



Class 1:

A First Look at Pentecostalism

In this class session we will study:

- The origins of the Pentecostal movement.
- The distinguishing characteristics of Pentecostalism.
- Some of the major organizations and ministries of the Pentecostal movement.

Introduction

Pentecostalism is a worldwide Protestant, or evangelical, movement that originated at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States. The movement takes its name from the feast of Pentecost, which celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples in Jerusalem (Acts 2). Pentecostalism emphasizes a post-conversion experience of spiritual purification and empowering for Christian witnessing. The entrance into this condition is shown by utterances in an unknown tongue, known as glossolalia in some Pentecostal circles. Although Pentecostalism generally aligns itself with fundamentalism and evangelicalism, its distinguishing characteristic reveals its roots in the American Holiness movement, which saw a post-conversion experience as sanctification.

It isn't easy to describe a clear identity for Pentecostalism. "Because of the great number of Pentecostal organizations, the variety of names, and the amorphous character of many groups, it is probably impossible to positively identify all Pentecostals."¹

An emphasis on experience, to the detriment of doctrine, has been the principal concern of Pentecostals. Among Pentecostal movements there is no unanimity on doctrine, policy, or any other matter except Spirit baptism and the practice of the *charismata* (gifts). Their only distinctive doctrine is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Most American Pentecostal denominations believe that the *initial evidence* of Spirit baptism is always glossolalia.

History

According to Vinson Synan, a Pentecostal historian and author, "glossolalia and Pentecostalism are modern phenomena."² In tracing the historical roots of Pentecostalism, however, it is impossible to avoid a reference to the Great Awakening. Around 1720 and 1750, the American colonies experienced widespread and intense revivals of interest in religion, a phenomenon known by supporters and historians as the Great Awakening. One of the most fa-

mous contributors to this religious response was the English itinerant preacher George Whitefield, a Methodist leader. Other important figures included Theodorus Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Reformed minister of New Brunswick, and Gilbert Tennent, a Presbyterian minister. Jonathan Edwards, who provided the best intellectual defense of the new emphasis on personal religious experience, joined them in their preaching endeavors. Together with many other clergymen who shared a Calvinistic heritage, these leaders stressed the importance of vital religious experience as the cornerstone of effective religious life.

More conservative ministers did not welcome the turmoil produced by the Great Awakening. Many resented traveling preachers who invaded their parishes and held religious services that competed for their audiences. Charles Chauncy of Boston argued that the new enthusiasm was a form of spiritual derangement in which emotions destroyed the rational control of one's destiny. Despite these opponents, thousands of individuals experienced a new sense of dependence on God's will. Many churches were revitalized, and new converts were added to the list of faithful members.

Religious enthusiasm tended to wane after 1750, but it did not entirely disappear. During the American Revolutionary period, many Methodist preachers kept the tradition alive in their congregations. Hollenweger perceives in Wesley a post-conversion emphasis. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, had already made a distinction between the sanctified, those who had been baptized in the Spirit, and ordinary Christians.³

Beginning in 1795 and expanding through the 1840s, a new revival known as the Second Great Awakening took place. Evangelists such as Charles G. Finney emphasized free will, divine forgiveness for all, and the need of each person freely to accept or reject salvation. The First Great Awakening drew on Calvinist theology; the second relied on Arminianism, which allowed for human decisions in the salvation process. But their common emphasis made revivals a central feature of American religion throughout those years. With the passing of time, what remained of those preachers of holiness was their accent on conversion and sanctification.

A time of changes

The time between 1850 and 1900 was a time of change. Science had little impact on most Westerners until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the rapid accumulation of knowledge suddenly changed the way people lived and worked. Trends in Western society moved people from the farm to the city, and new forms of communication and transportation accelerated the pace of everyday life. In short, the modern, secular, industrialized world took shape between 1700 and 1900.

In a brief period, several religious movements emerged. In the eastern United States, some were influenced by European rationalism. A new kind of sermons appeared. These were excessively elaborated and delivered within the framework of a very formal liturgy.

Each action causes a reaction. Among the churches, certain reactive tendencies were beginning to appear. There were those who disagreed with the formal liturgy; others were disgusted with the intellectual exercises of sermons filled with sophisticated language. People began to seek a different way of expressing their religious life. They looked for congregations that favored spontaneity of expression in liturgy and a participation of members who felt free to manifest aloud their approval of the sayings of the preacher.

Topeka, Los Angeles, and Chicago

In January 1901, at Bethel Bible College, in Topeka, Kansas, directed by Methodist minister Charles Parham, speaking in tongues and other ecstatic behavior broke out for the first time in the modern history of the Pentecostal movement.⁴ In a meeting that began on December 31, 1900, and continued to January 1 of 1901, Miss Agnes Ozman⁵ “began to speak in tongues.”⁶ Parham viewed glossolalia as the evidence of “the true Baptism in the Spirit,”⁷ an idea that remains in the articles of faith of some contemporary Pentecostal movements.

In 1906, W. J. Seymour,⁸ one of Parham’s students, was invited to Los Angeles by Nelly Terry, a pastor of a black Holiness church. Based on Acts 2:4, Seymour affirmed that “anyone who does not speak in tongues is not baptized by the Holy Spirit.”⁹ But the members didn’t accept that message and Nelly Terry put Seymour out.¹⁰ On April 9, 1906, “the First Pentecostal effusion came.”¹¹ Seymour moved to 312 Azusa Street, where meetings continued for three years¹² with speaking in tongues, singing in tongues, and prophecy. In general, the Azusa Street Mission is regarded as the birthplace of the Pentecostal movement.¹³

Around 1907, W. H. Durham, a successful evangelist in Los Angeles and Chicago who received the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Los Angeles, entered the Pentecostal scene. Around 1908 the Pentecostal movement began to teach the doctrine of a three-stage way of salvation, namely: conversion,¹⁴ sanctification,¹⁵ and the baptism of the Spirit—the latter added by Parham and Seymour and evidenced by speaking in tongues. W. H. Durham reduced the three stages to two: conversion¹⁶ and the baptism of the Spirit¹⁷ (with speaking in tongues). Seymour, who expelled Durham from the Apostolic Faith Church, rejected this belief. But in the future, this theological detail would become the essential difference between the Pentecostals who teach a three-stage way of salvation and those who emphasize two stages.¹⁸

After its first humble steps in Topeka, Los Angeles, and Chicago at the turn of the century, the Pentecostal movement began to expand to other continents and denominations. This contagious tendency was perceived early by Father Kilian McDonnell as an appropriate seed that would germinate in ecumenism.¹⁹ Certain elements of the movement favored ecumenism. For example, although Pentecostalism derives from Protestantism, Pentecostal churches are not typically Protestant in their beliefs, attitudes, or practices. Some writers have regarded them as the “third force” in the Christian world.²⁰

In the 1950s, the Pentecostal movement was expanding quickly and began to knock at the doors of other denominations. Around the 1960s the Charismatic Renewal Movement began in the Catholic Church. The 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a giant step in ecumenism. Prominent leaders of the Charismatic movement and Pentecostals were among the representatives of denominations that signed the document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium in 1994.” In the same year, 25 major Pentecostal churches met in Memphis, Tennessee, where they pledged to work for unity, especially to eliminate divisions based on race. The largest multi-congregational Pentecostal body in the world is the U.S.-based Assemblies of God, with a membership of about 25 million in 1992. Today, Pentecostalism has spread to many lands and is a major religious movement in several countries.²¹ It is difficult to offer a precise estimate of the number of followers of a practice that has knocked on the gates of almost every Christian movement and has penetrated many of them.

Review *Pentecostalism derives its name from Pentecost. What is the relevance of this word to the beliefs of this group?*

In what way did European rationalism contribute to the beginnings of Pentecostalism?

Explain the meaning of the word glossolalia.

Fundamental beliefs of Pentecostals

Probably the main characteristic of Pentecostalism is its dynamic liturgy. It involves preaching, singing, praying, and speaking in tongues. For some, it is exhilarating; for others, it is disorderly and confusing. One of the main theological tenets of Pentecostals is their special preference for the Third Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, and a preaching that emphasizes the gospel of power.

As we have seen, Pentecostalism is an expanding movement that has several denominations and groups attached to it. It is a process that has not yet ended. We must take into account that Pentecostalism is rooted in the Holiness movement that was formed as part of evangelical fundamentalism.

In considering the articles of faith of several Pentecostal denominations, what follows here is a brief, but not exhaustive, summary of their beliefs based mainly in the Declarations of Faith of the Assemblies of God, discussing in the endnotes some of the differences between them and other groups within the Pentecostal movement. The Assemblies of God believe:

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is unquestionably the fastest growing phenomenon not only among the traditional Pentecostal churches and neo-Pentecostals, but also among various other charismatic and renewal movements. There are estimates that between 140 and 370 million Christians engage in glossolalia worldwide. These figures suggest that between 7.7 percent and 20.5 percent of all Christians engage in glossolalia, if one accepts the figure of 1.8 billion as the total number of Christians on this globe.”²⁹

- God eternally exists in three persons: God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost.
- The Holy Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, which is the “all-sufficient rule for faith and practice.”²² Some believe in “the verbal inspiration of the Bible.”²³
- Humankind was created “good and upright,” but fell because of voluntary transgression. Humanity’s only hope is redemption in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.²⁴
- Humanity is justified only by God’s grace.²⁵
- Those who sincerely repent and accept Jesus Christ are saved by the washing of regeneration and renewing in the Holy Spirit, and, being justified by grace through faith, they become heirs of God according to the hope of eternal life.
- There is double evidence of salvation: inwardly, by the direct witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16); and outwardly, by a life of righteousness and true holiness.²⁶
- The Lord’s Supper consists of bread and the fruit of the vine as symbols that express the community sharing of the divine nature of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:4).²⁷
- All believers must expect and earnestly seek the promise of the Father, the baptism in the Holy Ghost, and fire according to the command of the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁸
- “The Baptism of the Holy Ghost is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking in tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance (Acts 2:4). Speaking in tongues in this instance is the same in essence as the gift of tongues (1 Cor. 12:4-10) but different in purpose and use.”³⁰
- Complete (or entire) sanctification is evident in obedience to the Lord’s Word.³¹
- The church is the body of Christ and the habitation of God through the Spirit and has to fulfill the great commission. Each believer is a member of the assembly and part of the Church of the First-born.³²
- The church is an ordained ministry whose purpose is the evangelization of the world and the building of the body of Christ.³³
- “Deliverance from sickness is provided for in the atonement, and is a privilege of all believers.”³⁴
- Those who died believing in the Lord Jesus Christ will be resurrected and translated.³⁵
- “The revelation of the Lord from heaven, the salvation of national Israel and the millennial reign of Christ on the earth [are] the Scriptural promise and the world’s hope.”