



# The Pentecostals

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Introduction: The term Pentecostal describes "a large number of revivalistic American sects, assemblies, and churches" (Mead, 1980, p. 197). A few of the more well known organized groups are the Assemblies of God, the Church of God, and The United Pentecostal Church. There are also several "charismatic" or "pentecostal" movements within mainline denominations such as the Catholics, the Baptists and the Methodists.

Thus, there are millions of Pentecostals in the United States, and millions more world wide, but no one knows exactly how many millions. There are so many different groups, some of which give no report of the size of their membership, that an accurate count is impossible.

Pentecostal preachers are among the most highly visible religious leaders in America. Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, R. W. Schambach, Kenneth Copeland and Ernest Angley are only a few of the Pentecostal "televangelists" who have become household names. The picture that many Pentecostal leaders paint of Christianity is one of emotionalism, modern miracles and money. Americans have been influenced (and some have been turned off) by this tainted view of New Testament Christianity. Christians need to be interested in correcting misconceptions in the minds of Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals alike. The truth of God needs to be vindicated in the eyes of the world, and it is the job of God's people to do it.

## < Point of Origin >

Pentecostal churches claim to have their origins in the events that occurred in the second chapter of Acts on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ. Thus, they point to the baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues as key

elements of the "full gospel" message which they preach today.

However, Pentecostal scholars acknowledge that, since the time of the apostles, only a few groups and individuals even claimed to have received Pentecostal powers (Nichol, 1980). The United States is recognized as the true "birthplace of twentieth-century pentecostalism" (Nichol, 1980, p. 25).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, many common people began to feel out of place and unfulfilled in the structured mainline denominations. The movement toward pentecostalism grew out of this popular discontent. Historian David Edwin Harrell ably summarized this early movement in these words:

American pentecostalism grew out of a deepening of spiritual life associated with the holiness movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Participants in this nebulous movement, both in America and abroad, looked beyond the conversion experience to continual personal encounters with God for the Christian. Around the turn of the century some of these reformers began to teach that the baptism of the Holy Ghost, accompanied by speaking in tongues, was the final, and pentecostal, work of grace to be sought by every Christian. (1975, p. 11).

Three early outbreaks of pentecostalism catapulted the movement into the twentieth century. The first occurred in 1896 at the Shearer Schoolhouse in Camp Creek, North Carolina. Three holiness preachers made "emotional and personal" appeals to a large crowd and received unprecedented results. A Pentecostal historian described the scene like this:

As more and more people filled the altars, praying until their burdens and doubts were relieved, the expectation of each service became steadily higher. In the lamplighted room the people felt a strange exaltation that intermittently overflowed in weeping and shouting. Their emotional expression frequently became even more demonstrative, for many danced in spiritual ecstasy or trance as they were deeply moved by a sense of salvation and well-being. (Conn, 1955, p. 20).

This group formed an alliance with a group from Cleveland, Tennessee, under the leadership of R. G. Spurling. First known as The Christian Union, in 1902 the name was changed to The Holiness Church. Later branches, several of them head-quartered in Cleveland, Tennessee, have the phrase "Church of God" in their official names (e.g. Church of God of Prophecy).

The second Pentecostal uprising occurred in Topeka, Kansas in 1901 under the leadership of Charles Fox Parham who ran a Bible school there. Parham and his students had concluded that "on each occasion in Apostolic times when the Holy Spirit baptized believers, there was an outward manifestation -- speaking in tongues" (Nichol, 1966, p. 27). During a "watch night" service on New Year's Eve, one of Parham's students, Agnes Ozman, appeared to receive just such an experience as Parham laid hands on her and prayed. The importance of the events in Topeka is that for the first time in the Pentecostal movement, Holy Spirit baptism was directly linked to the outward sign of speaking in tongues (sometimes called "glossolalia") (Nichol, 1966).

The most famous early "revival" of pentecostalism in America occurred at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles in 1906. William J. Seymour, a humble black preacher, somehow attracted individuals from all over to seek the Pentecostal experience in his Apostolic Faith Mission. Many claimed to receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost and miraculous healing. The Azusa Street "revival" is noteworthy because several of its participants eventually took the Pentecostal message to other part of the country.

From these beginnings, Pentecostalism grew. As it did, groups of like-minded individuals organized to form churches or fellowships. Typically, the organizational pattern would follow that of some existing denomination. "Assemblies of God emphasized the independence of local congregations in the Baptist tradition; others, including most of the forms of the Church of God, formed centralized organizations in the Methodist tradition" (Harrell, 1975, p. 12). So the Pentecostal movement was not unified to begin with, and more divisions have surfaced as the years have past.

### < Points of Difference Among Pentecostals >

As mentioned above, Pentecostal churches differ widely in organization and polity. They also differ on a great variety of doctrinal issues. A few are listed below.

1. "Jesus Only". Some pentecostals hold that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all one person -- that there are not three persons in the Godhead. This "Jesus only" or "oneness" doctrine typifies the United Pentecostal Church. However, most other Pentecostal groups believe that there are three Persons in the Godhead.
2. Standards of dress. Many Pentecostal churches have strict standards of dress for their members. In some groups, wearing jewelry, make-up, or pants is forbidden for

women. In other groups, such is common practice (e.g. Tammy Faye Bakker). In the 1930's, the Pentecostal Holiness church actually split over the "neck-tie issue" --some believing that accepting "relaxed standards of dress was a sinful compromise with the world" (Harrell, 1975, p. 12).

3. Premillennialism. The vast majority of pentecostals are of the premillennial persuasion --believing that Christ will return to earth to rule over an earthly kingdom for 1,000 years. However, the Church of God of Anderson, Indiana holds that the personal return of Christ is "not connected with any millennial reign" (Mead, 1980, p. 87).

### < Distinctive Points of Pentecostal Belief >

1. Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Every Pentecostal believes that the baptism of the Holy Spirit can be experienced in the present day by believers. This occurs subsequent to ones conversion (Nichol, 1966). It is, however, an experience that is difficult even for Pentecostals to describe. In one of their tracts, "The Gift of The Holy Spirit," it is stated that:

"'Incomparable' is the only adequate description of this infilling. The transition to an entirely new realm and way of life. A complete transformation takes place...The baptism of the Spirit completely satisfies every longing of the soul. In this experience is fulfillment."

2. Speaking in Tongues. "Unique with the Pentecostals is the view that the reception of the Spirit is signified by the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. It is this principle which distinguishes them from the so-called historic Christian churches" (Nichol, 1966, p. 9). A Pentecostal tract states that the reasons tongues are given as a sign of Holy Spirit baptism are (1) to provide "external evidence of something that has taken place in the heart," (2) so that there will be "a uniform sign that one has received this gift of the Spirit," and (3) "because the tongue is the most unruly member of the body, its being tamed by God is evidence of His complete control" (tract entitled "Pentecost is not a Denomination").

3. Divine Healing and Spiritual Gifts. Pentecostals teach that Jesus died for our sicknesses as well as our sins. Divine healing is accomplished by the supernatural working of God. Thus, the aid of medicine or surgical skills is refused by some Pentecostals; others claim to use modern medicine in concert with the power of God.

The gift of healing is but one of the several spiritual gifts claimed by individual pentecostals, but with the exception of the gift of tongues, it is the most popular. With it, "ignorant believers with no knowledge of physiology, diseases, symptoms, drugs, or surgery" are supposedly able to heal real physical diseases "by the power of Christ" (Litzman, 1961, p. 54). The healings are often compared by pentecostals themselves to those which were performed by Christ and the apostles.

4. Foot Washing. Foot washing is practiced by several Pentecostal churches. It is frequently done in connection with an observance of the Lord's supper. John 13:4–17 is relied upon as scriptural support for this practice.

5. Water Baptism. Almost all Pentecostal bodies practice a baptism of immersion in water. It is usually viewed as merely symbolic --a public statement by one who has already experienced the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ in his heart.

6. The Bible. Most pentecostals say that they believe the scriptures should be the most highly regarded standard of faith and practice. A statement published in the Minutes of the annual assembly of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) says, "The Church of God stands for the whole Bible rightly divided. The New Testament as the only rule for government and discipline" (Conn, 1955, p. 118). In reality, however, Pentecostals tend to believe that nothing the scripture says can contradict their personal experiences --experience is a higher standard than the Bible.

7. The Role of Women. Many Pentecostal groups ordain women as evangelists and preachers. Charles Conn, a Church of God historian wrote concerning the historical role of women in that denomination as follows:

From the earliest days of the Church women were used freely as evangelists and church workers, and numerous local churches came into being through the tears and labors of consecrated handmaidens of the Lord...They were regarded as coworkers in the evangelization of the lost. There were always large numbers of licensed women preachers..." (1955, pp. 245–246).

In fact, Aimee Semple McPherson was perhaps the most charismatic charismatic of this century. Her healing campaigns brought thousands into the Pentecostal fold -- first to the Assemblies of God, and later to the Foursquare Gospel church which she founded.

## Cross-points

Compare Pentecostal doctrine with simple statements of scripture.

### The Pentecostals

1. Baptism of the Holy Spirit. "One may receive baptism in the Spirit by being a Christian in the first place (John 14:17), by asking the Father (Luke 11:13), by believing on Jesus (John 7:39), and by obeying God (Acts 5:32)." (R. M. Riggs, *We Believe*). "Every Pentecostal believes in the reality of a present-day experience for believers such as was received by the early disciples on the day of Pentecost" (Nichol, 1966, p. 8).

2. Speaking in tongues. "Reception of the Spirit is signified by the phenomenon of speaking in tongues" which is "a supernatural utterance by the Holy Spirit in languages never learned by the speaker--not understood by the mind of the speaker--seldom understood by the hearer" (Nichol, 1966, pp. 9-11). "There is not one verse in the Bible that states or even implies...that tongues would cease at the end of the apostolic age" (Litzman, p. 36).

3. Healing in the atonement. "The Church of God believes that divine healing is provided for all in the atonement (Exo. 15:16; Psa. 103:3; Isa. 53:5-6; I Pet. 2:24). This refers primarily to physical infirmity, but it can refer to body, soul and spirit..." (B. S. Triplett, *A Contemporary*

### The Bible

1. Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Cornelius received the baptism of the Holy Spirit before he heard: "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning" (Acts 11:15ff.). Jesus "...commanded them (apostles, SRK) not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which' He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:4-5). "...the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:26) and "were all fill with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues" (Acts 2:4).

2. Speaking in tongues. "Everyone heard them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:6, cf 7-11). "If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church" (I Cor. 14:26f.). "Whether there are tongues, they will cease..." (I Cor. 13:8).

3. Healing in the atonement. Isaiah 53:4, which states, "Surely He has born our griefs and carried away our sorrows," was fulfilled by Christ in the miraculous healings He performed while here on earth (see Matthew 8:16-17). Isaiah 53:5-6

Study of the Holy Spirit, p. 78). "We believe in divine healing as in the atonement" (Pentecostal Holiness Church Discipline, 1957, p. 13). "The atonement of Christ is complete and adequate for the whole man and all his needs...Thank God He was wounded for our transgressions bruised for our iniquities, chastised for our peace and beaten with stripes for our healing." (Bartlett Peterson, General Secretary of the Assemblies of God, "The Lord Our Healer," The Pentecostal Evangel, Feb. 10, 1972).

"...by whose stripes we are healed" refers to healing from sin (See I Peter 2:24). In considering whether the atonement of Christ heals from sickness as well as sin, look at 2 Corinthians. 12:7-9; 1 Timothy 5:23; and 2 Timothy 4:20.

### < Weak Points of Pentecostalism >

1. Modern "miracles" do not duplicate Biblical miracles. The "truth" according to Pentecostals is that Christians today should possess the gift of tongues and the power of divine healing like disciples did in the first century. But their tongues and their healings are NOT LIKE those possessed by first century disciples. This is the glaring internal weakness of the entire Pentecostal movement. New Testament tongues were understandable languages (Acts 2:6, I Cor. 14:26), yet Pentecostals admit that among them "speaking in tongues is ordinarily in an 'unknown tongue'" which the "uninitiated often characterize as 'gibberish' or 'babbling'" (Nichol, 1966, p. 12). New Testament miraculous healing power worked every time it was used, but Pentecostals admit that among them, "some people who desire healing are not healed" (Nichol, 1966, p. 16). In Mark 16:17-18 Jesus said, "And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick and they will recover." Pentecostals have not shown they possess any of these abilities to their fullest, yet they are the ones who insist these abilities must be possessed.

2. Both personal experience and scripture are held up as final authority. You can't have it both ways. What is right is either determined by the scriptures or it isn't. In

his book, *Pentecostal Truths*, Warren Litzman engages in typical Pentecostal double-talk on the authority of scripture versus personal experience. In response to those who object to modern tongue-speaking because many well known true Christians never spoke in tongues he asks, "Are we to look at human experience in order to find truth or are we to accept what the Scriptures say?" (p. 25). Three pages later, in trying to prove that laying on of hands to impart the gift of tongues is still to be practiced today he cites "our own experience as a Pentecostal movement...for fifty years people have been receiving the Baptism at times through laying on of hands...it has been my thrill to lay hands on as many as 127 in a single service, and see them all filled with the Spirit."

### Review Questions on Pentecostalism

1. Name at least three Pentecostal denominations.
2. When did the Pentecostal movement get under way in the United States?
3. What are some key doctrines over which Pentecostals themselves disagree?
4. What are the distinctive beliefs of Pentecostals?
5. What verses would you use to show that the "tongue speaking" done by Pentecostals today is not the same as the speaking in tongues we read of in the New Testament?
6. How would you show from the scriptures that Holy Spirit Baptism and speaking in tongues are not for Christians today?
7. Why does Isaiah 53:4-6 not support the doctrine that physical healing is in the atonement? (Give scripture).

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