



# A Theological Evaluation of Pentecostalism and its Relevance for the Contemporary Church

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## Abstract

The wave of spiritual dimensions in the Christian faith cannot be over-emphasised due to personal encounters with the Divine God and subject to people's understanding and knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. The writer adopted a historical and theological approach in discussing, appraising and evaluating Pentecostalism and its relevance to the contemporary Church. A notable distinction is made between classical Pentecostal denominations, that is, those which began in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the charismatic Movement within the historic churches since 1960 and the newer charismatic, and the third wave, that is, the independent churches since 1775. The paper argues that Pentecostalism is one of the most significant religious phenomena in twentieth and twenty-first-century Christianity and that the Azusa street revival is a notable historical Pentecostalism worldwide. The paper concluded that the Azusa revival remains the mainstream of Pentecostalism in Africa and the world at large and that Pentecostalism is undoubtedly a source of blessings to the Church, yet it is expected of the Church to thirst for it without delay. Pentecostalism serves as a means of membership retention within the organised structure; it has the potential to pave the way for harmonious living and teamwork within the body of Christ in general.

**Keywords:** Appraisal, Pentecostalism, relevance, faith.

## Introduction

The wave of spiritual dimensions in the Christian faith cannot be over-emphasised due to personal encounters with the divine God and subject to people's understanding and knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. This paper aims to access the historical trend of Pentecostalism and ascertain its relevance to the contemporary Church; the paper limits its scope to the charismatic experience out of the various dimensions of Pentecostalism or waves of Pentecostalism that have occurred. Therefore, tracing the movements' historical reality and deducing particular virtues from experiential Pentecostalism is the hallmark of this brief paper. Pentecostalism is a distinct type of Christianity that stresses the work of the Holy Spirit and the direct encounter of the presence of God by the devotees (Menzie & Menzie, 2000). Pentecostals trust that faith must be experiential, and not only ritualistic. Pentecostalism rather upholds the value of an enthusiastic and dynamic approach in faith. Pentecostals may be distinguished by their distinctive belief that an individual can serve as a tool for supernatural gifts granted by the Holy Spirit. These *charismata* one may obtain include the "sign" or "miraculous" gifts such as speaking in tongues, faith healing, prophecy and discernment (Martin, 1990).



## Historical Survey of Pentecostalism

The word Pentecostal originates from the Greek term *Pentekosti* which denotes the Jewish Feast of Weeks. For Christians this represents the descent of the Holy Spirit on the followers of Jesus Christ as outlined in the Book of Acts. A notable distinction is made between classical Pentecostal denominations, that is, those which began in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the charismatic Movement within the historic churches since 1960 and the newer charismatic, and the third wave, that is, the independent churches since 1775 (Dyrness et al., 2008:20-25). Anderson articulated the three phases of Pentecostalism. He asserts that at the beginning of the twentieth, Charles Perham, a former Methodist Preacher in Topeka, Kansas, was responsible for formulating a new doctrine of spirit baptism accompanied by speaking in tongues and creating an Apostolic faith Movement in 1901. William Seymour, an Apostolic Faith preacher from Houston, went to Los Angeles with this message in 1906, and the Azusa Street Revival, which transformed Pentecostalism into an international movement arose (Dyrness et al., 2008:20-25).

The second Phase of Pentecostalism began in the late 1950s and 1960s when ministers and members in the older churches began to seek the Pentecostal experience. In 1967 Pentecostalism entered the Catholic Church, and the charismatic Catholic Movement has since become the most significant force in global Pentecostalism with its particular Sacramental form of Pentecostal theology. In the 1970s, a third phase of the Movement arose in the form of independent churches with only a tenuous and weak relationship with denominational Pentecostalism and the charismatic Movement (Burgess & van der Maas, 2002; Dyrness et al., 2008:20-25).

Pentecostalism agrees that sins of all can be forgiven through the death, burial, as well as the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, humanity, is thus reconciled with God and this then the Gospel or the 'good news.' Pentecostalism is one of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Christianity's most significant religious phenomena. Deji Ayegboyin and Emiola Nihinola affirm that Pentecostalism is a broad term that incorporates several fundamental protestant sects that emphasise the Holy Spirit's ministry (Ayegboyin and Nihinola, 2008:213-216). According to Nihinola, Pentecostalism is a Christian religious movement of the twentieth century based on certain doctrines and a form of Christian experience (Nihinola, 1998:6).

Grenz acknowledged the historical relevance of the Azusa Street revival of 1906 – 1909 as the source of the worldwide Pentecostal Movement. He grouped the era of Pentecostalism thus; the first wave of the modern Pentecostal phenomenon, also known as doctrinal Pentecostalism, which precipitated the establishment of denominations with emphasis on the necessity of the post-conversion baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues as its sign and in the 1960s a second wave of Pentecostalism surfaces and it is known as charismatic Movement traceable to the ministry of Dennis Bennett who received the baptism of Holy Spirit in 1959, the third wave of Pentecostalism emphasis on speaking in tongues with a special demonstration with C. Peter Wagner (Grenz, 1994:543-544). Therefore, this segment's aim is to ascertain Pentecostalism's historical trend and its waves or phases; as stated earlier, the Azusa street revival is a notable historical Pentecostalism worldwide. Mark Noll (2006) presents his thought on the Azusa Street Revival, and he states:

An abandoned Methodist church at 312 Azusa Street in the industrial section of Los Angeles became 1906 the original centre of modern Pentecostalism. William J, Seymour, a mild-mannered Holiness preacher, founded The Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission, where a new emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work rapidly became a local sensation and eventually a worldwide phenomenon. Before coming to Los Angeles, Seymour had been influenced by the ministry of Charles Fox Perham, who had grown up in Methodist and Holiness circles. In his schools in Kansas and Texas, Parham taught that baptism of "the Holy Ghost and fire" should be



expected among those who had been converted and who had gone forward to the perfect sanctification that John Wesley and American Holiness bodies had proclaimed.

Noll further states that:

Perham also pioneered the teaching that a particular sign of the Spirit's baptism would be speaking with other tongues" with many others in the Methodist and Holiness traditions at the end of the nineteenth century, he placed a strong emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, including that of healing. The revival that began on Azusa Street rapidly attracted attention from secular media like the Los Angeles Times. More importantly, it soon became the center of attraction for thousands of visitors worldwide, who often went back to their homelands proclaiming the need for a special post-conversion baptism of the Spirit.

These included Florence Crawford (Founder of the Apostolic Faith Movement in the Northwestern United States), missionary T.B. Barrat (Credited with the establishment of Pentecostalism in Scandinavia and Northwestern Europe), William H. Durham of Chicago, early spokesman for Pentecostalism in the Midwest, and Eudorus N. Bell of Fort Worth (first chairman of the Assemblies of God). Meetings at Azusa Street, which went on daily for three years, were marked by spontaneous prayer and preaching, nearly unprecedented cooperation between blacks and whites, and the active participation of women. Observers at the time linked Azusa Street with the great Welsh Revival of 1904 – 1905 and the "Latter Rain" Movement, which had pockets of influence throughout the United States. Azusa Street remains a potent symbol for the activity of the Holy Spirit to more than fifty million Pentecostals worldwide (Noll, 2006: 496-497)

From the above assertion, history is pigment. However, in the context of this study, history is not seen in a pejorative or denigrated way as it revealed the historical truth and reality of the Pentecostalism movement; Noll's assertion also depicts the influence of Pentecostalism on world evangelism and cross-cultural relationship. The description of African Pentecostalism, as argued by Kgatle, is that Pentecostalism is based on the events as described in Acts 2:1-4 that when the day of Pentecost fully arrived, they were all with one accord in one place. Suddenly there came a sound from heaven like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

There appeared unto them cloven tongues like fire, and it sat upon each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4). Pentecostalism has other characteristics, such as faith healing and spirited music specific to the Movement refers to that radical expression of Christianity which emphasizes ecstatic speech in an unknown tongue as proof of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

According to the writer, this Pentecostal experience, although not a new phenomenon, has attracted the attention of the world. Pentecostalism ultimately became the fastest-growing Christianity stream in the United States and the rest of the world. A characteristic of the Pentecostal Movement is an emphasis on *charismata* and captivation, above all, speaking in tongues. Those who were influenced by the Movement and the ones who began speaking in tongues typically joined a Pentecostal congregation. Pentecostal churches throughout the world attach great importance to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The common ground among Pentecostals was that an authentic baptism of the Spirit was accompanied by a God-given sign of speaking in tongues. Pentecostals were committed to a more explicitly supernatural form of baptism in the Holy Spirit (Kgatle, 2018). Therefore, the totality of the doctrine and religious expression of Pentecostals are Neo –Pentecostals, charismatic and third wave is what is now popularly called Pentecostalism (Nihinloa, 2018:206-207), and it



is acknowledged that Pentecostalism has brought a new emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Nihinlola, 2018:208). The historical survey has re-emphasised the value and significance of several phases of Pentecostalism with its positive influences on the church mission enterprise.

### **A Theological Appraisal of Pentecostalism**

Assessing the theological relevance of Pentecostalism is crucial to this study; understanding the term or word Spirit and Holy Spirit's work is necessary. The word "spirit" is a conversion of the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma*; both of these words originally meant wind or breath (McCain, 2013: 21). In the Old Testament, the spirit *ruach* or Yahweh is God's power in action. Yahweh's Spirit is God himself present, and at work, as are his 'hand' and his 'arm' the distinct spirit personhood can, and according to the New Testament, should be read into the Old Testament, but cannot be read out of it, *ruach* has vivid and excellent association when used of God's energy let loose. *Ruach* is often designated as a wind (Numbers 11:31; Exodus 10:13), but it also refers to spirit (Judges 6:34, 1 Samuel 16:14; 1 Kings 18:12). In the book of Job it is interpreted as referring to 'breath' (12:10).

Yahweh's spirit shape creation animates animals and humankind, and directs nature and history (Genesis 1:2, 2:7, Job 33:4, Psalms 33:6, 104:29- 30, Isaiah 34:16). It also reveals God's message to his spokesman (Numbers 24:2, 2 Samuel 23:2), Yahweh's Spirit teaches the way to be faithful (Nehemiah 9:20, Psalms 143:10), it elicits faith, repentance, obedience, righteousness, docility, praise and prayer (Psalms 51:10-12, Joel 2:28, the Yahweh's Spirit equips one for robust, wise and effective leadership (Genesis 4:38, Numbers 11:16-29, and it also gives skill and application for creative works (Exodus 31:1-11, Haggai 2:5). Revealing and enabling are the activities mainly stressed by Yahweh's Spirit from the Hebrew word *ruach* (Holy Spirit in Dictionary, 1988).

In the New Testament, the Spirit is *pneuma* from the Greek word, and it is a word with a similar association to *ruach*, and the Holy Spirit pointed out by Christ at Pentecost (John 1:33, Acts 2:33) (Holy Spirit, in Dictionary, 1998). McCain submits that in the Bible, the two words sometimes mean life and alluded to the Spirit within a person in the New Testament; the Holy Spirit is exposed to be one member of the Trinity equipped in all ways to be both the Father and Son, and yet distinct from them in a triune Godhead where Jesus is a God-man or *Theanthropos* (Nicolaidis, 2018). James opines that a person is defined as one who has feelings knowingly and a will, and this is just what is stated of the Spirit (John 14:16-18) (Montgomery, 1981:376) and he was mentioning and referring to the personhood of Jesus Christ.

According to Redmond the catechism description of God as "a spirit" is based upon the Greek text of John 4:24 *pneuma ho Theos* literally Spirit (is) the God, in his thought Jesus is not saying God is one Spirit among many. Instead, he does intend to underscore the truth that God's essence is of the nature of Spirit (Redmond, 1998:166-167). The Holy Bible also identifies the Holy Spirit as a person because the Holy Spirit has the mind and will of a person, and he does what a person does; he speaks and gives instructions (Acts 13:2), and the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries (Donovan, 1996:131-132).

The importance of the Holy Spirit's doctrine in understanding the waves of revival or Pentecostalism serves as an impetus for the contemporary Church in its quest to acknowledge the theological relevance of charismatic or experiential Pentecostalism. The importance of the doctrine attests that the Holy Spirit is the point at which the Trinity becomes personal to the believer; the Holy Spirit is active within the lives of believers and resident in their lives; it is also of importance because the modern day is a period in which Holy Spirit's work more is more prominent than that of the other members of the Holy Trinity. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is of importance because the current culture stresses the experiential aspects, and it is primarily through the spiritual work that believers feel God's presence



(Erickson, 2007:862-863). Pentecostalism is theological because it values the biblical injunctions, dictates and teachings as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit; the second wave of Pentecostalism acknowledges the pneumatological concept of revival.

Grenz posits thus, “The first wave sparked the founding of many new denominations, but those involved in the second wave did not leave their churches. Instead, they often sought to work within the structure. Further, the new charismatic were less adamant that speaking in tongues was the vital sign of the Spirit's fullness. What united the new charismatics, therefore, was not adherence to specific pneumatology but a shared experience of the Spirit. We may, therefore, term this second wave "experiential Pentecostalism” (Grenz, 1994: 544).

Pentecostalism serves as a means of membership retention within the organised structure; it also paves the way for harmonious living and teamwork and does away with minor or unnecessary arguments as the wave placed a premium on individuals' encounters or experience rather than being rigid on speaking in tongues as the sole evidence of spirit baptism. Theologies and a particular kind of piety exist, but speaking in tongues is the Movement's most distinctive feature. The essence of Pentecostalism is the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit, especially the gift of speaking in tongues which is the initial evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit. In addition the Pentecostal aspect in Jesus' life, has been noted by scholars as a persuasive and influential presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. Even at the very beginning of his incarnate existence was a work of the Holy Spirit, the prediction and record of Jesus birth point to a particular working of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is also present in dramatic form at Jesus baptism, which commences his ministry (Matthew 3:16, Mark. 1:10, Luke 3:22, John 1:21).

The term pneumatology comes from two Greek words *pneuma* meaning wind, breath, or Spirit and *logos* meaning word, matter or being and so pneumatology, therefore, means the learning of the biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The image of wind and fire as a representation of spirit activities is evocative of the true nature of the Spirit.

### **The Relevance of Pentecostalism to Contemporary Church**

The Azusa revival remains the mainstream of Pentecostalism in the world. This singular event spread to the African continent. Emiola Nihinlola winsomely described the biblical event in (Acts 2) on the day of Pentecost as supernatural; he argues that many times, the work, operations and manifestations of the Holy Spirit are supernatural and miraculous. Pentecostalism is not only teaching or doctrine; it is an experience of power (Nihinlola, 2011:16-17). From historical archives and collections, this study has ascertained that experiential Pentecostalism serve as a means for church membership retention. Charismatic Pentecostalism is relevant to the contemporary Church most assuredly in the African church life in the following ways:

#### ***Biblical Engagements***

Pentecostalism paves the way for individual members to have an opportunity to be engaged with biblical responsibilities by serving God and humanity. It thus helps members or local Church to promote oneness, creating a sense of belonging.

#### ***Membership Retention***

Pentecostalism helps a local church or a denomination to retain its members and adds value to the Church's structure and its growth because the body of believers welcomes the new wave of development and embraced the trend. Many believers still join the ranks of Pentecostal churches (Robbins, 2004). This singular action shows that such a local church or denomination has a balanced theology. To this end, Nihinlola posits that some members of the Roman Catholic and other denominations began to have the classical Pentecostal



experience, but despite this, they remained in their churches and denominations. This second wave is called neo-Pentecostalism or charismatic revival (Mawerenga, 2019:255).

### ***Proclamation of the Gospel***

Pentecostalism creates a platform for the Church for the effective proclamation of the gospel; Christians must proclaim the gospel, preaching, teaching and witnessing to save and nurture souls (Romans 10:14 – 15), it is also expected of the Church to proclaim the gospel with enthusiasm and passion (1 Corinthians 9:16; 2 Timothy 4:2-3). (Macquarie, 1977: 328)

### ***Church Prayer Life***

Pentecostalism also awakens church prayer life. To experience a revival as it was at Azusa Street, prayer is essential; according to Ravenhill, no man is greater than his prayer life. The pastor who is not praying is playing; the people who are not praying are straying (Ravenhill, 2004: 25). The contemporary Church should take prayer life with all its sense of responsibility. Prayer is the principal key to the realm of the miraculous (Oyeyipo, 2014: 11).

Pentecostalism is very relevant to the contemporary Church because it is a tool of revival and church growth in this dispensation, experiential knowledge is the order of the day, worshippers and congregants in a local church are willing to experience or to be experiencing the wave and move of Holy Spirit and indeed Pentecostalism is a non-negotiable phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

The academic effort is made in this work by appraising the trend of Pentecostalism, an event that took place in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The Charismatic Movement was the second wave of Pentecostalism traceable to the Azusa Street revival of 1904-1906 Unlike the first and third waves, the second wave was different as it avoided focusing on one segment of revival and embraced the revival in totality with the result of retaining its members and it also allowed individual Christians to be helpful in its efforts. Pentecostalism is undoubtedly a source of blessings to the Church, yet it is expected of the Church to thirst for it without further delay. Charismatic Pentecostalism serve as a means of membership retention within the organised structure; it has the potential to pave the way for harmonious living and teamwork within the body of Christ in general.

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