Encounter: Journal for Pentecostal Ministry, **Fall 2016, Vol. 13**

African American Pentecostalism in the 20th Century: A View

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Pentecostalism is the "fastest growing segment of the black religious family."[1] Underlying this essay is the claim that the African American form of Pentecostalism came as a direct result of the early beginnings of the Holiness movement characterized by its belief in sanctification, speaking in tongues, and operating with the gifts of the Spirit. This movement has as its origin the encounter with the Day of Pentecost found in Acts 2, and is a reflection of the Azusa Street Revival of 1906. The Pentecostal reliance on the literal meaning of Scripture is grounded in the Bible's complete trustworthiness and interpretation.

Pentecostalism specifically has been a driving influential force and presence within the African American community with its distinct and characteristic praise and worship style of service that includes shouting and dancing. This worship style has its roots in African spirituality, and has been influential in mainline denominations (e.g., Roman Catholics and Lutherans) duplicating this form of worship style, which is outside their usual liturgical form of worship.

In order to adequately compose this essay, the term Pentecost (and its identifying denominational term for this paper, Pentecostalism) is of Greek origin and the translation "fifty, refers to the Old Testament Feast of Weeks, a spring harvest festival occurring on the fiftieth day (seven weeks) after Passover."[2] For explanation purposes only, one view of Passover is presented in the Book of Exodus "as a rite with the main function of enabling Yahweh to recognize the homes of Israelites and pass over them in his deadly mission."[3] It also was one of the ten plagues God sent against Pharaoh for the release of God's people from bondage.

Pentecostalism has its roots in the Holiness Movement with its belief in sanctification, speaking in tongues, and being filled with the Holy Spirit. For African Americans, their association with Pentecostalism can be traced to the days of slavery when they were not allowed to worship openly:

> Many of the traditions inherited from the "brush arbor" religious meetings held during slavery, . . . included chanted preaching, overt emotionalism, and drum beating, remained a part of black church life.[4]

In the early days of the Holiness Movement (18th-19th centuries) in the United States, its theology included a British flavor that, ultimately, led to a torrential rain of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in America.[5] It continued out of a series of movements that centered on the theory of additional blessings one received as a result of salvation, which John Wesley described as "entire sanctification."[6] This was followed by another movement described by Edward Irving as "the possibility of a restoration of the gifts of the Spirit,"[7] and, subsequently,

concluding with the Keswick Higher Life movement that began defining or interpreting this indwelling spirit as being "that of an enduement of spiritual power for service."[8] Based on these explanations, it is not difficult to understand the significance placed on Acts 1:8 and Acts 2, both dealing with the indwelling or baptism in the Holy Spirit for empowerment to Christian service and ministry. Although John Wesley is probably the earliest recognized Pentecostalist, his "friend John Fletcher was the first to call this experience 'the baptism in the Holy Spirit,' patterned after the experience described in Acts 2."[9] This became the catalyst for the initial outbreak of Pentecostalism throughout the United States, especially among African American Pentecostals. After several different activities resulting from the Holiness Movement, from which many different Pentecostal churches took their cue, the first actual Pentecostal churches were born in America sometime around 1901.

Although Bishop C. H. Mason may be the most notable African American pioneer in the spread and development of African American Pentecostalism, it did not get its start with him. Bishop Mason actually fed off what others and he himself experienced as a result of their attendance at the Azusa Street Revivals in Los Angeles, California, in 1906. Mason is more noted for his role in starting the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in Memphis, Tennessee, where he took his experiences from Azusa and used them to ignite the spread of Pentecostalism. The most significant and, perhaps, the lesser known leader in Pentecostalism was William Joseph Seymour who was most instrumental in this new revival and tying baptism in the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues in 1906.[10] Another significant note about C. H. Mason is the fact that he and those of his congregation of African Americans in Memphis were "only one generation removed from slavery"[11] at the time of Azusa.

Since the Azusa revivals, Pentecostalism has become the leading religious affiliation for African Americans, and is identified by its reliance on the "Upper Room experience" in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost. On that day, all who were present received this baptism in the Holy Spirit, and all "began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability" (Acts 2:4, NLT). This speaking in tongues came to be recognized as the initial evidence of the baptism because, for them, it was the "nonrepeatable post conversion experience that confirms the baptism in the Spirit."[12] But this initial evidence does not end here; once a person receives spirit baptism, "further evidential fruit must also follow."[13] Tongues neither made one whole and complete following salvation nor did it sanctify or immediately release the gifts of the Spirit found in 1 Corinthians 12. One must still carry out the Great Commission commanded by God in Matthew 28, as well as bear fruit through leading other souls to Christ.

One definition of sanctification implies that it is a setting apart for Christian service, and is also known as entire sanctification. This entire sanctification adheres to the belief that "this separation is intrinsic to one's initial experience in coming to know Christ as Savior. To be redemptively known by Jesus the Savior is to be set apart from the world by saving faith."[14] For African American Pentecostals, once salvation is received, sin becomes a thing of the past and the life lived must be in accordance with Scripture since Pentecostalism leans towards the literal meaning of Scripture. Sanctification, or living in Christian perfection, is also viewed as "a continuing process in the Christian's life before and after baptism in the Spirit."[15] It does not end with church membership, but is an ongoing

process toward becoming Christ-like. Although in the nineteenth century sanctification was a necessary process prior to being filled with the Spirit, it became a sticking point, both spiritually and theologically, among different denominations, primarily from the Reformed tradition, and from the Pentecostal and the Holiness movements. Sanctification also was and is viewed as a process where one is purified spiritually for service to God; every character trait or behavior pattern is transformed into a state that is pleasing to God and one becomes "fit" for Christian service. One becomes more worthy for the task.

The link between African American Pentecostal worship and the African religious tradition is a result of the restrictions placed on African slave life so "Africans leveraged the religious ritual structures available to them as a means of retaining their culture and religious rituals."[16] Although Africans who came to America did not necessarily adapt to Christianity in place of their own religious heritage, they simply added their own open way of worship and changed their style to remain within the confines of what they were allowed to do in maintaining their traditions, beings they were still slaves and without freedom. In response to their condition in America, "the phenomenon of spirit possession, one of the most significant features in African religion was reinterpreted in Christian terms to become a central feature of expressive behavior in African-American Christianity and a necessary part of the conversion experience."[17] Additionally, the spoken word or preaching by African American preachers is a direct result of the old African oral tradition, where "Africans lived in societies developed around a worldview that was predicated on highly sophisticated religious systems and impressive oral communication style."[18] This system of oral communication is what the slaves maintained of their heritage and tradition even while in slavery. This was subsequently carried over into their religious services on the plantations of the South.

The African American Pentecostal worship experience takes its roots in the "plantation prayer grounds of African slaves and the camp meetings of the American South,"[19] being brought to this country by African natives forced into slavery, and then spread throughout America. This experience includes lively singing, clapping, shouting, dancing, and prayer, all done according to the movement of the Spirit of God within the worship service. The worshippers engage on a corporate level with a "dominant emphasis on the Holy Spirit that is characteristic for both Black and Pentecostal communities."[20] Wolfgang Vondey uses the term Black liturgy to describe this experience: "[Black liturgy] comprises both a form of spirituality and a form of worship concentrated in the encounter with God."[21] Unlike the Catholic liturgy, Black liturgy is conducted in the spirit of liberty and freeness in worship rather than being structured: "For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17, NLT). There is an openness and deep desire in these services to have a personal encounter with God, whereby one is able to feel His very presence, and is moved to respond through various means, including intense personal worship, tears of joy, and feelings of love towards God. What makes African American Pentecostalism so unique in its worship style has been the inclusion of various music styles that are outside the norm. For example, the move from traditional hymns (Amazing Grace, Blessed Assurance, etc.) to contemporary music. Consequently, "black Pentecostals created a new sound within gospel music that later

would be called contemporary gospel, in contrast to traditional gospel music,"[22] from greats such as James Cleveland. This new dynamic musical form also borrowed from old school rhythm, blues, and soul music artists and translated the melodies into this contemporary sound that added to the high praise and lively worship experience now seen in African American churches (also in traditional Baptist, African Methodist and most Protestant churches). This influence has even filtered over into the Catholic Church.

Due to the strength of character and steadfastness in holding onto oral traditions in their African religious life, this has significantly impacted African American Pentecostalism with its lively worship services and music, including call and response communication (an exchange between preachers and the congregation during the sermon in predominantly African American churches that is reminiscent of the African oral tradition) and participatory worship style. For these reasons and other significant contributing factors, "the musical expressions of African Americans and the Black church have been the most significant forces in maintaining and nurturing the surviving African/African American language and cultural traditions,"[23] including the impact on African American Pentecostalism in the twentieth-century and beyond. So there is a reciprocal relationship—as Pentecostalism has impacted the African American community, African American spirituality has influenced Pentecostalism.

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[1] Richard E. Wentz, *American Religious Traditions: The Shaping of Religion in the United States* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 327.

[2] David W. Kling, *The History of the Bible: How the Texts Have Shaped the Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2004), 234.

[3] Tamara Prosic, "Passover in Biblical Narratives," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 82 (March 1999): 45-55 (49), (accessed November 14, 2014).http://0-eds.b.ebscohost.com.library.regent.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=9&sid=62583833-d8aa-4524-adc3-7b03112ffc9d%40sessionmgr198&hid=103

[4] Calvin White, Jr., "In the Beginning, There Stood Two: Arkansas Roots of the Black Holiness Movement," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (March 2009): 1-22 (2-3), (accessed November 14, 2014). http://0-eds.b.ebscohost.com.library.regent.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=16&sid=62583833-d8aa-4524-adc3-7b03112ffc9d%40sessionmgr198&hid=117

[5] Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 2.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 3.

[9] James T. Flynn and Wie L. Tjiong, "Fanning the Flames: How the Renewal Movement has Shaped American Theological Education," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 28, no. 1 (March 2006): 89-103 (97), (accessed November 16, 2014), http://0-eds.b.ebscohost.com.library.regent.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=25&sid=62583833-d8aa-4524-adc3-7b03112ffc9d%40sessionmgr198&hid=117.

[10] Synan, 4.

[11] Ibid., 5.

[12] Kling, 235.

[13] Renea Brathwhite, "Tongues and Ethics: William J. Seymour and the 'Bible Evidence': A Response to Cecil M. Robeck, Jr.," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 32, no. 2 (July 2010): 203-222 (210), (accessed November 20, 2014). http://0-eds.b.ebscohost.com.library.regent.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=30&sid=62583833-d8aa-4524-adc3-7b03112ffc9d%40sessionmgr198&hid=117.

[14] R. Hollis Gause, "Pentecostal Understanding of Sanctification from a Pentecostal Perspective," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18, no. 1 (May 2009): 95-110 (96), (accessed November 22, 2014).http://0-eds.b.ebscohost.com.library.regent.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=40&sid=62583833-d8aa-4524-adc3-7b03112ffc9d%40sessionmgr198& hid=117.

[15] William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids,MI: Zondervan, 2000), 18.

[16] Korie L. Edwards, "Race, Religion, and Worship: Are Contemporary African-American Worship Practices Distinct?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 1 (March 2009): 30-52 (32), (accessed December 3, 2014), http://0-eds.a.ebscohost.com.library.regent.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=b5efd62c-5138-4f82-84fc-9701965a02d5%40sessionmgr4003&hid=4105.

[17] Wolfgang Vondey, "The Making of a Black Liturgy: Pentecostal Worship and Spirituality from African Slave Narratives to American Cityscapes," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (July 2012): 147-169 (154), (accessed December 3, 2014), http://0-eds.a.ebscohost.com.library.regent.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=12&sid=497e0e22-eba9-4292-97cd-25f3205fc86e%40sessionmgr4004&hid=4102.

[18] Janice D. Hamlet, "Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture," *Black History Bulletin* 74, no. 1 (January 2011): 27-31 (27), (accessed December 4, 2014), http://0-eds.b.ebscohost.com.library.regent.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=48&sid=bde359ec-995d-4104-a98d-40970f2d0591%40sessionmgr198&hid=112.

[19] Vondey, 147.

[20] Ibid., 149-150.

[21] Ibid., 149.

[22] Synan, 289.

[23] Hamlet, 26.