

From the periphery to the centre:  
The radical transformation of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in the 20th century

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*Abstract*

This article examines the radical transformation of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement in the 20th century and how it has moved from the periphery of the Christian faith to the centre. It is argued in the article that although Pentecostal-charismatic movements were frowned upon in the past, there was a change of heart towards this form of Christianity in the 20th century. From its humble beginnings in the United States of America in the 1900s, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity is now a global movement with followers both outside of the mainline churches and within the mission churches such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other churches throughout the world. Pentecostal-charismatic movements are here to stay and have become a fourth force in Christendom, thereby becoming a religious power to be reckoned with.

**Introduction**

This article examines the history of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in the 20th century, with special emphasis on the manner in which it has progressed from being rejected to being accepted as the fourth force in Christendom. The article traces the history of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity back to the Patristic period, more particularly to Montanism as a charismatic movement. It is argued that although in the Patristic and subsequent periods of church history the Pentecostal-charismatic movement was rejected outright as being heretical, today it is fully accepted as a genuine form of Christian expression. More important still, it has moved from the periphery to the centre of Christian life. This is deduced from the fact that it has permeated the whole range of Christian traditions, making it both the fastest growing type of Christian faith and practice in the world as well as the most appealing to young people today. The information that forms the bulk of this article was collected by means of library research, personal observation and fieldwork.

**The emergence of the Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in world history**

Traditionally the roots of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity are traced to the Pentecostal evangelical movement that grew out of the 18th-century Anglo-American revival movement known as the Great Awakening.<sup>ii</sup> In this article it is contended that the roots of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity lie deep in the Patristic period with the emergence of Montanism, a charismatic movement that developed in the second century of the Christian era. Williston Walker has indicated that Montanism was distinctively Christian in origin.<sup>iii</sup> Its history is traced back to AD 156, when Montanus proclaimed himself the passive instrument through whom the Holy Spirit spoke. In this new revelation, Montanus claimed that the promise of Christ, as declared in John 14:15–17; John 15:26; and John 16:7–8, was fulfilled and that the dispensation of the Holy Spirit had begun. He preached that he was a medium of the Holy Spirit, and taught that the second coming of Christ was imminent. In addition, he advocated the need for Christians to live lives of strict austerity, marked by strict continence and fasting.<sup>iv</sup> In this venture he was assisted by two women, Priscilla and Maximila. J Stevenson has documented that Priscilla claimed that Christ came to her in the likeness of a woman, clad in a bright robe, bestowed wisdom upon her, and revealed that Pepuza was a holy city and that there Jerusalem came down from heaven.<sup>v</sup>

Montanus, Priscilla and Maximila delivered their inspired utterances in the first person as direct statements from the Holy Spirit. The Montanist prophets urged everyone to acknowledge their utterances as the true work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>vi</sup> In preparation for the fast approaching end of the world, they encouraged their followers to practise the most strenuous asceticism, celibacy, fasting and abstinence from meat.<sup>vii</sup>

## Montanism considered a threat to mainstream Christianity

It is important to note that this charismatic millennial movement soon won a large following in Asia Minor. Its beliefs were strengthened by the fact that the region had recently been struck by earthquakes and famines, which were considered to be signs marking the second coming of Christ in the last days. Amongst its sympathisers was the eminent theologian Tertullian. However, despite the conversion of entire communities in Asia Minor to what was considered a sect, and despite Tertullian's advocacy in the west, mainstream Christianity rejected the movement as heretical and did not accord it any recognition. Instead, mainstream Christianity taught that the age of miracles and divine revelation had ended with the death of the twelve Apostles.<sup>viii</sup> Charismata in the Church in fact began to be perceived as a threat to the establishment. It was commonly believed that Montanism, as a charismatic movement, was anti-canonical, anti-establishment and anti-structure, and in consequence the leaders of the Church viewed the movement as a threat to their authority.<sup>ix</sup> This belief was strengthened by the fact that Priscilla and Maximila claimed to be possessed by the Holy Spirit and that he spoke directly through them. As a result, they were magnified above the Apostles, and some Montanists went to the extent of claiming that they possessed something more than Christ himself.<sup>x</sup> One of the early fathers of the Church, who opposed this movement strongly, was Irenaeus. He argued that it is the normal ministry of Word and Sacrament, and not charismata, the emotional ecstasies which reject rationality and tradition, that is, in principle, the point at which humanity encounters the spirit of God.<sup>xi</sup> It appears that although Montanism appealed to many people, it failed to capture the imagination of the majority of the Christians because of the strong opposition prevalent in the Church; most Christians remained faithful to historic Christianity.<sup>xii</sup>

It should be noted that, in order to remove the threat posed by Montanism as a charismatic movement within the Church, a synod was held in AD 160 during which Montanus and his followers were condemned as heretics. Montanus himself was eventually excommunicated.<sup>xiii</sup> Having been discredited by the ecclesiastical establishment, Montanism gradually moved out of the dominant church. Its influence, however, continued to be felt in one way or another for a very long time. Interestingly, although Montanism was sidelined by mainstream Christianity, its ascetic demands gave rise to a new spirituality among Christians that eventually, in a much stricter form, permeated monasticism.<sup>xiv</sup> In this way, what had been previously perceived as a heresy found its way into mainstream Christianity.

## The Pentecostal-charismatic movement on the periphery of Christianity

It has been noted above that in the early Church the charismatic movement was not accepted in mainstream Christianity on the grounds that it was heretical. Daniel L Migliore has pointed out that throughout Church history the "doctrine of the Holy Spirit" has rarely received the attention given to other doctrines of the Christian faith such as Christology and Ecclesiology. By and large, the Church has tended to neglect the important position and role of the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by the many instances in which the Church has officially opposed charismatic movements that have stressed the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This was the case not only with Montanism in the early Church but also with the Waldensians in the 12th century and the Radical Reformers in the 16th century, whose beliefs were not accepted as genuine forms of Christian expression.<sup>xv</sup> Migliore has noted that routine neglect and suspicion of the work of the Holy Spirit has had damaging effects on both Christian life and Christian theology. In his view, such neglect can lead to distortions of the understanding of God, the doctrine of Scripture, the significance of the natural order, the value of human culture, the interpretation of Christ and his work, the nature of the Church, the freedom of the Christian and the hope for the final fulfilment of life.<sup>xvi</sup> Migliore has observed further that when the work of the Holy Spirit is forgotten or suppressed, the power of God is apt to be understood as distinct, hierarchical and coercive. Moreover, the Church is seen as a rigid power structure in which some members rule over others and the sacraments degenerate into almost magical rites under the control of the clerical elite.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **Renewed interest in charismata in the 20th century**

Alistair E McGrath has pointed out that one of the most significant developments of Christianity in the 20th century has been the rise of charismatic and Pentecostal groupings, which affirms that modern

Christianity can rediscover and re-appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit as described in the New Testament, particularly in the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>xviii</sup> In the 20th century, the Pentecostal-charismatic movement is traced back to Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929). Sometime in 1901 he set out the basic ideas of what became the crux of Pentecostalism. They included the notion of speaking in tongues and baptism of the Holy Spirit after the conversion of the believer. These ideas were later developed by Joseph William Seymour (1870–1922), an African American pastor, who presided over a major charismatic revival at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, which lasted from 1906 to 1909. This marked the beginning of most major Pentecostal groupings in North America, such as the Assemblies of God.<sup>xix</sup> The charismatic movement gathered momentum in the 1960s. Attention is drawn to the activities of Van Nuys in California in 1959: a local Episcopal Rector told his congregation that he had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had spoken in tongues. What is significant this time, as compared with the Patristic period, is that this event triggered widespread attention to charismatic renewal within mainline churches in Europe, North America, South Africa and Latin America.<sup>xx</sup>

At the end of the 1980s David Barrett estimated the membership of charismatic movements at over 300 million people in over 230 countries. The same survey estimated that the movement is growing annually at a rate of 19 million members. Many have stayed within the historic denominations, but a large majority have founded their own denominations.<sup>xxi</sup> In recent years it has been estimated that there are 523 million adherents throughout the world and that 9 million people are converted to the Pentecostal-charismatic tradition each year.<sup>xxii</sup> It has been noted that although the above statistics may be questionable by even the most conservative estimates, it is reckoned that there are at least 250 million adherents globally and that the Pentecostal-charismatic movement has experienced its most explosive growth in the southern hemisphere, making it the most dynamic and fastest growing sector of Christianity in the world today; it is likely to surpass other forms of Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a global religious movement, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity has succeeded in reaching many cultures of the world. It has reached many people across the class divide in both urban and rural areas, and among both the middle classes and the poor, thereby becoming a religious power to be reckoned with.<sup>xxiii</sup> It is now considered to be the “fourth force” alongside Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy, and the fastest growing religion in the world.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Joel Robbins has identified a number of factors that have accounted for the rapid growth and expansion of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in the twentieth century. In the first instance, it has been observed that deprivation is one of the factors that have contributed to the spread of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity throughout the world. This observation is based on the fact that the majority of Azusa Street converts, and the majority of converts in places such as Latin America, Africa and elsewhere, have been rural migrants to cities, people at the lower end of the social class scale, or the rural stay-at-home displaced from the centre of their own worlds by social change. To such people, Pentecostal-charismatic churches provide a social foundation and a sense of direction through the formation of tight communities around a high-intensity, time-consuming ritual life and a collectively policed ascetic moral code. Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity offers those who are deprived ecstatic escape, hope of millennial redress, an egalitarian environment in which everyone is eligible for salvation, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>xxv</sup>

It is also argued that Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity has spread on the wings of evangelism. This is inferred from the fact that this form of Christianity encourages all members to act as evangelists working hard to convert others and bring them into the fold. It has been observed, for instance, that from the beginning of the movement at Azusa Street the emphasis has been on outreach programmes in order to carry the message throughout the world. The emphasis on evangelisation is founded on the theological tenet that everyone who has been inspired by the Holy Spirit can evangelise, regardless of educational qualifications. This belief encourages all converts to see themselves as evangelists. In carrying out this mission, the Holy Spirit is expected to sustain evangelists and all other people as they go out in faith as missionaries and evangelists.<sup>xxvi</sup>

It has furthermore been observed that egalitarianism in Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity supports evangelical efforts, as it assists evangelists in attracting a following. The teaching that all are equal when used by the Holy Spirit has the effect of liberating both men and women to speak at services, and thus to reach a large number of people. It is argued, for example, that the egalitarian stance of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in its outreach programmes as it reaches the poor and the marginalised has encouraged them to see their most important identity not as one based on class, race, gender or ethnicity, but as children of God. In this context, egalitarianism is viewed as an evangelistic tool that enables Pentecostal-charismatic Christians to make a strong appeal to potential converts and makes the field of potential converts truly universal.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Moreover, Pentecostal-charismatic Christians are bound together by a network of relationships through publications, media productions, conferences, revival meetings and constant travel. It has also

been observed that since the global organisation of the Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity is decentralised, segmentary and reticulate, there is no central authority that questions local evangelical efforts and stifles the work of the Holy Spirit. In both the history of the Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity and its missionary work today local efforts are said to contribute tremendously to the advancement of evangelism throughout the world.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Furthermore, the successes of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity are attributed to the appeal of its ritual life. Those who have advanced this view hold that one of the greatest appeals of the new Pentecostal groups is their manner of worship. The spontaneity of the services, and the experiential and exuberant manner in which they are held appeal to many people. Their services are full of great expectations of the extraordinary, as people wait to see what the Spirit will do. Pentecostal worship is characterised by a spirit of acquisitiveness which, in turn, compels people to attend services, revivals and other ritualised gatherings as they look relentlessly to the next experience.<sup>xxix</sup>

It is argued that the black roots of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity are largely responsible for the spread of the movement world-wide. According to this argument, African religious elements, as mediated through African American culture, have been part of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement from the start. The black roots of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity such as orality of ritual, narrative of theology and witness, emphasis on participation, use of dreams and visions in worship, and the model of body/mind correspondence that promotes healing and prayer are all said to have contributed tremendously to the development and spread of the movement.<sup>xxx</sup>

### **The distinctive nature of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement**

The Pentecostal-charismatic movement today is distinguished by a number of distinctive characteristics that make it quite different from other types of Christianity. In the first instance, it is characterised chiefly by its pattern of enthusiastic worship, relatively unscripted and egalitarian in offering the floor to all those whom the Spirit calls. It also places a great deal of emphasis on “speaking in tongues”, “being born again” and “baptism by the Holy Spirit”. In addition to this, there is emphasis on the daily practice of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and strict adherence to moralism. On matters of theology, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity stresses that Jesus offers salvation, Jesus heals, Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus is coming again.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Migliore has pointed out that the new interest in the Holy Spirit is perceived as indicative of a number of things taking place in the Church. In the first instance, it is perceived as a protest against depersonalisation and bureaucratisation in both modern society and church. It is said to be a protest against the domination of form over vitality, structure over purpose, and external authority over free consent. Second, it is viewed as evidence of a widespread hunger for a deeper faith, for a new relationship with God, for the experience of genuine love and lasting friendship and for the spiritual resources to deal with the personal and corporate crisis of our time. Third, it is considered to be evidence of the need for personal appropriation of the reality of salvation in Christ and actual participation in its transforming power. Fourth, it has also been suggested that the interest in the Holy Spirit has grown in response to the emptiness and burnout experienced by many in modern times and the realisation that perseverance in struggles for justice, peace and freedom cannot be sustained without the Holy Spirit. Fifth, interest in the Holy Spirit is also a result of the ecumenical movement, the growing influence of the Orthodox Churches, the emergence of the Christian-based communities in Latin America, with an emphasis on reading the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in an atmosphere of discovery and celebration. Finally, it has also been observed that the current surge in embracing the Holy Spirit may be a result of a better appreciation of the work of the Holy Spirit in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>xxxii</sup>

It is important to note that some of the chief characteristics of the Charismatic Renewal in modern times, like those of the Patristic period, have been largely anti-structural and anti-ecclesiastical. For example, in place of the liturgy there is ecstasy; in place of institutionalised authority there is inspirational utterance; in place of collective acts there is opportunity for individual and even atomistic behaviour. Since the Holy Spirit is likely to speak through any individual, the need for a clergy becomes less evident.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Pentecostal-charismatic movements place great emphasis on spontaneity, immediacy, personal freedom of expression and the elevation of experience over intellect, and they break out of the boundaries or borders of conventional activity. The charismatic movement is highly individuated and implicitly privatised in comparison with the old order, which is looked upon as an empty, ritualistic and institutionalised form of Christianity.<sup>xxxiv</sup> For example, my own research findings in Botswana show that charismatic movements in the country are very dynamic. They are all full of energy and enthusiastic in their missionary zeal. As a result, they are expanding everywhere, every day,

especially among the youth. This stands in sharp contrast with the older churches, which are either stagnant or expanding only slowly.<sup>xxxv</sup> As John McManners has noted, the natural home of charismatic manifestations is informal and unstructured contexts – the prayer meeting rather than the cathedral. This de-institutionalised image of the church is associated with the demand for the removal of constraints on spirituality.<sup>35</sup>

By and large, the charismatic movement represents a break with the past, which is perceived by many to be inadequate, archaic and otiose. Demands are made for opportunities for greater participation and elimination of symbols of authority and status. The house church movement is also emphasised.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Charismatics believe and insist that modern Christians can be infused with the power of the Holy Spirit in ways similar to those experienced by the disciples in the New Testament.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Andrew Walker, writing about the position of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in the 20th century, writes:

On the whole Pentecostalism has remained within the bounds of historic orthodoxy in the same sense that we can say Montanism – despite its wildness and messianic pretension – remained Christian in the early Christian centuries ... Charismatic Christianity began as a minority religion of the disinherited, but it has now arguably come into its inheritance and become one of the largest and most potent forces in world Christianity.<sup>xxxix</sup>

David Barrett, concurring with Walker, has observed that in many parts of the world, new Christian movements are beginning and growing rapidly, the largest being the global neo-Pentecostal and charismatic movements within the major older denominations. Many movements exist within the structures of older denominations, value their close relations with them and oppose anything that may artificially crystallise their identity and appear to divide Charismatics from their non-charismatic fellow Christians.<sup>xl</sup>

#### **From rejection to acceptance**

It has already been noted that, for centuries, the Christian churches taught that the gifts of the Holy Spirit referred to in 1 Corinthians had been gifts limited in their operation to the Apostolic age, and subsequent manifestations of what were claimed to be those gifts (most conspicuously glossolalia) were condemned. Glossolalia has not been an uncommon occurrence in Christian history, but was always an extreme and a castigated phenomenon until the early 1900s, when the modern Pentecostal groups emerged. As in the past, those claiming to exercise the gifts of the spirit were generally excluded from the mainstream churches. As a result, a variety of Pentecostal bodies sprang up throughout the Christian world, beginning in America but spreading rapidly to Scandinavia, Russia, the Protestant countries of northern Europe and eventually to India, Africa and Latin America. Up until 1958 the spiritual gifts claimed by such bodies were rejected by the major Christian denominations.<sup>xli</sup>

Robbins has indicated that the most dramatic event in the history of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement occurred around 1960, when the mainline Protestant churches opened up to the gifts of the Spirit. Prior to this, members of the non-Pentecostal churches who experienced Spirit baptism, spoke in tongues or received other gifts of the Spirit were compelled to leave their churches and join Pentecostal ones. With the spread of the neo-Pentecostal or charismatic movement world-wide, those who received gifts of the Spirit retained their membership of mainline churches and eventually formed charismatic groups within them. It is estimated that by 1970, 10% of the clergy and 1 million lay members of mainline Protestant churches had received the baptism of the Spirit.<sup>xlii</sup> Eventually, the movement known as Charismatic Renewal spread throughout the Christian world.

This phenomenon seems to have had particular appeal in Catholic churches, and in the 1960s rallies of American Catholics, including many priests and nuns, were organised to celebrate the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Robbins recounts that in 1967 the charismatic movement also entered Catholicism, and Catholics who received the gifts of the Holy Spirit began to remain in their churches, calling themselves Pentecostals or charismatics.<sup>xliii</sup> Church authorities appear to have been taken off guard by this sudden resurgence of ecstatic Christianity, but in place of the earlier condemnation of the theory and practice of this type of charismatic manifestation, they were initially silent and subsequently tolerant of the Charismatic Renewal movement. The movement eventually received the endorsement of some prominent clergymen, including the then Archbishop of Michelen in Belgium.<sup>xliiv</sup> What is even more important is the fact that charismatic renewal was endorsed by Pope Paul VI in 1973, and in 1975, at a charismatic mass in St Peter's Cathedral in Rome, he urged charismatics everywhere to share the joy of the Holy Spirit with everyone.<sup>xli v</sup>

Pentecostalism is now for the most part wholly accepted as orthodox in its beliefs as far as the major Christian doctrines are concerned.<sup>xli vi</sup> In the early 1950s, leading figures in the World Council of Churches began to recognise Pentecostalism as genuinely Christian – indeed as a third force within Christianity.<sup>xli vii</sup> James Dunn, writing about the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, has the following to say:

The acceptance of Pentecostalism by the leaders of the World Council of Churches marks the first time that more traditional Christianity has genuinely welcomed this enthusiastic brand of faith and worship as a valid and important expression of Christianity. Previously such forms of Christianity were either persecuted or only able to flourish outside the organized Church.<sup>xli viii</sup>

It is worth noting that in the early 1960s Pentecostal teaching and experiences began to penetrate significantly into the older Protestant denominations. Although the encroachment of Pentecostalism caused strains within many congregations, for the most part they remained within their original denominations, functioning mainly in prayer groups and conferences.<sup>xli ix</sup> More significant has been the development of Catholic Pentecostalism, which, within a few years, has become one of the most significant forces within Roman Catholicism.<sup>i</sup> By the early 1980s the charismatic movement had moved into its global phase, with ever-increasing influence in most world communions. By the mid-1980s over a hundred Anglican Bishops were active in renewal, and the movement penetrated deep into the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted that in modern times the charismatic movement has developed a distinct style of corporate worship particularly evident in songs, in lay participation, and in styles of prayer. Many of these features have not remained confined to those who would identify themselves as charismatics, but are also found in other major denominations. For example, in Botswana a number of mainline churches have introduced some characteristics of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement in their worship and church practice. This is the case in the Roman Catholic Church, which some 15 years ago introduced what has come to be known as the “Charismatic Renewal” within the church in which everyone is allowed to participate. In Botswana the Roman Catholic Church allows its members to express their spiritual gifts within the church as they feel fit. These include the gift of prophecy, speaking in tongues and healing. People have also developed a free style of worship by introducing Charismatic Renewal services every Monday, during which teaching, preaching and singing along Pentecostal lines take place. There is also a Charismatic Renewal group, which organises seminars intended to regenerate the life of the Christians. One such seminar is entitled “Life in the Spirit”.

It is claimed that those who participate in such seminars are “born again”. They speak in tongues, prophesy, heal and perform other miraculous deeds. After attending the “Life in the Spirit” seminar they are commissioned by the Bishop to go out and proclaim the gospel to the world. During the commissioning each person is given a bible and a lit candle, and a pinch of salt is placed on their tongue. As a result, the church has begun to experience an influx of people from other churches. Again, those who left the church because it was too rigid before are now returning to the fold. In this way, the church has provided a mechanism for retaining its members within the church, where they experience charismatic renewal as if they were in a Pentecostal church.<sup>iii</sup>

### **The theology of prosperity as exploitation of the masses**

In recent times the Pentecostal-charismatic movement has spread like wildfire on the wings of what has come to be known as the “theology of prosperity”. Robert Mbe Akoko has outlined the basic tenets of the gospel of prosperity in the new Pentecostal churches. According to the theology of prosperity, God

has mercifully provided for all the needs of humanity in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sickness and poverty. A believer has a right to the blessing of health and wealth won by Christ. He or she can obtain these blessings merely by emphatic confession of faith. The spiritual and material fortunes of a believer depend on faith and on how much the believer gives spiritually and materially to God or his representative in the world. Great emphasis is placed on the importance of financial prosperity and financial giving here and now. People are encouraged to pay “seed money” to the church as a means of generating wealth. As the slogan goes, “you prosper by planting a financial seed in faith, the return on which will meet all your financial needs.”<sup>liii</sup>

Lovemore Togarasei, who conducted an in-depth study of the new Pentecostal-charismatic churches in Zimbabwe, has also indicated that, using the analogy of sowing and reaping, the new churches teach that in the Kingdom of God money is the seed to be sown and that all who want to be prosperous must give money to God, that is, the church. Giving is taken as an investment, and the more one gives, the more one reaps at the end. According to Togarasei, during offerings people are graded on the basis of how much they are prepared to give. Those who give large sums of money come first, and those giving little come last.<sup>liv</sup> Togarasei has observed that the poor in the church see themselves as upwardly mobile. The theology of prosperity makes them feel that they are in the process of transformation to a higher status in life, and they are convinced that Jesus Christ will deliver them from poverty.<sup>lv</sup>

A similar study conducted by David Maxwell has indicated that Zimbabwe Pentecostal churches stress the view that God gave human beings dominion over the world, and human beings are now responsible for realising their dreams by creating wealth through gifts and tithing in the church. On the basis of Malachi 3:10, people are taught that the more they give the more they will receive from God, who will open the windows of heaven and shower upon them heavenly blessings in the form of money and other possessions. The “born again” are urged to reject their ancestral spirits on the understanding that they are responsible for the poverty of Zimbabweans.<sup>lvi</sup>

Also deserving mention here is Christ Embassy Church in Botswana, where it is taught that Christians have certain rights in Christ. These include divine health, prosperity and deliverance. Adherents are taught that God wills the born again to be in good health, as testified in Isaiah 53:4–5 and 1 Peter 2:24. Divine health is their inheritance. It is taught that diseases, sickness and death are brought about by sin. With regard to prosperity, Christ Embassy teaches that God wants people to have things in abundance. It is taught that Jesus became poor so that through his poverty people might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). It is also held that God wants people to have things in abundance so that they can be a blessing to others.<sup>lvii</sup> Tithing is emphasised because it opens the windows of heaven and sanctifies people’s income, thereby enabling them to accomplish more with their money. Reference is made to Malachi 3:8–11; Matthew. 25:21, 23–29; Deuteronomy 8:18; and Haggai 1:5–11. It is argued that failure to give tithes is like closing the windows of heaven; everything goes into reverse gear.<sup>lviii</sup> Christ Embassy propagates its teachings through crusades, nights of bliss, tapes, and videos, the sale of literature, door-to-door preaching, televising and other methods considered appropriate for the cause of the gospel.<sup>lix</sup> As a result of their theology of prosperity, Pentecostal-charismatic churches attract a large number of followers, many of whom come from the mainline churches.

Despite their successes in the world, to the point of becoming a fourth force, Pentecostal-charismatic churches have been heavily criticised for their theology of prosperity. This is particularly true in Africa, where these churches have enjoyed enormous success. It has been observed in many quarters that the theology of prosperity is anything but helpful to people, and in fact exploits human frailties such as disease, the fear of death, and suffering in general. A related criticism is that the gospel of prosperity exploits the poor, as it is claimed that in some instances the tithes of the poor support a pastor in maintaining a lavish lifestyle. (In this context, the example of the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa in Benin, Nigeria, is cited.) It is reported that in some of the new Pentecostal Churches in Ghana, members are sometimes urged to borrow money, if necessary, in order to give to the church. They are told that by doing so, they qualify for supernatural monetary blessing.<sup>lx</sup> This, I contend, is an abuse of the system of giving and tithing in the Church and a form of exploitation of human beings by other human beings.

I concur with Werner Kahl, who, in writing about the situation in Ghana, has argued that the theology of prosperity is unbiblical because it refers to an understanding of Christianity that identifies success in business resulting in material wealth as a major objective for Christian existence.<sup>lxi</sup> According to Kahl, “the idolisation of individual business success as divine blessing undermines Gospel values and to a certain extent African traditional values such as justice and equality, service in community, compassion, sharing and caring.”<sup>lxii</sup>

Critics of the theology of prosperity argue that while proponents of the prosperity gospel claim that the ultimate purpose of this theology is the funding of evangelism and Christian charity throughout the world, it is actually a teaching of materialism masquerading as theology. Furthermore, it seems to promote self-gratification rather than true spirituality. It is argued that the primary objective of the gospel of prosperity is the accumulation of wealth and material goods, and not “gospel work” per se.<sup>lxiii</sup>

It has been stated that the prosperity gospel is at best a doctrinal error, and at worst a con. It is argued that promising financial miracles to people distracts them from the core principle of Christianity, which is to have faith in God without preconditions. In addition to this, it exploits poor people who give their last savings in anticipation of a windfall that they never receive. It is also observed that preachers of the prosperity gospel live fabulously wealthy lives while riding on the backs of the poorest and most desperate people in society.<sup>lxiv</sup> Although some of these criticisms may sound rather harsh, I consider many of them to contain an element of truth. The gospel of prosperity does, to a large extent, distort the truth of the Christian gospel, since it makes people believe that the essence of Christianity is individual success in the form of material wealth and good health; in the process, they lose sight of the true gospel, which is to worship God in spirit and truth without pre-conditions.

### Concluding remarks

This article has examined the history of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in the 20th century. It has been argued that in the early Church charismatic movements were frowned upon and charismatics were forced out of mainstream Christianity, as evidenced in the emergence of Montanism as a charismatic movement. It was noted that one of the most interesting developments in Christendom in the 20th century has been the emergence of Pentecostal-charismatic movements. Starting from America in the early 1900s, they gathered momentum in the early 1960s and eventually spread rapidly to many parts of the world. Although initially rejected, they gradually found their way into mainstream Christianity and were recognised as a genuine form of Christian expression. Today Pentecostal-charismatic movements exist within many traditional forms of Christianity such as Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Orthodoxy and others. Rejection has ultimately been transformed into an acceptance of charismatic belief, doctrine and practices as part a truly Christian process. The article concluded with a discussion of the nature and effect of the theology of prosperity in the world generally and Africa in particular. It was noted that some aspects of this theology constitute an abuse of the system of giving and tithing by enticing people to give what they do not have, thereby plunging them into poverty and distorting their understanding of the essence of Christianity.

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## Endnotes

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