

The Future of Pentecostalism

What will keep Pentecostalism from decaying into dead formalism?

One hundred years ago, at the time the Azusa Street Revival broke out in Los Angeles, a great revival was already in progress in Wales. Today there's not much to show for the Welsh Revival—but by God's grace Pentecostalism, the movement that was fueled by the revival at Azusa, has somewhere between 400 million and 600 million adherents around the world.

Why did one move of God continue and the other die? Let me share some thoughts after having covered the ongoing revival as a journalist (and participant) for more than three decades.

Most revivals fizzle quickly—unless they become institutionalized as Pentecostalism did. Early Pentecostal leaders in other nations spread the revival around the world and set up Bible colleges and seminaries to train new generations of leaders. By contrast the leaders in Wales—particularly Evan Roberts—withdrew from leadership in order to avoid stealing the glory from God.

The Pentecostal revival also reinvented itself and broadened, almost as the Protestant movement has done for nearly 500 years. In fact, historians are saying Pentecostalism is the third great segment of Christianity after Roman Catholicism/Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism.

Pentecostalism evolved into many denominations and then morphed into the charismatic movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Today it continues to grow, particularly among African-Americans and Hispanics in this country and in Third World settings. Several factors, including its spiritual intensity, its resolution to take the New Testament at face value, and

its use of television and other forms of media to get out the message, have contributed to its growth—at least for the time being.

But what will keep Pentecostalism from decaying into dead formalism? And how will the tendency of some Pentecostal lone rangers to drift into doctrinal error, sexual sin or financial indiscretions affect it? Though there is a strong strain of holiness and righteousness undergirding the movement, rottenness has plagued it from the beginning. Which way will it go in the future?

At this centennial, as we praise God for the good that has come out of Pentecostalism, let's also consider what more we could have done. In the last century, our nation has drifted steadily toward godlessness while Pentecostals were busy shouting in their churches.

Ask yourself: How many Pentecostals spoke out in the early days against communism? Against Nazism and the Holocaust? Against the proliferation of nuclear weapons? How many marched with African-Americans in support of civil rights?

Thankfully, more Pentecostals are making a difference today. Men such as pastor Jack Hayford and evangelist Reinhard Bonnke are raising the standard of godliness among Christian leaders. Attorneys such as Jay Sekulow are arguing important cases before the Supreme Court. Pastor John Hagee and others are speaking out against anti-Semitism, Rod Parsley is voicing concern about moral issues, and Spirit-filled leaders such as Keith Butler are getting involved in the process to change society.

If we believe that God has answers and that the power of the Holy Spirit can change institutions as well as lives, then in the next century we must not only speak out but also work to impact the culture.

One thing is certain: The Pentecostal/charismatic church will face enormous change, and we must participate with the work of the Holy Spirit if we want to experience unceasing revival.

We can do that first by praying, as Pope John XXIII did, for a “new Pentecost” and by being willing to embrace it when it comes. Second, we can exercise our faith to believe God will send His fire in answer to our prayers. Finally, we can avoid triumphalism—an attitude that makes us appear to others as if we think we have all the answers. This alienates believers and unbelievers alike.

According to my friend Mark Rutland, president of Southeastern University, “The key to Pentecostal power is brokenness.” If we want to see the movement not only continue but also receive fresh impetus from God, we must remain humble before Him.

Stephen Strang, the founder and publisher of Charisma, is a fourth-generation Pentecostal.