

Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism is a global Christian revivalist and missionary movement that places the transcendent workings of the Holy Spirit and charismatic practice (the spiritual gifts of healing, speaking in tongues/glossolalia and prophecy, cf. Acts 3 and 1 Cor 12-14) at the centre of its spirituality. It is defined by four fundamental teachings, all of which involve some kind of practice: salvation, healing, baptism in the Holy Spirit and expectation of the immanent Second Coming of Christ. Alongside its evangelical concerns (conversion/rebirth, fellowship, mission), Pentecostal spirituality focuses on experiences and phenomena (e.g. miracles, visions, deliverance from possession, ecstatic states) that go beyond religion.

Perceptions of Pentecostalism vary depending on the particular political and religious context in which it appears. In the Western world it is a protest against the Enlightenment understanding of reality that holds no secrets, and against an understanding of faith that excludes the dimension of the miraculous. In Africa, Asia and South America, where there is richer scope for inculturation, Pentecostal spirituality is spreading much more vigorously than in modern industrialised societies. Many who join the movement do so in the hope of improving their lot in life. For those who join the Pentecostal movement, its social significance can include: strengthening their self-confidence, getting in touch with their own emotionality, pursuing their interest in education and achieving social mobility.

The faith of the Pentecostals is strongly Biblicist, and in many of its manifestations also fundamentalist, being based as it is on the infallibility of Holy Scripture and the Pentecostals' direct identification of their own faith practice with the example set by the first Christians. At the centre of this spirituality is the quest for experience of the Spirit as "strength from above" that takes hold of the believer, heals them and enables them to bear a witness that is accompanied by signs, miracles and the driving out of demons (cf. Mt 10.7ff). Baptism in the Holy Spirit is seen as an experience of divine grace, following conversion and rebirth, which authorises the individual to bear such witness. It is the focal point of this spirituality. There are numerous traditional forms of teaching that identify speaking in tongues as a visible sign of successful baptism in the Spirit.

The self-understanding of many Pentecostal communities requires them to build "New Testament", i.e. Free Church, Baptist and charismatic Pentecostal congregations, everywhere. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not just an individual experience, but also a strategy of Divine action in a revivalist spirit with a view to the Last Days.

The historic Churches have long seen Pentecostal movements as sectarian cults. Conversely, the early Pentecostal movement saw anti-Christian systems at work in the major Churches. Germany's largest Federation of Pentecostal Free Churches, the *Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden* (BFP, approx. 44,000 members), is now proclaiming an increasing openness toward other Churches. As a result of these developments, in 2001 its guest status within the *Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen* (VEF) [the Union of Free Protestant Churches in Germany] was converted into full membership.

Assessment

The challenge posed by Pentecostal spirituality to the historical Churches is that of injecting vitality into the conventional forms of Church service. The experiences that Pentecostal movements offer are a response to people's yearning for certainty in their life context, which is characterised by religious and ideological plurality. The simple answer they give to today's

uncertain seekers and Christians is: “You don’t have to try out all the options or exert yourself intellectually in order to discover your religious identity. You can experience God’s strength concretely by calling on Jesus and the Holy Spirit directly, and by experiencing visible and tangible signs of being touched (speaking in tongues/glossolalia, healings, visions, prophetic impressions ...). The experience of certainty is sought and found in visible manifestations of the Spirit that are taken as unequivocal signs of God’s presence.

Criticism of inappropriate forms of Pentecostalism should be expressed in a way that does not lose sight of the common Christian orientation. From an ecumenical perspective, Pentecostal missionary practice and the programmatic formation of congregations raise the issue of proselytism. Objections to Pentecostal teaching and practice becomes necessary particularly where the workings of the Spirit are focused on certain spectacular manifestations, and thus de facto limited; where the provisional nature and fragility of Christian life are underrated; where pastoral care for incurable diseases and disabilities is refused; and where a dualistic world view, in conjunction with problematic practices and teachings concerning the battle against spirits and demons, comes to dominate the practice of religion.

Pentecostal groupings and organisations in Western Europe have lost momentum. At the same time, a spirituality that is close to the Pentecostal movement in terms of both teaching and practice is continuing to spread through numerous “multidenominational” free charismatic congregations and centres.

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