

Conformed to the Image of Christ: Pentecostal Spirituality, Sacramental Practices and Daily Living¹

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Abstract:

Many Pentecostals have been hesitant to refer to Baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments and have preferred to call them ordinances. However, many elements of Pentecostal spirituality are in fact sacramental in nature and build the foundation for Christian formation. After a clarification of terminology, Pentecostals sacramentals are considered, illustrating a conveyance of divine grace. The focus is then given to the fivefold gospel and the altar call as pivotal elements of Pentecostal Christian formation in the life of the church and its calling to the world.

Keywords:

Pentecostal spirituality — ordinances — sacramental practices — fivefold gospel — altar call — Christian formation

Introduction

One of the fundamental agreements between Christians in the Roman Catholic Church and believers in the Pentecostal movement is that Jesus Christ is the gift of God's love to the world. We read Bible passages like John 3:16 about God's commitment in Christ. We think of Paul's description in his Letter to the Ephesians that expresses God's lavish blessings upon the people who have been chosen by the Father, destined in Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3-14). It is the Church, as the Body of Christ, that is called to be Christ-like in daily life. "Discipleship and Christian Formation are ... employed in both of our traditions. They are closely connected with faith, conversion and experience. Together they constitute the foundation of the Christian life...".²

What follows can be understood as an illustration of Pentecostal spirituality and its underpinnings; that aims at extending faith to everyday living.

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² Cecil M. Robeck Jr, "On becoming a Christian" An Important Theme in the International Roman Catholic – Pentecostal Dialogue in *PentecoStudies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2008: 1-28, 15.

To begin with, some clarification of terminology will be necessary, before Pentecostal sacramentality can be appreciated. Then, we will be looking at Pentecostal sacramentals and how they relate to Jesus Christ, who is the primordial sacrament. The context of these reflections will be the church, understood as the sacrament to the world.

Some clarifications: ordinances, sacramentality and embodied life

People familiar with the history of Pentecostalism will point to two major streams within that movement. On the one side there are those Pentecostals that have largely emerged from a Reformed background with Presbyterian leanings, and on the other side there are those that were deeply influenced by the Holiness movement who have largely adopted a Methodist spirituality. A typical example is evident when the one tradition calls the Lord's Supper an ordinance, whereas the other tradition has more freedom to consider Holy Communion as a sacrament.³ Pentecostals considering themselves to be part of a movement rather than a confessional church have been able to accept both interpretations.⁴ There is, however, another dimension that needs to be considered. For Pentecostals, being at worship means being receptive to the move of the Holy Spirit and open to an encounter with the living God. This disposition is fundamentally sacramental as an increasing number of Pentecostal theologians have noted.⁵

For the purpose of better understanding Pentecostal spirituality and its relevance to daily life we must pay attention to two aspects, the human movement and the divine initiative. From a human point of view, Pentecostals will relate any encounter with God as a validation and strengthening of their faith. Experience is an important hermeneutical element that often precedes theological reflection.⁶ In more traditional terms, we could say that for Pentecostals the context of worship is bringing forth a *theologia prima*. However, as the word "prima" indicates, experience is but one step in spiritual discernment and growth. Pentecostals are

³ The Assemblies of God for instance refer in their 16 Fundamental Truths to Baptism and Holy Communion as ordinances <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths#6>. The Church of God Cleveland TN, avoids critical terminology by simply referring to Baptism and the Lord's Supper in their declaration of faith, <https://churchofgod.org/beliefs/declaration-of-faith/>. The Foursquare Church mentions in their statement of faith the term ordinance twice and use the word sacrament and sacred twice each. <https://www.foursquare.org/about/beliefs/>. Similarly, the Elim Church in the United Kingdom refers in its foundational truths to ordinances https://www.elim.org.uk/Articles/417857/Our_beliefs.aspx, whereas the Apostolic Church UK, refers to Baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments <https://acuk.online/what-we-believe#:~:text=We%20believe%20in%20one%20true,in%20His%20image%20and%20likeness>. All references accessed on June 21, 2024.

⁴ I will therefore use the words like sacrament, ordinance, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, and Eucharist interchangeably.

⁵ Daniel E. Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). He pointed to the highly ritualized elements in Pentecostal worship. Frank D. Macchia, discusses sacramentality in the context of Baptism, the Eucharist and Spirit-baptism in *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 70-75, 247-256. Chris E.W. Green maintains a strong sacramental emphasis in his book *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Lord's Supper. Foretasting the Kingdom* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2012), starting with a bibliographic review on Pentecostal views on sacramentality (5-73) and then focuses on the sacramentality of early Pentecostalism (74-181).

⁶ Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology (A Theology of Encounter)*, London, T&T Clark, 2008), 193.

aware that there is need for a secondary level reflection, namely the communal interpretation of scriptures. Experience also points to the fact that we are embodied human beings who respond through their senses. For Pentecostals there is little abstraction between spirit and matter. On the contrary, their faith is at home in both domains, the intellect and the materiality of life. In fact, these domains cannot easily be separated. As we shall see, due to this embodiment of faith there is a plethora of sacramental elements⁷ in Pentecostal spirituality.

From the divine side, any encounter caused by the Holy Spirit is a gift of grace and as such it is not only a sign, - it is much more. That is why, as we shall see, speaking of “ordinances” and avoiding sacramental language can be interpreted as a theological reduction of what Pentecostals experience in their spiritual practices and daily lives.

Bringing the human and the divine side into conversation is a typically Pentecostal matter. In the Book of Acts we read that the believers were filled by the Holy Spirit during the feast of Pentecost. Going by the writer’s illustration, this event must have come close to sensory overkill. There was a sound, a violent wind was felt, fiery tongues visibly appeared, and then the Holy Spirit spoke through the 120 followers of Jesus. That was so to speak the overwhelmingly evident divine part. Then came the human response. The devout Jews were saying, “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11). This is indeed a Pentecostal paradigm. By praising God and speaking about God’s deeds the believers were in fact giving testimony to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. As a result, the perplexed bystanders responded by asking “what does this mean?” (v.12) and later “Brothers, what should we do?” (v. 37). I suggest that the disciples testifying to the great deeds of God’s power is also the paradigm that Pentecostals today use as they relate to moments of sacramental grace in their lives. Daniel Tomberlin, a Pentecostal of the Holiness tradition puts it like this, “Testimony is the way Pentecostals reflect upon their encounter with the Word and Spirit in worship. Testimony is the story of faith. Pentecostals do not view testimony as authoritative, but as informative and inspirational.⁸ Applied to our context I would say that testimonies, the stories of faith at the threshold between an experience of divine grace and daily life, will provide an important matrix for interpreting a Pentecostal understanding of sacramental situations, both in their material and spiritual dimensions. Together with Wolfgang Vondey and Chris Green, Daniel Tomberlin suggests that sacramentality is a necessary component for understanding Pentecostalism. A Pentecostal hermeneutic is suggested “in which present reality, inhabited by Christ and Spirit, exceeds ‘the boundaries of the describable’. This allows for a Pentecostal imagination that transcends rationalism in which the indescribable becomes visible, the unspeakable becomes audible, and the unexpected becomes reality. In this reality the sacrament is the place where heaven and earth touch.”⁹

⁷ For all practical purposes sacramental elements can be understood as signs that carry salvific meaning to the life of the Christian.

⁸ Daniel Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments: Encountering God at the Altar*, Revised Edition (Cleveland, TN: Cherohala Press, 2019), 53 (Kindle-Version, 61).

⁹ Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments*, 68

Up to this point, the choice of words has not always been clear. Do the references to “sacrament” refer to specific rites like Baptism or the Eucharist, or are allusion made to sacramental spirituality more generally? I suggest moving more clearly to the role of sacramentals.

Pentecostal Sacramentals

Sacramentals could be defined as signs, gestures, actions or practices that imply a sacramental dimension, a connection between the believer and God, a bridge to faith and trust in God. As the word sacramentals is not common in Pentecostal vocabulary it might be more helpful to refer to sacramental signs or practices. There are several contexts in which sacramental practices come to bear for a Pentecostal believer. The order in which they will be presented does not necessarily imply the scale of their importance.

To begin with, there is the attitude towards the Bible as the Word of God. For Pentecostals reading the Scriptures is not just as an intellectual exercise. As they believe that the Bible has been inspired by the Holy Spirit, they are expectant to learn through the illumination by the Spirit as they read it. Roger Stronstad put it like this, “Because Scripture is spiritual, the task of interpretation, and, therefore, hermeneutics, necessarily transcends the human... Because Scripture is spiritual, and because it must be spiritually appraised it can only be understood with the help of the Spirit.”¹⁰ In other words, studying the Bible with all academic tools available is important, but there is a dimension to reading the Word of God that transcends human analysis. Consequently, reading the Bible is for many Pentecostals an activity with a sacramental quality. Many who practice their daily devotions, typically pray that God may speak to them while reading the Word.

Central to Pentecostal formation is also the experience of Spirit baptism. It can be seen as a pneumatological anchoring in the Christian’s life. Whereas early Pentecostals had lively discussions where exactly in the *ordo salutis* Spirit baptism had to be placed¹¹, there was general agreement that being filled with, or experiencing a filling by the Spirit, was a central event in the life of Christians. It is sacramental because this experience is a meeting of God’s sovereign Spirit in the life of a disciple of Christ. The empowerment language in the Book of Acts reflects a perichoretic indwelling of God in communion with the believer. It is one thing to believe that the Holy Spirit indwells us, because we are created by God. It is altogether

¹⁰ Roger Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture and Theology A Pentecostal Perspective* (Bagio: APTS Press, 1995), 74.

¹¹ Those influenced by Methodist theology saw Spirit baptism as a third work of grace after conversion and sanctification. Others insisted that the Spirit could fill a believer during their progressive transformation to a holy life style. In the 1930s, Leonhard Steiner, a well-educated Pentecostal minister in Switzerland, argued for a more historically accepted interpretation of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion and saw Spirit baptism as a (sacramental) sign of empowerment from above. Similarly, Frank D. Macchia has repeatedly argued for a Spirit-filled life that can be associated to conversion and baptism, cf. Frank D. Macchia, “Spirit Baptism: Initiation in the fullness of God’s promises,” in Wolfgang Vondey eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology* (London: Routledge, 2020), 247-256.

another thing to be (speaking in human terms) touched, filled and empowered by the same Spirit because nothing can separate us from the God who loves us (Rom 5:5; 8:16, 38, 39). Spirit baptism is experienced by Pentecostals as the real presence of God in Christ, and through the Spirit, and as such it is deeply transformational and sacramental. It is an experience of utter abandonment to the presence and sovereignty of God.

Many Pentecostals relate speaking in tongues to Spirit baptism. From a sacramental point of view, it matters little if one associates glossolalia to an evidential teaching or not. More importantly, it has the quality of de-centering the believer and allowing him or her to a self-transcending perception of reality. It is a symbol of fully reconciled relationship with God. As tongue-speakers do not understand what they are saying, their practice opens them toward the other. This is the case on rare occasions when a bystander understands what is being said.¹² Normally, speaking in tongues is a personal expression to God and for the edification of the praying person (1 Cor 14:2+4). The sacramental value rests precisely in the “not knowing”, it is an intimate communion with God, without the interference of limited human knowledge or a corrupt heart. This can be explained in a practical way. James exhorts the believers in the diaspora that the tongue is treacherous. With the same tongue we praise God and curse the neighbor (James 3:9+10). That is why human speech is defiled. But when one addresses God in prayerful tongues, then one can do that in a language that was never consciously used for unholy speech. It is a moment of the sacred that suffers no intrusion by the profane.

There is another dimension of uttering prayers in an unknown tongue. When Pentecostal and charismatic Christians express their suffering, lament and groaning with the whole of creation words are often lacking and they do not know what they should pray for. Then the Spirit intercedes on their behalf (Rom 8:18-27) as they speak in tongues to God. Summing up we can say that speaking in tongues is a strong sacramental practice that strengthens the believers trust in God.

Another sacramental dimension known to Pentecostals has to do with the tactile ramification of faith. Especially during the pre-digital days when radio ministry was strong, preachers would pray for the listeners and invite them to touch the radio while they were praying. This provided a “point of contact” between the person praying and the person who was being prayed for. Similarly, small prayer cloths were anointed, prayed over and then sent by mail to those who wished prayer for healing. This was a practice popularized by Oral Roberts¹³ but already existed in the days of the Azusa Street revival where sacred handkerchiefs were blessed, prayed upon and distributed in accordance with the precedent given by the Apostle Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. The paper *The Apostolic Faith* recounts in September 1906

¹² The context is here in terms of xenolalia, the speaking in a foreign language that can be understood by a person other than the speaker who has no knowledge of that language. It is comparable to the account in Act 2. The prophetic context of speaking in tongues with an interpretation following as mentioned in 1 Cor. 14 is not discussed here.

¹³ On the Pentecostal ministry in radioland and the use of prayer cloths see: Anderson Blanton, *Hittin’ the Prayer Bones: Materiality of Spirit in the Pentecostal South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), chapters 1 and 2.

A brother living in the east had been down sick for quite a while and sent a handkerchief to be blessed as in Bible times [cf. Acts 19:11-12]. His sister brought it to the Mission, praying for the Lord to show her to whom she was to give it, and the Lord showed her to give it to Sister Sallie Trainor. She [Trainor] immediately took it upstairs and as she knelt before the Lord, the Spirit came upon her in great power and she prayed in tongues, and kissed the handkerchief three times, as the Spirit seemed to lead her. It was sent with a prayer and the brother was immediately healed.¹⁴

Cecil M. Robeck comments on this account saying,

Sallie Trainor seems to have treated this handkerchief as a sacramental, that is, an item through which the healing grace of God was mediated or came to the person who needed healing. It might be said that the handkerchief functioned as the outward sign or symbol of the grace that came through it. That is the definition of a sacrament. The handkerchief held no healing power of its own; it was not in any way understood to be magical. Those at the Mission believed only that what they practiced in blessing or anointing these handkerchiefs and sending them to the sick paralleled what the facts recorded in Acts 19:11-12.¹⁵

A common sacramental gesture among Pentecostals is the laying on of hands. The universal church knows this practice mostly in connection with the rite of ordination. So do Pentecostals, but they lay hands on more occasions than the ordination to ministry or in a gesture of blessing to someone who is sent out to missionary work. Most commonly the laying on of hands, sometimes including the anointing with oil, is practiced in relation to the ministry of healing. Kimberly Alexander argues that these situations "... are typically understood as sacramental in that the material and the spiritual come together in visible ways..."¹⁶

Some Pentecostals, mostly coming from the holiness tradition, value the practice of foot washing and consider it to be an ordinance from the Lord (John 13:14-15). Already in the early days of the Azusa Street revival, they considered this sacramental practice as an "expression of humility toward each other in real love".¹⁷ Foot washing is often practiced in the context of confession and sanctification. In that sense it is meaningful as a practice of Christian formation.¹⁸

¹⁴ "Fire Still Falling," *The Apostolic Faith* [Los Angeles, CA] 1.1 (September 1906), 1,2,

¹⁵ Mentioned in a personal communication and to be published in a forthcoming book by Cecil M. Robeck on the Azusa Street revival.

¹⁶ Kimberly Alexander, "Divine Healing: Sacramental Signs of Salvation," in Wolfgang Vondey eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology* (London: Routledge, 2020), 259.

¹⁷ *The Apostolic Faith*, 1.10 (September 1907), 2.

¹⁸ Daniel Tomberlin, in his book *Pentecostal Sacraments. Encountering God at the Altar*, devotes a full chapter entitled "Footwashing: The Fellowship of the Towel" (218-246 in der revised edition).

Another popular practice among Pentecostals is to bless people. It is an affirmation of God's good will on a person. It happens in a variety of ways. Of course, there is the evocation of a blessing at the end of a service sending the people into the week with the affirmation of God's blessing and often including the mandate to be a blessing to others. There are other gestures of blessing dispersed in daily life. For instance, many Pentecostals sign off a written communication with "Blessings".¹⁹ There may be a blessing prayer by a family member or a friend to someone who is facing a difficult task. It is also common for a person to come forward at the end of a service to ask for a blessing. What is expressed in all these cases is a hope filled affirmation of God's favor. The sacramental nature of conveying a blessing may be recognized in the rise in interest of blessing or anointing ceremonies that also attract un-churched people. There is the perception of a self-transcending situation that is attractive to many.²⁰

Having looked at a number of sacramentals that are closely related to Christian formation, we need to look at the wider context where these actions are received, namely the church. It is not so much that all sacramental expressions have to take place within the confines of a worship service in the presence of the community, but every sacramental practice relates to the life of the faithful in one way or other. In other words, a sacramental expression is not limited to an individual's experience. It relates to the community that is united in the name of the triune God as believers are gathered in word and sacrament, as well as scattered by the sending Spirit in mission and daily life.

For Pentecostals their Christian life is anchored in communal praise and worship, they want to "come under the Word", they expect to be met by the living God who dwells in the praises of his people (Psalm 22:3). The church (ekklhsia) who is in fellowship (koinwnia) is where the Christian life and sacramental presence of God is bridged. The church is also the discerning body who deliberates a way forward through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in Christ and the Word of God. Keeping the central role of the Church in mind, we can move to the next section that pays attention to an essential element in Pentecostal formation.

Christ the primordial Sacrament and the fivefold gospel

John Christopher Thomas for one has long pleaded for elaborating a Pentecostal framework within ecclesiological dimensions. In his presidential address to the Society for Pentecostal Studies in 1998, he suggests relating the fivefold gospel²¹ to the life of the church and its

¹⁹ The Pentecostal tendency to bless should not necessarily be identified with an allegiance to the teachings of a "prosperity gospel". There is a vast realm of spiritual blessings and material blessings are often contextualized in spiritual terms (e.g. health, reconciliation with a neighbor, finding employment).

²⁰ The former Pentecostal Walter J. Hollenweger introduced in the 1980s anointing liturgies to mostly Reformed churches in Switzerland. The participants, both the lay people praying a blessing and anointing persons that came forward (altar call!) and those receiving a blessing, were often deeply touched by this sacramental exercise.

²¹ The four- or fivefold gospel is a reference to the Pentecostal emphasis on the role of Jesus Christ as the Savior, Sanctifier, Baptizer in the Spirit, Healer and Coming King. This framework has also been referred to as full gospel in reference to Romans 15:19. Those Pentecostals relating more to the Reformed/Baptist tradition have often

sacramental celebrations.²² One of the reasons he gave was that “this method would also go some way toward reclaiming and reappropriating the sacraments for a tradition that has been a bit uncertain about them and their place in the community’s worship.”²³ The full gospel model has more recently been picked up by Wolfgang Vondey, who made it the center piece of his book *Pentecostal Theology*. He does, however, make clear “that these theological accents build the core motivation for Pentecostal theology but not the exclusive rules or structures for articulating Pentecostal doctrine.”²⁴ What is of interest to us is that the Full Gospel provides a framework for Christian formation, a place where the freedom of Pentecostal experiences and practices can be related to theological reflection and doctrinal articulation.²⁵

There is a corresponding element to the full gospel, namely the call to the altar. Popularized by Charles G. Finney and his evangelistic campaigns, the altar call is understood as an invitation to commit one’s life to Jesus. As most Pentecostal churches do not have a physical altar, the term is used as a ritual metaphor for salvation and the human encounter with God. “The Pentecostal altar... comes into existence, as on the day of Pentecost, through the unexpected outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the participation of creation in response to the divine presence.”²⁶ It is a sacred space, but that space is not limited to a church building. Now, each of the aspects of the fivefold gospel (salvation, sanctification, Spirit baptism, healing, eschatological hope) can be explained as a coming to the altar. We will now turn to each of these aspects and look at them from a sacramental point of view keeping Christian formation in mind. The altar call shall serve as a hermeneutic key.

Jesus saves!

The altar call is primarily understood as a call to commit one’s life to Jesus. It is call to conversion and discipleship. The invitation to come forward is illustrating the embodied nature of Pentecostal faith from the very beginning. It is not only a decision of the mind, because it entails the physical movement of the person towards the front where the pastor and helpers wait ministering in prayer. It is a visible response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. There is a sacramental quality to the altar call because the person coming forward is surrounded by prayer. It is a moment when the individual is experiencing God’s grace, compassion, and renewal. Coming forward for prayer is a liminal act opening the person for transformation.

The altar call to Jesus our savior is also a call to continual conversion and repentance. It is a common feature that the preacher addresses the congregation during the altar call including

referred to the fourfold gospel by bracketing sanctification. Nevertheless, these Pentecostals would also subscribe to the need for ongoing sanctification in the life of a Christian. I have chosen to abide by the fivefold gospel model for the sake of completeness.

²² John Christopher Thomas, “Pentecostal Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” *Pneuma*, 20/1, 1998: 17-19.

²³ Thomas, *Pentecostal Theology*, 18.

²⁴ Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel* (London: T & T Clark, 2017), 21.

²⁵ Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 23.

²⁶ Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 41.

persons who have cooled in their faith or who feel that God's Spirit is calling them to abandon sinful ways and embrace the salvation they have been granted in Christ. It is an act of penance. Consequently, an altar call can function in much the same way as a visit to a confessional, except that the prayer is not necessarily made by clergy.

What can be theologically described as a moment of justification of faith in Christ by God's grace is more than a matter of forensic justification. Many Pentecostals remember their salvific moment before the altar as a response to God's offer of reconciliation that completely transformed them. It is a spiritual new beginning, but it has the whole person in mind. In other words, one's embodied existence is renewed. This might be one of the reasons why the salvific message of Jesus is drawing many poor people.²⁷ There is a physical dimension to salvation that many instinctively feel.

Jesus sanctifies!

The rite of coming to the altar is also expressing the desire for sanctification. The focus is firmly on Jesus as the 19th century Holiness hymn "I need Thee every hour" by Annie Hawks expresses:

*I need thee every hour,
most gracious Lord;
no tender voice like thine
can peace afford.
I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee;
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.²⁸*

This intimate focus on Jesus is also reflected in the song "Lord I need you" by Matt Maher, a musician popular in the Charismatic Renewal Movement of the Catholic Church. The focus is the same as he borrowed from the original. The first verse and the refrain are:

*Lord I come, I confess
Bowing here, I find my rest
Without You, I fall apart
You're the one that guides my heart*

*Lord, I need You, oh, I need You
Every hour, I need You*

²⁷ Jean-Daniel Plüss, "Effleurer la surface d'une anthropologie pentecôtiste" *Positions luthériennes* 2022/3, 209-222.

²⁸ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-i-need-thee-every-hour> accessed June 23, 2024.

*My one defense, my righteousness
Oh God, how I need You*

More telling is the introduction to that song in which Matt Maher sings:

*Yes, where You are Lord, I am free
Holiness is Christ in me
Where You are Lord, I am free
Holiness is Christ in me*²⁹

“Lord I come, I confess, bowing here, I find my rest” is a most appropriate description of an altar call response seeking sanctification, a closer union with the triune God. The hymn, both in its old as well as contemporary versions, is very popular among Pentecostals.

Traditionally, sanctification has been understood as being set apart and undefiled for the sake of following God. But Dale Coulter has argued that sanctification aims at a wider horizon. It is not just in terms of being separate from the world but may aim at reflecting the fullness and beauty of God and God’s creation.³⁰ We have here an appreciation of *theosis*, the participation in the life of God (2 Peter 1:3-4; Romans 12:1-2). “To come down to the altar in a Pentecostal service means a movement to renew one’s covenant with God, a new level of consecration as the person tarried before the Lord for his work of deliverance and union.”³¹ The reference to “tarrying” brings up another common practice among Pentecostals, especially African American Pentecostals, who pray at the altar with invocations, supplications, songs and religious expectation.³² Tarrying is an ascetic exercise that has lost some of its appeal in this fast paced world. However, Pentecostals have opened up to other ascetic practices like different forms of fasting, sacrificial giving or going to spiritual retreats.

Finally, it must be added that holiness is a mark of the church. And it is significant that many Pentecostals value the altar as a place where Jesus is approached as the Sanctifier who is worthy to receive glory, honor and power (Rev. 4:11) and who, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, transforms believers for their calling in the church and in the world. In other words, holiness is not an end in itself.

Jesus baptizes!

²⁹ <https://genius.com/Matt-maher-lord-i-need-you-live-lyrics> accessed June 23, 2024.

³⁰ Dale Coulter making the argument in a digital communication. For a historical study of the checkered past of Pentecostal views on sanctification see: Dale Coulter, “Sanctification: Becoming an icon of the Spirit through Holy Love,” in Wolfgang Vondey eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology* (London: Routledge, 2020), 237-246.

³¹ Coulter, *Sanctification*, 245.

³² David Daniels, *Until the Power of the Lord Comes Down. African American Pentecostal Spirituality and Tarrying*, in *Contemporary Spiritualities: Social and Religious Contexts* (London: Continuum, 2001), 175, quoted in Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 63.

Tarrying is a practice that also relates to experiencing Spirit baptism. Following the Pauline encouragement to strive for spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:1), Pentecostals have spent hours in prayer waiting for (Acts 1:4) and seeking to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Although not exclusively, Spirit baptism is closely connected to the altar, because there is a movement from moving to the altar (conversion) to tarrying at the altar (sanctification) and culminating at the altar (Spirit baptism). The point here is not to uphold a certain *ordo salutis*, but to show the intimate connection between these aspects of Christian formation. Room is given to be transformed by the Holy Spirit.³³ This transformation can happen in a variety of ways, but it is most clearly manifested when the disciples began to speak in tongues (Acts 2:4) and the reception of the Holy Spirit is frequently related with the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17; 19:6). The context is clearly sacramental, and it could be interpreted as a sacrament, as the gift of the Spirit is a conferment of grace. Nevertheless, Pentecostals hesitate to call Spirit baptism a sacrament, in the same sense that would apply to Baptism of the Eucharist.³⁴

It is known that although most North American Pentecostals consider speaking in tongues as the “initial evidence” of Spirit baptism, many European Pentecostals see glossolalia as a typical but not only sign of being filled with the Spirit. In recent years some Pentecostal Theologians have suggested to move from using “evidential” language to preferably speak about a “sign” or “symbol” of the charismatic work of the Spirit.³⁵ The reason for this is to move away from a legalist or empirical language (initial physical evidence) to a theological language (sign, symbol, sacrament). That would also take in consideration that Spirit baptism with the ability to speak in tongues is not a phenomenon unique to Pentecostals as it is also a hallmark within the charismatic renewal movement. Using theological vocabulary is conducive to ecumenical dialogue.

In terms of Christian formation, Spirit baptism with the sign of speaking in tongues is seen as having missiological, eschatological and ecclesial significance by William and Robert Menzies. Father and son argue that from a missiological point of view tongues were given at Pentecost as a gift to all, hence there cannot be any form of discrimination. The experience of Spirit baptism has eschatological significance because the Spirit is poured out in the last days and the coming of the Lord’s kingdom is near (Acts 2:17-20). The ecclesial significance for Menzies’ rests in the fact that Spirit baptism has a democratizing effect on the church, first because the reception is not bound to clerical activity, and second, because empowerment to be witnesses is given to all.³⁶ These points directly relate to the Christian’s life. Wolfgang Vondey summarizes as follows, “With the baptism in the Spirit, the church has arrived as a threshold

³³ Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 84-87.

³⁴ For this reason, Baptism as a sacrament or ordinance is capitalized, whereas in any reference to Spirit baptism the word is written with a small b in this text.

³⁵ Celso Miguel Antonio Carillo, “The Baptism of the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal Theology: A Critical Comparison between Proposals of Frank Macchia and Wolfgang Vondey” *Pentecostal Education* 9/1 2024: 43-51.

³⁶ William Menzies and Robert Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of a Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 121-32.

of its own identity: from the reception to the giving of the Spirit, from the community of saints to the community of witnesses and from the altar to the world.”³⁷

Jesus heals!

To heal was a mark of Jesus’ ministry. After his death and resurrection, the healing ministry of the church is conceived in new dimensions. Healing in all its forms is a symbol of God’s saving power for all creation. It is a sign of reconciliation and as such also of eschatological significance. The sacrament of anointing of the sick has been with the church through the ages.³⁸ Prayer for healing rose to new prominence during the Holiness movement in the 19th century. It does, therefore, not surprise that prayer for healing and anointing with oil also play a significant role in the Pentecostal movement.

Obviously, the healing ministry does not exclusively take place in the church. But the metaphor of the altar is bringing significant understanding of the crucial role the persons find themselves in as they ask for, pray, anoint, deliver and respond in faith to healing offered in the name of Jesus Christ. They come to the altar because they believe that there is not only salvation but also healing in the atonement. Then, by coming to the altar they cross the threshold from the personal to the communal. Furthermore, by coming to the altar they publicly affirm that healing is a promise for the world. Let us look at these points individually.

We can see three aspects that lead Pentecostals to emphasize that there is healing in the atonement. First, the connection between salvation and healing is rooted especially in the synoptic gospels and in the Book of Acts where the Greek word *swteria* can be translated both in terms of deliverance as well as healing.³⁹ Second, John Wesley’s theology conceives of Jesus’ victory on the cross as a “double cure”; namely in terms of justification and sanctification. And sanctification reflects wholeness and union with God. Thirdly, the healing movement in the 19th century made a connection between atonement in Christ and healing based on the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53:3-4 especially the phrase “he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” and other passages that emphasized the desire of God for healing and wholeness like Psalm 103:2-3, Matthew 8:16-17; Mark 16:18; and James 5:14-15.⁴⁰ The connection between salvation from sin and death on one side and healing and wholeness on the other, finds its focus in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The believer comes to the altar because Jesus is the source of life. The sacramental dimension is fundamental and graces the Christian with hope and praise.

Healing also has communitarian dimensions. For one, because healing and reconciliation are twin realities. The focus on healing is not limited to physical or psychological healing, it can also refer to relationships and communal life in general. Then, the person that goes to the altar

³⁷ Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 105.

³⁸ In spite of the cessationist argument by Augustine and later Calvin, the attribution of healing as a grace of God has remained in the church. Luther and Zwingli, although being critical of any acts of superstition, acknowledged healing as a sign from God. Pietist and Methodist theologies of healing followed.

³⁹ Colin Brown ed. *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol 3 (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 212-213.

⁴⁰ For a history of the development of the divine healing movement see Donald W. Daton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: F. Asbury Press, 1987), 115-141.

is crossing the threshold from being an individual to making him or herself vulnerable by coming to the public, by asking for prayer. Furthermore, there is a dimension to healing that needs to be mentioned, namely the role of testimony. If a Pentecostal believer has experienced some form of divine healing, he or she is invited to share the experience with the community. Of course, there is a discernment that is called for whether the testimony is reliable.⁴¹ If healing has indeed taken place, it involves a self-transcending act of attributing it to God. Consequently, such a testimony is giving glory to God and has a doxological quality. Furthermore, as Wolfgang Vondey notes, there is a verbalizing of faith “The testimonies of healing ... therefore become healing practices in their own right.”⁴² The context of healing practices should, therefore not be mistaken as mainly self-serving, there is a communal aspect that is important in Christian formation.

Thirdly, there is an implicit promise to divine healing in relation to the world. Sickness is often associated with a withdrawal from the world. If a person is suffering from an illness, she is not able to take on her full position in society. She is not able to fully “function”. Furthermore, the sick person is often shunned by the world, whether we think of unclean lepers in the biblical writings or remember the exclusion we suffered due to the recent pandemic. Being healed means re-integration into the life of the world. It corresponds to a sending, a mission. In terms of Christian formation, the believer is called to be taking up his or her responsibilities in the society. Furthermore, Pentecostals increasingly act and pray for the healing of creation. The passage in Romans 8:18-23 reminds them that their redemption is closely linked to the redemption of all creation. The healing ministry is extended to the care of creation, which is suffering and is waiting to be set free for its original purpose. This, of course, is of eschatological bearing and brings us to the next point.

Jesus is coming again!

Early Pentecostals interpreted the fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit very much in line with the first Pentecost where the day of the Lord is clearly brought in relation to the gift of the Holy Spirit to the nascent church (“in the last days ... I will pour out my Spirit” and “before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day” Acts 2:17, 20). The understanding by those who were so powerfully touched by the Spirit was that they were called to witness to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) so that the Lord could gather his people before his return. There was great urgency to this apostolic calling. It was at the altar that people received their calling to mission and evangelism and dedicated themselves to the ministry.

At the same time, the eschatological fervor helped many Pentecostals to gain hope in spite of many adversities, be they economic, social, based on racial prejudice or any other

⁴¹ For a hermeneutic of testimony see: Jean-Daniel Plüss, *Therapeutic and Prophetic Narratives in Worship: A Hermeneutic Study of Testimonies and Visions. Their Potential Significance for Christian Worship* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), 54-66.

⁴² Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 110.

marginalization. Their laments were turned into confidence, even shouts of joy, because they knew that the Lord would have the last word. That gave them courage to live their daily lives and to speak up.

If the great day of the Lord was near, then that meant that the disciples of Christ would have ethical responsibilities. There was no time for trivial pursuits and, most importantly, one's life had to bear evidence of Christ's reign in the here and now.

To sum it up, by confessing that "Jesus is coming again" there is a conflation of salvation, calling, sanctification and hope. In this context Pentecostals have referred to the celebration of Holy Communion as the sacrament most fitting⁴³, not only to remember what Jesus Christ has done on the cross, but also celebrate the hope of his coming as believers gather "to proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*" (1 Cor. 11:26). The eucharistic celebration is the all-encompassing symbol/sacrament of life in Christ. The altar call, as its handmaid, is at the intersection of human insufficiency and hope on one side, and divine grace and empowerment on the other. In spite of their shortcomings, Pentecostals, as any other Christians, are called to be sacraments of hope; as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1).

Conclusion

The aim has been to illustrate that Pentecostal spirituality is seen as inherently sacramental, "because it understands the spiritual and the physical, as well as the divine and the human, as fitted for and belonging to each other."⁴⁴ It may begin with a prayer before reading the Scriptures and continues with a lifestyle that is committed to following Christ in everyday life. And there are intersections, moments of transformation like conversion, Baptism, the celebration of the Eucharist, the experience of being filled with the Spirit and altar calls, which nourish and empower Christians on their journey.

In a way, it's all about Jesus. Jesus Christ can be called the primordial sacrament because God's presence and grace are made fully visible in Christ to humanity. This central theological conviction is translated for Pentecostals in the fivefold gospel narrative. This model points to liminal moments of spiritual life. In each case these situations are inherently self-transcending and point to the Source of Grace, the Giver of Life and the Subject of Worship.

At the same time, Pentecostals can agree with Catholics who see the church as the universal sacrament to the world. The metaphor of the altar points to the fact that the believers are called out (*ekklesia*) and into a community (*koinonia*) to live with Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of God. That explains why Pentecostals consider "going to church" of pivotal importance. Ultimately, sacramental life is ecclesial. The proclamation of the Word reaches from the community to the individuals, their families and the people they associate with. The administration of the sacraments like Baptism and the Lord's Supper, bring a frame

⁴³ So for instance Kenneth Archer, Christopher Thomas, and Daniel Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments*, 85.

⁴⁴ Chris E.W. Green, "Sacraments: Rites in the Spirit for the presence of Christ," in Wolfgang Vondey eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology* (London: Routledge, 2020), 314.

to a life in grace and communion with the triune God. But most importantly, it is the Holy Spirit that calls us to live in a Spirit-filled covenant community.⁴⁵ Not individuals grace the church, but grace comes from God's Spirit alive in the church to the members of the Body of Christ (*totus Christus*). This calls for participation and mission. The Christian life has not come to fruition unless it is shared with the world. That is why there is a focus on mission and evangelism. There is the mandate for ethical integrity (holiness) for the love and care of the neighbor. And there is the call to be a prophetic presence in a world torn by strife, caught in injustice, obsessed with power, and in need of redemption. Every Christian is called to their full vocation, becoming a sacramental sign of God's love and grace impacting the world in Christ and through the power of Holy Spirit.

⁴⁵ James P. Bowers, *A Wesleyan-Pentecostal Approach to Christian Formation* in *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, Issue 6, April 1995, p. 76.