

Margaret Court's Word of Faith

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Margaret Court (nee Smith, b. 1942) is unquestionably Australia's most successful tennis player. Playing in the 1960s and 1970s, Court amassed over 60 Grand Slam titles including eleven Australian Opens, five US Opens, five French Opens and three Wimbledon singles victories. In 1970 she won the Grand Slam i.e. all four major singles titles in a calendar year.

Having married into the Western Australian Court dynasty (two of whose members were State Premiers), Margaret Court retired from international tennis in 1976. Shortly before that time, she had converted from Catholicism to a brand of Pentecostalism. In the early 1980s she obtained a theological qualification and re-emerged into public life in 1991 as the head of Margaret Court Ministries. By 1995 she was running Victory Life Centre, a Pentecostal church with weekly attendances now approaching 2,000. Her television show 'A Life of Victory' appears regularly on the Australian Christian Channel.

Court is highly regarded by Australian religious right organisations and has spoken at gatherings of groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby and Fred Nile's Festival of Light. Speaking at the Ninth National Prayer Breakfast held at Parliament House, Canberra in November 1994, Court declared to the audience that 'Homosexuality is an abomination to the Lord! Abortion is an abomination to the Lord!' (*New Life*, 24 Nov. 1994)

Healing miracles

But I'm not going to dwell on Margaret Court's socio-political views and activities here. Rather, I'll focus on her so-called 'healing ministry', recently highlighted by Robert Bertoz in a letter to the *Skeptic* (Summer 2006, pp. 63-4).

Briefly, Robert attended one of Court's 'miracle services' at CityLight (Pentecostal) Church, Kingston, Tasmania. Court spoke for some time, explaining that the Devil brings pain and suffering but that people who called upon God to help them would be relieved of these problems. 'People with pain' were called forward:

... and there they were, falling like ninepins as Margaret prayed for each one individually while grasping them by the shoulders, rocking them slightly and periodically chanting incomprehensibly.

Suddenly, some of these people began to claim that they could straighten their afflicted leg, that their back pain had vanished etc. Court then told people on lifetime medication that God would become their medication if only they believed.

Robert Bertoz noted that limping people continued to limp and that wheelchair-bound people remained in their wheelchairs, even after Court's 'miracle' treatment, but that everyone seemed pleased with the whole experience.

So what's going on here?

Pentecostals

According to the 2006 census, Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing Christian denomination in Australia, increasing by 26% in the 1996-2006 period.

However, there still aren't a lot of them around, about 220,000 Australia-wide, which is about half the size of our Buddhist population (also growing fast). By comparison, there are over five million Catholics. Another way to look at it is that for every three Australian Pentecostals, there are also two Hindus.

If someone tells you that they're a Pentecostal, your first question should be, 'What sort?' If you wanted to show off, you might add, 'Are you a Holiness Pentecostal, or perhaps a Classic Pentecostal or a Restorationist? Are you a One-ness or Jesus Only Pentecostal, or are you merely a charismatic who belongs to one of the larger denominations?'

If you asked Margaret Court this question, I suspect that she wouldn't answer you directly. But if you kept at it you'd finally discover that she is a 'Word of Faith' Pentecostal. To quote Humphreys and Ward's (1995) *Religious Bodies in Australia* (p. 176):

The teaching of evangelists like Kenneth E. Hagin [1917-2003] and Kenneth Copeland (b. 1937) began to have an impact in the early 1970s with Hagin founding Rhema Bible Training Centre in Oklahoma in 1974. Deriving from Romans 10:8 (Greek: rhema - word of faith), these televangelists speak of the power of positive confession as bringing into existence what is stated with the mouth. Whatever is spoken by faith becomes immediately inspired and dynamic in the situation.

The authors add that the 'Word of Faith' (often simply called 'Faith') teaching is fundamental to the 'prosperity gospel' which holds that temporal prosperity here and now is a divine right for believers.

To sum up, preachers like Margaret Court think that if you sincerely believe in God's Word, i.e. the Bible, and you claim what you take to be the promises of God with your mouth - yes, you have to speak your prayer out loud, as well as basing it on 'the Word' - God will most certainly grant your desire. Note that this won't work if you pray for something evil, as that would be inconsistent with the Word. But health, wealth, contentment - all yours, buddy. I've been unable to discover how mute people can speak their prayer out loud but perhaps you can ask Margaret.

Now, you may be thinking, 'Haven't I seen all this somewhere before?' - New Thought, Christian Science, Amway, Norman Vincent Peale and *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Rhonda Byrne and *The Secret* etc - all variations on the same hokey theme? Well, if you were thinking that, you're not alone. No less a conservative evangelical Christian than Bill Muehlenberg (ex-Australian Family Association and currently an independent blogger) had this to say when reviewing Byrne's *The Secret*:

... [It's] not just New Agers and occultists who have been into all this stuff. Some Christian groups have taught these things as well. Much of the positive confession movement, the health and wealth gospel, the name it and claim it theology, the word of faith movement and the prosperity gospel teachings all nicely fit in here as well ... Kenneth Hagin says, 'You will never be a conqueror until you confess you are one ... You have to confess [i.e. speak your desire] first to become one. Faith's confessions create reality.' (CultureWatch site, 23 May 2007)

Just in passing, this is a very good example of the permanent tension existing between fundamentalist Baptists like Muehlenberg and significant segments of the Pentecostalist movement. The two denominations may form temporary alliances to battle abortion or homosexual rights, but deep down there is a mutual antagonism involving the crucial question of what constitutes true Christianity.

Margaret Court's odyssey

So how did Margaret Court become so deeply involved with the 'Word of Faith' or 'positive confession' movement in Australia? The process began in 1973, before she retired from world tennis, when she was sitting in a French church and suddenly realised that the Catholic tradition in which she had been raised no longer held any meaning for her. Her biography explains that:

[Margaret's] heart was zealous for God, but it had long been blinded by religious traditions which made the religious way of life - the deeds, penances and good works - more important than the simple truth of the written Word of God which glorifies Jesus alone.

(Margaret Court with Barbara Oldfield (2006) *Winning Faith [WF]*, 42)

Shortly afterwards, a friend took Court along to a 'charismatic-style' meeting in Australia, where she 'responded to the altar call' i.e. publicly acknowledged that she had been 'born again'. (p.37) But this was only the beginning of Court's odyssey. After retiring from her international tennis career in 1976 and while raising her young family, she slipped into a period of deep depression, feeling 'guilty, unworthy, fearful and totally insignificant'. (p.46)

Court began listening to Pentecostals who taught a practice called 'inner healing', involving the identification of 'suppressed memories' of people and experiences that may have adversely affected Court in the past. She reacted very badly to this process, especially when a 'deliverance team' diagnosed

demonic influences at work in her life, including the 'demon' of pride in her tennis career. Her depression grew worse, she had great trouble sleeping and in 1979 she was hospitalised and treated for a variety of conditions including a torn heart valve. (pp.45-51)

But then she watched a videotape featuring Dr Frederick K. Price. Price is a leading Word of Faith teacher (have a look at the mountain of Christian critiques of him on the Web!) and this story tells us a great deal about why Margaret Court is where she is today:

[In a meeting Court had attended in Hawaii several years earlier], Dr Price, acting on a word of knowledge, prophesied that God was healing someone in the audience of stomach ulcers at the very time he was speaking. That someone was [Court's husband] Barry, who told Margaret about it some hours later ... (52)

According to Pentecostals, a 'word of knowledge' is an insight given by the Holy Spirit to an individual, often for the benefit of another person, although it may be as prosaic as reminding you where you left your keys. (This is one of nine such 'spiritual gifts', which include the better-known ones of healing and speaking in tongues.) Shortly after leaving hospital in 1979, Court watched a Fred Price video, recalled his 'word of knowledge' at the meeting in Hawaii, and suddenly:

... heard clearly for the first time that the Word of God was the only way to grow in faith and to overcome the areas of defeat in life. She sat transfixed ... (53)

So we have a history of great success followed by depression, a period of increased stress, a desperate wish for deliverance, the memory of an apparent miracle and a formula for happiness all sloshing around together. Combined with elements of Court's personality, a pretty good recipe for what happened next, I'd say.

Margaret Court Ministries

Court's next step was to start talking to herself. Of course, as far as she was concerned she was talking to God, but we're reminded of positive thinking techniques often associated with pyramid selling - sorry, 'multi-level marketing':

The scripture Margaret found was in 2 Timothy 1:7: 'For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.' The discovery of this scripture at that time turned her whole life around forever ... Over and over she said it; day and night, night and day ... (54)

She began to attend 'a newly-formed church in Perth' - the Rhema Family Church which opened its doors in 1979 - as it 'taught along the same lines as

Dr Price'. Meanwhile, she kept discovering helpful scriptural texts, and lo and behold:

The more she said [these texts], the more she started to believe [them] and the stronger she became. (57)

In 1982, Court enrolled in the newly-formed Rhema Bible Training Centre (WA) and 'began to understand the incredible power of her own words'. She started refusing to listen to bad news, accentuating the positive at every opportunity, and another supernatural healing suddenly occurred: her heart valve was checked again and pronounced OK. Some people might have opted for natural explanations such as an initial misdiagnosis, but Court was happy to 'give God the glory', especially as she had earlier been healed of 'a spinal curvature and scoliosis' in a 'laying on of hands' ceremony.

She graduated from Rhema in 1983 and spent the next seven years raising her family and actively participating in church activities. During this time:

... [She] began to observe that anyone who genuinely knew how to apply faith and the Word of God to their problems always overcame them. (64)

In other words, Court convinced herself that she had backed a certain winner, possibly by ignoring the weasel word, 'genuinely', in the preceding quote. Early in 1991 she was ordained a minister by a South African Rhema Church pastor and went on to form Margaret Court Ministries Inc. Her biography notes that:

Officially Margaret now bore the title 'the Reverend Margaret Court'. But like anything that hinted of ostentation, she preferred to leave the title on her ordination certificate. (76)

This is no longer true (if it ever was), as Court frequently signs herself 'Rev. Dr Margaret Court MBE PhD LLD (Hon.)', as in her foreword to Pentecostal Pastor Danny Nalliah's *Worship Under the Sword* (2005). Her doctorates seem to consist of an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma, USA (Roberts has strong Word of Faith connections and is noted for having told his supporters that he would die if they didn't donate millions of dollars to his organisation); and a PhD of uncertain provenance.

As well as assisting the poor, Margaret Court Ministries (MCM) held public meetings and generally operated as a full-tilt Pentecostal outfit:

... [Scores] of people began to give their lives to Christ ... Hundreds more were baptised in the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in a new tongue ... A woman with severe depression was healed ... A young man who took a morning off work to attend a meeting was healed of a longstanding back ailment ... (77-82)

Readers familiar with the work of James Randi and other debunkers will recognise conditions such as depression and back pain as the faith healer's bread and butter. They seem to have more trouble curing terminal cancer or restoring lost limbs, although, as we'll see below, Court claims spectacular success with girls' bits!

Although Court's 'spiritual antennae were finely tuned to the Holy Spirit', she never claimed personal credit for healings and other miracles, but gave the credit to God who worked through her. All Pentecostal faith-healers do that. Other 'gifts of the Spirit' granted to Court evidently include both prophecy and the ability to speak in tongues (glossolalia).

Victory Life Centre

A few years later, Court began to think that there weren't quite enough 'solid' churches around Perth to handle all her new converts so she decided to form her own. God personally told her to do this while she was washing the breakfast dishes one day:

'I want you to start this work. Step out [i.e. in faith] and I will show you how to do it as you go.' It was clear and it was definitely God. (92)

To cut a long story short, it all came to pass. Victory Life Centre came into being in 1995 and is now one of the most well-attended churches in Perth. Its aim is 'to take the city and the nation for Jesus'. Court has her own Christian television show, her own Bible college, missions and youth departments and basically everything else that the well-dressed Pentecostal pastor is wearing. Word of Faith champions from various corners of the globe speak at Victory Life Centre, including heavyweights like Richard Roberts (son of Oral), Jesse Duplantis and Kenneth Copeland (the last two have their own shows on Australian free-to-air television, but at an ungodly hour).

The rub, of course, is that Margaret Court has a lot of funny ideas deriving from her Word of Faith philosophy. And the ideas don't just seem a little bizarre to the secular mind, but to most Christian minds as well. I've already referred to Baptist Bill Muehlenberg's contempt for Word of Faith doctrines, and to the widespread evangelical criticism of Court's mentor Dr Fred Price (Google his name or that of Kenneth Hagin or Kenneth Copeland and see how many times you can count the word 'heretic').

We can lead a heavenly existence right here on earth if we simply follow Court's Word of Faith precepts:

We can live here on earth as it is in heaven, for Jesus has already won the battle for us to live in victory. (93)

Contrary to the majority evangelical view, God never wills illness or poverty on people to punish them for their sins. This is all Satan's work. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross vanquished not only death but all other afflictions of humanity by taking them upon himself:

The price Jesus paid 2,000 years ago included not only forgiveness for my sins but also deliverance from every other effect of evil in my life ... (Margaret Court [1999] Winning Words [WW], 86)

... [We] can walk in health all the days of our life ... [I've] learned enough about the power of God's Word to say, 'Hip trouble: you're on Jesus' hips, not mine. You can't stay in this body.' ... I've got no hip trouble today. (ibid., 33, 85)

Notice how you have to keep speaking out loud to God if you want results. This is how Court explains the process of recovery from her torn heart valve:

I got a picture of a healthy heart from an encyclopedia and left it open on the hall table ... Every time I passed that open book I would say, 'This is a picture of my heart. I have healthy valves, arteries and blood vessels ... I thank you, Lord Jesus, that my heart is healed today' ... (87-8)

Here's a good summary of her position:

I started to see that [like God himself creating the natural world], I, too, was creating my desired natural world of good health from the supernatural world as I released my faith through my mouth. (88-9)

Almost as an afterthought, and in parentheses, Court adds that readers should keep taking their doctors' medication 'until Jesus' medication overtakes it!'

All this looks very much like primitive magical thinking to me. As does this passage:

I've ... learnt that my thoughts, by themselves, have no power, but once I speak them into the atmosphere I have established either a negative or a positive situation - one in which God is able to be involved or one in which the devil is involved. (WF, 69)

A final observation about Court's Word of Faith theology is that it operates like a clockwork machine, and preachers like Court are often criticised by other Christians for daring to remove God's independent agency. See if you think she's talked her way out of this one:

God is compelled to comply with the demands that we make on Him through our faith. I don't mean we should arrogantly think we can force God to act on our behalf, for He is God and He is sovereign. But we do honour and respect Him when we believe and act on His Word regardless of our situation, and our faith pleases Him ... [because] on the basis of our faith, He can move to bring about everything we firmly believe. (WW, 96-7)

In other words, God can do what he likes, but if you've followed the Word of Faith formula, you've got him by the ... well, by the throat. It seems to work pretty well for Margaret Court, though, as among her healing successes was a young South African girl with 'no right ovary, her left ovary was undeveloped and her uterus was only as big as a thumbnail.' But after Court had finished laying hands on her, 'now there are two fully developed and functional ovaries and a normal-sized uterus.' (pp. 97-8)

Conclusion

It's extremely difficult to get strong-minded people like Court to change their viewpoints. They're obviously capable of incorporating virtually any event or situation into their worldview by the simple expedient of appealing to the supernatural.

One wonders, however, what might happen if Court herself or a close relative of hers was to contract a degenerative disease. When all the praying and faith-speaking and laying on of hands has failed, where does this leave the very foundation of your version of reality? According to Court:

Dying can be as simple as sitting down and committing our spirit into the hands of our Father God ... It's possible to die in perfect health at a fine old age. (33)

Other Word of Faith preachers say similar things: you shouldn't really die of a disease or condition, but simply 'wear out' and die when you're good and ready to do so. But often it doesn't happen that way, even to Word of Faith people.

However, Margaret Court will have none of this defeatism:

In the future she sees large healing meetings being held in the Perth Entertainment Centre, with lines of ambulances outside and people lining up with all sorts of stretcher-bound and wheelchair-bound cases, waiting by the thousands to get inside where they finally find God's healing and leave praising Him for His goodness. (WF, 108)

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