The Formation and Development of Pentecostalism in the Twentieth Century

By: Bishop Barrington C. Hibbert, PhD

Thesis Statement

Pentecostalism has become a significant theological movement within Christianity on a global basis, and its influence is felt not just among Pentecostals, but also among many mainline denominations. Its rapid growth is due in part to its missionary program that is sensitive to the particularities of the indigenous peoples abroad, its eschatological passions, as well as to the experiential nature of the conversion experience.

Introduction

Over the last hundred years Pentecostalism has grown from just a few persons to over 500 million worldwide by the year 2000. R. G. Tiedmann states that the inspiration and formation of this movement finds their genesis in the development of extreme evangelical undercurrents during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Tiedmann, these radical evangelical movements had different eschatological expectation and missionary methods which challenge mainstream Protestantism in Europe and North America. These challenges gave rise to the Pentecostal movement. It is worth noting that the Pentecostal movement is not a monolithic group because already by 1915 three movements within Pentecostalism emerged: Holiness, Reformed or Finished Work, and Oneness Pentecostals. R. G. Robins states that these were further subdivided according to “regional, racial, cultural, doctrinal, and liturgical lines.”

Tiedmann argues that the growing worldliness of the mainline Protestant denominations in Western countries provided the impetus for the emergence of diverse movements within Protestantism such as, Holiness Wesleyans, higher life fundamentalists, premillennialism, restorationist currents, as well as German and Scandinavian Pietism. The current study considers the genesis of the Pentecostalism, its theological emphases, the development of the movement, its scholarship, and its missionary outreach program.

Genesis of Modern Pentecostalism

Many date the beginning of Pentecostalism to 1901 or 1906 but its roots go further back. Pentecostalism grew out of the holiness movement within evangelicalism. Jay Case observes that in the late nineteenth century, a new movement emerged within evangelicalism that emphasized a particular kind of conversion experience. Adherents yearned to experience a “deeper spiritual life to follow their initial conversion experience, insisted on the necessity of a second conversion-like experience: the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” These first generation Pentecostals believed that they had “access to the power of the Holy Spirit in ways that fellow evangelicals had not discovered.” In 1906 Pentecostals broke away from the rest of holiness movement and insisted that the baptism of the Spirit was evidenced by speaking in tongues. Harold Hunter suggests that there may not have been a century when tongues among Christians did not take place. He states: “In light of this, it is not surprising to find tongues-speech being practiced in the nineteenth century. Further, Pentecostal terminology became more prominent after the Reformation, snowballed in the nineteenth century and exploded in the twentieth century.”

McClymond states that modern Pentecostalism had its beginnings in a small Bible college in Topeka, Kansas where a female student first spoke in tongues on January 1, 1901. Douglas Petersen and Chas. H. Barfoot date the beginning of this movement to 1906 at the Azusa Street Mission revival. Cecil Robeck states that some scholars credit Charles F. Parham
and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the *glossolalia* utterance at Topeka, Kansas in January 1901 while others have given priority of William J. Seymour and the Azusa Street revival in April 1906. Robeck states that the emergence of Pentecostalism cannot be linked to any specific place or person. The rise of Pentecostalism was not solely an American phenomenon. Robeck cites Walter Hollenweger as having written that several revivals; in Wales in 1904-5, Azusa Street, 1906-9, the Korean "Pentecost" of 1907, the Mukti revival in India, 1905-7, the Hebden revival in Toronto, 1906-7, and the emergence of Pentecostalism out of the Methodist Church in Chile, 1910, have all produced centers of Pentecostal activity around that same time period.

Robeck argues that still others see a connection between Edward Irving’s work, (he formed the Catholic Apostolic Church in 1832), and the modern Pentecostal Movement. Other scholars hold that a revival that occurred at the Shearer Schoolhouse in Tennessee in 1886 is the real start of the Pentecostal movement. Whatever may be one’s view as to the start of the Pentecostal movement, it seems clear that the forces that gave birth to this movement, gave it momentum that is still felt today. Pentecostal has infiltrated the mainline churches with its spirituality in ways that only a few decades earlier could not have been imagined.

### Distinctive Theological Emphases of Modern Pentecostalism

When the word Pentecostal is mentioned, it conjures up the idea of loud music, dynamic preaching, lots of prayer, shouting, hand clapping, speaking in tongues, ecstatic utterance, prophecy, holiness, etc.. But what else makes a Christian Pentecostal? R. G. Tiedemann states that from the early days in Topeka, Kansas, and Azusa Street in California, people “experienced dreams, visions, prophecy, tongues and interpretations during religious revivals in different parts of the world.” Frank Macchia states that to Pentecostals the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a post-conversion experience and is evidenced by speaking in unknown tongues. This aspect of Pentecostalism was controversial, and, therefore, represented an “outstanding distinctive of Pentecostalism in its formative years.”

While speaking in tongues was the most recognizable and distinctive aspect of Pentecostalism, the movement has evolved. Macchia notes that more recently, Pentecostal scholars have insisted that Pentecostalism should be more broadly defined to include “conversion, Spirit baptism, bodily healing, and an eschatological expectation for the soon return of Christ.” According to Macchia, eschatological passions were also central to the Pentecostal movement. Such passions generated “intense holiness, empowered missionary witness, and a revival of extraordinary gifts, such as tongues and divine healing.” The physical healing that accompanied the Pentecostal fervor sweeping the land at the time was also felt in prestigious mainline churches such as the Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Boston in 1906. William Kay and Anne Dyer observe that what distinguished Pentecostals from Baptists and Methodists in the 19th century was their expectation of miraculous signs, most especially in bodily healing.

As the movement took form, it took several positions that identified it as Pentecostal. Among these were the following. First, God was actively manifesting himself in the church as he had done in the primitive church of the first century. John Carter writes that Pentecostals speak of “power encounters,” with demonic forces and that their worship services were “punctuated by prayer for God's power to heal the sick, to bring deliverance from demonic influence or to intervene supernaturally in human affairs.” Pentecostals believed that this kind of power was a gift of the Holy Spirit manifesting in the church for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Second, there was a spontaneous element in each worship service. These include shouting, waving, and lifting up of the hands, dancing, and prophecy. Prophecy was spontaneous messages delivered in public worship by some gifted person recognized as having
this gift. Third, Pentecostals believed and taught that the initial sign of speaking in tongues evidenced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, although now there is a shift away from tongues and prophecy among Pentecostals. Jacob Dodson writes that now “these practices are embraced mostly in the context of extraordinary revival environments, small group settings, or individual, private prayer.” It is clear as to what were the distinctive elements of Pentecostalism, but it remains now to be seen how it developed over the last one hundred years.

**Development of Modern Pentecostalism: Four Stages**

In the beginning of the movement, Pentecostal theology inherited its core doctrines from four influences of Anglo-American Pietism. According to William Oliverio these were, the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, American revivalism and radical Evangelicalism, the Keswick movement, and the coalition of premillennialists. Paul Lewis points out four major periods in this development, (Formulation, 1901-1929; Entrenchment and Adaptation, 1929-1967; Challenge, 1967-1984; and Reformulation, 1984-Present).

The period of formulation (1901-1929) was an attempt to stake out positions that defined what Pentecostalism really meant. Allan Anderson states that: “This period was also the decisive heart of the movement, the formative time when precedents were set for posterity.” This stage was critical, for it was here that the founders defined what Pentecostalism would be. For the first generation of Pentecostalism, its place in the wider world of Christianity was not at all certain. Amos Yong offers that the first generation of Pentecostals in North America found themselves "betwixt and between," rejected by fundamentalists who were convinced that charismatic gifts ended with the apostles, and by liberals who had "outgrown" supernaturalistic Christianity.

The period of entrenchment (1929-1967) sought to firm up itself theologically. It witnessed a gradual appropriation of Fundamental and Evangelical theological models and issues in its effort to firmly establish a distinctive Pentecostal theology. The emphasis in this period was to understand the Bible, to repeat Scriptures, particularly those that formed the foundation of Pentecostal confession. The period of challenge (1967-1984) was sobering for the movement. Pentecostalism faced challenges from three sources. The first was the Charismatic movement’s revised pneumatology that argued that tongues were not an initial sign of one receiving the Holy Spirit, but rather because one had the Holy Spirit, one was free to speak with tongues. The second challenge came from the “third wave” movement which maintained that the baptism in the Holy Spirit was not a subsequent activity but rather simultaneous at conversion. The third challenge came from scholars who accused Pentecostals of employing faulty hermeneutics to exegete certain passages in Acts.

The period of reformulation (1984-present) marked an attempt by Pentecostals to be more scholarly and reflective. This was a time to examine Pentecostal hermeneutics in light of the other theological movements in the Christian church. In this period a consensus emerged that Pentecostal theology was not something wholly different or unaffected by the weight of other theological traditions, but was rather influenced by them.

The spread of Pentecostal fervor was not only a Protestant phenomenon. The revival that started in the Holiness movement and morphed into the Pentecostal movement also infiltrated Catholicism. Pentecostals felt vindicated by this event for it confirmed their belief in speaking in tongues. The Charismatic movement and Pentecostalism differed in this respect: the Charismatics did not teach that speaking in tongues was the “initial” sign that one was baptized with the Holy Spirit. They taught rather that because one was baptized with the Holy Spirit, one now had the ability to speak in tongues. Tongues were a gift.
Pentecostalism’s embrace of Charismatics was not unanimous because there were real concerns. Vinson Synan showed his consternation when he wrote: “They [Charismatics] were singing our songs and exercising our gifts. It was more than I could take.” Macchia notes that: “The presence of the Charismatic movement in the Catholic Church was most unexpected for Pentecostals and posed significant theological and ecumenical challenges for Pentecostalism.” Still another challenge to Pentecostalism came from Oneness Pentecostals. From the very earliest days of this movement, there were vigorous debates between Oneness Pentecostals and their Trinitarian cousins on issues such as the formula used in baptism, the eternal Sonship of Jesus, and the modalistic Trinity versus the Trinitarian view. Notwithstanding these challenges, Pentecostalism continued to expand, and began to attend to its scholarship.

**Pentecostal Scholarship**

Pentecostal scholarship has grown along with the movement. It has moved away from a purely polemical stance to more engagement with other Christian traditions. Dodson observes that many Pentecostals in the United States engage with scholarly societies such as the National Council of Churches, Society for Pentecostal Studies, American Academy of Religion, Society of Biblical Literature, among others. The result of this exposure is that a new generation of Pentecostal scholars has emerged that is familiar with the theology and practices of other Christian traditions.

Yong identifies three waves of Pentecostal scholarship. First, the Pentecostal Historians who were interested in preserving the firsthand accounts of the revival while eyewitnesses were still alive. These scholars had available to them many of the original written sources in addition to eyewitness. The second wave is known as Pentecostal Biblical Scholarship, in which Pentecostal biblical scholars raised questions about the objective study of the Bible given their conviction that they themselves were participants in the biblical story, caught up, as it were, by the Holy Spirit into the biblical narrative. Yong points out that while these theologians, the historical-critical method was essential to understanding the original context of the Bible, it was more helpful to focus on the world behind the text (background) rather than the world in front of the text (foreground), yet their critical posture raised skepticism rather than engender faith. This led Pentecostal biblical scholars into dialogue both with conservative evangelicals as well as postmodern biblical interpretation, reader-response theories, and postcolonial hermeneutics.

The third wave, identified as Pentecostal Theologians, departed from the defense of the practice and teaching of speaking in tongues. Instead, these Pentecostal theologians “began to understand tongues as a sign of the multilingualistic and multicultural kingdom of God.” The new Pentecostal theologians are more interested in developing a theology of glossolalia that is context within a broader “ecumenical, pneumatological, and Trinitarian framework. So Pentecostal scholarship has developed to the point of examining its own presuppositions and practices by engaging with the other theological traditions. But what has been the role of missionary outreach in the development and spread of Pentecostalism?

**Missionary Outreach of the Modern Pentecostalism**

From the earliest days Pentecostalism emphasized evangelism. Robeck observes that to Seymour, pastor of the Apostolic Faith Mission at 312 Azusa Street, the purpose of the Mission was the “evangelization of the entire world.” Not only will Pentecostalism be always a theological and religious movement, but it will also be a missionary one. Its zeal for mission is driven by the experiential nature of Christianity. For Pentecostals, being a Christian is not only a matter of intellectual ascent. It is a deep personal and emotional encounter with Christ. Yong state: “how can witness not be given when God has been tasted and seen to be good?”
Pentecostal missionaries ventured far, taking the message to various parts of the globe. David Bundy provides three examples of Pentecostalism’s missionary efforts. The first is Thailand. The initial Pentecostal witness in Thailand to produce a church resulted from Finnish Pentecostal missionaries. After them the Oneness Pentecostal tradition was started by a Danish missionary. Following them, Taiwanese, Chinese, Koreans, Americans, Sri Lankans and others planted Pentecostal mission in Thailand.

A second case is Japan. Bundy observes that before the arrival of Pentecostal ideas in Japan, “Wesleyan/Holiness ideas were being spread by several distinct branches of that tradition.” Pentecostal missionaries continued to come from the USA, Britain, Sweden, and other places. Also, indigenous groups emerged that “adopted Holiness and/or Pentecostal spirituality with careful attention to Japanese cultural structures.” These groups did not rely on foreign mission organizations to help them spread the gospel in Japan.

The third example is Chile. The origin of the Pentecostal movement in Chile is attributed to the Wesleyan/Holiness Methodist missionary, Willis C. Hoover, and the Methodist Episcopal Mission Society. Hoover had converted to Pentecostalism, travelled to Chile and found the Methodist Pentecostal Church. The indigenous church refused to accept leadership or funds from any North American or European mission board in order to maintain its independence. As in the other two examples, Pentecostal missionaries descended on Chile from diverse places.

Due in large measure to its evangelical efforts, Pentecostalism has experienced tremendous growth in the Third World as well as in the developing world. Paul Freston states that: “In much of Latin America the erosion of Catholicism has corresponded to the numerical rise of two other categories: “Pentecostalism” and “no religion.” In a region once dominated by Catholicism, Pentecostalism has made inroads into their constituency. Freston observes that in Latin America, Catholicism has seen a sharp decline to about 70% of the population; Protestants have reached around 15% and continue to climb, with two-thirds or more of all Protestants being identified as Pentecostals.

Conclusion

The modern Pentecostal movement has experienced rapid growth, particularly in the Third World. What will the next one hundred years look like for the Pentecostal movement? Pentecostalism is conceived as a “spirituality,” according to Kimberly Alexander. Alexander argues that to say that Pentecostalism is primarily a spirituality does not mean there were no doctrinal distinctions that spread through missionary activity, “but the Pentecostal outpouring preceded the arrival of Pentecostal missionaries.” If Pentecostalism is to continue to grow it must remain a spirituality. Alexander states: “Pentecostal spirituality defies the restrictions of space and time, while taking on the sights, sounds, and sensations of the cultural contexts in which it flourishes.” But can Pentecostalism survive on its being a spirituality alone? Is there some other factors that will continue to give life to this movement?

In large measure Pentecostal scholarship will help to define what the essence of Pentecostalism is in the future, thus keeping it relevant and forward-looking. Kimberly Alexander observes: “It seems to me that the best expression of a truly Pentecostal approach to scholarship is an interdisciplinary one, where there is cross-pollination of practical theology, biblical studies, theological studies, historical studies, missiological studies, and so forth.” If Pentecostalism is to continue its growth and increase its worldwide reach, there must be a steady influx of young, energetic, and imaginative members.

Pentecostalism must continue to focus on its missionary outreach at home and abroad. Its missionary efforts must however, be conducted with full appreciation of the context of the
post-colonial realities. Partnerships must be forged between missionaries from the countries of the former colonial masters, and the indigenous peoples that they hope to reach. Given that the most rapid growth of Pentecostalism seems to be in the Third world, thinkers and leaders of the Pentecostal movement would do well to ensure that the movement’s missionary philosophy is one of equality and mutual respect and benefit. There is no reason to believe that if this is done, that with instant communication, and rapid transportation, that the next one hundred years would not be as exciting as the previous hundred years were.
Bibliography


