

Defining Pentecostal Identity:

Differences between Charismatics and Classical Pentecostals

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by

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Introduction

As the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC) approaches a centenary of Spirit-empowered gospel proclamation throughout Canada and the world, there is a mutual desire to rediscover its unique theological identity. Throughout its storied history, the PAOC has encountered a number of pentecostal-like charismatic movements that have challenged Canadian Pentecostals to re-examine their sense of self within the highly pluralistic Canadian religious landscape. One of the most significant and influential movements to challenge the identity of Canadian Pentecostals has been the Charismatic Movement. Dubbed “the new Pentecost” by Donald Gee, this mid-twentieth century North American religious movement experienced distinctively pentecostal blessings and phenomena, yet remained outside any denominational framework or shared confession of faith.¹ Within the contemporary context, the next generation of the Charismatic Movement, known also as the neo-charismatic movement or the “Third Wave,” is advancing its pentecostal-like theology and practice among post-denominational and independent churches throughout the world.² Now considered to actually outnumber all Pentecostals in numbers and in annual converts worldwide, the Charismatic Movement has little traditional Pentecostal ties but is a prime mover in the pentecostalization of the global Church.³ From the house-church movement in China to the indigenous churches in

¹ Stanley M. Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 477.

² Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 928.

³ Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 385.

Africa to the Toronto Blessing, the Charismatic Movement continues to experience remarkable growth.⁴ With its burgeoning religious popularity, the Charismatic Movement appears to have blurred the theological lines that classical Pentecostalism once struggled to establish. “It is often impossible now to distinguish between ‘Pentecostals’ and ‘Charismatics,’ states Allen Anderson.⁵ Whereas Classical Pentecostals had historically defined the parameters outlining the doctrine and experience of pentecostal spirituality, the Charismatic Movement has proposed a far more inclusive, open-ended, and multi-dimensional approach to the work of the Holy Spirit. Stemming from this emerging theological diversification is what appears to be an erosion of Classical Pentecostal identity. Has the third wave overcome the first wave? Are there any discernable differences between Charismatics and Classical Pentecostals? P. D. Hocken’s article “Charismatic Movement” compares the Charismatic Movement with Classical Pentecostalism and identifies nine key differences between the two movements.⁶ This paper will examine Hocken’s theses to understand the differences and propose a way forward in defining PAOC identity within the global pentecostal/charismatic family.

Differences between Charismatics and Classical Pentecostals

1. Origins

⁴ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 502.

⁵ Allen Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 144.

⁶ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 515.

Hocken argues that the naissance of the Charismatic Movement was far more diverse than that of the Pentecostal Movement. Highlighting how the Charismatic Movement never had an Azusa Street as a geographical point of genesis, people under the umbrella of the Charismatic Movement received Spirit-baptism through a variety of connections and influences:

- direct contact with Pentecostals or charismatics already baptized in the Spirit
- growing experience of spiritual gifts following the rediscovery divine healing
- outbreaks of glossolalia in circles praying for revival (more in Europe than America)
- bible studies (especially in the book of Acts)
- divine interventions among people who knew nothing of the Pentecostal blessing⁷

Although many of these influences were also part of the early Pentecostal experience, the majority of early Pentecostals came into the movement through revival meetings that were erupting throughout North America. The Charismatic Movement however, attracted followers through a variety of diverse pathways, some of which were made possible by the pioneering efforts of early Pentecostals.

2. Missions

One of the defining characteristics of early Pentecostals was their missionary impetus. When believers were filled with the Spirit, many of them would set their sights and focus their energies on evangelism- often on a global scale. Not only was Pentecostalism birthed on the heels of the foreign missionary movement of the late nineteenth century, but Pentecostals also equated their baptism in the Spirit with power to

⁷ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 515.

witness.⁸ Within the Charismatic Movement however, their missional aims were largely consigned to sharing Spirit-baptism with fellow church members. According to Menzies, Charismatics tended to “see their role as a revitalizing influence within their own tradition.”⁹ Although the Charismatic Movement’s missionary impulse has increased over the years, especially among restorationist, non-denominational, and para-church groups, classical Pentecostalism has consistently upheld world missions and gospel proclamation as a central component of their theology of Spirit-baptism and consequently their pentecostal identity and mission.¹⁰

3. Holiness

Historically an emotive flashpoint for Pentecostals and Charismatics, differences in their perspectives of holiness has been a defining feature of these two movements. According to Hocken, this division in devotional and moral ethics largely stems from the socio-religious context of each movement.¹¹ When Pentecostalism was birthed in the early twentieth century, not only did many Pentecostal pioneers have Holiness backgrounds, but holiness codes were part and parcel of the fundamentalist/evangelical

⁸ Jacobsen, Douglas, *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 49. Parham: “Pentecost is given as power to witness.” Also see Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1984), 1.

⁹ William W. and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 31.

¹⁰ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

¹¹ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

religious culture.¹² When the Charismatic Movement emerged however, it was a different generation and culture where holiness inclinations were not as passionate and concentrated; charismatic practitioners were also from a multiplicity of confessional backgrounds that did not reflect a Pentecostal holiness framework.¹³ When people received Spirit-baptism within the Charismatic Movement, Pentecostals expected that their reception of the Spirit would birth a pentecostal-like transformation towards holiness. When this did not occur, Hocken notes that Pentecostals became increasingly suspicious about the authenticity of their experience in the Spirit.¹⁴ Furthermore, this persisting moral variance between Pentecostals and Charismatics also influenced how each group understood how seekers received Spirit-baptism. Whereas Pentecostals would “tarry for the baptism” with much soul-searching, contrition, and confession, Charismatics would simply pray for people to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit without a concerted insistence on personal repentance and particular modes of religious propriety.¹⁵

4. Ecclesiology

Unlike Pentecostals, who traditionally viewed Spirit-baptism as a highly individual event designed to empower believers to fulfil their unique God-ordained purposes in the world, the Charismatic Movement has a more corporate view of the work

¹² Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 129. A popular tract of the World War era attacked church suppers and stated that the body of Christ needed: “less ham and sham and more heaven. Less pie and more piety. Less use for the cook and more use for the Old Book.”

¹³ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

¹⁴ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

¹⁵ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

of the Spirit.¹⁶ For Charismatics, the Holy Spirit is given to renew the existing Church as a whole.¹⁷ These sentiments have been strongest within the sacramental-liturgical traditions, where Spirit-filled believers have remained within their denominations and have contributed to the rediscovery of covenant relationships and spiritual gifts within the corporate body.¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the Charismatic Movement's pneumatological framework is more inclined towards the Pauline texts that emphasize the corporate life of the body of Christ rather than the Lukan perspective that depicts the outpouring of the Holy Spirit descending on individuals and groups of believers.¹⁹

5. Ecumenicism

Although both movements have experienced their share of criticisms from the broader religious community, Charismatics have been able to cross confessional boundaries far more than Pentecostals. During the early years, Pentecostals were ostracized from the larger evangelical community and were duty-bound to theologically validate their experience in the Spirit. By the time the Charismatic Movement emerged on the horizon, a number of factors were at play that would enable Charismatics to enjoy a greater interdenominational influence. First, Pentecostal pneumatology, already in its second generation, was permeating the religious landscape and was becoming less

¹⁶ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

¹⁷ Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 31

¹⁸ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

¹⁹ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

offensive and more respectable.²⁰ Second, coinciding with the rise of the Charismatic Movement was the emergence of the Ecumenical Movement which created a greater receptivity to various pneumatological ideas.²¹ Third, those who had experienced the baptism of the Spirit and remained in their churches were able influence others from within their traditions more so than if they left to join established Pentecostal churches.²² As early as 1955, charismatic believers were holding meetings within their mainline denominations by arranging opportunities for seekers that featured the anointing of the sick and prayer for healing. Although it did generate some controversy at the time, within a few years, virtually every American denomination had been introduced to the work of the Spirit through the Charismatic Movement.²³ Although the openness and acceptance of the pentecostal message among the broader Christian community would likely not have been possible without the Charismatic Movement, it was the Pentecostals who loosed the proverbial jar a generation earlier.

6. Eschatology

Coinciding with the emergence of Pentecostalism was an enduring evangelical preoccupation with the events surrounding the end-times. Within this context, Pentecostals, with their Scofield Bibles in hand, largely accepted the dispensationalist

²⁰ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 591. R. P. Spittler highlights the convergence of David Du Plessis' involvement in the World Council of Churches and the acceptance of Pentecostals within the National Association of Evangelicals.

²¹ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 243.

²² Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 30.

²³ Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 30.

teachings promoting the pre-millennial second coming of Christ.²⁴ Conversely, the Charismatic Movement has not sanctioned any particular eschatological standing despite the heightened “end-times” consciousness resulting from their experience of Spirit-baptism.²⁵ Within the Third Wave camp, there are voices that oppose the pessimism of pre-millennialist propositions, yet there remains little eschatological cohesion and consistency within the movement.

7. Healing

A central component of both the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements is an enthusiastic belief in divine healing. Despite the shared confidence in divine healing, the patterns resident within each movement demonstrate some differences. While Pentecostals have engendered a more demonstrative divine healing praxis with a focus on physical restoration, Charismatics have largely concentrated on inner healing with a focus on emotional recovery.²⁶ Hocken’s explanation for this distinction is worth noting: “This contrast reflects differences in social background and theology. Awareness of mental states is more characteristic of a middle-class milieu than of working-class people, and the theology of many charismatics is more sympathetic to psychology than that of many Pentecostals.”²⁷ Although Hocken attributes the socio-economic contexts of each movement as a way to explain their respective distinctions, there likely are further

²⁴ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 516.

²⁵ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 517.

²⁶ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 517.

²⁷ Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary*, 517.

contributing factors such as how each movement interprets Scriptures related to divine healing, their common healing practices, and the explanatory style of the suffering and healed within their faith communities.

8. Spirit-baptism

If there is one central theme to both Classical Pentecostals and Charismatics alike, it is that a person can have a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit. Classical Pentecostals traditionally hold that all Christians should seek a post-conversion crisis experience called the baptism in the Holy Spirit.²⁸ Referring to the Lukan narrative as their *modus operandi*, Pentecostals cite multiple examples of biblical characters receiving Spirit-baptism some time following their conversion, underscoring how these examples are to be normative for all believers. The Charismatic position does affirm a subsequent crisis experience of Spirit-baptism, but it is understood more as an actualization of the Spirit given at conversion and less a gift of the Spirit for vocational empowerment.²⁹

9. Initial Evidence

As part of their theological validation of Spirit-baptism, historical Pentecostal denominations affirm that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of Spirit-baptism. The Charismatic view however, refuses to make any such “law of tongues,” contending that simply providing glossolalic evidence can not and should not be the sole signifier of

²⁸ Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit*, 395.

²⁹ Chad Owen Brand, ed., *Perspectives on Spirit Baptism*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 117; also see Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 31.

Spirit-baptism.³⁰ Other than the fact that Charismatics refuse to make a “law of tongues,” there is little continuity among Charismatics regarding a theology of glossolalia. Early Charismatic leader Dennis Bennett highlighted how “tongues are part of the package” when it comes to Spirit-baptism while contemporary charismatic leader Larry Hart teaches that one “may or may not speak in tongues when baptized in the Holy Spirit, but speaking in tongues is still seen as a normal part of Spirit-filled living available to all.”³¹

A Way Forward: Defining PAOC Identity

With such theological variability within the contemporary context, it is easy to see how the Charismatic Movement has blurred the theological lines Pentecostals once struggled to establish. From a distance, I agree with Allen Anderson that “it is often impossible now to distinguish between ‘Pentecostals’ and ‘Charismatics’.” However, if we were to zoom in for a closer look, I believe that there are three significant Pentecostal characteristics that contribute to the formation of a unique identity with the global pentecostal/charismatic family: foundational, missional, and reinventing.

a) Foundational

Emerging from Hocken’s article is the inimitable position Pentecostals have as founders of the modern outpouring of the Spirit. Not only did early Pentecostals proclaim

³⁰ Brand, ed., *Perspectives on Spirit Baptism*, 165.

³¹ Brand, ed., *Perspectives on Spirit Baptism*, 173, 123.

an experience of Spirit-baptism and pioneer a theology of Spirit-baptism while it was unpopular and persecuted, they also blazed a trail for future generations of Spirit-filled believers. Without the revolutionary initiatives of early Pentecostals, the Charismatic Movement would have had to break its own ground, defend its own experiences, and develop its own theologies. Unfortunately, so many Pentecostals know so little about their own history to truly appreciate the pioneering work of their spiritual forbearers. Perhaps it takes a non-Pentecostal such as Harvey Cox to remind us of our unique place in the world:

Pentecostalism has become a global vehicle for the restoration of primal hope. The movement started from the bottom. A partially blind, poor, black man with little or no book learning outside of the Bible heard a call. Seymour was anything but a Paul of Tarsus, trained by the leading religious scholars, or an Augustine of Hippo, schooled by the most polished Roman rhetoricians, or a Calvin or Luther educated in the original languages of scripture. He was a son of former slaves who had to listen to sermons through a window and who undoubtedly traveled to Los Angeles in the segregated section of the train. Yet under Seymour's guidance, a movement arose whose impact on Christianity, less than a century after his arrival in Los Angeles, has been compared to the Protestant Reformation.³²

For Canadian Pentecostals, our heritage differs from the American story, yet it remains a rich tapestry of Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered believers whose sacrifice paved the way for our own faith journey. Despite the changing times, tapping into our shared heritage is one of the most valuable exercises in rediscovering our unique identity. Although classical Pentecostalism now shares the road with the Charismatic Movement as the global torchbearers with the message of the Spirit, to rephrase the words of Killian McDonnell, behind every Charismatic stands a classical Pentecostal.³³

³² Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1995), 119.

³³ Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit*, 361.

b) Missional

Having identified some of the differences between Pentecostals and Charismatics, an indispensable quality of Pentecostalism continues to be its inherent mission of global evangelization. Permeating almost every theme is the intrinsic awareness of a lost world and the need for Spirit-empowered witness. Although the context changes and new voices emerge, Pentecostalism remains anchored to gospel proclamation. Experiences may be debated and theologies disputed, but sharing Christ is a non-negotiable feature of the Pentecostal message and an essential component of Pentecostal belief and practice.

c) Reinventing

Not only is Pentecostalism missional at its heart, but it is also intensely pragmatic and able to continually reinvent itself into new and relevant ways of communicating the gospel without compromising its core beliefs. Although some have described the blurring theological lines within contemporary Pentecostalism as an identity crisis and a worrisome fragmentation of a divinely ordained religious institution, Jacobsen explodes this myth by stating that Pentecostalism was never united enough to fragment in the first place.³⁴ For example, early Pentecostalism was endemic with theological controversies: holiness Pentecostalism, finished work Pentecostalism, and Oneness Pentecostalism—each vying for the hearts and minds of Pentecostal believers. Within the contemporary context, the Charismatic Movement has challenged Pentecostals on many of its historical doctrines and belief systems, but the most contentious issues today still pale in

³⁴ Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit*, 134.

comparison to the historical debates of the past. Rather than perceiving Pentecostalism as suffering an identity crisis or fragmentation, a more accurate and helpful way of understanding Pentecostalism is to return to the understanding that it is a movement and vastly capable of reinvention. While denominations grow stale and stagnate, movements “change on the fly” and consistently and creatively reinvent themselves according to the changing cultural and religious landscape. Pentecostalism is movement not a denomination- and its identity lies in its inherent ability to reinvent itself with the foundational and missional message of Christ for generations to come.

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