of land north of the city to set up a private community. He renovated an auditorium and called it *Central Zion Tabernacle*. He established a Zion school for deaconesses, a Zion printing plant and a Zion orphanage. Eventually a town was built which he called *Zion City*. The town was essentially a theocracy with Dowie as the sole director of God's rule. Dowie strongly promoted tithing and those who did not practise this were branded as 'hypocritical pretenders'. He funded his ministries and lifestyle mostly through tithes, but he also bought up securities of bankrupt companies and sold them to his members. (11) Two women whom he defrauded in this way sued him and won their cases. (12)

At the Chicago World Fair in 1893 Dowie staged ‘Divine Healings’ to large audiences. Many ‘healings’ were reported as fraudulent with people being planted or screened beforehand, before healing them of psychosomatic illnesses. (13)

By the late 1890’s, Zion headquarters had moved to a seven-story home 40 miles from Chicago. Now there was the New Zion Tabernacle, Zion Junior School, Zion College, Zion Printing and the Zion Hall. He also leased Chicago’s Auditorium Building to accommodate increasing crowds. His teaching spread in publications across the U.S. and worldwide. (14) Dowie again faced opposition and in 1895 he was charged with practicing medicine without a license. (15)

In 1903 he faced financial difficulties and in 1904 ordered every resident to make a deposit. At the same time Dowie had secretly tried to borrow 7 million dollars using as collateral the homes and businesses of Zion City. Dowie forced his followers to deposit their funds into a Zion Bank. This appeared to be a registered entity but was in fact an unincorporated entity under his control. He also sold stock in an array of Zion’s businesses, which proved worthless. (16)

The same year Dowie renamed his organisation the *Christian Catholic Apostolic Church*. (17) He then declared he was the third and final manifestation of the prophet Elijah and dressed as if Elijah. On September 1904, in front of 8,000 followers, he announced he was ‘*the first apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ...*’ He signed his name with the title ‘*First Apostle*’. He stated: ‘*...I now have the right to speak as the instructor of nations*’. (18) By this time his wife and children had left him.

In 1904 he revisited Adelaide, Australia, where his meetings were met with hostility. (19) The next year Dowie suffered a stroke and travelled to Mexico to recuperate. (20) The debt in Zion City was now a staggering \$2,529,765.00. The operations of the city were described as ‘*a carefully-devised large-scale platform for securities fraud*’. (21) His ‘lieutenant’, Wilbur Voliva, initiated an investigation of the business practices and deposed Dowie from leadership in

1905, giving him an allowance until his death. (22) In 1907 Dowie suffered a second stroke and died at the age of 59. (23)

T. P. O'Connor, an Irish member of Parliament and journalist, wrote of Dowie: *'The one incomprehensible element in the man's gigantic success is the personal luxury in which he lives, and his superb refusal at the same time to account for any of the sums of money entrusted to him. His horses are worth a fortune in themselves; his carriages are emblazoned with armorial bearings; his wife is said to dress with the gorgeous extravagance of an empress. When he travels, hemmed round with a little army of servants, the prophet of humility and self-denial has a special train chartered, and whenever the spiritual burdens become too great a tax there is a delightful country residence belonging to him in which to retreat from the clamour and importunate appeals of the faithful'*. (24)

Doctrine

In addition to his extra biblical revelations and healing doctrines, Dowie taught heresies such as universalism (all will be saved). He also denied the eternality of Hell, believing any fires of Hell were temporary to burn a sinners rebellion into submission. He claimed his newspaper *'Leaves of Healing'* was directly inspired by God and was *'the seventh gospel'* (the 'fifth' and 'sixth' were Acts and Revelation).

Dowie tried to resurrect the apostolic and prophetic offices and the first century gifts. (25) However, the apostles and prophets were the foundation of the building of the early church (Eph.2:20). Those who today claim to be apostles and prophets are not ordained by the Lord and are false self anointed ones (Matt.24:24). Apostles had to be *'eye witnesses of his resurrection'* and have *'signs of an apostle'* (Acts 1:22; 4:33; 5:12; 2Cor.12:12). Prophets spoke *'in times past'* the Word of God and this was put down for us in the closed canon of scripture which is now the *'more sure word of prophecy...the prophecy if the scripture'* (Heb.1:1,2; 2Pet.1:19,20). Certainly Dowie did not fulfil any of these qualifications.

One of the consistent features in the history of almost all the Pentecostal founders and pioneers is the *level of exaggeration* in the accounts of *revelations* from God and in *healings*. Like Parham, the founder of Pentecostalism, and like most of the Pentecostal forerunners, Dowie was documented as a prolific exaggerator and was well known for his amazing stories of healing.

There is nil documentation of real miraculous healings in Dowie's ministry, yet stories of Dowie's healing exploits abound. Most claims were of psychosomatic illnesses that show nothing of the miraculous healings of Jesus and the apostles - who healed *not some* but '*...all manner of disease*' (Matt.4:23,24; 8:16; 9:35; 10:1; 12:15...) - healings that were *not partial* but always '*immediate*' and '*completely whole*' (Matt.8:3; 12:13,15; 14:36; 15:28; 20:34); healings that were not just *stories* but *seen and testified to by many* (Matt.15:30,31).

Underlying the false efforts to copy the first century healings was Dowie's doctrine of *healing in the atonement* - *that Jesus died for our bodily healing in this life*. Most of this doctrine was based on one scripture - 1Peter 2:24,25, and one phrase ripped out of its context - '*by whose stripes you were healed*'. However, the context is actually the spiritual *healing of sins* and of the '*soul*', not the body: '*Who His own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we being dead in sins should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes you were healed. For you were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the bishop of your souls*'. This scripture is also a *quote from Isaiah 53:4-6* which refers not to any bodily healing but to '*transgressions*' and '*iniquities*'. What he '*bore*' and was '*laid on him*' were '*sins*' and '*iniquities*', not our sicknesses! The offerings in the Old Testament for atonement were for *sins* (Lev.16:3). This teaching was the standard for the atonement for 1,900 years until the late 19th century when '*healing ministries*' were spawned. Multitudes of professing Christians are today duped by what Dowie and others introduced in this addition to the true Gospel.

Dowie advocated for total reliance on divine healing and against the use of all forms of medicine. He taught that only a Christian could be healed and he refused to pray for the healing of unbelievers. He also taught that living a clean and holy lifestyle was the only way one could keep their healing.

Zion City was a veiled attempt, as is much of Pentecostalism, to bring back what was the founding of the first century church with *signs and wonders, apostles and prophets*. As with all the founders and pioneers of Pentecostalism, their lives ended in immoral failings, charlatanry, false revelations and hypocrisy.

Conclusion

Charles Parham, the recognised founder of Pentecostalism, *visited Dowie's Zion City just before* events in 1901 at his Topeka Bible school would set the stage for the beginnings of the new Pentecostal movement. (26)

Parham came to prominence right in the middle of the last days of Dowie. With a short struggle for control of Zion city, Wilbur Voliva took over Zion City. But Parham claimed to have a prophetic word from God in a vision to deliver the people of Zion from 'the paths of commercialism'. He wrote: '*Arise and go to Zion and take up the burden of an oppressed people*' a voice said to me. *I am here and will bring you out of all your difficulties if you will trust in me*'.

One newspaper reported: '*Parham says that he has taken a deep interest in the Zionist movement since its inception, and has followed the teachings of Dowie. He asserts that God appeared to him in a dream two weeks ago and told him that Voliva was a false prophet and would lead the people of Zion into ruin. Ten days ago Parham says 'the spirit' again appeared to him at Topeka and commanded him at once to go to Zion and combat the evil influences of Voliva*'. (27)

However, Parham and the ‘Parhamites’ as they were known, were short lived in Zion City. His prophecy never materialised when a water tower fell on the large meeting tent he was living in within the city.

Parham left and was soon to be arrested and charged for Homosexual acts with a 22 year old man (1907). (28) Two ‘Parhamites’ now took over the group as leaders, Tom Hezmalhalch and John G. Lake. Hezmalhalch’s ministry had begun after he had an adulterous relationship in Los Angeles at the Los Angeles Azusa St. Church pastored by William Seymour, a student of Parham. To rehabilitate him, Seymour sent him in 1907 to Zion city. Both men Hezmalhalch and Lake eventually went to South Africa and established the Parhamite and Dowie doctrines. Zion City later descended into chaos when some people were killed in bizarre exorcisms. (29)

Dowie is regularly referenced by Pentecostals as one of ‘*God’s Generals*’, a term used by Pentecostal author, Roberts Liardon, who writes of Dowie as the ‘*healing apostle*’...‘*Undoubtedly, this man succeeded in shaking the world at the turn of the century. He brought to the forefront of society, the visible Church of the living God - primarily in the area of divine healing and repentance*’. Yet, if one searches the sources for Liardon’s research, it comes from only two sources, a book by Gordon Lyndsay, a disciple of Dowie, and from a ‘*handbook of the Christian Catholic Church*’, detailing the church founded by Dowie. Although Liardon does mention some failings of such ‘generals’, his writings on these Pentecostal founders is shallow at best, and he often defends them as ‘misrepresented’. But history does not lie concerning the fallen lives of *most of the Pentecostal pioneers*. The roots of the Pentecostal movement are a telling expose of trails of fallen prophets *to and from Charles Parham and the Los Angeles Azusa St. Pentecostal church* that his student William Seymour founded.

How is it that a false prophet and apostle who made merchandise of thousands is lauded by Pentecostals today? Dowie often, despite his healing claims, left a trail of death and sick people in ‘healing homes’. Newspapers of the day detailed deaths of young and old in Dowie’s Zion, some also caused by bizarre exorcisms which somehow many escaped prison sentences. (30)

The biggest tragedy in all of this history is *that which was lost* - the Gospel of God sending Jesus to die on a cross for our sins to satisfy an offended and holy God; a Gospel that proclaims that believers in Jesus might have salvation from the *penalty of sin*, spirits justified, souls sanctified, and new healed bodies in a future eternal life!

Footnotes

- (1) See our ‘*Pentecostal Founders - Charles Parham*’, *Diakrisis* March/April, 2026
- (2) Zion Banner 1, July 3rd, 1901:114
- (3) Percival Serle (1949) ‘Dowie, John Alexander’. *Dictionary of Australian Biography*
- (4) Gibbney, H. J. (1972) ‘John Alexander Dowie (1847–1907)’. *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol.4
- (5) ‘Family Notices’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* Vol. LXXIV, no.11, 942. 28 Aug.1876
- (6) *Australian Dictionary of Biography*
- (7) IBID Gibbney, H. J. (1972)
- (8) IBID
- (9) ‘*The Life of John Alexander Dowie*’ by Gordon Lindsay; *Voice of Healing* 1951; *Life*, Lyndsay, 86
- (10) ‘*The Magic Lantern*’ 18, P.3-6 <https://www.magiclantern.org.uk/the-magic-lantern/pdfs/4010264a.pdf>
- (11) *London Daily Mail*, 24 Oct.1900; I. D. Bowman, ‘*Dowieism Exposed*’ 1904, 10-1
- (12) ‘Christian Science and Dowieism’, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 8 April 1899
- (13) R. Harlan, *John Alexander Dowie and the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion* (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1906, P.117; J. Swain ‘*John Alexander Dowie: the Prophet and his Profits*’, *The Century* 64 (1902): 941
- (14) Wolfe, Stephanie ‘*John Alexander Dowie and Zion City*’, Illinois, Zion, General Overseer, ‘*The Story of Zion*’, *Fallen Leaf*, 10 Feb 1900, Vol.VI, No.16, P.482
- (15) Blumhofer, 32-33
- (16) *Holmes vs Dowie et al*, Federal Reporter 138 (1906-7); *Samuel Stevenson vs John Alexander Dowie* 31 Jan.1902, Illinois Circuit Court (Chicago 1909), 153-92

- (17) Percival Serle (1949) ‘Dowie, John Alexander’ *Dictionary of Australian Biography*
- (18) *Life*, Lyndsay, P.234-235
- (19) ‘Family Notices’, *The Narracoorte Herald* Vol.XXXI no.3, 204. South Australia 12 March 1907 P.3
- (20) Newspaper Article ‘Stroke Lays Dowie Low’, *Chicago Tribune*, 1 Oct.1905 P.3
- (21) B. Morton, ‘*The Big Con: John Alexander Dowie and the Spread of Zionist Christianity in South Africa*’
- (22) Gibbney, H. J. (1972) ‘John Alexander Dowie (1847–1907)’ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*’ Vol.4
- (23) IBID Percival Serle (1949)
- (24) Personal Items, *The Bulletin* (Australia), 27 Aug. 1903, P.16
- (25) Blumhofer, Edith L. *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism Vol.1 - To 1941* Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1989, P.33
- (26) ‘*Pentecostal Founders - Charles Parham*’, *Diakrisis* March/April, 2026
- (27) ‘*The Topeka Daily Herald*’ Sept.26, 1906; *The Baltimore Sun*: Sept.27 1906
- (28) ‘*Fields White Unto Harvest*’ James Goff P.106,136
- (29) *The Parhamite Killings* <https://www.themessedupchurch.com/blog/the-parhamite-killings?rq=john%20dowie>; *Dowie’s Den of Death* <https://www.themessedupchurch.com/blog/dowies-den-of-death?rq=john%20dowie>
- (30) <https://www.themessedupchurch.com/blog/dowies-den-of-death>

Notes

Notes

About the Author and the Ministry

Terry Arnold holds a Doctorate in Theology (Dth), a Masters degree (MABS) and several diplomas. He was founder and president of *South Pacific Bible Institute*, a Bible college training and equipping people for ministry. In addition he was the founder of Hervey Bay Bible Church in Queensland, Australia. He has for 25 years served as an elder and then pastor.

Terry is the author of several books and is involved in a full time ministry of *teaching, informing* and *equipping* the church. He is also editor of a growing worldwide publication '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

His ministry includes preaching/teaching and conducting seminars and conferences in a wide range of churches and colleges.

TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.