

Contemporary Pentecostal-Charismatic Movements: Spread and Broad Impact

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Abstract

According to the unanimous assessment of observers, Pentecostal-Charismatic movements constitute the fastest-growing branch of global Christianity today. Based on this observation, it makes sense to reconstruct the origins of these movements and, subsequently, to trace their spread in particular. In doing so, we will also examine the reasons for their widespread impact. Since the growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity varies greatly from region to region, the underlying causes must also be considered here. This will be explored in greater depth with regard to the German-speaking world.

1. Introduction

Pentecostal-charismatic movements have increasingly come into the focus of academic theology in recent decades [1, 2]. Their worldwide spread was a major factor in this. The following section will examine the origins of these movements. This will be followed by a classification of the various phenomena into two main streams. The third section will identify the main theological and spiritual characteristics of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity. The fourth section will describe its varying regional distribution and the reasons behind it. The final section will address the reasons for the enduring appeal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity.

The catalyst for the spiritual revival from which the modern Pentecostal-charismatic movements emerged was the African American preacher W.J. Seymour (1870–1922) at the predominantly African American Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles in 1906—even though there were precursors and similar revivals occurring in parallel. Seymour’s message culminated in the assertion that speaking in tongues was the outward sign of baptism in the Holy Spirit (in the sense of Acts 2:4: “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them”). That era was marked by imperialism, and Christian circles associated with the Holiness Movement anticipated the “baptism in the Spirit” amid the politically, intellectually, and spiritually charged situation at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, on both sides of the Atlantic. It was understood as an experience of the Spirit distinct from conversion and rebirth—a new Pentecost.

The Los Angeles revival lasted several years. It was attended not only by preachers from all parts of the United States but also from around the world. Many of them experienced a baptism in the Spirit accompanied by glossolalia—speaking in tongues—in Los Angeles. Upon returning to their home countries, they founded Pentecostal-influenced groups and thus contributed significantly to the worldwide spread of the Pentecostal movement and the independent Pentecostal churches that emerged from it. Therefore, the Azusa Street Mission can be considered the birthplace of the modern Pentecostal movement.

2. Two Main Streams

Since 1906, the Pentecostal-charismatic movements have diversified to the point of becoming difficult to survey. There are now a multitude of churches, congregations, communities, groups, and circles. When looking at the broad field of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, two main streams can essentially be identified [3]:

First, the traditional Pentecostal churches, which emerged from the rise of the modern Pentecostal movement in 1906 [4]. The oldest and largest Pentecostal church is the “Assemblies of God,” with approximately 88 million members worldwide. Today, the independent Pentecostal churches represent the fourth major denomination alongside Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and the Reformed churches [5]. Related to them is a rapidly growing, younger form of Neo-Pentecostalism, which is organized primarily in independent groups and congregations.

Second, the more recent charismatic movement, which emerged in the early 1960s in the United States, much like the Pentecostal churches, and which remained within the framework of traditional churches and free churches [6]. The initiators and many of the leading members had their foundational charismatic experiences within the context of the traditional Pentecostal churches. This applies both to Episcopal Reverend Dennis Bennett, with whom the intra-church charismatic movement in the U.S. began in 1959–60, and to Pastor Larry Christenson, who for a long time served as the leading theologian of the charismatic movement within the Lutheran churches. This second wave of charismatic revival—which also reached the Catholic Church in the United States during the 1960s—was paved the way by healing evangelists such as William Branham, Oral Roberts, Gordon Lindsay, and T.L. Osborn, as well as by the Pentecostal lay organization “Full Gospel Business Men,” whose activities had always extended beyond the traditional Pentecostal churches. Today, the Catholic charismatic movement is the largest of all intra-church movements worldwide.

3. Theological and Spiritual Characteristics

Although the classical Pentecostal movement initially distanced itself from traditional academic theology at its inception in the early 20th century, a Pentecostal-charismatic theology has since become established. It is represented by a growing number of academic theologians—both within and outside the movements—a trend that has also been evident in Germany over the past 30 years. In light of the rapid global growth of Pentecostal-charismatic movements and the establishment of charismatic groups within traditional churches, traditional academic theology has been compelled to reflect, at least to some extent, on their spiritual and theological characteristics [7].

Nevertheless, the characteristics of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity remain, to this day, primarily in the realm of spirituality. It emphasizes a personal experience with the Holy Spirit, highlights the New Testament charisms, and cultivates worship and praise as essential components of the service. This is accompanied by shared theoretical convictions: the recognition of a special work of the Holy Spirit alongside Jesus Christ, criticism of a closed, rationalistic understanding of reality, and the self-understanding of being part of a spiritual renewal that is global and ecumenical and to which salvific significance is attributed.

3.1 The Baptism in the Spirit as a Foundational Spiritual Experience

The initial experience of the Spirit is the *conditio sine qua non* of Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality [8]. However, it is interpreted theologically in very different ways by the various movements, as is evident from their use of different terms. Members of traditional Pentecostal churches usually speak of “baptism in the Spirit” as a specific and thus datable event that can be distinguished from conversion and rebirth as a second fundamental experience of faith. Accompanied by the “initial sign” of glossolalia, the “baptism in the Spirit” is perceptible from the outside and can, in principle, be experienced by any Christian, provided they are open to it. By placing the “baptism in the Spirit” in parallel with water baptism, it acquires sacramental status and a special role in the practice of the faith.

From the very beginning, the charismatic movements within the churches have relativized both the Pentecostal linking of the experience of the Spirit to a strict two-stage doctrine and its standardization through speaking in tongues. The Catholic charismatic movement, in particular, has pointed out that extraordinary breakthrough experiences must not be made mandatory for all Christians. Furthermore, intra-church groups were compelled to relate the charismatic experience of the Spirit to baptism by water or confirmation—which were theologically established in their denominations as the means of receiving the Spirit—in order to remain within their respective denominations. Lutheran and Catholic charismatics share the conviction that the Spirit is not bestowed through the baptism in the Spirit, but is already present beforehand in the baptized or confirmed person. The fundamental charismatic experience, as a renewal of baptism or confirmation, represents the Spirit becoming conscious and active on the experiential level.

Experiences of the Spirit are not foreign to the New Testament texts. On the contrary, they reveal a wealth of corresponding experiences of very diverse character. However, nowhere—not even in the Acts of the Apostles—is a general doctrine of the baptism of the Spirit developed. Overall, the New Testament is dominated by concepts that point to a non-spectacular reception of the Spirit. Where spectacular forms of receiving the Spirit are evident, they appear to be linked to specific circumstances. Thus, at Pentecost, the universal reception of the Spirit promised in the Old Testament for the eschaton takes place: regardless of gender, social status, or age, people receive the Spirit of God (Acts 2:17ff). Exegetical observations thus confirm the call by intra-church charismatics to move beyond the Pentecostal standardization and stereotyping of the reception of the Spirit in favor of integrating the baptism of the Spirit into the practice of faith and opening it up to various forms.

3.2 Rediscovery of the Charisms

Pentecostal-charismatic movements have rediscovered the charisms, including spectacular gifts of grace such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy [9]. A fundamental openness to the practice of all the charisms mentioned in the New Testament is characteristic of all these movements. Differences become apparent in the significance of the individual gifts for the practice of piety and in their theological evaluation.

The traditional Pentecostal movement has brought back into theology and spirituality areas of biblical experience that had fallen into oblivion—namely, the transrational spiritual phenomena of speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy. Especially at the outset of its emergence in the early 20th century, this set it apart from mainstream global Christianity. With its expectation of the “supernatural in the present,” it stood in contrast both to American Christian fundamentalism—which was shaped by a belief in the “supernatural in the past”—and to the strongly intellectual and ethical religiosity of the mainstream churches in Europe [10]. Members of traditional Pentecostal churches understand the Spirit, as described in the Pentecost account in Acts 2—the movement’s foundational text—as “power from on high” [11]. Charisms are interpreted as evidence of being filled with the Spirit and as significant for enhancing the individual’s piety in the sense of being empowered for the service of God. The non-spectacular charisms take a back seat, as do their ecclesiastical and social dimensions.

The charismatic movements within the churches reveal a different emphasis on charisms than that of the traditional Pentecostal churches. Although the experience of spectacular charisms was also present at the beginning here, in the wake of these experiences the movements discovered the ecclesiastical orientation of charisms as described by Paul. 1 Corinthians 12–14 became the foundational text, and the goal of the use of charisms became the realization of the charismatic church [12]. The efforts of intra-church charismatics toward a charismatic renewal of the churches and congregations since the early 1970s corresponded to roughly contemporaneous developments in theology, the church, and society that were leading toward greater participation [13].

Through the rediscovery of the charisms, Pentecostal-charismatic movements have contributed to the practical implementation of the Reformation’s insight into the “priesthood of all believers” [14]. For this process to move forward throughout the entire church with the help of the charisms, a number of insights must be brought to bear—insights that are only partially taken into account within the movements: that charisms have an ecclesial horizon, that spectacular charisms must be demystified, that charisms possess identity-forming potential, but that this requires their integration into the whole person; that a theory and practice for the awakening of charisms must be developed; that charisms can have a social dimension; and that the doctrine of charisms should be oriented less toward pneumatology and more toward Trinitarian theology.

4. Variations in Regional Distribution

Although the traditional Pentecostal movement, together with the various intra-church charismatic movements that have emerged since the 1960s, constitutes the fastest-growing branch of global Christianity, this growth varies greatly from region to region: Currently, Latin America, Africa, and certain regions of Asia (such as South Korea) are the centers of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement.

In German-speaking countries, the Pentecostal movement has always remained small [15]. This is due to a whole range of theological, sociological, and political factors: The spiritual orientation of Pentecostalism differs significantly from the Christological character of the mainstream of Western church and theological history. The Berlin Declaration of 1909, in which the German Community Movement (Evangelische Gemeinschaftsbewegung/Gnadauer Verband) separated from the fledgling Pentecostal movement, cut off the latter’s natural pool of members in Germany. Since the end of World War I, the Pentecostal emphasis on experience stood in stark contrast to Karl Barth’s dialectical theology,

which had a lasting influence on German theology until the late 1960s. Because state privileges for the major denominations were once again strengthened after the end of the Third Reich—particularly in the Federal Republic of Germany—all other Christian movements struggled to gain a foothold. In the GDR, Pentecostal movements were also banned in 1951.

Today, larger Pentecostal congregations in the German-speaking world are found primarily in major urban centers. Pentecostal-charismatic immigrant congregations are the only Christian congregations experiencing significant growth in German-speaking countries [16].

The prediction made in the 1980s—that the charismatic revival within the churches would increasingly fade into insignificance in the face of independent Pentecostal-charismatic groups and centers—has not come true. Since the charismatic movement in the Protestant churches of the GDR was more strongly integrated into the church structure than in West Germany—for both internal and external reasons—the all-German “Spiritual Community Renewal in the Protestant Church” (GGE), which emerged as a result of reunification, became more “ecclesiastical,” a development linked to its growing significance. The importance of the former East German GGE for the new all-German GGE is evident in the fact that its chairpersons soon came from the East.

The “Charismatic Renewal,” the intra-Catholic charismatic movement in the German-speaking world, underwent a development during the same period comparable to that of the movement in the Protestant sphere. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI repeatedly emphasized its importance, along with that of the so-called new spiritual movements, for the New Evangelization and expressed their support for their activities. Pope Francis was even regarded by the Catholic charismatic movement as one of their own.

Over the past few decades in Germany, the affiliation of charismatic movements within the church with their respective traditional churches and free churches has become increasingly accepted as a matter of course. This growing societal acceptance of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity is primarily due to non-theological reasons. The process of pluralization has extended all the way to the level of theology and spirituality. The resulting diversification of the theological and spiritual spectrum within the church has increased the willingness to engage with Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity and to integrate its insights into traditional Christianity. Added to this was growing societal globalization, which did not stop at the doors of theology and the church. As a result, encounters with Pentecostal-Charismatic movements intensified within the framework of the World Council of Churches, the denominational world federations, and, not least, at the level of the worldwide Evangelical Alliance. Above all, however, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is, in terms of mindset, closer to certain modern social developments than traditional Christianity, whether within the mainline churches or the free churches.

5. Reasons for the Continued Spread of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity

5.1 Focus on Experience: An Inner Affinity with the Attitude Toward Life in the “Experience Society”

Gerhard Schulze has put forward the now widely accepted thesis that late-modern society is characterized by a pervasive focus on experience: “The lowest common denominator of attitudes toward life in our society is the idea of shaping a life that is beautiful, interesting, and subjectively perceived as rewarding” [17]. It is no longer an outward focus on achieving a specific accomplishment that determines one’s life plan, but rather an inward focus on the “project of the beautiful life”: “The project of the beautiful life is the project of experiencing something” [18]. People today want to avoid suffering in order to save time and enjoy life to the fullest: “The time saved by this fast-paced lifestyle is based precisely on the fact that people skim off the pleasant aspects of life and eliminate the painful ones” [19]. The expectation of experiencing something beautiful corresponds to an ever-expanding range of opportunities for new experiences.

In light of the progressive loss of experience due to the advancing encroachment of technical civilization upon nature, and due to the increasing massification of humanity—where people are no longer valued as individuals but only in quantitative terms, based on their function in the work process— and due to the decline of genuine communication and encounter in favor of virtual communication and encounter mediated by mass media or digital technology, many people’s longing for experience is all too understandable.

Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity is characterized—including in its self-perception—by a strong focus on experience and a high “quality of experience” [20]. God is to be experienced through pneumatological experiences. Above all, Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal denominations, but also many followers of charismatic movements within the church, emphasize the work of the Spirit through “signs

and wonders.” For many people today, a purely rationalist understanding of reality has lost its plausibility. The possibility of experiencing the extraordinary is fascinating. Here, the search for “the transcendent” finds an answer. Transcendent experiences apparently offer the ultimate “thrill” that other experiences cannot provide. Therefore, Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality appears as a response to many people’s longing for experiences [21]. It serves as a counterbalance to the lack of meaningful experiences in the everyday lives of many people today.

When Pentecostal-charismatic movements emphasize that spiritual experience is indispensable to being a Christian, they provide a necessary and helpful counterpoint to a spiritually parched form of mainstream Protestantism within the established church or free churches [22]. However, analogous to similar developments in the postmodern secular sphere, there are many indications that the role of experiences is being overemphasized. Pentecostal-charismatic groups often overlook the fact that faith must be tested through suffering and trials when no miracles are experienced (2 Cor. 12:7ff; 6:4–10). According to biblical tradition, this demonstrates that the Spirit of God is the Spirit of the risen Crucified One.

5.2 Overcoming the Neglect of the Spirit: A Response to the Shortcomings of Traditional Western Theology and Spirituality

Due to the centrality of the message of justification, Protestantism has focused primarily on God’s great deeds in the past—on what God has already done for humanity in Jesus Christ [23]. The category of memory became formative for Protestant spirituality. In contrast, God’s action through the Holy Spirit in the present moment fell out of view. The consequence was that the dynamism of the Holy Spirit’s work was neither adequately recognized theologically nor anticipated in Western Christianity. Nor did the Christocentrism of dialectical theology leave room for an independent doctrine of the Holy Spirit [24]. Karl Barth himself confirms this observation when, in 1968—the final year of his life—he stated that he would have to rewrite his *Dogmatics* anew on the basis of the Third Article [25]. Until just a few decades ago, works on the Holy Spirit repeatedly warned of the “neglect of the Spirit” in Western theology [26]. In light of this situation, charismatic movements provided a necessary counterbalance with their expectation of spontaneous, powerful workings of the Spirit. Correspondingly, the pneumatological frameworks developed by charismatic theologians strive to give the Holy Spirit the place he deserves within the theological system.

Protestantism has always struggled with the recognition of special spiritual experiences. The still relatively young Reformation movement had to grapple with what Luther termed the “fanatics.” In their political struggle to eradicate evil in the world, these individuals invoked revelations outside of Word and Sacrament. This threatened the gospel of God’s free grace. Through his disputes with Müntzer, Karlstadt, and others, Luther became convinced that any appeal to the work of the Spirit apart from Word and Sacrament would, sooner or later, lead to a false reliance on one’s own works [27]. Yet even the New Testament texts show that special spiritual experiences have been part of the history of Christianity from the very beginning. Pentecostal-charismatic movements have rightly reintegrated these areas of biblical experience—which had fallen into oblivion—into Protestant spirituality. For Protestant theology, this presents the challenge of defining the Spirit’s connection to Word and Sacrament in the future in a way that is less causal and more criterion-based [28]. The work of the Spirit extends beyond the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, though Word and Sacrament must remain the source of inspiration and the corrective authority for assessing phenomena brought about by the Spirit.

5.3 Ritual and Symbolic Affirmation of Faith in the Realms of Emotion and Sensuality

For a long time, Protestantism placed one-sided emphasis on the rational and voluntaristic dimensions of faith. Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, on the other hand, assumes that the Spirit of God can be experienced sensually and emotionally. In this way, it meets the needs of many people—especially those who are intellectually challenged—who no longer want to merely think about their faith but also want to feel it. Many people today long for symbolic and ritual reaffirmation of their faith. In the information society, people’s interests seem to focus primarily on the experience of their own physicality. The growing longing for self-affirmation through self-experience is understandable against the backdrop of constant sensory overload. Whether people find a connection to Christian worship depends not least on whether their physicality and emotionality are reflected in it [29].

Pentecostal-charismatic movements take this longing into account, particularly in their worship and pastoral ministry. In Pentecostal-charismatic worship services, praise and worship of God play a prominent role. The songs specific to the Pentecostal-charismatic tradition create a positive emotional

atmosphere that is immediately conveyed to worshipers during the time of praise [30]. Charismatics have also rediscovered personal healing prayer in worship services. The laying on of hands during prayer symbolizes God's care and closeness in a physical way. Through this touch, the healing prayer takes on special significance in a society that has grown emotionally detached due to increasing trends toward individualization. Anointing, which is often associated with prayer, is also a ritual that can be sensed physically. Because the oil is applied directly to the skin, it creates an even greater sense of closeness than the mere laying on of hands. Moreover, the oil serves as an additional outward sign of God's care for the person being blessed—a sign to which faith can cling.

The rediscovery of emotionality and sensuality in Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity offers an opportunity to reintegrate elements of biblical faith—which have long been neglected in Protestantism—into liturgical practice. The blessing of the sick (with or without anointing) takes up an aspect of God's action that is essential to biblical tradition: In addition to God's saving action, the Bible testifies in many places to His blessing [31]. According to Hebrews 6:2, the laying on of hands is one of the foundations of the Christian faith. Kerygmatic theology emphasized, more or less one-sidedly, the dimension of God's action in worship. Reflection on human action took a back seat [32]. This was accompanied by widespread skepticism toward symbols and rites. This reluctance toward form in worship—but also in personal piety—turned into a veritable fear of fixed forms in the mid-1960s [33]. In the meantime, the recognition has gained ground in liturgical studies that rituals—when used thoughtfully—can contribute to deepening and enlivening spirituality [34]. The aim is not to replace the focus of Protestant piety on the Word. Rather, the verbal assurance offered by the Gospel should be supported by the laying on of hands and anointing. These represent a necessary complement to a Protestant spirituality oriented solely toward the proclamation of the Word, in which symbols and rituals that strengthen faith have largely been lost. The aim is “to encourage Christian congregations to take the embodied, material aspect of their worship seriously” [35]. Even from a Christological perspective—based on the idea of the Incarnation—faith calls for embodiment. Faith is not merely a matter of inner life but concerns the whole of life. Otherwise, it remains merely abstract talk about faith.

I hope that the above remarks have shown that the worldwide spread of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity over the past 120 years is due in no small part to the intrinsic affinity between charismatic spirituality and the current social mood. This is a form of Christian life that is no longer viewed with suspicion, but rather one that is worth examining for its potential contributions to traditional Protestant theology and spirituality.

With this article, I would like to express my gratitude to my esteemed colleague Angelika Berlejung on her 65th birthday for two decades of consistently pleasant collegial cooperation at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Leipzig.

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