

# Pentecostalism

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Pentecostalism, which is an outgrowth of the Holiness movement, originated in 1901 and has grown and spread rapidly until today it claims some 12,000,000 adherents in 90 countries of the world. Theologically Pentecostals are fundamentalists, holding to the doctrines of the inspiration of the Scriptures, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, the vicarious atonement, regeneration, sanctification, and the resurrection of the dead. The characteristics that distinguish them from other evangelicals is their insistence on holiness of heart and life, a baptism with the Holy Spirit, the evidence of speaking in other tongues, and faith-healing.

The origin of Pentecostalism is traced to Charles Fox Parham, who had opened a school in Topeka, Kansas, in October 1900. On New Year's Eve of that year he laid hands on Miss Agnes Ozman so that she might receive the Holy Spirit. She immediately began to speak in tongues, speaking no English but only Chinese for three days. Miss Ozman's "Pentecostal experience" sparked a movement which after serious reverses in the early years in Kansas, Missouri, and Texas received new impetus through the renowned Azusa Street Revival in California in 1906. William J. Seymour, an ousted Negro preacher, was invited to conduct a service in the home of Richard and Ruth Asbury at which seven seekers received the Holy Spirit baptism and commenced to speak in tongues. From California the movement spread to South America and Italy. In New England several of the leaders of the Christian and Missionary Alliance became Pentecostals. Soon England and Wales experienced Pentecostal revivals. Thomas Ball Barratt and others spread the Pentecostal movement to Germany, Norway, and Switzerland. It appeared also in India, China, Brazil, and Chile. In less than ten years Pentecostalism had become an international movement.

Initially Pentecostalism met with considerable success, perhaps because the Pentecostals did not consider themselves to be a separate entity. They regarded themselves as "spiritual" members of existing church bodies. They published great volumes of literature, mostly periodicals promoting their views. They employed considerable showmanship in their revivals, attracting large crowds to their tent meetings, but they established no permanent churches. They worked people up to a high pitch of excitement, thus providing an outlet for their pent-up emotional energies. One feature which attracted many was their practice of faith-healing.

Opposition soon arose from the established churches, which began not only to eliminate from their membership those who followed the Pentecostals, but often openly persecuted them. By many they were regarded as fanatics; some accused them of various forms of misconduct and immorality. Some denounced them as chiliasts. More vexing was the dissension which arose from within the movement.

That there should be inner dissension among the Pentecostals is not surprising. At first each area had its own recognized leader. Yet the movement as such resisted leadership and organization on principle. In the course of time organization became necessary, and then the varied backgrounds of the Pentecostals, coming as they did out of the Holiness movement and out of various Protestant churches, brought with them a variety of doctrines and practices, which often clashed so severely as to bring about a rift. As a result there never was a united Pentecostal movement, but rather a large number of independent smaller Pentecostal groups in various areas.

In America the oldest and most prominent branches of Pentecostalism include the Apostolic Faith Movement founded by Charles Fox Parham, the Apostolic Faith founded in Oregon, the Church of God, the Church of God in Christ (Negro), the Pentecostal Holiness Church—a merger of several Holiness bodies, the Assemblies of God (the largest in America), the Pentecostal Church of God of America, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, and the United Pentecostal Church. Besides these there are many varieties of Pentecostalism in America comprising a number of regional, ethnic, small, and cultic groups. Among the regional groups are: the Church of God of the Mountain Assembly, the Pentecostal Fire-Baptized Holiness Church, the Congregational Holiness Church, the Emmanuel Holiness Church, the Pentecostal Free-Will Baptist Church, the Pentecostal Church of Christ, and the Elim Missionary Assemblies. Ethnic groups limited to Negro, Italian, and Spanish-speaking people include: the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church of God of the

Americas, the Apostolic Overcoming Holy Church of God, the United Holy Church of America, Inc., the National David Spiritual Temple of Christ Church Union, the Christian Church of North America, and the Spanish-Speaking Pentecostals. Smaller Pentecostal groups have sprung up chiefly in the southern part of the United States. Among them are: the Churches of God, the International Pentecostal Assemblies, and the Open Bible Standard Churches, Inc. Cultic branches include: the United House of Prayer for All People, one of the largest Negro Pentecostal groups in the country, founded by Bishop (“Sweet Daddy”) Grace, and the Snake Handlers, found chiefly in the hills of Kentucky and Tennessee.

Pentecostalism has spread into all parts of the world. In Canada there are several groups. One has recently been organized in Newfoundland. The Pentecostals constitute the largest body of Evangelicals in Mexico. In South America they are growing very rapidly in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Columbia. Small groups of Pentecostals have been organized by missionaries in Egypt, Israel, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. In Africa they are gaining large numbers in the Belgian Congo, Nigeria, and the Union of South Africa. Aimee Semple McPherson and others brought Pentecostalism to Australia. India has several branches of the movement, and two American missionaries introduced Pentecostalism into Indonesia. There is also a group of them in New Zealand.

On the European Continent there has been considerable difficulty experienced by Pentecostals in some areas. Two groups, the Apostolic Church and the Elim Church, have been moderately successful in the British Isles. In Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden the Pentecostals have established themselves without difficulty. However in Bulgaria, Poland, Russia, and Yugoslavia they have encountered strong opposition from the Communist government, which regards them with grave suspicion. In Austria, Germany, and Switzerland there are small groups of Pentecostals active, but in France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain they have difficulty in becoming established because of the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church to all other churches in these countries.

One of the characteristics of Pentecostal faith and practice is their supposed ability to speak in tongues. Pentecostals believe that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was not just for that time or for the Apostolic community, but is a relevant, recurring phenomenon. They hold that the reception of the Holy Spirit is signified by the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. They are convinced that there is enough evidence from post-Apostolic times to their own experiential involvement with the phenomenon to demonstrate that “tongues” have never completely disappeared from the Church. While some critics have judged glossolalic utterances as mere “gibberish,” “the babblings of fanaticism,” “satanically inspired,” “an infantilism thrusting itself into the period of maturity,” or “hysteria,” Pentecostals themselves regard it rather as “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.” To Pentecostals speaking in tongues is evidence of their “Spirit baptism.” It is for them not the final goal of religious experience, but rather a beginning of a new kind of Christian living that is graced by one of the gifts of the Spirit.

There are several other noteworthy features in Pentecostalism that merit special attention. One is their missionary zeal. In proportion to their size they support an amazing number of foreign missionaries. These are usually sent out by individual congregations, not by the church bodies. They are supported in a haphazard manner until such time as they can become self-supporting in the foreign field. The Pentecostals concentrate on establishing indigenous churches as soon as possible and then withdraw their missionaries for service elsewhere. Another noteworthy feature is their publishing activity. They produce literature literally by the ton and distribute it wherever and whenever they can, carrying the cost by means of free-will contributions from their constituency. This flood of printed material is one of the factors in their rapid growth, which is another significant feature of Pentecostalism. In many areas of the world, notably in South America, the Pentecostals are the fastest growing church body. This can be accounted for in part by the fact that their appeal is chiefly to the lower classes, the poor, the underprivileged, and the unlearned. Their emphasis on faith-healing has attracted many of these lower-class people to the movement. Their lack of organization, their multiplicity of sects and cults, their lack of financial resources, does not seem to affect their rate of growth.

In recent years there has been a noticeable change in the policies and trends of Pentecostalism. Whereas from the start they were aloof from all other churches, even regarding organized churches as being of satanic origin, they seem to manifest a greater willingness to cooperate with other churches and to seek recognition. Doubtless their extensive foreign missionary involvement has brought them into frequent contact with other churches, and the major Pentecostal groups have joined the National Association of Evangelicals. Yet they have resisted membership in the World Council of Churches on the grounds that body includes in its membership also non-Evangelicals. True, two Pentecostal groups in Chile have joined the World Council of Churches recently, but it remains to be seen whether others will follow their lead in this respect.

On the other hand, there is a discernible trend in recent decades toward the establishment of a global fellowship of the various Pentecostal bodies themselves. The trend in this direction began with a series of Pentecostal Unity Conferences, sponsored by the Assemblies of God in the years between 1930 and 1940. This culminated in the formation of the Pentecostal Fellowship in North America in 1948–1949. This is not intended to be a merger nor even a federation of the various Pentecostal bodies, but rather an agency for cooperation among them in carrying on their various activities such as publication, mission endeavor, comity, and the like. In this respect the effect of the ecumenical movement among the churches generally seems to be affecting also the Pentecostals.

One other noteworthy trend in recent years is the increased emphasis on faith-healing. An outstanding example of this is seen in the successes of Oral Roberts, the well-known American evangelist. The successful efforts of Tommy Hicks in South America and of T. L. Osborn in the Caribbean are perhaps less well-known, but equally significant. These men gather crowds ranging into the tens of thousands in all the large cities of the world where they have conducted their evangelistic revivals, and place more emphasis on healing than on spirit-baptism and speaking in tongues.

There is noticeable in Pentecostal circles also an abatement of sectarian traits. In the early years much energy was expended in discrediting other similar sects and cults. This seems to be diminishing today in favor of a more tolerant attitude toward the peculiarities of other Pentecostal groups. Also, their straight-laced rejection of anything pretentious or permanent by way of meeting places has given way to the building of rather elaborate houses of worship. Little orchestras and drums have given way to mighty pipe organs, tents and rented storefronts have been replaced with established meeting halls and even pretentious temples and auditoriums. Multi-million dollar publishing plants have been established and are operated successfully. There is a growing interest in education. Whereas the early Pentecostals prided themselves in being “plain people and unlearned,” they now have Bible colleges, junior colleges, several liberal arts colleges, and even a university. They seem to realize the need for a college education on the part of their clergy, although there is still no strict requirement of a BA degree for ordination. Self-examination and self-criticism is now possible and is being practiced. Older methods are reexamined, discarded, and new and different procedures are being substituted. Extremely narrow legalism, austerity of dress, and avoidance of all worldly entertainment are on the way out. This would not have been possible a generation ago. The rank and file of Pentecostals are no longer the poor and underprivileged, but rather the middle-class property owners. In fact there is an organization known as the Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship International, which has grown to 100,000 members, which seeks to promulgate the Pentecostal ideas among businessmen by means of gatherings and banquets.

Once regarded as an insignificant group of religious enthusiasts and known as “Holy Rollers” or “Holy Jumpers” because of their boisterous and noisy worship habits, the Pentecostals have not only increased in numbers but have also exerted an influence in church circles that must henceforth be recognized alongside Roman Catholicism and the Protestant churches as “The Third Force.”