

Back to the Future for Pentecostal/Charismatic Evangelicals in North America and World Wide: Radicalising Evangelical Theology and Practice

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It was Summer, 1967. Since I had just graduated from a well-known evangelical seminary nearby, I dropped in on a friend who was a resident of the 'Faith Homes' in Zion, Illinois. The 'Faith Homes' provided solace for spiritual refugees in a utopian town built by a faith healer, John Alexander Dowie, who, though amazingly gifted, came to believe in his later life that he was the prophet Elijah and that he deserved more than his share of women.

During my visit, I learned that in one of these houses lay an elderly, housebound saint whose ministry it was to pray all night, every night for the salvation of the world. My friend, with an air of reverence, ushered me into the bedroom. We chatted briefly, then I was told that the Lord had promised this intercessor that before Jesus returned there would be a billion 'Spirit-filled believers' on the earth.

I was incredulous. It never occurred to me then (and probably neither to the elderly gentleman) that the term, 'Spirit-filled' could refer to anyone other than Pentecostals, or perhaps, to the new charismatics, whose presence was just beginning to be felt in North America. But a *billion*?! We were a tiny minority. Hadn't I just overheard a faculty member from my seminary heatedly insist that, along with Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals should not be allowed to matriculate there? Another professor demurred, who, in Christian charity, clung to the hope that Pentecostal students might be salvageable.

In the intervening years, my sins have swung from doubt to vainglory. 'Spirit-filled' Christians, secure in their experience that God performs miracles today,¹ number around 543 million²—on cruise control to that prophetic figure of one billion. The movement, originally dismissed as 'the last great vomit of Satan,'³ has now become the largest active group in Christianity.

¹ A *Newsweek* Poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, April 13-14, 2000, asked the question, 'Do you believe that God performs miracles?' Eighty-four percent of the American general population said yes. Of these respondents, of course, few were Pentecostals, but the responses show the fertile ground in N.America for a Pentecostal/charismatic worldview. <http://www.pollingreport.com/religion2.htm>

² David M. Barrett, World Evangelization Research Center <http://www.gem-werc.org/>. Barrett projects that by 2020 the figure will reach 811 million. Barrett is the author of *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2002).

³ This characterisation of Pentecostals is widely attributed to G. Campbell Morgan, e.g., by Frank J. Ewart, *The Phenomenon of Pentecost*, rev. ed. (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, [1947] 1975), 38-39. Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1971), 144.

Not all evangelicals, however, want to be in that number. This raises the issue of the ‘evangelical’ nature of Pentecostals and their offspring, the charismatics and the third wave movement.⁴ Evangelicals, of course, see themselves as faithful to the Protestant tradition, against the ‘main-line’ denominations who have drifted leftward.⁵ Historically, Pentecostals conducted an unrequited love affair with the pre-cursors of the evangelicals, *i.e.*, the fundamentalists, who were characterized by their shrill polemics and bitter splits from the traditional major denominations over their drift into modernism/liberalism—and the denial of historic tenets of the Christian faith such as the infallibility of scripture, the virgin birth of Jesus, his miracles, atoning sacrifice for sin, resurrection, and literal return to earth.

So when it came to relating to the Pentecostals, the early fundamentalists (ca. 1920s to ‘50s) were in no mood for ecumenical trysts with anyone messing with Reformation doctrine. This was particularly true of their doctrine of cessationism, that is, the notion that miracles were limited to around the time of the apostles strictly to accredit the authority of the New Testament. Any claim to a miracle, such as speaking in tongues, was tantamount to adding new text to scripture—the ultimate heresy to those often accused of bibliolatry.⁶ To gain acceptance, Pentecostals desperately tried to behave and believe more fundamentalist than the fundamentalists, but mostly they received rejection for their efforts. Nevertheless, classical Pentecostals fervently shared the fundamentalist refrain: ‘My hope is built on nothing less/ Than Scofield’s notes and Moody Press!’

By the 1960s and 70s, most rigid fundamentalism had mellowed into evangelicalism, becoming less brittle about most of its issues, including cessationism. The National Association of Evangelicals included Pentecostals, who served in many joint ventures, such as Billy Graham crusades and world-wide missions conferences. Presently, the Pentecostal/charismatic constituency world-wide vastly outnumbers their evangelical counterparts; the tail now wags the dog. Interest among Pentecostals in being identified with evangelicals remains strong, but may be waning. For example, bellwether Pentecostal scholars are increasingly more drawn to the Society for Pentecostal Studies, the Society for Biblical Literature, and to ecumenical conferences, than to the Evangelical Theological Society. The second and third wave charismatics seem increasingly vague about their identity as evangelicals, though all Pentecostals and virtually all charismatics share the essential doctrines with evangelicals.

⁴ Classical Pentecostals, a movement beginning around the 1900s, tended to be strict fundamentalists until the rise of the charismatic movement, springing up within, and frequently abandoning, mostly mainline churches during the 1960s. The ‘Third Wave’ of Pentecostalism, comprised of many independent and denominational churches, is more focused on the spiritual gifts as edification rather than as a distinguishing ‘evidence.’ The worldview and worship styles of Pentecostalism have penetrated broadly across not only Evangelism, but within the increasingly marginalised ‘main line’ denominations as well. Some remain unhappy with this development, *e.g.*, Laurence W. Wood, ‘The Third Wave of the Spirit and the Pentecostalisation of American Christianity: A Wesleyan Critique,’ *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31 (Spr 1996), 110-140.

⁵ George Barna has discovered, however, that more than four out of five American Senior Pastors (83%) describe themselves as ‘evangelical.’ Large majorities of clergy representing churches not generally thought of as evangelical embraced that label, such as seven out of ten who serve mainline churches.’ ‘A Profile of Protestant Pastors in Anticipation of ‘Pastor Appreciation Month,’ September 25, 2001,’ <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=98&Reference=B>

⁶ For a history and theological analysis of cessationism see Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Post-Biblical Miracles* (Tulsa, Ok.: Word & Spirit Press, 2011).

The Current Scene

In North America, classical Pentecostalism,⁷ which had grown rapidly during the decades of the 1970s and '80s, have seen its growth flatten during the 1990s, the so-called 'Decade of Harvest'.⁸ In North America, it is independent Pentecostal/charismatic or 'apostolic' churches and emerging denominations like the Association of Vineyard Churches that are experiencing the most growth. The growing institutionalization of even this new movement made them uneasy with the extremely popular charismatic manifestations of the Toronto Airport Fellowship which saw some 300,000 visitors spreading its 'blessing' back to their home churches.⁹ Similarly, the 'Pensacola revival' served to revitalize Pentecostalism.

Despite these expressions, North America is no longer the focus of church growth. Instead in the non-Muslim Third World, in Asia and especially Latin America and Africa, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement is remarkable for its vitality. Reinhart Bonnke often draws crowds of a million in a single meeting, proclaiming an aggressive Gospel of counterattack against the power of the devil in sickness, demonic oppression and sin. The Third World, nevertheless, has long ago moved beyond dependence on white missionaries. Missions statistician David Barrett offered that 'according to our estimates, the specifically new independent churches in Christianity number about 394 million, which is getting on for twenty percent of the Christian world.'¹⁰

Why this growth in the Third World? The answers vary. Many academics who study missions offer social, economic and political reasons galore for the success of Christian missions, but, as another expert pointed out, they failed at the most elementary level as historians: to take the primary sources seriously, that is, the testimonies of the original missionaries themselves, who routinely recorded that the penetration of new areas for the Gospel was a result of the power of God in healings, exorcisms, revelatory spiritual gifts, and miracles.¹¹

Harvey Cox, by contrast, suggests that Pentecostalism, on a spiritual level, scratches where it itches: this charismatic gospel resonates across all cultures with the 'primal spirituality' common to humanity.¹² Humans are hard-wired; it seems, to believe not only in the afterlife, but in revela-

⁷ Represented by such denominations as the Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada The Church of God (HQ Cleveland, Tenn.), Church of the Foursquare Gospel, and the largest, The Church of God in Christ, an African American body of some five million.

⁸ A term coined by the Assemblies of God leadership to apply to the 1990s partly in response to a cooling of evangelistic fervor after two decades of almost effortless but sizeable windfall numerical increases, that is, the influx of many whose experiences with the Spirit tended to alienate them from their 'mainline' denominations. See the statistics in Eileen W. Lindner (ed.), *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 2002* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), *ad loc.*

⁹ Toby Lester, 'Oh Gods!' *Atlantic Monthly* (Feb 2002) <http://www.The-Atlantic.com/issues/2002/02/lester.htm>

¹⁰ Cited by Toby Lester, 'Oh Gods!'

¹¹ Gary McGee, "Miracles and Mission Revisited," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 25:4 (October 2001), 146-56.

¹² Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1995), 81-84. Cox sees Pentecostalism as representing the 'recovery of primal speech (ecstatic utterance), primal piety (mystical experience, trance, and healing), and primal hope (the unshakable expectation of a better future).' 83. This seems to be true in North American expe-

tory experiences, demons, and supernatural power. These experiences fit more closely with the worldview of Jesus and the New Testament than to that of the cessationism of the Reformers and the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which color much traditional evangelical theology. Certainly, the future of Christianity, then, resonates with St Paul's hope: 'That your faith not rest on words of wisdom, but on God's power' (1 Cor 2:5).

Perhaps the question of Pentecostal/charismatic growth worldwide is best answered by another question: what are those in the Third World doing differently than Pentecostals in North America and Europe?

1. Unlike the powerfully anesthetizing effect of materialism of the West, which insulates its adherents from almost every form of suffering and want ('fat, rich and in need of nothing'), Third World people face starker choices and see more clearly their need for intensive prayer for the power and life of God. For a westerner, God can be an expendable comfort; but for the poor, He is survival. The western impulse to solve spiritual problems by more expertise, buildings and technology is seductive, but in the long run will likely be counterproductive.

2. Unlike the private individualism of North Americans, those in the Third World tend to think and act more communally. Families and villages are much more needed in cultures without welfare state government programs and powerful economies that can supply every whim. With the rise of urbanization in the Third World and the breakdown of family and village ties, the small-group based church often steps in as a surrogate family, providing security, nurture and, above all, a larger sense of responsibility for others in the communal presence of God.

3. Unlike the professional, formally-educated ministers of North America, ministry in the Third World is the business of lay people. The Pentecostal principle of encouraging spiritual empowerment as broadly as possible undergirds the practice of ministry training by apprenticeship rather than by a detached, academic and often irrelevant formal education. In keeping with the model of 1 Cor 12, each 'member' (spiritually-gifted person) in a Pentecostal church body is expected to express their charisms of the Holy Spirit. The oft-misinterpreted proverb, 'A man's gift makes a way for him' applies to a young person whose spiritual yearning to be useful in the Kingdom of God finds encouragement to ministering to those around her or him, all the while learning, as an apprentice, while doing. By contrast, traditional theological education may well contribute to the stagnation of church growth in North America.¹³ This system has that same potential overseas. Missionaries frequently complain that when they send their best and brightest young people to North America for Bible college or seminary training they rarely return, and if they do, they often return infected with materialism, status-seeking and a loss of their original zeal for ministry.

rience as well. 'We maintain that ecstatic religious experience is an important factor in evangelistic activities that undoubtedly promote church growth.' Margaret Poloma and Brian F. Pendleton, 'Religious Experiences, Evangelism and Institutional Growth within the Assemblies of God,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28:4 (Dec 1989), 415.

¹³ See the author's article, 'Between Two Worlds: One Dead, the Other Powerless to Be Born'—Pentecostal Theological Education vs. Training for Ministry,' forthcoming, *Pneuma: Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, 2003.

4. Unlike their western counterparts,¹⁴ Third World Christians may actually enjoy a more accurate and sophisticated grasp of ‘theology.’ If ‘theology’ is the understanding and articulation of the Christian faith, then they have penetrated beneath evangelical traditions to perceive more profoundly the emphases of New Testament theology. Salvation is viewed by Third World Christians more holistically, encompassing the physical and social dimensions of life as well as the spiritual focus on regeneration and sanctification. Prayer and faith for God’s miracle power is scarcely mentioned positively in traditional evangelical theology, but they play a huge role both in the New Testament and in Third World Christianity.

The Future of Evangelical Pentecostal/Charismatic Theology and Practice?

This observation brings us to our principal speculation on the Pentecostal/charismatic ‘evangelical future,’ namely, that either descriptively or prescriptively, evangelicalism is in line to redefine its key theological vocabulary to conform more to New Testament doctrine and Third World (or, primal human) experience. Whether or not theology precedes or follows religious experience is debatable—most likely they are mutually conditioned, but the church could profit from a theology that did not, at least, ignore or thwart the major factors for church growth.

Within traditional evangelical systematic theology, a number of key biblical doctrines, outlined below, evolved toward a common characteristic: the denial or evasion of their inherent charismatic significance. By contrast, the biblical theology movement showed the New Testament emphases within these doctrines to be a great deal more informed by the charismatic power of God. More disciplined study suggests this charismatic emphasis to be even greater. Nowadays, however, even the growing Pentecostal/charismatic branch of Christianity lacks a thoroughgoing theology that treats these themes from a radically biblical/charismatic perspective rather than from scholastic categories of traditional Protestantism. Pentecostal doctrine has been popularly attributed more to personal experience rather to scripture. In fact one could say, potentially at least, that in the area of the application of Scripture, Pentecostals may finally ‘out fundamentalist the fundamentalists, or at least their evangelical counterparts in a radical (in the sense of returning to the root) biblical grounding for a truly evangelical theology.

However, traditional Protestant hermeneutics can be shown consciously to deny or minimize charismatic themes in the NT. For example, Luther’s ranking of NT canonical books was based primarily, and inversely, on their emphasis on miracles.¹⁵ Pentecostal interpreters simply adopted the traditional view of miracle to articulate their experience of the Spirit: ‘miraculous’ gifts existed only as apologetic devices to serve as ‘signs’ or ‘evidence’ of otherwise invisible divine actions. Further, Pentecostals followed the Protestant *ordo salutis* to place the ‘Baptism of the Holy Spirit’ as a subset of the stage of sanctification: hence and experience that served only as ‘evidence’ of the Spirit, occurring ‘subsequent’ to ‘salvation.’ The following paragraphs show

¹⁴ George Barna, ‘Barna’s Beefs: His Nine Challenges for American Christianity,’ *Christianity Today* 46:17 (Aug.5, 2002), 35. ‘Shockingly few Americans understand the power and significance of the supernatural world—the real supernatural dimension. Most Americans deny the existence of Satan and the Holy Spirit and are blissfully ignorant of the spiritual battle that rages around and within them. Who will inform and motivate God’s people about the realities of the battle?’

¹⁵ *The Works of Martin Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-) 35: 361. See the discussion in P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, E.t., R. C. Schultz from the 1963 German edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 83.

that the New Testament itself would shift the experience of the Spirit from these old conceptual ‘old wineskins’ into newer, more useful and biblical paradigms.

1. Holy Spirit

Traditional theology has discussed the Holy Spirit as an adjunct to extraneous concerns: the Trinity, the procession of the Spirit, ethics and, in Protestantism, the *ordo salutis*. Biblical theology in a number of key studies laid out a more charismatic portrayal of the Spirit.¹⁶ Statistical methods show that the OT and NT share essentially the same profile of emphases about the Spirit, one that is overwhelmingly active in charismatic expression. It is this charismatic Spirit, the Spirit of revelation, prophecy and miracle, not simply the Protestant Spirit of regeneration and sanctification, that is normative for all Christians.

2. Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God has received scant attention on traditional systematics, being identified with either the ‘visible church’ (RCC), the ‘invisible church’ (Protestant), or with the ideal theocracy at the end of the age. This latter concept devolved into the ‘just society’ of the Enlightenment, theological liberalism and the ‘liberation’ theologies. The biblical theology movement from Schweitzer onward showed how the kingdom was the central motif in Jesus’ ministry (Lk 4:43). Where the few NT contexts actually describe the nature of the Kingdom (*e.g.*, Mt 12:28//Lk 11:20; Rm 14:17; 1Cor 4:20) analysis shows its profoundly charismatic nature, almost a synonym for ‘Spirit,’¹⁷ though the overwhelming emphasis in the NT is on the radical demand that one enter the kingdom.

3. The ‘New Covenant’

The ‘new covenant,’ a major theme in traditional Protestant thinking, particularly in classical Reformed. The traditional ‘covenant’ focuses on the movement from law to grace in dealing with sin. However, the covenant promise of the Old Testament is centrally a promise of the Spirit of prophecy (*e.g.*, Isa 59:21; Jer 31:31; Ezk 11:19; 36:26; Joel 2:28-30) to those normatively in the ‘new covenant,’ *i.e.*, in the proleptically experienced ‘age to come.’

4. The Human Condition

The Reformation saw man centrally as sinner in need of grace. In the redeemed order there was growth in sanctification (ethics) and in vocation (Calvinism), but there was little appreciation for the breadth and depth of human charismatic perception and experience outside of these categories. A biblical worldview appreciates the range of ‘charismatic’ experiences indigenous to all mankind (Jer 32:20; Rom 1), involving demonic, revelatory or physical phenomena. The ‘bond-

¹⁶ For example, Hermann Gunkel’s *Die Wirkungen des heiligen Geistes* (1889), E.t., by Roy Harrisville under the title, *The Influence of the Holy Spirit : The Popular View of the Apostolic Age and the Teaching of the Apostle Paul: A Biblical-theological Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1979). Gunkel’s work was popularised in a *TDNT* article by G. Freidrich, which was translated into English in the late 60s, radically reframing the doctrine of the Holy Spirit toward a much greater charismatic emphasis.

¹⁷ James D. G. Dunn, “Spirit and Kingdom,” *Expository Times* 82:2 (N 1970), p 36-40.

age to decay' must include demonic oppression, disease, the religious traditions of men, as well as the effects of social, physical and environmental forces. This theological emphasis asks, 'before we provide the theological solution, what is the problem—that is, the human condition?'

5. Salvation

Related to the human condition is salvation. Traditionally, 'salvation' involves forgiveness of sin, regeneration, ethical living and one's acceptance into heaven. Biblical theology expanded the notion to include rescue from oppressors (human and demonic) and physical healing. Analysis of the semantic field for salvation in the NT drives the term even more toward the physical, though including the ethical. For example, where the context is clear, virtually all of the references in the gospels to 'salvation' (*soteria*) apply principally to physical healing. Salvation in the NT is a much broader term than in traditional evangelicalism.

6. Miracle

Traditional concepts of 'miracle' rely on a highly rationalistic epistemology and anti-biblical concepts of nature. The function of miracles was largely evidential (they were 'proof' for the Gospel) or metaphorical of traditional 'salvation' (the blind see the light of the Gospel; the deaf hear the Word, *etc.*). Biblical theology moved the concept of miracle much closer to a biblical worldview, involving elements of revelatory disclosure and faith. On scriptural grounds one may argue that God's 'mighty acts' did not 'point' to the Gospel, as the unfortunate English translation, 'sign' implies, but rather *express* the Gospel: they do not *prove* the Gospel, they *are* the Gospel. This does not diminish Christ's atonement for sin, but it does affirm His atonement for sickness as well (Mt 8:16).

7. Christology

Traditional Christology has stressed the uniqueness and deity of Christ to save from sin, as over against His humanity and role as an example, a role emphasised in theological liberalism and hence, largely rejected by evangelicals. Biblical theology restored a greater balance. In this regard, the New Testament emphasises Jesus as the bearer and expresser of the Spirit, the 'anointed one,' who served as the *prototype for ministry* of the ideal Spirit-led Son for all believers.

8. Discipleship

A biblical Christology leads inextricably to a crucial purpose: the imitation of Christ as a pattern for discipleship for all believers—a huge theme in the NT—a theme largely neglected in both traditional and biblical theology. The Third World is more in tune,¹⁸ it seems, with the NT demand for a replication of *all* aspects of Christ's ministry, including that of the miraculous and charismatic. This insight is then applied more faithfully in their expressions of training for ministry

¹⁸ R. Blank, *Teología y Misión en América Latina* [Spanish: Theology and Mission in Latin America] (St Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1996), 213. Blank uneasily notes trends toward formal education in Latin America, however (p. 212), cited in an excellent survey article, Sergio Matviuk, 'Pentecostal Leadership Development and Church Growth in Latin America,' *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5:1 (2002), 164.

than in traditional evangelical institutions, which tend to see the ministry of Jesus more as an object of academic study than of personal replication. This state of affairs echoes the criticism of traditional Protestantism that it is more a religion *about* Jesus than *from* Jesus.

9. Faith

Faith served in traditional Protestant theology as one of the three key ‘*solas*’ and was primarily defined over against ‘works’—the referents of both terms competing as the means of ‘salvation.’ Reformation scholastics developed the dichotomy of ‘saving faith’ (for every Christian) and ‘miraculous faith’ (limited to the apostolic era as proof of doctrine). Where traditional **systematic theology** texts discuss ‘faith,’ it is almost exclusively associated with Protestant ‘salvation.’ This is not the emphasis of the NT. As with the other major doctrines of the NT, above, the doctrine of ‘faith’ strongly connects to a broad and normative charismatic experience. Content analysis shows that a substantial proportion—about one-half—of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples dealt with the areas of faith, most often in the context of miracle stories. An analysis of the *pistis* family of words (‘faith/believe’) in the NT, shows that, where the context is explicit as to the ‘intended result’ of faith, 93 of all 230, or, over 40% of the passages, refer to healings and other acts of power.

10. Prayer

Though usually subsumed under ecclesiology, the doctrine of prayer has received scant attention, either in traditional evangelical systematics texts or in biblical theology. By contrast, prayer is a major New Testament theme. Jesus is recorded as praying some 26 times. Paul often frames the objectives for the spiritual growth of the church in terms of that for which he prays. Much of the New Testament participation in the eschatological dimension is expressed in prayer, praise and worship. Future evangelical theology and praxis needs to embrace prayer as a central emphasis.

11. Ecclesiology

The traditional doctrine of the church has failed to engage the New Testament contexts of ecclesiology in that the charismatic dimension is usually ignored. Rather, traditional ecclesiastical structures have evolved which have demanded theological attention and justification. Biblical theology has demonstrated more sensitivity to the processes of the gathered community, particularly recovering the notions of ‘mutual edification’ via the charismata. Systematic analyses of NT contexts discussing the church reveal a model quite close to the modern ‘cell church’ whose notion of church ‘member’ is not simply a consumer of spiritual information, but rather describes a charismatic function toward the ‘building up of the body of Christ.’

Evangelicals must reaffirm its Reformation grounding on *sola gratia* (if we also include the graces of the Spirit), *sola fidei*, and also *sola scriptura*. On this basis we must be bold in separating the historically conditioned traditions of men from our allegiance to the emphases of the Word of God. We must articulate, and above all, apply the New Testament emphases of its Founder, the Lord Jesus Christ and his powerful works in this world, if we are to represent faithfully God’s work in this world and, accordingly, our evangelical future.



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