

Discerning the Spirit: Pentecostal spirituality and practice

by [Amos Yong](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, NRSV).

Pentecostals' spirituality and practice revolve around their understanding of the infilling of the Holy Spirit, which empowers Christian witness. For most Pentecostals, the experience of this empowerment is logically (if not chronologically) subsequent to the experience of salvation, and opens the believer to the wide range of charismatic gifts of the Spirit as enumerated at various places in the New Testament (especially 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 27-31; Romans 12:3-8; Ephesians 4:11-13; and 1 Peter 4:10-11).

Particularly important for Pentecostal spirituality are the gifts of prophecy, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. While both prophecy and tongues are inspired by the Holy Spirit, the gift of tongues calls attention to the realm of the Spirit's working that is not irrational, but that cannot be adequately comprehended by conventional languages, categories of thought and rational explanations. However, since focus on these gifts could also lead to a false sense of elitism or to the neglect of other aspects of the faith, many Pentecostals are careful to insist both on the importance of the fruits of the Spirit (as recorded in Galatians 5:22-24) and on seeking after the Giver of the gifts, the Holy Spirit, rather than after the gifts themselves.

Perhaps surprisingly, the emergence of Pentecostal theology, in the sense of formal scholarly work, has coincided and overlapped with the renaissance of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the academy. Many Pentecostal thinkers have been deeply engaged in conversations with those mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians who have been involved in research on the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal contribution has been to emphasize not only the person of the Spirit, but the Spirit's gifts or charisms and their function for Christian spirituality and for the practices of the church. This may explain, at least in part, why Pentecostal theologians have been less interested in historic doctrines like the *filioque* ("and from the Son") clause in the creed (which are related to the person and procession of the Holy Spirit) and

more interested in doctrines like Spirit baptism (which are related to the works of the Spirit).

Ecumenically, Pentecostals have slowly become involved over the course of the last generation in bilateral dialogues—for example, with the Roman Catholic Church and with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches—and have participated in various discussions organized by the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. To be sure, those involved usually have represented only themselves, since Pentecostal denominational leaders generally have not endorsed formal participation in ecumenical dialogue, given the movement's historic alliances with fundamentalism and conservative evangelicalism rather than mainline Protestantism. Further, most laypeople in Pentecostal churches are committed to evangelistic and missionary activities, and many are not even aware of the ecumenical movement, much less of developments in the ecumenical world. Yet because of the recognition that those who are filled with the Holy Spirit are empowered to testify about their experience of the Spirit, official Pentecostal leaders often view the involvement of Pentecostal scholars and theologians in the ecumenical arena as a legitimate form of witness.

How exactly do the gifts of the Spirit function in the church? Citing Acts 1:18, Pentecostals believe that the primary purpose of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is to empower believers to bear witness to the gospel to the entire world. The 20th century has been called the “century of Pentecostal mission” because of the explosive growth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in the Eastern and Southern hemispheres. Pentecostals have from their beginnings espoused a Spirit-centered theology of mission and evangelization, believing that the gifts of the Spirit orient believers toward evangelism.

The gift of healing is especially important in this regard since it is through this gift that many lives are initially touched and people are turned to God. Further, the gifts of the Spirit include empowering vocational witness as seen in the lives of individuals appointed to be apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers. Individuals called toward these vocations and anointed by the Spirit for serving in these roles are the instruments of God through whom mission, evangelism and discipleship occur, and through whom the church is built up and edified. Hence the gifts of the Spirit not only strengthen and edify the body of Christ but also enlarge the church as individuals are added daily to those who are saved (cf. Acts 2:47b).

Within the ecumenical context of the worldwide church, however, counterquestions have arisen. Insofar as the gifts of the Spirit are central to Pentecostal spirituality and practices, does that mean that the presence and activity of the Spirit is constrained to this realm? What about the historic Christian sacraments like baptism and the Eucharist, and what about the liturgies of the churches? Is not the Spirit also present and active in those domains, and if so, why are Pentecostals in general so opposed to more sacramental and liturgical forms of worship? Do Pentecostals privilege the spiritual gifts and minimize the sacraments of the church? Insofar as the anointing of individuals is central to Pentecostal missionary and evangelistic activities, what about the church's corporate witness on issues related to peace and social justice? Have Pentecostals so focused on the witness of the individual member that they have neglected the corporate witness of local churches and of the church catholic?

These questions culminate, of course, in considerations regarding the nature of the church. Arguably, Pentecostal sensitivities to the gifts of the Spirit have led them to embrace a more spiritualized (rather than institutionalized) notion of the church. However, through the ecumenical conversation many Pentecostal theologians have been led to rethink their understanding of the relationship between the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit and the doctrine of the church. Perhaps tongue speech (or any of the other gifts of the Spirit) is a kind of sacrament through which the transcendence of God is both pointed to and mediated (albeit in this case, through the human body). Further, it is being recognized that the Spirit's work also involves the bringing about of righteousness, peace and justice (cf. Isaiah 32:15-20), and that this is accomplished through the collaboration of local churches (or the church catholic) rather than through individual members. Hence, a Pentecostal understanding of the church cannot be merely a spiritualized one, nor can it be formulated only in terms of local congregations.

All of this points the way toward future explorations. Pentecostals need to be involved in ecumenical discussions on the nature of the church catholic. This is especially important given the concerns about proselytism expressed by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communions, given the fact that the charismatic churches of the global South are now sending missionaries to reevangelize the Anglo-American West, and given the explosive growth of independent, charismatic churches around the world. Pentecostalism can help ecumenical theology retrieve the more organic shape of the New Testament church, and the ecumenical

movement can help Pentecostal theology appreciate the sacramental, liturgical and conciliar dimensions of the church also expressed in the pages of the New Testament.

But how optimistic can we be about ecumenical conversation if the conversation partners have differing approaches to the theological task? Pentecostals who begin with Acts 1:8 often conclude their testimony by inviting their audiences to experience for themselves the Spirit's presence and activity as recorded throughout the Acts narrative, and to continue to expand the early Christian story into—as it were—an additional chapter of the book of Acts.

This focus on the book of Acts raises a number of questions. For one, does not privileging any particular book in the Bible result in a skewed theological orientation? In addition, is not the genre of the book of Acts ill-suited for theological and doctrinal purposes? This latter question is raised especially by Protestants who believe that the didactic portions of the New Testament, such as the letters of Paul, are more reliable for theological and doctrinal reflection than historical narratives such as Acts.

Pentecostals would certainly do well to heed the admonitions about privileging the book of Acts. On the other hand, there are numerous points of entry into the biblical canon—whether the Gospels in contemplative traditions or Paul's letter to the Romans in Lutheran churches. Pentecostals see their own contribution as highlighting the Lukan perspective, especially the book of Acts. Further, Pentecostals who read Acts theologically and even doctrinally are simply joining scholars across the theological academy who have emerged in the last generation to defend the author of Luke-Acts as a theologian in his own right.

The unique Pentecostal emphasis is on the charismatic and missiological components of Luke's theological vision. The Lukan witness that the many tongues of Pentecost all combine to declare "God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11) to the ends of the earth is confirmed by Revelation's insistence that many tribes, languages, peoples and nations will be represented in the coming kingdom. Hence, Pentecostals defend the unity of the Spirit not in terms of the uniformity of the church, but as expressed in the plurality of the many members of the church catholic and the diversity of their biblical interpretations.

A hermeneutic focused on Acts not only results in securing for Pentecostals a place at the ecumenical roundtable, but also injects into the conversation issues related to

the church's mission. There is no possibility of an abstract doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal theology because the person of the Spirit is understood in terms of the Spirit's gifts and empowerment for witness. Hence, Pentecostalism's contribution to the ecumenical conversation involves also a spirituality and theology of mission that express the essential unity of Christian belief and practice. In turn, Pentecostal theology will itself be enriched by treasures from the church catholic on the entirety of the biblical canon, the vitality of various Christian spiritual traditions, and the history of the church's mission theology and practices. We can look forward to at least this much in the Pentecostal-ecumenical dialogues of the 21st century.