

The Rising Tide of Influence

How Pentecostalism is gradually changing the dynamics of American politics



A phenomenon is emerging in politics today, one off the radar of most political observers. This movement hasn't come crashing on the scene all at once, but instead has been steadily forming like a tsunami, untraced by most and even ignored by those aware of its potential yet who dismiss it out of personal bias. As this wave surges, its rising water line can lift political candidates to new heights of influence almost overnight.

The tsunami I speak of is the new wave of *proactive* involvement among Pentecostal/charismatic Christians in the American political system, and it is becoming an increasingly powerful force with enough potential to change a nation. Donald Miller, professor of religion at the University of Southern California, has said that "Pentecostalism is reshaping the face of Christianity." I would argue it is also reshaping the face of American politics and represents a significant part of a larger movement to return America to its Judeo-Christian values.

According to the World Christian Database, there are almost 80 million "renewalists" in the U.S., which would include Pentecostals, charismatics and neo-charismatics (often referred to as the "Third Wavers"). Yet to understand just how influential the Pentecostal political movement is becoming, we must first understand how far charismatics (a term that, for the sake of brevity, I'm using interchangeably with *Pentecostals*) have come regarding politics.

A Silent Minority

Historically Pentecostals have been pietists and not reformers, meaning they've traditionally remained unengaged in matters of public policy and politics. With a focus on robust worship, church life and spiritual gifts, they've held a natural disposition against engaging in "the things of the world" such as politics.

This was evident during World War I, when most Pentecostals were pacifists. Over the years, taking a stand on public policy has not been a priority. In the mid-1950s, for example, Pentecostal leaders had little to say about the pressing issue of the day—nuclear disarmament—yet many preached "boldly" on the importance of not playing sports on the Lord's day.

By the late '70s to early '80s, an emerging movement among believers became known by the semi-pejorative term "Religious Right." During this time evangelical Christians rose up in record numbers and decided that they should not—and could not—sit back while the nation slid into moral decline. Their theology, which previously saw politics as dirty and something the church shouldn't get involved in, was replaced with a conviction that embraced a believer's duty to be fully engaged in shaping the world. Largely influenced by the thinking and writings of the late Francis Schaeffer, men such as Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell, Presbyterian pastor D. James Kennedy and Methodist minister Don Wildmon rose up in the '80s to educate their followers and challenge them to engage in culture and politics.

Pat Robertson was the first major charismatic figure to appear as a leader in the Religious Right. A former Baptist by association, Robertson was a charismatic in his pneumatology and presentation. In the early '80s, he formed a short-lived national organization called the Freedom Council. Using quotes from the Founding Fathers throughout its literature, this non-profit group began organizing grassroots citizens to register voters in churches and raise awareness for Christians running for office. By 1986, Robertson had announced his candidacy to

run for president of the United States, and the Freedom Council's network used many of the same people who conducted his campaign.

Because of his strong media presence—he was president of the Christian Broadcasting Network—Robertson found a built-in following among Pentecostals, who enthusiastically rose up to support “one of their own.” This gave him the instant push he needed to eventually win the Iowa straw poll in 1987 and push Bob Dole and George H.W. Bush into second and third place, which stunned the GOP establishment and made national news.

Robertson couldn't sustain the momentum, however, and ended his campaign before the 1988 primaries. Shortly after, he hired a young, dynamic political operative named Ralph Reed to spearhead a new organization called the Christian Coalition. This group used the network of followers created by Robertson's campaign to create a national grass-roots organization that proved to be the most significant force in modern American politics for getting Christians involved in local party politics. Though the Christian Coalition of America, as it is now called, has dissipated into a weak and scattered organization today, for more than a decade no other group rivaled the scope and reach of its influence, and it must not be overlooked that this all began with a charismatic.

The Making of a Pentecostal President

✖ As a charismatic, Robertson was a natural pick for those who shared his faith. But Pentecostals have also proven themselves willing to support others who aren't Pentecostal by denomination but who at least understand them or show them due respect. Because charismatics are accustomed to being marginalized by the world, a candidate who reaches out to them with genuine friendship is often rewarded with robust support. If charismatics are anything, they are a *passionate* people. And when they get motivated behind someone, they will pour an exponential amount of time, money and energy into helping to

propel a candidate into a viable status almost instantly.

Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann and Texas Gov. Rick Perry are both recent examples of this. Bachmann is a Lutheran and Perry a Methodist, yet each is loved and supported by charismatics because of a willingness to speak to, work with, befriend and sincerely embrace these believers. Bachmann is an Oral Roberts University graduate with charismatic roots (see "Michele Bachmann Talks About Her Faith" on p. 36). Interestingly enough, she placed first in the same Iowa straw poll Robertson won 24 years earlier.

Pentecostals also played a part in Sarah Palin's instant rise to fame last election. Immediately after being chosen as the vice presidential candidate for Sen. John McCain, the Christian community buzzed over the fact that she grew up in Wasilla Assembly of God church in Alaska.

Charismatics also have had a major role in propelling Perry to his initial GOP front-runner status since he partnered with them to hold The Response, a day of prayer and fasting in August. It attracted more than 30,000 Christians and culminated with Perry praying and reading Scripture. Yet behind the scenes many charismatics were responsible for organizing the event, including Alice Patterson, Doug Stringer and leaders from the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Mo.

The Change We Want

Perry and Bachmann are indicative of the candidates that typically attract Pentecostals. Based on observing purely intuitive appeal, Pentecostals are prone to like authoritative candidates who speak with the same authority of a traditional Pentecostal preacher.

Charismatics often opt for candidates who reflect the passion and dynamic nature of their own form of worship. And they also seem more open than other segments of the church to backing

minority candidates, including women, Hispanics and African-Americans.

This may be partly because many charismatic churches allow women to be pastors and hold leadership positions; the majority of Hispanic Protestants are charismatic in at least expression of their faith, if not theology as well; and the black church in America has been integral to the Pentecostal movement since its formation in the early 1900s.

Across the board, Pentecostals tend to be politically conservative, especially on moral and social issues. As a result, they predominately identify with and register as Republicans—with the primary exception to this being black Pentecostals, who have been predominately loyal to President Barack Obama. Among the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), for example, most churchgoers are registered Democrats, although they would be mostly against gay marriage and abortion rights—both of which Obama supports.

Among Hispanic charismatics, the majority tend to be Republican, according to the latest Pew Hispanic Center study. This is largely because the Latino alignment with white evangelical Republicans against same-sex marriage and abortion is almost universal. However, Hispanic believers sharply part with conservative Republicans on the issue of immigration.

Charismatic Controversy

Charismatic leaders who step into the political fray are typically attacked by the left and the mainstream media the moment they are perceived as being effective or influential. The left has made a virtual art form out of trying to demonize any high-profile leader who takes a stand for Christian values. Yet for a host of reasons, Pentecostal leaders often receive greater vitriol than their evangelical counterparts. I believe some of these reasons are legitimate, while others are completely bigoted and illegitimate.

Illegitimate Attacks: The secular elites in academia and the media often know little about the importance of religion in general, but are even more clueless about the very real experiences and beliefs practiced by millions of charismatic Christians in America and around the world.

Added to this, however, is an inherent bias toward any religion that expresses itself in a socially conservative political context. The opposition against Pentecostals is even more intense because of their unique expressions of worship and extraordinary practices such as speaking in tongues, praying for healing of the sick and prophetic deliveries. The liberal virtues of tolerance, diversity and open-mindedness are completely lost when it comes to Pentecostals stepping into the political arena. (For more on this, see Stephen Mansfield and David A. Holland's article, "So Help Us, God," on p. 38).

When the left attempts to demonize leaders such as Palin, Bachmann and Perry, they believe they're actually exposing these figures and damaging their credibility. Their main weapon is to stir up fear by launching vicious, strategic and multidimensional attacks. In the past, this was evident in the mainstream media's skewering of leaders such as James G. Watt, who served as Ronald Reagan's first secretary of the interior, and former Attorney General John Ashcroft, both of whom had Assemblies of God backgrounds.

More recently, NPR, *Newsweek* and *Time* each launched blatant attacks against Pentecostal-friendly candidates, targeting their connections to charismatic groups such as Peter Wagner's New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). In Wagner's case, all three liberal media outlets twisted NAR's "seven mountain" terminology, which involves Christians establishing God's kingdom in every sphere of culture, and even compared the NAR to a jihadist terrorist group. (For Wagner's defense, see "The Truth About the New Apostolic Reformation" on p. 40.)

The left's ploy is to attack Christian leaders such as Wagner as a warning to others who venture into the political arena; and tragically, the church has often succumbed to this intimidation. Yet what charismatics must understand—and what the leftist media doesn't comprehend—is that such tactics can galvanize support for these figures and bolster their influence more than if the political hopefuls had been left alone or ignored. Such a backfire is reminiscent of Joseph's story in Genesis 50:20 in that what these often anti-Christian agendas meant for evil, "God meant it for good."

Legitimate Criticism: Despite the flow of media-driven religious bigotry and illegitimate disparagement directed toward charismatics, there are times when criticism is warranted, particularly when it deals with the abuse, hypocrisy and poor judgment exercised by charismatic leaders. How many times has the secular media mocked yet another charismatic minister for pronouncing a "prophetic word" that never comes to pass?

Equally as bad, how often are Pentecostal leaders taken to task by their evangelical brothers and sisters for proposing a clearly unbiblical teaching? These prophetic pronouncements and misguided interpretations of Scripture are rarely shared with church elders or leaders before becoming public, namely because in many of these churches or ministries there is no true accountability or plurality of leadership. These situations hurt credibility for all charismatics with other evangelicals, as well as with the general public.

Countless other unscripted statements during sermons have become fodder for the press simply because they weren't well thought out beforehand or screened by the collective wisdom of the saints. Because many charismatic pastors run their churches with singular authority either functionally or organizationally, a structural lack of accountability makes them prone to become the media's next easy target.

Charismatic Leaders Engaging in Politics

Criticism from the left is nothing new for charismatics. What is relatively new, however, is the increasing number of Pentecostal leaders emerging on the political scene who remain unashamed of their charismatic roots and theology. With the exception of Robertson's significant contribution to the Religious Right, most conservative Christian leaders who rallied their constituents for political purposes in the '80s and '90s were noncharismatic evangelicals such as James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, D. James Kennedy and Don Wildmon. Only in the last decade have Pentecostal leaders emerged to publicly endorse candidates, speak out on policy issues and encourage their followers to actively vote. Here are a few of those:

✖ **Samuel Rodriguez** – One of the leading voices of Hispanic believers in America, Rodriguez holds a number of national leadership positions and straddles both evangelical and charismatic lines. An ordained minister with the Assemblies of God and co-pastor of an unapologetically charismatic church in expression, Rodriguez could arguably be the most powerful Pentecostal leader in American politics today because of the number of Hispanic born-again believers he represents (16 million) and because Latinos are the fastest-growing demographic in the country. Because of Republican disagreement with the Hispanic community on immigration issues, Rodriguez has also become an ally and an adviser for President Obama and congressional Democrats, as well as conservative Republican leaders.

✖ **Bishop Harry Jackson** – As senior pastor of the Washington, Hope Christian Church, Jackson has lived and breathed politics for years while remaining passionate about how public policy can intersect with faith to positively impact local communities. Like Rodriguez, Jackson is openly embraced in

charismatic and noncharismatic circles alike, as evidenced by his frequent work with Family Research Council President Tony Perkins. Though Jackson has spoken out against gay marriage and abortion for years, he has grabbed national spotlight in recent years for leading the fight against legalizing same-sex marriage in the nation's capital. His appeals were eventually dismissed by the U.S. Supreme Court, but Jackson continues to be one of the leading proponents in aligning public policy with biblical values, particularly as this affects urban communities.

✖ **Lou Engle and The Call** – The charismatic prayer leader has been instrumental in establishing a nationwide prayer movement, often working in tandem with the International House of Prayer in Kansas City. Engle has rallied hundreds of thousands of teens and young adults in various cities for all-day prayer gatherings as part of “The Call.” Because repenting for and praying against abortion has taken center stage at The Call, Engle is naturally connected to the political scene. He has also spoken out against same-sex marriage and radical Islam, but usually does so in redemptive ways.

✖ **Rick Joyner and The Oak Initiative** – The Oak Initiative, which was launched by Joyner in 2009, describes itself as an “interdenominational movement that is mobilizing thousands of Christians to be engaged in the great issues of their times, being the salt and light that they are called to be.” It also has taken a strong but legitimate stand against radical Islam, among other moral and social issues. Although Rodriguez was originally part of leading the organization but has since resigned, Joyner's remaining board members include mostly national charismatic-associated names such as Cindy Jacobs, Bob Weiner, Bishop Larry Jackson, Lance Wallnau and Ardell Daniels, the husband of Jacksonville, Fla.,

Councilwoman Kim Daniels.

✖ **Jim Garlow and Proposition 8** – A Wesleyan pastor who prefers to be identified with Third Wavers, Garlow leads Skyline Church in San Diego. He was responsible for developing the California Pastors Rapid Response Team that networked several thousand pastors across the state to support Proposition 8, the California Marriage Amendment that passed in 2008 by 5 percent. In March 2010, Garlow, who continues to pastor Skyline, was appointed by former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich to be the Chairman of ReAL (Renewing American Leadership), based in Washington, D.C. Garlow is considered one of the leading Christian activists and cultural change agents in the U.S.

✖ **Rod Parsley** – The popular and fiery “Bapticostal” preacher from Ohio was fully engaged in the support of passing the Ohio marriage amendment in 2006 and was once active in the Arlington Group, a national coalition of conservative Christian leaders that met in Washington, D.C. Parsley also actively campaigned for John McCain in his presidential bid, yet after the media criticized McCain because of Parsley’s statements on Islam, McCain rejected his endorsement. Parsley is also the president of The Center for Moral Clarity, a Christian grass-roots organization.

The New (and Future) Wave

These are just a sampling of the hundreds of charismatics involved in shaping the politics and policies of our nation for the sake of God’s kingdom. Among the leaders we haven’t highlighted but who are certainly worth noting are: Keith Butler, Alice Patterson, John Hagee, Cindy Jacobs, Dutch Sheets, James Robison and Mark Gonzalez.

Each represents a new wave in charismatic circles. The sheer growth of Pentecostals in the U.S. makes them a serious potential political force waiting to be registered to vote, educated and led to the polls. These believers—80 million strong—are slowly awakening to political engagement as their pastors and leaders help them see how they have a duty to speak out and take action within the wider culture, which includes politics and elections. Politicians cannot and will not ignore numbers of potential voters so significant—and if they do, it will be at the risk of their own political future.

John Stemberger holds degrees in public administration, political science and a juris doctorate in law. He's been a political activist for more than 30 years and was responsible for leading the 2008 campaign to pass Amendment 2, the Florida Marriage Protection Amendment, by a 62 percent margin. John also has an Assemblies of God background and has attended a Sovereign Grace church in Orlando, Fla., for the past 16 years.