Introduction

Black Tongues of Fire: Afro-Pentecostalism’s Shifting Strategies and Changing Discourses

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African American Pentecostalism: Entering the Field

In 2006, the contemporary American Pentecostal movement passed a milestone, celebrating its one hundredth birthday. Over that time, its African American sector has been markedly influential, not only vis-à-vis other branches of Pentecostalism but also throughout the Christian church. Still, this segment of Pentecostalism has not received the kind of critical attention it has deserved. As a central contributor to historic Pentecostalism and as one of the fastest growing segments of the Black Church, the African American Pentecostal movement increasingly clamors for scholarly assessment.

Perhaps part of the reason for the neglect derives from overlooking African American agency at the origins of the movement. Even today, debates remain over who was at the forefront of the nascent modern Pentecostal movement—the white Charles Fox Parham, who is credited with laying its foundations by formulating its central doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit being accompanied with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues; the black William Seymour, the leader of the 1906 Azusa Street Revival to which many, if not most, American Pentecostal denominations trace their roots; or simply the Holy Spirit, who used a variety of personalities, events, and locations to bring about the advent of the movement. As Seymour’s founding role has been increasingly recognized, so has the role of many other African Americans in the ongoing development of modern Pentecostalism. After a century of expansion, from a movement once considered by many as a marginalized cult to one that has come to have far-reaching global influence throughout the church and society, we are now at the point at which the important contribution of African Americans cannot be overlooked. Throughout this relatively short period within Christian history, African
Americans have been involved in every aspect of the Pentecostal movement’s development: forging its worship and music styles, framing and carrying out strategies to mold its public presence, shaping its theological discourse, and contributing to the variety of deliberations, schisms, and controversies that have shaped its structure.\(^2\)

This recovery of and emphasis on the African American contribution must acknowledge the role of black Christians in laying the groundwork for the Pentecostal revival. The nineteenth-century Holiness movement, which focused on calling the church back to personal piety through the experience of sanctification, produced such black leaders as the evangelists Jarena Lee and Amanda Berry Smith, and pastors like Charles Price Jones and William Christian, and saw the founding of several black denominations including the Church of Christ Holiness and the Church of the Living God (Christian Workers for Fellowship). Members of this movement laid the foundations for twentieth-century Pentecostalism by reincorporating John Wesley’s concept of entire sanctification into a personal spirituality and piety, which they sensed was missing in their churches. These Holiness folk, who were already employing camp-meeting style revivalism and language of Holy Spirit “fire” baptism as endowment with power for service and piety, eventually made their way into the Pentecostal movement. For their part, the Pentecostals incorporated the initial sign of speaking in tongues as an indication that one had truly received the Spirit, and by so doing, made a significant shift in Holiness beliefs about practices regarding the Holy Spirit. A number of denominations that had roots in the black Holiness movement, including the United Holy Church of America and the Fire Baptized Holiness Church of America, would ultimately become Pentecostal.

From out of these late nineteenth-century Holiness movements, it is now widely accepted that blacks made up a substantial portion of William Seymour’s Azusa Street congregation, which fueled the spread of the Pentecostal movement across the country beginning in 1906.\(^3\) Once their tongues were touched by the fires of Azusa Street, blacks left Los Angeles, serving with others of every race and culture as missionaries at home and abroad, to take the message of the Spirit being poured out on them in a new way. The movement was decidedly multiracial, and black Pentecostals founded churches and denominations—some of them interracial constitutions—which at first dotted the West and the South, where they were largely confined. Then they moved with the Great Migration to major urban centers in the North and East and to every town and hamlet in between, establishing predominantly black congregations. Within twenty years, no part of the American landscape
and very little of the world remained untouched by the revival that emerged from Azusa Street.

This book is one of the first scholarly volumes to cover the spectrum of this African American Pentecostal—Afro-Pentecostal, for short—world. We should note that just as there is no one black Baptist denomination, or one exclusively black Methodist denomination, there is also no one black Pentecostal movement—no one type of black Pentecostal discourse, and no one form of black Pentecostal life. Instead, Afro-Pentecostals can be found in more than one hundred large and small bodies, which extend from regional groups with a handful of congregations and a few hundred members to those with international constituencies. For purposes of classification, we can identify at least four types of Afro-Pentecostal groups: classical Wesleyan-Holiness Trinitarian Pentecostals, classical Apostolic (Jesus’ name or “Oneness”), charismatic independent congregations or networks, and recent neo-Pentecostal currents within the wider black church tradition.

In brief, classical Afro-Pentecostal groups involve denominations that have links to the first generation of the modern Pentecostal movement, in some way tracing their roots back to the Azusa Street revival. Included among these are denominations such as the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), with several thousand congregations and several million members in North America and around the world; the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America; the Fire Baptized Holiness Church of God of America; and the United Holy Church of America. Many of these are connected to black Holiness churches and traditions.

Apostolic or oneness churches are those who hold to the necessity of baptism by immersion “in the name of Jesus” and who, more importantly, reject the Trinitarian conception of the Godhead in lieu of a concept of God as one person who is expressed in three modes. These include the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, and Bible Way Church World Wide. We will mention more about these churches later.

Since the 1960s the development of the charismatic tradition has seen the rapid spread of Pentecostal theology, which incorporates a expanded pneumatology and a distinctive appreciation for the operation of spiritual gifts in the life of the individual and in corporate worship—without the strict personal piety or rigid insistence on speaking in tongues as a necessary evidence of Holy Spirit baptism—into mainline congregations and independent networks. Black charismatic churches include the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship International and a number of Word-of-Faith congregations and
denominations that focus on teaching that those who are favored by God and who tap into the potential of the Holy Spirit will be materially successful. Representative of these are such churches, congregations, and networks as Creflo Dollar’s World Changers Church International in Atlanta, and Frederick Price's Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles.

More recently, neo-Pentecostal spirituality has impacted many classically black denominations including large segments of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Black neo-Pentecostals have generally thus remained in their classical denominational churches and may not even go by that label, but they have incorporated Pentecostal style worship practices without making major changes in theology.

This typology provides a convenient, albeit rough and provisional, framework for understanding the broad scope of Afro-Pentecostalism, at least as the term is used in the remainder of this book. In reality, however, Pentecostal spirituality has so influenced the Black Church that in many instances—perhaps with the exception of the emphasis on speaking in tongues—there is little noticeable difference in the worship styles of contemporary African American congregations, regardless of which denominations are involved.

These various churches, organizations, and networks are all bound together in part by their distinctive Pentecostal belief that the “baptism” or “outpouring” of the Holy Spirit on the believer is a distinct work of grace, subsequent to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit given at initial conversion, and is an essential aspect of the Christian experience. This experience of Spirit baptism is understood as a direct fulfillment of the prophecy of the Old Testament book of Joel, in which the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28) and, among other signs, individuals would speak with other tongues as the Spirit makes its presence known. (Acts 2:4). Pentecostal believers thus have always been marked by a sense of personal communion with God established through ecstatic religious experience, including glossolalia or “speaking in tongues” as initial objective evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence in an individual. For them, the corporate experience of this manifestation has been thought to signal the arrival of the reign of Christ. These palpable religious manifestations are also perceived as divine urgings to earnestly redouble evangelistic efforts to reach every soul with the salvation message in view of the impending end of the age. To Pentecostals, this “in-filling” of the Holy Spirit is a supernatural enablement to live a holy life and to accomplish works of righteousness on behalf of the kingdom of God.

But Holy Spirit empowerment alone was not enough to ensure that black Pentecostals would be able to overcome the social realities of American race
politics in the first half of the twentieth century, within which they suffered the
double indignity of racial discrimination and religious persecution. Despite
Seymour’s early leadership and the uncontestable contribution of other blacks
such as Charles Harrison Mason, founder of the Church of God in Christ,
and Garfield T. Haywood, early leader and first General Secretary of the Pen-
tecostal Assemblies of the World, blacks were denied access to positions of
influence or leadership by white Pentecostals, who quickly forsook the Azusa
Street ideal of interracial fellowship to embrace the existing racial status quo
of the broader society. Black Pentecostals were also scorned as ignorant and
uncouth by their mainline black brother and sisters, who wrote them off as
members of a mysterious cult under the leadership of unscrupulous charla-
tans. Black Pentecostals were thus forced to frame and live out a distinct self-
understanding. They had to forge a particular set of strategies and peculiar set
of discourses for being the “sanctified church” in an unsanctified world.

Shifting Strategies and Changing Discourses

While they share a common openness to the immanent work of the Spirit
within their lives and congregations, the African Americans who make up
otherwise very diverse black Pentecostal groups have had to deal with the
same variety of modern issues—economic and political realities, spiritual-
ity, ethics, and the like—that are of concern to other members of society.
Further, black Pentecostal church leaders have historically had to wrestle
with the same concerns—mission strategies, gender roles, and theological
relevance—as leaders within other contexts and have employed a variety of
strategies to do both. Notwithstanding common depictions of Pentecostals—
black and white—as almost entirely otherworldly, what is noteworthy about
Afro-Pentecostalism is the variety of modes of expressions found within it—
the various ways in which its adherents were able to shift the discourse about
race and social ethics and incorporate tactics to enable adequate engagement
with the realities of this world. Far from being simply the monolithic, oth-
erworldly, “tongues movement” (this terminology was used by detractors to
call attention to what they saw as an overemphasis on the practice of speak-
ing tongues in Pentecostal personal devotions and public worship) that
many have depicted, Afro-Pentecostalism exhibits a wide range of responses
that has informed the movement’s coping with modern issues and realities.

The diversity within Afro-Pentecostalism reflects at least in part the
changing dynamics of the North American socio-political, cultural, and reli-
gious context. During the Jim Crow era of the first half of the twentieth cen-
tury, blacks were marginalized from engaging with the dominant structures of the nation. In this context Afro-Pentecostals were forced to form their own cultural institutions, to create their own social spaces and niches, and to articulate their own version of Pentecostal and Christian beliefs. While it is reductionistic to think that the earliest Afro-Pentecostals derived homogeneously from the lower classes, it is also undeniable that Pentecostalism made its most substantive inroads among this social stratum of the black community. But the phenomenon of the emerging black middle class since the civil rights movement has transformed the shape of the Afro-Pentecostal church over the last forty years. Whereas storefront Pentecostal and Holiness black churches have not disappeared, there are now established, solidly middle-class Afro-Pentecostal congregations as well as megachurches like those of T. D. Jakes’s The Potter’s House in Dallas, Charles Blake’s West Angeles Church of God in Christ, and John Cherry’s From the Heart Ministries in suburban Washington, D.C., among many others. Afro-Pentecostalism is now televised across the continent—and around the world—in mainstream and cable TV channels, with the result that few are uninformed about African American forms of Pentecostal life.

This shift from the margins of North American society to the more-or-less mainstream has brought with it changes in Afro-Pentecostals beliefs and practices. While among the generation of Seymour the emphasis was on ecstatic worship, the current generation has tempered this with professional worship teams. While the earlier Afro-Pentecostals were more sectarian in nature in terms of their avowed apolitical or antipolitical stances and countercultural practices, the recent Pentecostals have become bolder in the public square, more willing to engage both the polis and the world, even while wrestling with what that means for their Pentecostal identity. These changes can be understood in terms of the social dynamics of twentieth-century American life viewed through the lens of race and ethnicity, but doing so without recognizing the agency of Afro-Pentecostal people would be to tell only one side of the story.

The shifting strategies of Afro-Pentecostal agency, for example, can be observed in the dynamics of the movement’s interface with the wider society. Because of the earlier sectarian posture, interaction with the “world” outside the church was never overtly sanctioned. Afro-Pentecostal congregations, however, have always found ways to deal with the challenges besetting their parishioners and communities: poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, domestic and community violence, and, more recently, teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. With the advent of the civil rights movement more and more
Afro-Pentecostal pastors and leaders have been motivated to enter directly into the social and political limelight, adding their voices to the prophetic activity long characteristic of the Black Church tradition. Simultaneously, African American Pentecostal congregations have cultivated virtues of honesty, ethical character, industry, and modest living that have assisted many of their members to gain middle-class status. Many larger, more successful Afro-Pentecostal congregations—especially megachurch congregations—have combined spiritual formation/discipleship, life-skills training and education, community service, social activism, and political engagement—all under the rubric of a much more sophisticated theological understanding of holistic ministry.9

Herein we can also observe the changing theological and doctrinal discourses of Afro-Pentecostalism. Ecclesially, whereas early Afro-Pentecostals were predominantly shaped by the Holiness movement, contemporary Afro-Pentecostalism is much more diverse, and much less denominationally linked or constrained. Theologically, the traditional doctrinal emphasis on sanctification, understood as separation from the world, has given way to an implicit theology of cultural affirmation, framed in terms of contextualization or the cultural relevance of the gospel. Such an overall theological adjustment has more often than not been implicit, rather than explicit. These theological revisions exist at the oral and lived levels of African American Pentecostal pastoral and congregational life, rather than in the formally crafted manuals, handbooks, or theological texts. Indeed, there has only been slight revision of long-held doctrines that have been handed down from generation to generation, particularly in churches that are and remain denominationally affiliated.

This trend—of a fairly conservative official theological platform—is not peculiar to African American Pentecostalism. The wider Pentecostal movement, both in North America and elsewhere, remains theologically conservative. But if other Pentecostals can attend their denominationally sponsored (and accredited) colleges, universities, and seminaries, Afro-Pentecostals do not usually have such options. There are a handful of Afro-Pentecostal institutions of higher education such as the All Saints Bible College and Charles H. Mason Theological Seminary under the auspices of the Church of God in Christ, Aenon Bible College of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, and the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ’s Bonner Bible College. The majority of theologically trained African American Pentecostals receive their formative academic education in non-Pentecostal settings either in historically black colleges and universities such as Howard University, Morehouse Col-
lege, or Spellman College, or in institutions friendly to the Black Church and with programs that address the concerns of black Christians such as Candler School of Theology, Duke, Vanderbilt, or Crozer Divinity Schools, or Princeton Theological Seminary.

The result of increasing matriculation of African American Pentecostals in such programs has been the gradual emergence of the Afro-Pentecostal academy. Whereas a strong anti-intellectual strain existed in earlier generations who often rejected the “higher learning” of liberal institutions that might undercut Pentecostal faith and piety, more recent sentiments have sustained the healthy tension of receiving and engaging the specificity of Afro-Pentecostal commitments amid the less parochial forms of black theology and the more “universal” evangelical and ecumenical Christian discourses. Thus Afro-Pentecostal scholars have from their beginnings been firmly rooted in the wider Black Church tradition, drawing simultaneously on slave traditions as well as the black liberation and political theologies that began to appear at the end of the 1960s. More recently, some scholars are also exploring the possibility of a convergence between African American Pentecostal theology and certain strands of Liberationist and even Womanist theology. The Afro-Pentecostal academy, in other words, has always walked a fine line between the much more theological conservative orientations of the pastors and congregations they serve and the more progressive and even radical trajectories of the black theological academy under whom many were tutored and within which many continue to be engaged in dialogue.

The ongoing maturation of the Afro-Pentecostal theological academy should be understood, however, as part of wider globalization processes. While black Pentecostal scholarship had begun in North America with the work of James F. Tinney, Bennie Goodwin, James Forbes, Leonard Lovett, and others in the 1970s, the present generation has built on their work to rethink black Pentecostal identity in global context. In this wider context, the discourses of the African Christian diaspora are increasingly considered. The voices of African Pentecostal scholars as well as those of Caribbean Pentecostals are slowly emerging. At the vanguard of this stream of global Pentecostalism is the work of black Pentecostal theologians in the UK like Robert Beckford and Joseph Aldred, among others. While there are distinct differences between black Pentecostalism in the UK and in the United States, many Afro-Pentecostals are seeing links that can be forged around common histories, concerns, and issues. Globalization trends related to migration, transnationalism, and market capitalism are being registered more regularly and forcefully in Afro-Pentecostal thinking.
It is notable that black Pentecostal Apostolics have, like their white counterparts in North America and elsewhere, attempted to hold out longer against the dominant social, cultural, and religious forces that have impinged upon them. One of the distinctive ways black Apostolics persisted counterculturally was by remaining the most racially integrated segment of the movement over the longest period of time. In addition, and here in substantial contrast to the experience of white Oneness Pentecostals, black Apostolics have tended to be less divided from their Trinitarian counterparts in the Pentecostal movement and even in the wider Black Church tradition. Perhaps because of common cause in resisting racism, political marginalization, and economic injustice, the Black Church has been generally more inclusive when engaging these issues, so that black Apostolics have stood in solidarity with Trinitarians when the opportunities have arisen. Yet these same Apostolics have firmly held their theological ground concerning the Oneness of the Godhead, salvation understood in terms that include the necessity of both baptism by immersion in the name of Jesus and the reception of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues, and rigid holiness standards in personal piety. In these matters, black Apostolics have been as staunchly resistant to ecumenical “accommodation” as any white Oneness organization or denomination.

Clearly, African American Pentecostalism has evolved as a complex reality: it has always been “home” to a dynamic population, and has constantly served the needs of a wide range of people representing different socio-economic, geographical, cultural, and even theological backgrounds. It is precisely this diversity of beliefs and practices that is at the heart of this book.

Overview

Afro-Pentecostalism explores the ways in which adherents of African American Pentecostalism, the antecedent black Holiness movement that spawned it, and the descendent charismatic movement, which inserted Pentecostal spirituality into black mainline and nondenominational congregations, have adapted strategies to faithfully engage the broader social, political, and economic culture while formulating discursive practices of worship and spirituality consistent with their self-identities and ethical and ideological commitments. The scholars in this volume, representing diverse traditions from within and outside of the Pentecostal movement, examine four major aspects of the Afro-Pentecostal movement: (1) its historical trajectories, (2) issues of gender and culture, (3) the nature and central features of Afro-Pentecostal ethics, and
(4) its changing theological discourses. Through their extensive experience with Pentecostal culture or scholarship, these authors embody the breadth of its expression within the African American community. Their work demonstrates the range of strategies African American Pentecostals have employed—sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully—to deal with the issues of spirituality, culture race, gender, sexuality, economics, and politics.

There are black Pentecostal scholars among our authors. David Daniels, Leonard Lovett, William Turner, and Frederick Ware have not only contributed extensively to the scholarship on Afro-Pentecostalism but have also been faithfully involved in various aspects across the spectrum of its ecclesial life for several decades. Valerie Cooper, Clarence Hardy, Cheryl Sanders, and the late Ogbu Kalu represent scholars who stand outside the tradition, although their dialogue with and viable critiques offered to those within it and their work in Pentecostal studies have been no less passionate and insightful because they are not adherents. As African American scholars (perhaps with the exception of Kalu, who was Nigerian, although he lived in the States for the last part of his life), their sensitivity to realities that impact the entire black community and the Black Church provide a foundation from which to assess the movement’s specific contributions and opportunities. This volume also includes the work of a white Pentecostal scholar, Cecil Robeck, who has been a consistent champion for racial reconciliation within the movement, and is certainly one of the most knowledgeable scholars of modern Pentecostal history. Finally, this book also features three white scholars from outside the classical Pentecostal tradition. Louis Gallien, Craig Scandrett-Leatherman, and Dale Irvin share extensive experience with the African American community. Gallien is an educator who has taught for several years in historically black institutions of higher education. Scandrett-Leatherman has been involved with black Pentecostal congregations both as an observer and a participant. Dale Irvin, has conducted extensive work on the intersection of Pentecostal spirituality and the social realities of our day within the global context, and is especially interested in issues of race and justice.

Drawing on the disciplines of history, theology, ethics, missiology, religious studies, or cultural anthropology, each author brings his or her unique vantage point to bear in ways that enrich the discourse and highlight nuances in the strategies of the movement that might not be evident if viewed through a single lens. Of course, black Pentecostalism cannot be reduced to being only a religious movement; rather, it is also a social, political, cultural, and ethical movement that has personal and social implications for those who are within it as well as the broader black community and the
Christian church. The unique backgrounds each author brings to this book are channeled toward elucidating the overarching theme by moving the examination of the Afro-Pentecostal movement out of artificial isolation from the cultural realities with which every viable movement must wrestle. Instead, the authors place the beliefs and practices of African American Pentecostals in their historical and socio-economic context, not only illuminating how the movement has drawn on its particular religious and ethical outlook to enable its adherents to grapple with the race, gender/sexuality, and financial inequalities they have confronted, but also by shedding light on how the movement has grown to become a powerful force on the American and global religious landscape.

Part I sets the foundation for evaluating how Pentecostalism emerged out of the antecedent Holiness movement, with its dual emphasis on Christian perfection and right social ethic, to become a movement of, literally, global proportions. It allows us to conceive how, with numerical growth, the movement has expanded its discourse in ways that have given its followers strategies to engage the complex racial realities of modern society, within local, national, and global contexts.

In chapter 2 Cecil M. Robeck Jr. illuminates the complexity of the social and religious culture that newly arriving blacks found in Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. He shows that the Azusa Street Mission was the only congregation that attempted to meet the needs of blacks who were then migrating to the city in large numbers by providing comfortable worship patterns drawn on traditions of slave religion. He further details how, amid a largely middle-class black community that was accommodated (and accommodating) to the dominant white society, class and culture appear to have played a role in the broader African American church community’s rejection of the early Pentecostal revival in Los Angeles. In this framework, the unique agency and praxis of early Afro-Pentecostals can be better appreciated.

In chapter 3 the historian David D. Daniels shifts the study of early Afro-Pentecostalism from a focus on beliefs and culture, which often dominate the discourse about the movement, to that of institutions. He shows how the discourse of African American Pentecostals that evolved within the early twentieth-century public arena differed from that of black mainline Protestant churches, arguing that Pentecostalism initially operated strategically within black vernacular society with antecedents in “slave society” rather than in black civil society. Daniels insists that while black civil society interacted with the state as a counter-public, early Afro-Pentecostalism functioned with little regard to the state; as the movement grew, though, some streams of Afro-
Pentecostalism lodged their institutions within vernacular society while others situated themselves in the terrain where civil and vernacular society overlap. What clearly emerges are the diversity of Afro-Pentecostal initiatives in developing their own civic institutions, structures, and networks.

In Part II, four scholars explore Pentecostalism and its antecedent Holiness movement through the lens of gender and sexuality. In this framework, they explore how Pentecostal men and women have drawn on the movement’s worldview to craft strategies for living out of their spirituality and community, and to redefine its self-understandings. These new strategies and discourses have allowed them to make sense of and survive not only the racial realities but also the challenges of gender within American society.

In chapter 4 Valerie Cooper traces two movements that unfolded two centuries before Azusa Street—American Evangelicalism and Wesleyan Holiness—and how changing understandings of women’s appropriate place in public life created unprecedented opportunities for women’s leadership. These changes allowed nineteenth-century, black Evangelical women to wrestle with expectations about their roles in ministry and public life, construct biblically based, pneumatological arguments for women’s religious leadership, and preach with eschatological expectancy in ways that foreshadowed what subsequently emerged at the Azusa Street Revival. Cooper contends that it was upon this foundation that the largely egalitarian ethos of early Pentecostalism was established. This egalitarian ethos understood the movement of the passage in Joel 2:28 that the Spirit was being “poured out” equally on “all flesh.” Early leaders made no distinction in race, culture, gender, or social class regarding who was fit and useful for the ministry, and thus gave freedom to women as well as men, poor as well as rich, the uneducated as well as the educated to participate in what God was doing. Within this understanding, the fact that the revival unfolded under the leadership of a largely self-educated black evangelist cannot be overlooked.

Clarence Hardy’s discussion in chapter 5 reviews the groundbreaking work of early religionist Arthur Fauset. Hardy draws on Fauset’s work on Pentecostalist and esoteric sects to look at how black Pentecostal women eschewed the categories immediately available to them while establishing new religious communities that provided alternative conceptions and creative forms of discourse about religious experience and the divine. In doing this, these women were able to reshape fading concepts of Victorian respectability and to reimagine new possibilities for religious leadership. In remaking the “politics of respectability,” they replaced discourse about the (black) nation with the physical body as the principal site to imagine the divine and
shifted to a religious modernism better suited to the demands of twentieth-century black urban life. In many respects, Hardy’s chapter shows how Afro-Pentecostalism has developed its own forms of what might be called proto-feminist and proto-Womanist discursive practices, long before these movements appeared on the horizon.

The anthropologist Craig Scandrett-Leatherman’s chapter 6 considers how early African societies used rites of passage that first lowered the status of boys into liminality and then elevated and reincorporated them into the community as men. Scandrett-Leatherman asserts that the “middle passage” and American slavery were also rituals of status decline, though they lacked the final element of elevating black males, serving instead essentially violent purposes that kept them in the status of boys. For Scandrett-Leatherman, during the period before the civil rights movement, this violence was ritualized by the thousands of lynchings that occurred throughout the South. However, he sees in Charles Mason, founder of the Church of God in Christ, an attempt to ameliorate the emasculation of black men and the disempowerment of the black community by strategically developing rituals of revision that helped black men resist these dehumanizing rites while promoting liberation of their tongues and bodies. What emerges is the undeniable agency of Afro-Pentecostals in an era and during a period when they were expected to be passively resigned to the conventions of the dominant (white) classes.

In chapter 7 Louis B. Gallien Jr. explores the Pentecostal foundations of three secular music icons with deep roots in African American Pentecostalism: Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye, and Donny Hathaway. In this provocative chapter, Gallien relates the experience of these superstars’ crossover from the gospel music that was an integral part of their young lives in the church to rhythm and blues, which catapulted them to success in the secular arena. He uses the stories of their experiences to shed light on the complicated themes of sexuality and spirituality within the black Pentecostal movement. Drawing on the scholarship of Michael Eric Dyson, Gallien contends that other scholars have often neglected these issues and thereby failed to critically address the intersection of these two themes. He further suggests that healthy dialogue in this area is essential for developing strategies to ensure the life and relevancy of the movement. This chapter allows us to see how Afro-Pentecostal beliefs—in this case about “the world” and about culture—here were challenged and expanded through the social and upward mobility of its members.

Part III addresses ethical concerns that black Pentecostal culture and spirituality raise within contemporary American society. By grappling with the often taboo subjects of sexuality, money, and race, the two contributors
in this section deal candidly with an integral part of the human reality that black Pentecostals, like all other Christians as well as every human person, must navigate. Their insights suggest that even deeper discussions in these areas would be enormously fruitful for further scholarship.

The ethicist Cheryl J. Sanders's chapter 8 speaks to the ethical, political, and ecclesiological significance of Pentecostal preaching with particular attention to two perceived polarities: the prosperity gospel and the social gospel. It looks at the role of ethics in African American Pentecostal preaching's embrace and promotion of the prosperity gospel, which emphasizes God's will for the believer to become wealthy through faith. Sanders questions whether pastors who nurture their flocks with this message have neglected the social ethical message of the biblical prophets as advocates for the rights of the poor. If so, many African American Pentecostal preachers are abandoning the struggle for social justice, accepting the strings attached to faith-based government funding for their community development programs, and buying into the divisive family values discourse crafted by political conservatives. She further points to signs that the discourse is changing and strategies are shifting through a resurgence of prophetic activism among some black Pentecostal pastors, ministers, and community leaders who have maintained their theological conservatism while adapting a more effective, liberal social ethic, which is attractive to younger Pentecostals who desire a more socially relevant spirituality. Finally, Sanders implores African American Pentecostals to retrieve the biblically based message of advocacy for the poor and to resist conforming themselves to the worldly strategies of consumerism, simplistic multiculturalism, and political conservatism implicit in the prosperity gospel. Thus this chapter attempts to retrieve the prophetic praxis of a previous generation while calling attention to contemporary discursive practices, which are deemed to be a departure from and at odds with the more historic Black Church tradition.

Another ethicist, Leonard Lovett, uses the theological genre of the autobiographical essay to look back over his long career as a Pentecostal scholar, churchman, and social activist. Chapter 9 highlights the influence of the scholars who helped shape Lovett's socio-political thought in order to shed light on how racial dynamics within the Pentecostal academy have mirrored concerns found in other segments of the movement. It also provides insight into how some Afro-Pentecostal scholars were able to appropriate the guidance received through mentoring relationships with prominent scholars, and through studying the works of more liberal scholars, were enabled to engage in intellectual dialogue in the classroom and be involved in academic consultations to help frame a response to the racism they encountered within the
movement. At the same time, Lovett candidly forces open a discourse that compels those within the movement to confront questions regarding the racial injustice still visible within the Pentecostal church and academy, as reflected in his rejection by white Pentecostal scholars and exclusion from recent reference works on the movement. Lovett’s chapter is itself an illuminating discussion of the shifting discourses of Afro-Pentecostalism even when limited to the generation since its emergence in the theological academy.

Part IV examines Pentecostal approaches to the task of theology, paying special attention to two interrelated areas at the core of black religious thought—pneumatology, the study of the work of the Holy Spirit, and eschatology, a concern with the end of the world or of the ultimate destiny of humanity and liberation—as they relate to providing a religious framework for the struggle for social justice. These chapters contend that these themes are at the heart of Pentecostalism itself and explore how they might be used as vehicles for expanding the conversation between often isolated black Pentecostals and the broader Black Church and academic community.

The theologian, historian, and homiletician William C. Turner Jr. advances the thesis in chapter 10 that good pneumatology is liberation theology, and good liberation theology is pneumatology. Turner explores the gap between the African American Church’s worship, service, prophetic-liberative social consciousness, and the underdevelopment of pneumatology in major scholarly projects. He laments that since this gap developed among the first generation of black theologians, there has been little sustained effort to close it, and suggests that there are grave consequences for both the Pentecostal movement and the larger church. For Turner, when fervor is without the guidance of such reflection, and when efforts to remedy the neglect in pneumatology are undertaken without sufficient sensitivity to concrete issues of liberation, the result is a discourse that is woefully inadequate for developing strategies to address the authentic spiritual and social needs of either black Pentecostals or the wider black community. Herein is a constructive proposal, both seeking to further Afro-Pentecostal self-understanding and to contribute to the wider theological academy.

Frederick L. Ware’s chapter 11 suggests that shifting the discourse within eschatology, which he sees as a principal focus of both Pentecostal thought and black theology, could potentially form a powerful intersection between the two seemingly disparate ideologies. Ware contends, however, that African American Pentecostalism’s tendency toward premillennialism (the belief that Christ will physically return to earth to reign for one thousand years at the end of an apocalyptic period of tribulation before the end of the world),
is incompatible with black theology and that it fosters political, social, and economic indifference. He recommends a strategy that replaces premillennialism with an eschatology rooted in black folk sources and black Christian millennialism, and suggests that such reorientation is both liberative and promotes new possibilities for a constructive black Pentecostal theological discourse. Ware’s chapter can thus be read both as highlighting the disparity between black slave and classical Afro-Pentecostal eschatologies, and as urging further adjustment and innovation in order to more adequately address the contemporary task of Afro-Pentecostal and black theology.

In Part V, two scholars with broad expertise in both global Christianity and varieties of Pentecostal spirituality explore ways in which Afro-Pentecostalism has enriched and been enriched by engagement in the global Pentecostal context. Their essays open the reader to two arenas—missiology and liberation theology—in which Afro-Pentecostalism has made a substantial contribution, while suggesting ways in which these contributions could be better appreciated.

The missiologist Ogbu Kalu was one of the most prolific and yet unheralded scholars of Afro-Pentecostalism until his death in early 2009. His chapter first explores the strategies African Americans employed to evangelize the African motherland from the eighteenth century on. He then turns his attention to a comparison of the missionary achievements of two of the largest black Pentecostal denominations—the Church of God in Christ and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World—between 1920 and 1950, examining specifically the Liberian context. He then explores contemporary linkages, networks, and blockages of the Afro-Pentecostal mission and the impact of those mid-century African American Pentecostals on contemporary African Pentecostalism. Kalu’s chapter, one of the first scholarly overviews of Afro-Pentecostal missions history, clarifies the ways in which missions within black Pentecostal denominations have evolved from a monologue dominated by the American context to a discursive give-and-take between American and African cultures. The distinctive contributions of Afro-Pentecostal missionaries across their first century can be better appreciated against the broader religious and political landscape.

Picking up again on the intersection between pneumatology and liberation, Dale Irvin’s chapter suggests that a fully engaged discourse between black Pentecostal theology and black liberation theology has yet to be attempted. While Irvin sees the work of fellow contributor, Leonard Lovett, as laying the foundation for such a fuller discourse, he also avers that the conversation between the two disciplines is still in its infancy because the
potential benefit of such dialogue often has been overlooked. Irvin’s contention, as a historian of world Christianity, is that both have something specific to offer—not only to each other but to the global Christian community—and he suggests several ways they can serve to mutually critique and correct each other, while outlining the specific contributions each makes to this broader context. This emphasis on the diverse beliefs and practices of the global Afro-Pentecostal movement and the potential of its encounter with black liberation theology fittingly concludes the volume.

Taken together, the essays in this book provide a lens through which to move from simple reductionist characterizations of African American Pentecostalism to a more intricate understanding of this movement, whose reach and impact are still unfolding and expanding into every arena of American and global culture. They demonstrate that this expansion has already made significant contributions and enriched the theology, spirituality, praxis, and social realities of American and global religious life. At the same time, they highlight areas where further discussion is warranted, and suggest that these conversations can be made even richer when engaged with the breadth of both Pentecostalism and the broader Christian tradition.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1


2. The literature on African American Pentecostalism is only recently emerging. See, for example, the selected bibliography at the end of this book.


4. Both these denominations began as interracial bodies but now have essentially African American constituencies.


6. The term “sanctified church” is the nomenclature many scholars of religion use to speak collectively about the black Holiness and Pentecostal tradition.


