

Ecumenical Perspectives on Pentecostal Pneumatology

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Abstract

There is an unbearable and undeniable tension between the ecumenical movement and the Pentecostal movement on the subject of the Holy Spirit, especially on Spirit baptism in Pentecostal pneumatology. There are various perspectives about Pentecostalism cum pneumatology on the subject of the Holy Spirit from different schools of thought. One of the major attributes of Pentecostalism is the emphasis on the Holy Spirit evident by speaking in tongue. This is a subject of controversy in the ecumenical domain and thus a need to bridge the chasm between the body of Christ. This study adopted an analytical-historical method in arguing her point on the need for a right perspective on the subject of the Holy Spirit in the ecumenical body of Christ. There is the need for the ecumenical body to tolerate the excess of each of her constituency without prejudices or bias.

**KEY WORDS; ECUMENICAL, PNEUMATOLOGY,
PENTECOSTAL, GLOSSALALIA, EXEGESIS**

INTRODUCTION

There are unbearable and undeniable tension between the ecumenical movement and the Pentecostal movement on the subject of the Holy Spirit especially on Spirit baptism in Pentecostal pneumatology.¹ There are various perspective about Pentecostalism cum pneumatology on the subject of the Holy Spirit from different school of thought. One of the major attributes of Pentecostalism is the emphasis on the Holy Spirit evident by speaking in tongue. Classical Pentecostalism began with hermeneutical developments which reframed regnant interpretations of scripture and developed the interpretive quest for deeper fillings of the Holy Spirit which sprang from holiness and revivalist movements.²

Granted that Pentecostals are part of the ecumenical in the body of Christ, they project certain impression to their sister denomination on the subject of the Holy Spirit and baptism of the Holy Spirit. What is the view of mainline churches about Pentecostals churches in relation to the Holy Spirit? should the Holy Spirit be emphasized above Christ? What is the right perspective of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ? These are some of the questions begging for answers. The burden of this paper is therefore to ascertain what Pentecostal pneumatology is, examined the perspective of the ecumenical and draw implications therein.

¹ James D.G Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 2.

² Kenneth J. Archer and William Oliverio Eds., *Constructive Pneumatological Hermeneutics in Pentecostal Christianity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF PENTECOSTALISM AND PNEUMATOLOGY

Pentecostalism sprang from a post-civil war irruption of heroic Christianity known to historian as American Holiness movement of which ecumenicity is a distinct feature.³ This implies that Pentecostalism is a child of necessity as result of a particular movement in history. The origin of Pentecostalism can be traced back to remarkable series of meetings in Azusa Street, Los Angeles in 1906 and the Topeka Bible College in 1900. The Pentecostalism in question is reckoned as the third force in Christendom which emphasis baptism of the Holy Spirit as evidence by speaking in tongue.⁴

Pentecostalism is almost certainly the fastest growing religious movement in history. Though it originated only a hundred years ago, it currently accounts for as much as 25 percent of the global Christian population. In raw numbers this means that approximately half a billion people can now be identified as Pentecostal in one form or another. Pentecostalism's growth is made even more impressive by its having taken place with virtually no political or military support to pave the way, and it has spread despite its opposition to some of the most powerful cultural trends of the era. ⁵

Pentecostal refers to those who share in the experience of Spirit-baptism in the classical sense; incidentally, Pentecostals have

³ R. G. Robins, *Pentecostalism in American* (Oxford: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2010), 1-3.

⁴ James D.G Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 2-3.

⁵ Douglas Jacobsen Ed. *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1

traditionally made a sharp distinction between conversion to Christ and the post-conversion experience of Spirit baptism.⁶

While Pentecostalism has become a huge global phenomenon, the definition of exactly what makes a person Pentecostal is still to some degree unclear. Pentecostalism is not institutionally defined in the same way, for example, as Roman Catholicism is. Thus, membership or lack of membership in a Pentecostal organization is not a sufficient means of differentiating Pentecostal from non-Pentecostal believers. Pentecostalism also differs from groups like the Lutheran and Reformed churches, which have bodies of normative theological documents such as creeds and catechisms that delineate the belief boundaries of those movements. Pentecostalism is more fluid than either of these alternatives.⁷

Pentecostals are Spirit-conscious, Spirit-filled, and Spirit empowered Christian believers. In contrast to other groups or churches that emphasize either doctrine or moral practice, Pentecostals stress affectivity. It is the *experience* of God that matters—the felt power of the Spirit in the world, in the church, and in one’s own life. Pentecostals believe that doctrine and ethics are important, but the bedrock of Pentecostal faith is experiential. It is living faith in a living God—a God who can miraculously, palpably intervene in the world—that defines the Pentecostal orientation of faith.⁸

Pneumatology on the other hand is the systematic analysis and interpretation of the texts of scripture and tradition that deal with the regenerating and consummating work of the Holy

⁶ Martin William Mittelstadt, *The Spirit and Suffering in Luke-Acts: Implications for a Pentecostal Pneumatology* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 1,13.

⁷ Douglas Jacobsen Ed. *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2.

⁸ Douglas Jacobsen Ed. *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4.

Spirit and it has been typically structured around the distinction between the person (identity) and work (activity) of the Holy Spirit; describe the person and works of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Pneumatology analyzes the identity or person of the Holy Spirit and the activity or works of the Holy Spirit in the life of a person or the church as a whole. Consequently, different denominations in the Christendom have various presuppositions about the identity and the activity of the Holy Spirit.

PERSPECTIVES ON PENTECOSTAL PNEUMATOLOGY

Pentecostalism is one of the most significant religious phenomena in twentieth and twenty-first-century Christianity. Deji Ayegboyin and Emiola Nihinola affirm that Pentecostalism is a broad term that incorporates several fundamental protestant sects that emphasise the Holy Spirit's ministry.¹⁰ According to Nihinlola, Pentecostalism is a Christian religious movement of the twentieth century based on certain doctrines and a form of Christian experience.¹¹ In sacramental traditions there is but one baptism, namely in water and Spirit (Eph 4:5). This does allow for a repeated endowment or filling with the Spirit but not for a one-time event subsequent to conversion to Christ.

For Macchia, however, Spirit baptism is best understood as a post-conversion experience of charismatic Empowerment for witness. Macchia quotes Christoph Blumhardt's famous comment that one must be converted twice, first from the world to God and then from God to the world. If so, the Pentecostal doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit may be seen as a "second"

⁹Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit- Systematic Theology: Volume Three* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 2.

¹⁰ Pentecostalism and Waves of Pentecostalism see DejiAyegboyin and EmiolaNihilola, " Pentecostalism and the Nigerian Baptist Convention Churches: The Way Forward." *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, 13, (2008), 213 – 216.

¹¹EmiolaNihinlola. *A Biblical Evaluation of Pentecostalism*. (Ibadan: Sceptre Prints Limited, 1998), 6.

conversion, an awakening of one's vocation in the world – and a charismatic empowerment for such witness.¹² Pentecostalism was a bumptious, contrarian movement with sectarian instinct such as pride, purity, and proof-texts dictated separation from the world,¹³ it has burgeoned into a prominent and permanent feature of modern Christianity.¹⁴

Dunn opines that baptism of the Holy Spirit is the most distinctive aspect of Pentecostal theology as the Holy Spirit plays vital role in the area of conversion, initiation, and baptism.¹⁵ To the Pentecostals, when God's own Spirit enters the human body, it took command of the speech organ and spoke a language of ineffable purity, simplicity and power.¹⁶ The Holy Spirit is an agent which is communicated to human by the father, it is the act of God the Father in which by His Spirit He draws man into union with His Son Jesus Christ, so that they become Sons and daughters in this Son and thus share the intimacy of the Son's own relationship with Him.¹⁷

ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PENTECOSTAL PNEUMATOLOGY

Ecumenical in this wise suggest the relationship in the body of Christ or Christendom, that is the relationship between outside Christian denomination or sect to foster unity in the body of Christ. The ecumenical have her presuppositions and views about Pentecostal pneumatology which calls for sober

¹² Ernst M. Conradie, "Ecumenical Perspective on Pentecostal Pneumatology" *Missionalia* 43:1 (63-81).

¹³ Robins, 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁵ James D.G Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 3.

¹⁶ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 34-35.

¹⁷ David Coffey, *Did you Receive when you believed?: Some basic questions for pneumatology (The Pere Marquette Lecture in Theology 2005)* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005), 110.

reflection. This is because some mainline churches perceive the Pentecostals as majoring on the minor and vice versa. Pentecostal pneumatology emphasizes the baptism of the Holy Spirit. There can be little doubt that empowerment through Spirit baptism is a distinctive feature, probably the distinctive feature of the Pentecostal movement, also in the African context and also amongst “spirit type” African Instituted Churches (AICs).

For Pentecostals, the Spirit is present in their worship, their prayer life, and their everyday experience.¹⁸ The Pentecostal movement expresses at its core an experience of the fullness of the working of the Holy Spirit and the practice of spiritual gifts. As Frank Macchia opines, Spirit baptism is “an empowerment for witness as evidenced by heightened participation in extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, especially speaking in tongues”. It is also evidenced in other manifestations of the presence of the Spirit such as healing, prophetic utterances (whether predictive or diagnostic and deliverance from evil spirits). As Macchia also notes, this “crown jewel” of Christian experience is sometimes underplayed by Pentecostal authors for the sake of developing a more ecumenical Pneumatology.¹⁹

From ecumenical perspectives, Pentecostal culture encouraged certain ways of thinking and behaving that seemed so deep seated they almost preceded self-conscious articulation. Early Pentecostals explain themselves to the outside world with the experience of Holy Ghost baptism signified by speaking in tongues.²⁰ Pentecostal hermeneutics seems to envelop the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in a subjective package. They most at times base their interpretation on experience and extra-

¹⁸ Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (London: University of California Press, 2007), 4.

¹⁹ Ernst M. Conradie, “Ecumenical Perspective on Pentecostal Pneumatology” *Missionalia* 43:1 (63-81).

²⁰ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 34-35.

biblical revelation as though the Holy Spirit has for once been a human idea hatched from human incubator or thought pattern. John Akinjide Adeyemo is right that this perhaps is one of the greatest threats to the gospel.²¹ This suggests that the Pentecostals' attempts to put the Holy Spirit in a straight jacket which can be stereotyped at will, this is contrary to the normative in the mainline churches and other ecumenical Christian bodies

Furthermore, in Pentecostal discourse, Spirit baptism is primarily understood as an experience of empowerment for Christian service and mission that is distinct from conversion, initiation through water baptism, regeneration and sanctification. This suggests three distinct aspects (if not stages) of the work of the Spirit in believers, namely regeneration, sanctification and empowerment for witness. Spirit baptism is then connected to the third element. By contrast, in reformed and evangelical discourse, Spirit baptism is understood in terms of regeneration. What is signified in water baptism is Spirit baptism, namely regeneration involving a radical change in a person, a passage from death to new life.²²

The Christian tradition often referred to the Holy Spirit as divine power and in contemporary discussion of pneumatology, there is widespread agreement that the traditional reference to the Spirit of God as the third person of the Trinity is both inadequate and misleading from the ecumenical standpoint.²³ The Pentecostal movement is known for passionate pursuit and equipping of the Holy Spirit for the task of Gospel witness and the growth of the movement has brought with it a maturity in

²¹John Akinjide Adeyemo, *"In Season and out of Season: Defending the Gospel in the face of opposing Ideologies and Circumstances"* (Lagos: Donobish Creative Print, 2019), 119.

²²Ernst M. Conradie, "Ecumenical Perspective on Pentecostal Pneumatology" *Missionalia* 43:1 (63-81).

²³Bernard Cooke, *Power and the Spirit of God: Towards an Experience-based Pneumatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

the development Pentecostal theology and praxis, particularly as Pentecostalism gain prominence in an ecumenical world.²⁴

Pentecostalism is growing exponentially especially in the southern Hemisphere nevertheless, there is a considerable confusion over the subject and pneumatology. Pentecostalism is viewed by some as a phenomenon while others view it as a complex social movement with many different strains. For example, there is the classical Pentecostal denomination such as the Assemblies of God, and the foursquare Gospel church and then there are plethora of indigenous and independent Pentecostal churches some of which emphasize the prosperity Gospel of health and wealth while others focus on evangelism, healing and ecstatic worship.²⁵

The ecumenical movement flourished especially in Europe and in the British Commonwealth, while the Pentecostal movement flourished where Christianity became established everywhere else, notably in North America, Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. It has now become an amorphous movement so that many scholars speak of Pentecostalism in the plural while almost all scholars seek to offer some form of typology of branches within the movement. The tensions between these two movements remain undeniable. It is clearly not only about free style worship versus a set liturgy. How should this divide between the so-called “ecumenical” and the “evangelicals” then be described? Is it a matter of an intellectualizing approach to Christianity (*fides quae creditur*) versus an emphasis on the experiential dimension of the Christian faith (*fides qua creditur*)? Or diverging positions on personal ethics, especially on abortion, homosexuality and patriarchy? Or a focus on personal ethics rather than on issues of social, economic and

²⁴ Martin William Mittelstadt, *The Spirit and Suffering in Luke-Acts: Implications for a Pentecostal Pneumatology* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), vii.

²⁵ Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (London: University of California Press, 2007), 1.

environmental justice from which Pentecostals in the past tended to shy away? Or between mission as “evangelism” and mission as “development”? Or between liberalism and fundamentalism? Or between a private personal morality and a public concern over social justice? Or between secular this-worldliness and an interest in the other-worldly “supernatural”?²⁶ These are rhetorical questions from ecumenical pneumatology.

Conversely, some Pentecostal church leaders have been at the forefront of ecumenical engagements with social justice issues. There may be numerous cases of people who are at home in both movements. In a way it is unbearable to speak of two movements connected with an “and”. If the ecumenical movement is not moved by the Spirit and in that sense “Pentecostal”, it would be futile. If the Pentecostal movement is not “ecumenical” in orientation, it would be fostering a divisive spirit. To use an “and” as a logical connector is therefore to articulate a painful underlying problem. That there are tensions is undeniable, although one necessarily has to generalize in order to capture such tensions. To do so is rather bold, not only because it hides the differences within Pentecostal movements and within the ecumenical movement, but because there have been all too few attempts to address such tensions.²⁷

IMPLICATIONS OF PENTECOSTAL PNEUMATOLOGY

Pneumatological eschatology is a viable and robust Pentecostal contribution; this is because it takes seriously both the freedom and the mystery of the Spirit within a Trinitarian framework. The Spirit in question is key to rightly discerning both God and

²⁶ Ernst M. Conradie, “Ecumenical Perspective on Pentecostal Pneumatology” *Missionalia* 43:1 (63-81).

²⁷ Ernst M. Conradie, “Ecumenical Perspective on Pentecostal Pneumatology” *Missionalia* 43:1 (63-81).

God's ongoing activity in history.²⁸ In the Pentecostal context, life in the Spirit is essentially a life of worship, as worship is a code term for the manifest presence of God and is the foundational Pentecostal ministry. The distinctive feature of Pentecostal spirituality is that it is Christologically and Pneumatologically fused. Christ is the content of Pentecostal worship and spirituality and its Christocentric focus is expressed through pneumatology.²⁹

Granted that the core focus of a Pentecostal pneumatology is on Spirit baptism, there should be ample opportunities for dialogue and mutual enrichment between the ecumenical movement and the Pentecostal movement. There are especially two issues that tend to emerge from such dialogue, namely on the relatedness of the Spirit and Christ and of the Father and the Spirit. There may well remain serious differences between the ecumenical movement and the Pentecostal movement in discerning the movements of the Spirit.

In Trinitarian categories such differences may be understood in terms of the relationship between the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Some in the Pentecostal movement may observe an arid lack of evidence of the transforming movement of the Spirit in the established churches that participate in the ecumenical movement. They would want to ask: "Where is the Spirit?" Or, as James Dunn puts it, "A church that seeks to restrict and control the Spirit, as too dangerous and unpredictable, may be safe, but it has signed its own death warrant.

A church that seeks to follow where the Spirit leads will have to expect the unexpected and be prepared to be shaken to its core." In short and in an attempt to capture very general trends, Pentecostals typically wish to emphasize the relative independence of the Holy Spirit, the freedom of the Spirit to

²⁸ May Ling Tan-Chow, *Pentecostal Theology for 21st century: Engaging with multi-faith Singapore* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 125.

²⁹ May Ling Tan-Chow, 142.

blow where it wants to, to stimulate movements that cannot be controlled by the institutional church. They would question the tendency to control the Spirit through ecclesiastic mechanisms such as the ordained ministry, the sacraments, biblical exegesis and higher theological education.

They are concerned that the Spirit is quenched by ecclesial gatekeepers who insist that the Spirit works primarily through Christ, the body of Christ, Episcopal representatives of Christ, the disciplined exegesis of the canonical witnesses to Christ, the proclamation of the Word (the Logos related to Christ) and ecclesial control over the sacraments. As Asamoah-Gyadu notes, the leadership of charismatic churches castigate the traditional mission churches as “cold, dead, bookish and moribund institutions that had no sense of the supernatural”. He adds that “The high level of clericalism and the routine process of incorporation into the church through the sacraments of infant baptism, confirmation and communion had created a large body of nominal Christians for whom religious experiences of the born-again type were alien.”

Instead, Pentecostals emphasize that the Spirit is not always controlled by the Word – as is evident in ecstatic forms of worship aided by audio-visual means, speaking in tongues, the role of dreams and visions, direct prophetic inspiration, healing ministries, deliverance or exorcism from evil spirits and a fascination with the extraordinary, the miraculous, the “supernatural”. Indeed, the letter of the Word remains empty if the Spirit of the letter is not grasped.³⁰

In response, ecumenical theologians from so-called mainline churches may wonder whether claims for the presence of the Spirit in some manifestations of the Pentecostal movement are indeed referring to the Spirit of Christ. They call for a discernment of the spirits, together with a reading of the “signs

³⁰ Ernst M. Conradie, “Ecumenical Perspective on Pentecostal Pneumatology” *Missionalia* 43:1 (63-81).

of the time” through contextual analysis, in order to recognize the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. They may point to the danger that such claims often constitute little more than rival claims to exercise or impose religious authority and are open to abusive charismatic leadership, with specific reference to financial gains accumulated by excessively wealthy pastors and the entrenchment of positions of clerical power and authority.

They would be concerned about claims to direct spiritual illumination that cannot be tested within ecclesial communities and through ecumenical fellowship. They would worry about forms of exegesis where the spirit is not directed by the letter. They may well harbor resentment over the spiritual legitimation of an upward social mobility, especially in non-Western contexts through the preaching of the prosperity gospel. More specifically, Christians in mainline churches would be concerned about the kind of power that is associated with the transformative work of the Holy Spirit.

If it is indeed the Spirit of Christ who is at work, that power would be based on the strange power of the cross, which is the power of love and therefore of vulnerability and not of success. Love is indeed a transforming power, but not one based on military, political, financial, technological or muscle power. It cannot be captured in the Pentecostal vocabulary of “breakthrough”, victory, glory, and blessings, if not success and prosperity – where the shame, poverty and deprivation of the cross are scarcely evident.

Some Pentecostal church leaders have been at the forefront of ecumenical engagements with social justice issues. There may be numerous cases of people who are at home in both movements. In a way it is unbearable to speak of two movements connected with an “and”. If the ecumenical movement is not moved by the Spirit and in that sense “Pentecostal”, it would be futile. If the Pentecostal movement is not “ecumenical” in orientation, it would be fostering a divisive spirit. To use an “and” as a logical connector is therefore to

articulate a painful underlying problem. That there are tensions is undeniable, although one necessarily has to generalize in order to capture such tensions. To do so is rather bold, not only because it hides the differences within Pentecostal movements and within the ecumenical movement, but because there have been all too few attempts to address such tensions.³¹

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the conceptual overview of Pentecostalism and pneumatology, ecumenical perspectives of Pentecostal pneumatology and the implications therein. The ecumenical as a body of Christ in relationship with other Christian denominations needs to tolerate the seemingly excess of the Pentecostals about their over emphasis on the Holy Spirit and at the same time learn some plausible things that are normative from the Pentecostals. This is because every church is expected to be a Pentecost church as evident in the book of Acts chapter two. Consequently, both the Pentecostals and the mainline churches should neither cage the Holy Spirit nor stereotype the Holy Spirit in their worship but rather allow the Holy Spirit to dictate the pace in the normative spirit of the scripture. Thus, the identity and the activity of the Holy Spirit should be understood in every Christian gathering irrespective of the denomination.

³¹ Ernst M. Conradie, "Ecumenical Perspective on Pentecostal Pneumatology" *Missionalia* 43:1 (63-81).

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