

Touring Pentecostalism

by [Catherine A. Brekus](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

Heaven Below: Earthly Pentecostals and American Culture. By Grant Wacker. Harvard University Press, 364 pp., \$35.00.

The stories that Glenn Cook, a middle-aged newspaper reporter in Los Angeles, began hearing in the spring of 1906 seemed too strange to be true. According to rumor, hundreds of people had begun crowding into a chapel on Azusa Street--a makeshift building that looked more like a barn than a house of worship--to witness a second Pentecost, a blazing demonstration of Holy Ghost power. Converts not only fell to the floor in ecstasy and shouted out their praises to God, but most startling of all, spoke in tongues. "The night is made hideous . . . by the howlings of the worshipers," wrote one shocked observer.

Cook attended several meetings until he, too, began to feel as if the Spirit was shooting through him like "electric needles." "Shaken violently by a great power," he finally lost control over his body. "I began to stutter and then out came a distinct language which I could hardly restrain," he testified. "I talked and laughed with joy far into the night." Overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, he felt as if he had been utterly transformed, as if his life now belonged to God.

Grant Wacker, an American religious historian at Duke University, tells Cook's story, along with many others, in this wonderful book that focuses on the years between 1900 and 1925. Wacker tries to step back into "early Pentecostals' kitchens and parlors" to eavesdrop on their conversations about their faith. "How did believers interpret their religious experiences?" he asks. "Structure their worship? Choose their leaders? Regulate their leisure? Perceive other Christians? Function in the workplace? Relate to the nation?" In short, how did people like Cook see their world?

Drawing on rich sources, including memoirs and letters, Wacker takes us on a fascinating tour of Pentecostal attitudes toward prayer, healing, speaking in tongues, women, the Bible, race, the nation and World War I. He asks how Pentecostalism--a faith that initially seemed to be in danger of "consuming itself in a fury of charismatic fire"--managed not only to survive, but to grow into a global

religious phenomenon. Today, almost 525 million people around the world identify themselves as Pentecostals or charismatics.

Rejecting interpretations that attribute Pentecostalism's success to its otherworldiness, Wacker argues that the genius of the early movement was its mixture of primitivism and pragmatism. On the one hand, Pentecostals longed for absolute religious purity, but on the other, they were also willing to work "within the social and cultural expectations of their age." Hence they railed against covetousness, insisting that they depended on God alone for their needs, but still embraced a capitalist ethic of prosperity. They denounced the state, but gladly embraced the powers of law enforcement. They protested against the bloodshed of World War I, but eventually renounced their pacifism in favor of patriotism. And they extended rare freedom to both women and African-Americans to lead worship, but finally accommodated themselves to more restrictive sexual and racial mores. Like all successful Christian groups in history, they "found ways to weave heavenly aspirations with everyday realities."

Pentecostals have usually appeared in history books as poor, barely literate people who turned to Holy Ghost religion in order to escape the hardships of their lives. Until now, the most influential study of the early movement has been Robert Mapes Anderson's 1979 book, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (Oxford University Press), which paints a bleak picture of Pentecostals as "economically, socially, culturally, and even physically displaced and deprived."

In contrast, Wacker makes the persuasive case that Pentecostals were virtually indistinguishable from other Americans: they tended to be working-class laborers, shopkeepers and farmers who prized personal autonomy. What men and women found in Pentecostalism was not "compensation," but the opportunity to explore "new possibilities." Besides yearning for "the life beyond in all its fullness," they also savored "life at hand in all its richness." What they enjoyed, in Wacker's evocative words, was nothing less than "heaven below."

Although Wacker's aim sounds modest--he hopes "simply to register the sounds of the Pentecostal past as fully as possible in a single volume"--he has succeeded in crafting an exceptionally rich and empathetic portrait of American popular piety. Raised as a Pentecostal (though now a Methodist), Wacker describes himself as a "pilgrim with one leg still stuck in the tent," and he seems to have an intuitive grasp

of the Pentecostal worldview. (In a typically witty passage he confesses, "I embrace many of their values. I understand their jokes and, what is worse, I usually think they are funny.") A master storyteller, he delights in telling us about zealous converts who felt as if the Holy Spirit had "literally filled their physical bodies."

Yet despite his obvious affection for the characters in his book, Wacker has such a deep sense of their humanity--and their moral complexity--that he never tries to whitewash their failings. With gentle humor, he points out that the early "saints" often mixed devotion with a crass streak of self-righteousness. For example, despite their claim to love all Christians, "a shark lurked just beneath the surface. Pentecostals' ecumenism was the ecumenism of the carnivore. Everyone was welcome as long as they were willing to be devoured."

Wacker suggests that the Pentecostal movement has been "deeply American." While Pentecostals may seem exotic to mainstream Protestants, they reveal both the "primitive certitude" and "pragmatic effectiveness" that has characterized so much of American religious history. Wacker's sensitive, insightful and beautifully written book is destined to become a classic, the definitive history of one of the most important religious movements in modern America.