Pentecostalism  
Review by: Kenneth J. Stewart


Conservative evangelicals are rather un-curious about Pentecostalism. An exception to this attitude is the interest we show in representatives of the Pentecostal tradition who share our allegiance to biblical inerrancy and, in more recent times, to the theology of the Reformers. Now there are streams of Pentecostalism we think deserve attention! But there’s something wrong with this picture. Since the early 1990s, many reports suggest quasi-Pentecostalism is the proliferating form of evangelical Christianity that will make the southern hemisphere the true logistical base of Christianity within our lifetimes. Even now, studies that attempt to distinguish non-Pentecostal from Pentecostal evangelicalism show that the latter—in formal existence only for little more than a century—easily outstrips the former (even though it is growing steadily, too).

My proposal isn’t that conservative evangelicals now need to say “ahem” and ask to join this movement that globally overshadows our own. It is simply a suggestion that we make a greater effort to take this movement seriously, locating points of commonality as well as of difference. Our evangelical commonalities are real and extensive. Enter William Kay, a U.K. minister of the Assemblies of God, holder of doctorates in theology and education, and currently professor of theology in Glyndwr University (Wales). Take up this compact volume in Oxford’s “Very Short Introduction” series, and discover that it’s a goldmine of fact and interpretation with especially strong insights reflecting Kay’s advanced social science training.

**History in Brief**

Here we have (in a first chapter) a description of the beginnings of Pentecostalism in both Western Europe and America in soil prepared by Holiness movements fueled by dissatisfaction with Methodism. Revival movements in places as diverse as Wales (1904) and Korea (1907) stand in a kind of “twilight zone” between Holiness and Pentecostalism.

In his second chapter, Kay elaborates on a view of multiple origins for classical Pentecostalism, with events in Scandinavia, India, and England figuring as significantly as California’s Azusa Street revival of 1906. He confirms what we have long been told: that early Pentecostalism endorsed tongue-speaking as the evidence of Spirit-baptism (earlier Holiness teaching had conceived of a post-conversion “crisis” of Spirit-baptism not tied to such a result). Not only were there these international flowerings of Pentecostal phenomena, but in America there was also an especially
notable interracial element by which, at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, whites, blacks, and Asians transcended their differences. This interracial character was largely lost by the 1920s, however; after this time early American Pentecostalism developed along more racially defined lines.

We read next of an impressive expansion of this rudimentary Pentecostalism across Western Europe (where it took root in Pietist soil), across Southeast Asia, and into Latin America. The upsurge of 1906 had provided a powerful impetus that propelled Western missionaries abroad with an urgent gospel message; they viewed the renewed “gift” of the Spirit as a harbinger of end times. Many attempted to dispense with foreign language study, reckoning that Acts 2 indicated all language barriers would be overcome by the Spirit.

In Africa, there is some evidence that Pentecostalism took root in areas (west and south) in which an earlier missionary Methodism had been at work. Of special interest is Kay’s view that the post-World War II de-colonization period provided a special opportunity for Pentecostal growth in the developing world. The emphasis on the empowering of rank-and-file believers, so characteristic of Pentecostalism, helped fuel the indigenization of the Christian faith in newly independent countries.

Additionally, Kay documents that in multiple geographical settings, Pentecostalism propagated “prosperity theology.” He suggests this developed as an extension of its pre-existing emphasis on healing and miracle. Jesus had multiplied loaves and fishes as well as healed the sick. Kay hypothesizes, then, that this extension of belief in miracle to the realm of personal prosperity was forged in the minds of American Pentecostal leaders (such as Oral Roberts) who’d known the grinding poverty of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the pre-World War II era. Half a century later, this teaching asserted itself in Africa and took on a quite different meaning.

Further, Kay demonstrates that early Pentecostalism was otherworldly, expected an imminent return of Christ and the world’s end, and was strongly inclined to pacifism (when World War I threatened). In certain respects, this eschatological outlook mirrored views popular in this same era in which dispensational teaching held sway (one of an interesting number of points of contact with rising Fundamentalism). Similarly, early Pentecostalism was supportive of the return of Jewish people to Palestine beginning after World War I.

**Mega Growth**

Yet the development of “classical” Pentecostalism is hardly the whole story. Kay proceeds to describe the development in the second half of the century of “mega” Pentecostal congregations in major cities of the world such as Singapore, Seoul, and London. Not only because of their numerical strength, but also because their urban settings mean they draw on a more professional strata of population, these congregations (which Kay terms “progressive”) have proven themselves more likely to address urban problems of crime and healthcare than were their Pentecostal forebears. They have also all advanced the “cell group” strategy taken up by evangelicalism at large.

Last, Kay explores how the proliferation of Pentecostal influence since 1960 has been achieved by two movements that, intriguingly, have overshadowed classical Pentecostalism. Reliable demographic studies show the difference made with the emergence of charismatic renewal (beginning in the 1960s) within major denominations (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic) in which Pentecostal distinctives had not previously been welcomed. More recently still, it has been the emergence of “third wave” movements (including the Vineyard, Calvary Chapel, and Victory Centers) in
which Pentecostal emphases live on, though assigned a slightly less central place. The latter two are, says Kay, now numerically greater than the “classical” movement, itself a little more than a century old.

An excellent reading list divided by themes concludes the volume. If we look to Kay for a descriptive and phenomenological approach to world Pentecostalism, we will not be disappointed. Thus, the theological aspects of Pentecostalism over which evangelical onlookers demur are not evaluated. What of those studies that indicate that tongue-speaking is in decline among those very churches that insist on it as essential? What of the flagrant media-star Pentecostal figures who seem accountable to none? Yet this volume, once digested and discussed, will help conservative evangelicals find greater areas of shared agreement with a now-extensive wing of the evangelical family. Shouldn’t we regret not having known them better?

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