

PENTECOSTAL-CHARISMATIC SPIRITUALITY AND THE SHAPING OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION¹

JACOB CHERIAN

Abstract: *Beginning with a short account of the author's journey as an Evangelical-Pentecostal educator, the article outlines the global spread of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement and describes four prominent features of Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality. Drawing on Lesslie Newbigin and the apostle Paul, the article offers insights for theological educators involved in the spiritual and ministerial formation of missional practitioners in this Spirit-led movement within the evangelical church.*

Keywords: *Holy Spirit, Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, Evangelical movement, theological education*

"Spiritual formation has to do with living from the Spirit, being nourished by the Spirit, being attentive to the Spirit, being empowered by the Spirit for ministry."²

1. My Journey as an Evangelical-Pentecostal Educator

Pentecostals share the evangelical tradition of offering personal testimonies. In that vein, and for purposes of full disclosure, I offer a brief description of my own spiritual, theological and ecclesiastical journey. I was born into a home where my parents were and remained faithful

1. This article has been adapted from a chapter originally published in *Leadership Development and Theological Education: A Festschrift for Graham Houghton*, edited by A. Varughese John and Havilah Dharamraj (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2023), 203-17.

2. Michael I. N. Dash, "Exploring Spiritual Formation in the Classroom," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre* 20:1/2 (1992/1993): 71. Dash was an African-American minister in the United Methodist Church who focused on the spiritual formation of parishioners and seminary students.

Christians and members of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. Growing up in central India, I began attending an Anglican church. My teen years were spent in a fine Methodist church, where I also went through the traditional rite of confirmation. After a season of intense spiritual searching and personal experiences, I gravitated to a vibrant Pentecostal congregation, which also had a significant number of Christ-followers from different religious backgrounds.

The basic foundation of the Pentecostal experience was laid during the following couple of years. This included a passion for prayer, Bible study, and witnessing, and experiencing diverse Spirit-gifts such as speaking in tongues and prophecy. I was barely eighteen when I sensed a call to serve God in the ministry of the church. When I decided to go to a Bible College after my undergraduate studies, my pastor then did not see the need for formal theological training—which, unfortunately, is the case in some Pentecostal-Charismatic circles. However, he did provide a strong recommendation when I applied to SABC for my Bachelor of Divinity studies.

After my first theological degree at Southern Asia Bible College, and as my understanding of theology and Church grew—along with my respect for the beliefs and traditions of other churches and denominations—I became more comfortable to serve in almost any denominational or so-called nondenominational setting. I served briefly in youth and pastoral ministry in Methodist and Charismatic churches before I joined an Assemblies of God church in Bangalore. I joined the faculty at Southern Asia Bible College (now part of CGLD) in 1987, where I continue to serve.

My foundational formation, especially as a student and teacher of the New Testament, came about after being mentored by the distinguished New Testament scholar Gordon Fee,³ probably the first one to be called

3. Gordon Fee taught for 6 weeks at SABC during 1992. Interacting with him and listening to his lectures were crucial to my decision to pursue NT studies. Later I studied under him, completing a ThM at

a “Pentecostal scholar”—which would have sounded like an oxymoron to some evangelicals. This four-decade faith journey, as a disciple and a theological educator in a Pentecostal institution, has shaped my views and convictions about Pentecostal-Charismatic Spirituality and theological education.

2. The Globalisation of Pentecostalism⁴

One evidence of the growing influence of Pentecostalism, both globally as well as nationally, is an openness among older denominations to listen to a voice from an earlier-neglected section of the Christian church. Pentecostalism, once viewed as an outlier, on the fringes of mainline denominations, is today increasingly recognized as an integral, or sometimes frontline, part.⁵

The Harvard theologian Harvey Cox predicted that the 21st century belongs not to the secularists but to the Pentecostals.⁶ In an invaluable study of Protestantism, the Anglican theologian Alister McGrath writes about the spectacular growth of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement:

The charismatic movement is the most rapidly growing element of Christianity today. Pentecostalism in its various forms is now the largest single Christian group apart from Catholicism and outnumbers the sum total of all other forms of Protestantism.⁷

Regent College, Vancouver.

4. A collection of scholarly essays, edited by Murray Dempster, B.D. Klaus, and D. Peterson, *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Irvine, CA: Regnum Books International, 1999), documents how the previous century was essentially the growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity.

5. Wonsuk Ma, “Pentecostalism: A New but Big Kid on the Global Christian Block,” *Pentecostal Education* 7:1 (2022): 73–91.

6. Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995).

7. Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 417.

While it is a challenge to account for such numbers on a global scale, McGrath mentions the number to be “at least half a billion in 2000” while in 2015 Todd Johnson et al estimate Pentecostals–Charismatics at 643 million.⁸ Currently close to a fourth of the Christian Church could broadly be called Pentecostal–Charismatic. As a result, the movement has caught the attention of sociologists, theologians and church leaders who explore various facets of this widespread movement. Anyone seeking to understand the breadth and increasing diversities of the Pentecostal–Charismatic movement today would find an abundance of resources—using emic and etic approaches—which provide popular⁹ as well as scholarly articles and books.¹⁰

While the birth of modern Pentecostalism is often traced to a few events in the United States, especially to the Azusa Street revival of 1906,¹¹ there is ample evidence for pre–20th-century Pentecostal experiences in other parts of the world. Interestingly, there is documented evidence of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and other charismatic manifestations occurring in India between 1860 and 1910.¹² During 1860, in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, there was a Pentecostal-like revival in the ministry of John Christian Aroolappen, an evangelist with the Church of England. This revival was totally unexpected and produced a mixed

8. Todd M. Johnson, Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing, “Christianity 2015: Religious Diversity and Personal Contact,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39:1 (2015): 28–29. See also Todd Johnson, “Counting Pentecostals Worldwide,” *Pneuma* 36 (2014): 265–88.

9. Such as www.atlasofpentecostalism.net; www.worldchristian-database.org; and www.ag.org.

10. Two such resources would be Stanley M. Burgess & Eduard M. Van der Maas (eds), *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) and Allan H. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). One could also refer to journals such as *Pneuma*, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, *Pentecostal Education*, and *PentecoStudies*.

11. Burgess & Van der Maas, *Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements*, 344–49.

12. *Ibid.*, 118–122.

response among the church leadership. Later in 1905, there were a variety of charismatic manifestations at Pandita Ramabai's Mukti Mission in Khedgaon, Maharashtra.

In this article, I will turn my attention to aspects of Pentecostalism which capture its "spirituality" – even though a fuller understanding of PCS would also require a reasonable knowledge of the century-plus old history of the movement and its key theological emphases. Sometimes there is a need to differentiate (on theological and ecclesiastical grounds) between those who would properly be called Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Neo-Charismatics.¹³ While Pentecostals generally hold to a post-conversion work of grace, in which the baptism in the Spirit is evidenced by speaking in tongues, Charismatics generally do not insist on this, even though there is often evidence and operation of glossolalia and other spiritual gifts among them. You can see the prevalence of the charismatic movement when significant leaders in episcopal denominations—such as archbishop Justin Welby and the eminent biblical scholar N. T. Wright—openly claim that speaking in tongues is integral to their prayer life. The largest single group of Charismatics is the 50-year Charismatic Renewal movement in the Roman Catholic Church in 230 countries—estimated at 160 million in 2013.

Ecclesiastically, Pentecostals are part of classical Pentecostal denominations (such as Assemblies of God, Indian Pentecostal Church, and The Foursquare Gospel Church), while Charismatics are those who are connected to mainline denominations (such as those within the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and Presbyterian Churches). Neo-Charismatic is a broad category for an ever-increasing number of churches and groups who cannot be easily classified as either Pentecostal or Charismatic.¹⁴ One earlier estimation put them at more than 18,000. These churches are usually independent, post-denominational, and often indigenous (such as the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, a majority of the Chinese house-churches, and thousands

13. *Ibid.*, xvii–xxii.

14. *Ibid.*, xx.

of groups in Latin America). In some places in India these groups are referred to as new-generation churches to distinguish them from traditional Pentecostal churches. In this article the term Pentecostal–Charismatic in PCS applies to this diverse family of churches and movements, including those in the Neo-Charismatic churches.

3. Prominent Features of a Pentecostal–Charismatic Spirituality¹⁵

To describe PCS is rather challenging, simply because of the vast diversities in history, organization, and practices of the large family of Pentecostal–Charismatic groups. One also struggles with the wideness as well as vagueness of the term “spirituality,” especially when applied to such diverse movements. Russell Spittler explains that most Pentecostals would rather use the adjective *spiritual* than the abstract noun *spirituality*.¹⁶ Nevertheless, at the risk of oversimplification or of flattening out a few unique features, I identify a set of four prominent features of PCS. Pentecostal–Charismatic groups generally value these aspects, seeking to experience them in greater measure. They are often comfortable with being considered part of the larger family of Evangelicals, even while differing with them on a few emphases.

3.1. A present and personal experience of the Spirit

While accepting the foundational tenets of Protestant theology, Pentecostalism—as the very designation suggests—holds on to one significant addition. While traditional Christian theology considers the experience of the hundred and twenty believers gathered in the upper-room on the day of Pentecost (as described in Acts 2) as

15. I have drawn substantially from my article entitled “Pentecostal–Charismatic Spirituality” in *Spirituality: Toward a Comprehensive Perspective*, edited by Mohan Larbeer and S Patro (Bangalore: BTESSC, 2016), 68–81.

16. Russel P. Spittler, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality,” in Burgess & Van der Maas, *Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements*, 1096.

an experience unique to the apostolic age, Pentecostals believe that this experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit (often referred to as the baptism in the Holy Spirit) and speaking in tongues is not limited to the apostolic age. Pentecostal-Charismatic believers seek to experience a similar infilling of the Spirit—living, as they believe, in the last days which began on that day of Pentecost. They hold to the reality, as does Paul, that the whole new covenant reality has been ordered under the aegis of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ They readily see an eschatological intensification at the foundation of a vibrant PCS: God’s presence in and through the Holy Spirit abiding with believers, often coupled with a sincere belief in an imminent Parousia.¹⁸

Pentecostals emphasise the need to be filled with the Holy Spirit (from passages such as Acts 2:38–39; 4:31; Rom 8:1–17, 26–27; Gal 5:16–26; Eph 5:18) so as to live the Christian life, grow into maturity, and bear witness to Christ. Pentecostal-Charismatic believers “emphasise the present work of the Spirit through gifts in the life of the individual and the church.”¹⁹ However, one must add that, today this emphasis is no longer unique to Pentecostals and Charismatics.

The significance of this emphasis needs to be viewed in the contrasting context of Cessationism—the dominant belief held by Protestantism till the end of the 19th century, that the work of the Spirit as described in such texts as Acts 2 and 10 was limited to the apostolic age and had ceased thereafter. Therefore, McGrath rightly identifies:

The feature that both characterizes and distinguishes Pentecostalism from all other forms of Christianity is its insistence and emphasis upon an immediate encounter with God through the Holy Spirit and the ensuing transformation of

17. See for example, Jacob Cherian and Joe Thomas, “The Spirit in 2 Corinthians,” *Pneuma* 43 (2021): 496–500.

18. Stephen J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 32.

19. Burgess and Van der Maas, *Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements*, xxi.

individuals. The ‘full gospel,’ Pentecostals insist, must include the gift of tongues.²⁰

Spittler speaks of personal experience as the arena of true religion.²¹ Ivan Satyavrata maintains that “the experiential emphasis of Pentecostalism has emerged as a reactionary, but necessary corrective to the cerebral coldness, shallow activism and external formalism of traditional churches.” For South Asian Pentecostals “biblical truth must be released from its intellectual captivity and certified in practical experience.”²²

3.2. The Spirit’s work transcends race, class, and gender lines

Roger Stronstad draws his central theme of the prophethood of all believers from Luke’s charismatic theology—reminding one of the Protestant ideal of the priesthood of all believers.²³ The Holy Spirit is freely available to all believers in Christ, irrespective of their spiritual, intellectual, or socio-economic location in life (Acts 2:4, 38; 8:15–17; 10:44–48; 19:1–7). McGrath credits this emphasis, on the empowerment by the Spirit made available to all, as the key to the appeal of Pentecostalism to those on the margins of society.²⁴

While the Protestant reformation upheld the ideal principle of the priesthood of all believers, in practice priest-craft or a clergy–laity divide tends to plague the church today. While it is evident that the pastor–people divide is not completely transcended in Pentecostalism, there appears to be a higher value placed on every member

20. McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution*, 424. PCS sees the spiritual gifts of tongues, prophecy and healing having a far more expansive purpose than that envisaged by Cessationists—who, it appears, are facing a losing battle.

21. Spittler, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality,” 1097.

22. Ivan M. Satyavrata, “Contextual Perspectives on Pentecostalism as a Global Culture: A South Asian View,” in *Globalization of Pentecostalism*, 211.

23. Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of all Believers: A Study in Luke’s Charismatic Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

24. McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution*, 427.

exercising their gifts for the benefit of all (along the lines suggested by texts like 1 Cor 12:4–11; 14:26; Eph 5:18–20). Pentecostal-Charismatic groups uphold the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit who orchestrates the gifted life of the Church. A spiritually gifted member may be asked to lead the worship service, speak to the congregation, or even preach from the pulpit, regardless of whether they have been formally ordained by the church or not. However, most Pentecostal churches do also practice some form of ordination to recognise a person's leadership and ministry within the church.

As a consequence of this openness to the ministry of every believer, there is also a proliferation of ministries as gifted individuals lead new ventures. It is common to come across a gifted leader of a large church who has little or no formal theological training.

Another result is that spiritually gifted women often find leadership roles in the church. Pentecostals are quick to point to the divine promise in Joel, now repeated in Acts: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people ... on my servants, both men and women" (Acts 2:17, 18). For example, The Foursquare Gospel Church, founded in the 1920s by Aimee Semple McPherson, today has 67,500 churches, 8.8 million adherents, and congregations in 150 countries and territories. The Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination, has 69 million adherents in 190 countries. In 2017 there were over 10,000 female ministers of the denomination in USA (27% of the total number of ministers).²⁵ Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, with its estimated 700,000 members, is considered the largest church in the world. The majority of its cell-group leaders numbering in the thousands are women. Janet Powers argues that Pentecostal women must build on a Pentecostal hermeneutic for the empowerment of women—a different route than that usually traversed by those using a cultural critique of patriarchy.²⁶

25. See statistics at www.ag.org.

26. Janet E. Powers, "Your Daughters Shall Prophesy": Pentecostal Hermeneutics and the Empowerment of Women," in *Globalization of*

This spiritual egalitarianism remains an ideal ethos for Pentecostal–Charismatic groups. They believe that the Holy Spirit will help overcome psychological and societal barriers. However, self-critical Pentecostals will readily admit that there is still a long way to go in some quarters. Major challenges remain as deep-rooted cultural and hermeneutical biases still hinder and seek to domesticate the transforming work of the Spirit.

3.3. The Spirit empowers and directs worship and witness

The Pentecostal experience is also fundamentally understood as an empowerment for a life of witness. The oft quoted text is, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you” (Acts 1:8). The experience of the apostolic church in the book of Acts is highly valued in Pentecostal circles. This shared Evangelical regard for biblical authority, illuminates Pentecostal–Charismatic beliefs and practices.²⁷ Hence believers are encouraged to see themselves as part of the biblical drama of spreading the gospel, in the power of the Holy Spirit. They see themselves as partners with God in the bringing of the kingdom—reflecting a more Arminian rather than Calvinist theological disposition. They seek to nurture, as Stephen Land puts it, a passion for the Kingdom.²⁸

This desire to expand the work of the Kingdom tends to drive Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians to active service in various kinds of evangelistic missions and works of compassion and justice. The Pentecostal experience is in a sense a “gateway into this eschatologically oriented vocation of witness.”²⁹

In his magisterial work on the Holy Spirit in the letters of Paul, Gordon Fee says:

In keeping with Paul’s Old Testament roots, the presence of God by the Spirit also meant for Paul the powerful and *empowering* presence of God. Life

Pentecostalism, 313–337.

27. Spittler, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality,” 1098.

28. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*.

29. *Ibid.*, 66.

in the present is empowered by the God who dwells
among us and in us.³⁰

In a Pentecostal gathering, there is often little reliance on a written liturgy—even though there is a planned order of service. But a Spirit-led spontaneity is the order of the service. The aim is to allow the Spirit to direct the service—whether through spontaneous and fervent prayer, kneeling, clapping or raising up of hands, joyful singing or even dancing, a word of prophecy, a word of knowledge, or a call by the leader to come to the altar to pray and be prayed for. Sharing of personal testimonies becomes a setting for mutual encouragement. There is “a shared reliance on the spoken word.”³¹ Highlighting this oral culture, Walter Hollenweger, a doyen of Pentecostal studies, spoke of Pentecostalism as an oral religion with a global appeal.³²

This invasion of the divine Spirit into their lives leads Pentecostals-Charismatics to see their vocations in life as places for Christian witness. As McGrath understands it, Pentecostals conceive of a re-sacralization of everyday life—since the transcendent reality of God virtually closed off by modernism is now overthrown with the present reality of God—including through social action and service, political involvement, ecological concerns, along with evangelism.³³

However, Spittler writes of “otherworldliness” as a prized biblical virtue among early Pentecostals.³⁴ Much of this is fading with the economic rise and cultural affluence among Pentecostals. Rather, today, there is considerable distress at the rise of the so-called health and wealth gospel that pollutes some influential Pentecostal-Charismatic streams.

30. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 8.

31. Spittler, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality,” 1097.

32. Walter J. Hollenweger, “Pentecostalism's Global Language,” *Renewal Journals* 3:11-15 (2012): 205–209.

33. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution*, 432. See also Rebecca Jaichandran and Madhav B. D. “Pentecostal Spirituality in a Postmodern world,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 6:1 (2003): 39–61.

34. Spittler, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality,” 1098.

3.4. Signs—healings, miracles, exorcisms, and the like

Since Pentecostal–Charismatic Christians believe in the present work of the Spirit, there is an active expectation of visible and tangible signs of God’s presence and power. There is a premium placed on God’s work in people’s lives, resulting in transformed lives, physical and emotional healings, exorcisms, miracles, and the like. For many, the book of Acts serves as a manual for church life and growth, where the role of the Spirit in the life of the apostles and the church is highlighted.

It is common to have prayer for matters such as physical and emotional healing, financial needs, and freedom from addictions. Prayer times could be during or at the end of a service, or people with needs may stay back after the service to be prayed for by pastors and/or lay leaders. Often a person’s testimony may recount a special experience of grace or an answer to prayer in their life or family, which is further intended to demonstrate an act of God’s sovereign intervention, thus encouraging others to persevere in fervent prayer. Providential answers to prayer may sometimes be referred to as miracles; however, experiences of healing or freedom from spiritual or emotional bondages are often shared as testimonies in corporate gatherings to return thanks to God.

Sometimes, there may be psycho-physical manifestations that occur during a service, especially during an extended time of prayer at the altar—manifestations such as weeping, joyful clapping, or people “falling under the power”—not unlike what has been recorded in other movements such as the Welsh and Wesleyan revivals.

4. Lesslie Newbigin and Apostle Paul to Theological Educators

As one engaged in formal theological education for a few decades, I offer these reminders to my colleagues. I have highlighted the exciting reality of the Spirit’s move globally, revitalising older ecclesiastical structures

and giving birth to new ones. I have also outlined four prominent features of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movements that have hugely impacted the Evangelical Church. I conclude with insights from Lesslie Newbigin and the apostle Paul.

The influential missionary-theologian Lesslie Newbigin spent three decades serving in India. In *The Household of God* (1953), while analysing the nature of the church, he suggested that there are three major categorical models or approaches in the family of Christian churches.

Whereas Catholicism and Protestantism have laid immense stress upon what is given and unalterable, the type of Christian faith which I have called Pentecostal has laid its stress upon that which is to be known and recognized in present experience—the power of the ever-living Spirit of God.³⁵

Newbigin's discerning judgment, pronounced by one who became a bishop in an episcopal denomination (Church of South India) several decades before the global growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, are both perceptive and prophetic.

The theological educator must grasp these exciting possibilities opening up for the whole Church as a result of what Newbigin describes as the "Pentecostal model" of the church.³⁶ Similarly, all those going into the world to serve in the name of Christ will need to grasp and work alongside this global reality.

The apostle Paul would seek to remind theological educators, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us walk in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:25). The theological educator will seek to mediate the immanent work of the Spirit and be

35. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 98. One wonders whether Newbigin somehow overlooked the estimated 250 million-strong Orthodox Christians or has subsumed under the rubric of Catholic.

36. Two such articulations are: Allan H. Anderson, "Pentecostal-Charismatic Spirituality and Theological Education in Europe from a Global Perspective," *PentecoStudies* 3:1 (2004): 1–15 and Daniel Toph, "Ten Characteristics of Pentecostal Theological Education in the Twenty-first Century," *Pentecostal Education* 5:1-2 (2020): 45–57.

ready for a transmission of *plerōphoria*—a word the apostle employs for the deep conviction generated by the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:5).³⁷ I like to think of this rare word as a metaphor for the significant component of theological formation led and empowered by the Spirit. The noun *plerōphoria*, which comes from the verb “to fill completely or to fulfill,” apparently does not occur in classical Greek, but is used by Christian authors. It is found 4 times in the NT (in 1 Thess 1:5; Col 2:2; Heb 6:11; and 10:22); and its use in Col 2:2 is related to *sunesis* (understanding and knowledge).

The goals of theological education in our churches and institutions include those of formation of Christian character, acquisition of biblical/theological knowledge, and an inculcation of ministerial skills. But along with these, we are called to transmit *plerōphoria* – an impartation of spiritual values, personal concern, and a sense of mission—all in the power of the Spirit.

37. See my article “The Parental Paradigm: A Pauline Model for Theological Education,” in Roji T. George and A. Varughese John (eds), *Theological Formation for Christian Missions – A Festschrift for Ian Walter Payne* (Bangalore: SAIACS Publications, 2019), 37–39.