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BRILL

Toward a Holistic Pentecost

Pentecostalism, Embodiment, and Social Justice

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Abstract

Pentecostalism is often celebrated as a holistic or embodied spirituality that overcomes the dualisms inherent to modernity, and that juxtapose the body and the spiritual. However, historically and in the present, pentecostals struggle to address the problems of inequity and oppression that impact certain bodies in the church and the world. This article explores this tension in Classical Pentecostalism with a focus on Azusa Street and contemporary Pentecostalism in Britain. Through a case study of a “progressive” pentecostal church, I demonstrate that even in contexts that prioritize social engagement, the realities of class, race, and gender oppressions can continue unnamed and unchallenged. Resources may be located, I argue, in the African roots of the movement that provide an integrated worldview in which all aspects of life are considered spiritual and thus the oppressed are empowered to resist social, economic, and political as well as spiritual oppression.

Keywords

Pentecostalism – embodiment – race – class – gender – justice

1 Introduction

As pentecostal theology has developed, so has its interdisciplinary potential as exemplified by James K.A. Smith’s paper “Advice to Pentecostal Philosophers”¹

1 James K.A. Smith, “Advice to Pentecostal Philosophers,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11,

and his book *Thinking in Tongues*,² which is considered the first monograph to explore Pentecostalism's relevance for philosophy. In this article, I seek to bring the theme of embodiment and especially bodily particularity as presented in Smith's work into dialogue with the issues of social justice within and for pentecostal faith. I write as a theologian taking a foray into philosophy as others have done before me,³ but with a womanist ethical lens, which is concerned with the lived experiences of Black women and all those dehumanized by classism, racism, gender, and so forth.⁴ Pentecostalism is an essential space for critical consideration primarily due to its historic roots among African survivors of slavery and global survivors of European colonization, the socioeconomically disenfranchised, and women in a patriarchal world. Some of the first to encounter the Spirit were Black washer women, and Black women such as Lucy Farrow were key figures in the story of the Azusa Street revival.⁵ Going back to these early roots allows us to explore what this movement meant—and might therefore mean in the present and the future—for those whom Howard Thurman described as “having their backs against the wall.”⁶ Analysis of the extent to which bodies were recognized and interpreted theo-ethically by early believers will enable us to trace an early philosophy/theology of the body, which I believe influenced social and political imagination and engagement.

Second, Pentecostalism is important because of its complex relationship with the body. Smith claims, for example, that in contrast to Western modernity in which rationalism, intellectualism, and dualisms dominate, “pentecostal worship constitutes a kind of performative postmodernism.”⁷ In relation to the specific matter of embodiment, he argues that a

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- no. 2 (2003): 235–247, written in response to Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1984): 253–271.
- 2 James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
 - 3 J. Aaron Simmons, “Philosophy: Inspiration for Living Relationally and Thinking Rigorously,” in *Routledge Handbook to Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (New York/ London: Routledge, 2020) 399–409; J. Aaron Simmons, “Prospects for Pentecostal Philosophy,” *Pneuma* 42, no. 2 (2020): 175–200; Simo Frestadius, *Pentecostal Rationality: Epistemology and Theological Hermeneutics in the Foursquare Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2020); Amos Yong, *The Dialogical Spirit: Christian Reason and Theological Method in the Third Millennium* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
 - 4 For the first monograph on womanist theology/ethics and Classical Pentecostalism in Britain see Selina Stone, *The Spirit and The Body: Towards a Womanist Pentecostal Social Justice Ethic* (Leiden: Brill/Schöningh, 2023, forthcoming).
 - 5 Patrice McDonald, “Pentecostalism: A Democratizing, Liberating Force for Black Women?,” *Journal of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity* 42, no. 2 (2022): 160–165.
 - 6 Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 1.
 - 7 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 59.

critique of dualism is implicitly embedded ... in the pentecostal affirmation of bodily healing. To say that God cares enough about bodies to heal them is to recapture the creation affirmation of the goodness of embodiment against the neo-Gnosticism of modernity.⁸

Smith's reasoning is understandable on the one hand. Within pentecostal spirituality, the body is not considered to be opposed to the spirit of the person or the Spirit of God; rather, the body is valued as a temple of the Holy Spirit and is thus given clear moral importance. The body is healed by the divine presence and is recognized as an instrument for worship and encounter with God—a sanctified *body*, not only a sanctified soul, is essential to baptism in the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Michael Wilkinson describes the “Pentecostal body” as “constructed around a series of dualisms that restrict or limit but also liberate.”⁹ However, the pentecostal relationship with the body and bodies may be more complex and nuanced. Steve Bishop has argued that Smith's Pentecostalism is unrecognizable, as Pentecostalism often functions out of a dualism in practice even if the theory suggests it need not.¹⁰ And Frederick L. Ware warns that Smith must “exhibit awareness of the normalization (regulation and control) of religious experience and religious story” and thus attend to “the negative, nontypical, and noncanonical stories of the movement.”¹¹ What might explain the gap between Smith's argument and such criticisms? Does the pentecostal emphasis on the body in worship and especially Holy Spirit baptism enable the recognition or addressing of how bodies are classed, racialized, gendered, and often oppressed due to those categories? In this article I argue that, for the most part, Pentecostals have historically fallen short of a fully holistic embracing of and attention to embodiment. While the body is valued in worship through healing and Spirit baptism, certain bodies suffered and suffer due to a lack of attention to how power relates to embodiment. Azusa Street was sabotaged due to this lack of attention to bodies and power. A holistic of embodied pentecostal spirituality must include and attend to the bodies of individuals, especially

8 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 61.

9 Michael Wilkinson, “Pentecostalism, the Body, and Embodiment,” in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion Vol. 8: Pentecostals and the Body*, ed. Michael Wilkinson and Peter Althouse (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 30–33.

10 Steve Bishop, “James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy*,” Grand Rapids, 2010: Eerdmans. 155 pages. ISBN 9780802861849,” *Philosophia Reformata* 76, no. 1 (2011): 161.

11 Frederick L. Ware, “An Interim Assessment of the Pentecostal Manifesto Series,” *Journal of Religion* 94, no. 1 (2014): 99–100.

dehumanized and excluded bodies, as well as to the body of the community by overcoming hierarchies, exclusions, and isms of all kinds.

2 Early Pentecostalism: Dualisms Undermining the Movement

2.1 *Spirit-Baptism, Race, and Early Pentecostalism*

At the time of the Azusa Street revival, opinions varied regarding the evidence that it was a true work of the Holy Spirit. For many, speaking in tongues had a primary place as evidence of the sanctifying work of the Spirit and of Spirit-baptism, as Charles Parham had taught:

We preach old-time repentance, old-time conversion, old-time sanctification, and old-time baptism with the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of power upon the sanctified life, and God throws in the gift of tongues ... The Spirit of God witnesses in your heart that you are sanctified ... The Spirit begins then and there leading us on to the Baptism with the Holy Ghost ...¹²

However, although Seymour initially promotes Parham's view above in the earliest *Apostolic Faith* newspaper, by 1915, when he published the *Doctrines and Disciplines of the Azusa Street Apostolic Faith Mission of Los Angeles, CA*, he seems to be keenly aware that this is a flawed perspective. What becomes clear from Seymour's own words is that while Parham's teaching regarding speaking in tongues as initial evidence made sense in theory, it had limitations in practice. Seymour encourages believers unreservedly to attend to the broader matters of Christian formation beyond speaking in tongues. He goes as far as to call it "heathenism"¹³ when people suggest that they *must* have outward signs of being filled with the Spirit. Instead, he encourages believers to "go by the word of God." This focus on the Bible, described here as "the word of God," is not a call to retreat into doctrinal arguments but to recapture a vision of a holistic transformation of the community of the Spirit-baptized. It is this vision, rooted in love, which he believes some of his white brethren have forgotten while they cling to a focus on speaking in tongues:

12 *The Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles, Sept, 1906), 3.

13 William Seymour, "The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Azusa Street Apostolic Faith Mission of Los Angeles, CA," quoted in Gastón Espinosa, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History* (New York: Duke University Press, 2014), 221.

We find according to God's word to be one in the Holy Spirit, not in the flesh; but in the Holy Spirit, for we are one body. 1 Cor. 12:12–14. If some of our white brethren have prejudices and discrimination (Gal. 2:11–20), we can't do it, because God calls us to follow the Bible. Matt. 17:8; Matt. 23. We must love all men as Christ commands (Heb. 12:14).¹⁴

Seymour's earlier thoughts, which were influenced by Parham's teaching, and his later perspectives, which were formed through his own critical analysis, represent two distinct trains of thought. On the one hand, the presence of the Spirit is linked solely to personal religious piety and, on the other, to the development of healthy community life and freedom. We can detect a different place for the body in each of these approaches. For those concerned primarily with personal piety in terms of personal holiness and speaking in tongues, the "Pentecostal body" is politicized, as Wilkinson articulates, through its being made holy and opposed to the secular.¹⁵ But the politics of embodiment and identity, inherent to bodily particularity, are overlooked. A focus on speaking in tongues as the core sign of encounter with the Holy Spirit makes it a priority over the matters of social holiness that would address the matters of racism Seymour highlights above or indeed over sexism or classism. While as Roger Glenn Robins explains: "religious ecstasy" may well have "offered a kinetic index of spiritual status and divine anointing that did not coincide with indexes based on race or class [but] ... reassigned status on religious or ethical, as opposed to social or material, grounds"¹⁶—this reassignment of status was not preserved by the community itself. Racial hierarchies did not disappear, but they were side-lined as unimportant material matters in contrast to the spiritual, and thus this kind of pentecostal spirituality can be seen as complicit in social inequity. This strand of pentecostal thought appears to be far from the "performative postmodernism" Smith claims.¹⁷ On the contrary, it is decidedly modern in its attempt to present a universal, normative experience of the Spirit that is disembodied, as it fails to recognize or reflect on the significance of the bodies being encountered by said Spirit, including any particularities. It is reminiscent of what sociologists Phillip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling have called Pentecostalism's "transcendent sacred," which is concerned with the "lifting" of people and their experiences out of existing immanent (and secular) social identities and

14 Seymour, quoted in Espinosa, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism*, 223–224.

15 Wilkinson, "Pentecostalism, the Body, and Embodiment," 30.

16 Roger Glenn Robins, *A.J. Tomlinson: Plainfolk Modernist* (New York, 2004; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2005), 54.

17 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 59.

bonds,” promoting individualism and “changing” bodies to fit ethical expectations.¹⁸ Such a “lifting” leaves behind any issues of class, race, or gender, which are considered temporal earthly matters in the light of the eternal, sacred and “transcendent.”

On the other hand, in Seymour’s later perspectives, we find a broader place for the body and bodies within the work of the Spirit and an understanding of the Spirit’s work that includes transformation beyond physical healing. In Seymour’s admonition, there is a clear expectation that within the Spirit-filled community of believers, a unity built on genuine love would overtake discrimination and prejudice. Put in embodiment terms, within Seymour’s vision, the Spirit would not *fill* the body while failing to *free* the body—especially the bodies of those victimized by inequity within the community of the saints and the world. Instead, the coming of the Spirit would directly correct the problems of identity, power, and community. As a result, genuine love would be a sign of the Spirit—and in this context especially, a love that transcends race.

2.2 *Racialized Tongues*

Various scholars have argued that the divide between those who limited initial evidence to speaking in tongues and those who looked for wider signs of Christian character and community, especially racial equity, fell along racial lines. Douglas J. Nelson argues that it is exclusively the white leaders, in writing their histories, who focus on speaking in tongues while overlooking the racial inclusion that many spoke of as the miracle of the Azusa Street revival.¹⁹ Lewis Brogdon explains that Seymour was driven by a theological vision of Pentecost that went beyond speaking in tongues to renewed community:

One can interpret Seymour’s insistence on human equality and relationality in community—in the midst of a society that gave absolute sanction to segregation and racism—as the real sign of the “baptism of the Spirit” and spiritual empowerment ... Seymour connected glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and koinonia (fellowship) in a manner that was entirely different from the way Parham and most other white Pentecostals connected them.²⁰

18 Phillip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, *Sociology of the Sacred: Religion, Embodiment and Social Change* (London: SAGE Publications: 2014), 28–29, 30–31.

19 Douglas J. Nelson, “For Such a Time as This: The Story of Bishop William J. Seymour and the Azusa Street Revival, A Search for Pentecostal/Charismatic Roots” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1991), 89.

20 Lewis Brogdon, “African American Pentecostalism,” in *Handbook of Pentecostal Christianity*, ed. Adam Stewart (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), 23.

While all of the early Pentecostals were seeking the experience of the Spirit as recorded in Acts 2, including glossolalia, Seymour can be seen as one who recognized the importance of the other sign in Acts 2: that of people of many ethnic groups being together in one place and receiving the good news in a form they could understand. While some white leaders such as A.J. Tomlinson, the founder of Church of God, may have valued interracial fellowship,²¹ it does not seem to have been given the same theological importance as it was by Black leaders. Interestingly, both approaches—the focus on glossolalia and the concern for love and community—are attuned to the matters of embodiment. Being filled with the Spirit is felt within the body and involves the brain and mouth being drawn into the mystery of unlearned words, sounds, and even groans. It is understood to be a tangible physical manifestation of the presence of God within the person. The concern for loving community is rooted in an expectation that the transformative work of the Spirit must be embodied among people sharing life together. However, it is only the latter approach that enabled Pentecostals fully to overcome the dualistic opposition of personal piety to community social life—by focusing on the matters of embodiment and power. Early Pentecostals such as Seymour, living within a society in which people were racialized predominantly as “white” or “black,” looked for a sign of the Spirit’s presence and power to overcome these divisions and the oppressions that resulted. A revival that left white supremacy intact was an unfinished work, but for those who focused purely on glossolalia, the work of the Spirit was a purely religious event with no social or political import, and thus an unfinished work could be considered complete.

Yet in an additional and original move, Ashon Crawley draws our attention to the significance between how early Black and white Pentecostals understood speaking in tongues. For Crawley, Parham and many white Pentecostals understood speaking in tongues as “xenolalia,” the ability to speak in foreign languages without learning them, while Seymour (eventually) and Black Pentecostals considered speaking in tongues to be “glossolalia,” the ability to speak in heavenly languages. This may seem inconsequential on the surface, but Crawley’s analysis is profound:

With xenolalia one could speak, without having to think in the language of the Other, without having to ever think about the value of the persons that think and speak in that language. One could maintain a grammar

21 Paul H. Thompson, “‘On Account of Conditions that Seem Unalterable’: A Proposal about Race Relations in the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) 1909–1929,” *Pneuma* 25, no. 2 (2003): 254–255.

and logic of settler colonial theological-philosophical thought, produced in the very language of the one that would be conquered ... Black pentecostals were willing to allow unknowability at the heart of the practice, were much more willing to think about tongues-speech as glossolalic ... glossolalia is irreducibly incoherent and generative for a Blackpentecostal radical imagination; not the recovery of nonsense but the refusal of sense having the final say. Glossolalia—registering as nothing at all—is the movement into incoherence as a choreosonic form toward praise, toward divine encounter.²²

What Crawley offers us is insight into the way race may have impacted early pentecostal doctrine and theological hermeneutics. By highlighting the dynamics of whiteness, he allows us to see Parham and many of the white Pentecostals who followed him as continuing a tradition of colonial Christian domination, even within early Pentecostalism. Whiteness is, for Crawley, informing—or more accurately distorting—the white pentecostal perspective on what provided evidence of Spirit-baptism and what speaking in tongues actually was. For Parham, whose white supremacy is now well known,²³ and those who promoted his view, speaking in tongues as xenolalia was an empowerment by the Holy Spirit for a white conquest in the name of Christ. On the other hand, Black Pentecostals, whose lives were steeped in the mystery of asking “why” of the divine and having no answers, seemed better able to handle the ambiguity of what speaking in tongues may be. In being able to welcome and embrace glossolalia, they welcome the mystery of connectivity between all things and an openness to the prerational, which can be considered deeply African.²⁴ For African Pentecostals and those who follow their example, speaking in tongues centers around communion with the divine and with one another more than it does around conquest.

When we consider this in relation to the matters of embodiment, and the particularity of bodies within early Pentecostalism, we can draw various con-

22 Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 217, 215.

23 Charles Parham, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness: Kol Kare Bomidbar*, 1902 (Pentecostal Books: 2013), 87–92; Allan Anderson, “The Dubious Legacy of Charles Parham: Racism and Cultural Insensitivities among Pentecostals,” *Pneuma* 27, no. 1 (2005): 51–64.

24 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1990), 2; Estrela Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2011), 28–60; Chammah J. Kaunda, “The Denial of African Agency: A Decolonial Theological Turn,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 13, no. 1 (April 2015): 75.

clusions. Primarily, whether or not we accept Crawley's argument in terms of the racial divide between glossolalia and xenolalia, it is clear that white supremacist colonial trends might be seen in the dualisms that embrace the body but fail to recognize the hierarchies of race and gender. This is an important distinction that is missed in Smith's analysis of Pentecostalism, which is blind to the matters of race. The question of whether Pentecostalism can be regarded as "modern" or "postmodern" may be less significant than the question of whether Pentecostalism upholds or opposes colonial Christian ideals in terms of its relationship with the body and bodily experience. In addition, it can be said, in light of Crawley's argument, that even within the spiritual practice of speaking in tongues, we see race impacting an understanding of both the nature and purpose of this core aspect of pentecostal spirituality. Xenolalia does not encourage critical engagement with the hierarchies of bodies, identity, and power; instead, it reinscribes them by assuming the superiority of whiteness and seeking to engage with the other as an object for domination and conquest. Glossolalia, on the other hand, encourages attentiveness to embodiment, in order to rejoice in the diverse community of faith and receive the gifts of the Spirit given to all people without discrimination due to race, ethnicity, or culture.

2.3 *Gender, Power, and Leadership*

In the matter of gender we find a similar complexity. On the one hand, the power of the Spirit is recognized as being outworked in women's lives and particularly in Black women's lives: "the work began among the colored people. God baptized several sanctified wash women with the Holy Ghost, who have been much used of Him."²⁵ These women were Black, from the lower classes of society, and were not only converts but also leaders of the movement. Lucy Farrow, the niece of Frederick Douglass, was sold into slavery as a girl²⁶ but as an adult served as the pastor of a Holiness church that she invited William Seymour to lead when she went to be the governess in the house of Charles Parham.²⁷ When Seymour went north to Los Angeles and the congregation started to grow in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lee, he sent for Lucy to assist him, recognizing her leadership.²⁸ In these early cases, sex was not a barrier to encounter with the Spirit and gender did not prevent one's access to leadership. On the contrary, Pentecostals received the words from the prophet Joel quoted

25 *The Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles, Sept. 1906), 3.

26 Nelson, "For Such a Time as This," 56, 61.

27 Nelson, "For Such a Time as This," 35.

28 Nelson, "For Such a Time as This," 56, 189.

by Peter in Acts 2, that daughters might prophesy, and women's ministry thus confirmed the divine source of the pentecostal faith and spirituality.

However, in a similar way to how racial tensions began to emerge to the extent that the initial interracial miracle of the Azusa Street gatherings was undermined, so patriarchal norms also began to emerge as denominations began to formalize their structures. Lisa Stephenson explains that

Pentecostal women who demonstrated any type of ministering authority by way of preaching, teaching, or evangelizing were not only tolerated, but expected. These prophetic functions were legitimated because of the power of the Spirit ... However, when it came to functioning in priestly roles that were understood to possess ruling authority (e.g., elders, church officials, denominational leaders), women were excluded on the basis of their sex. Legitimation for this type of authority required more than just an experience of Spirit baptism; one must also be male.²⁹

This is even more stark a shift when we consider Patrice McDonald's work on the special role Farrow played in the Spirit-baptism experienced by many, including Howard Goss, who would later depart from the interracial Azusa Street along with an all-white council to found the Assemblies of God.³⁰ McDonald explains that the Church of God chose not to continue the traditions of the Azusa Street revival, which included women as ministers and leaders, despite the fact that A.J. Tomlinson, the founder, had witnessed this under Seymour's leadership.³¹ Interestingly, Seymour began to betray similar presumptions about gender when he published his *Doctrines and Disciplines*. In his section on "the Call to preach" he speaks of "persons," suggesting women might be included, but then his third rule, "converse sparingly, and conduct yourself prudently with women. 1 Tim 5:2,"³² would suggest he presumes preachers would be men. In the section "plan of salvation" he goes on to say "all ordination must be done by men not women. Women may be ministers but not to Baptize and ordain in this work."³³ Seymour regresses from the early days of the movement when women enabled his own leadership development and were valued by him as equals.

29 Lisa Stephenson, "Prophesying Women and Ruling Men: Women's Religious Authority in North American Pentecostalism," *Religions* 2, no. 3 (2011): 414.

30 McDonald, "Pentecostalism," 164–165.

31 McDonald, "Pentecostalism," 167.

32 Seymour, quoted in Espinosa, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism*, 250.

33 Espinosa, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism*, 297.

Returning to Crawley's argument, it would seem, then, that while in the matter of race, Seymour and other Black people may well have embraced glossolalia as "generative for a Blackpentecostal radical imagination," this did not extend to a radical inclusion of Black women, their gifts and leadership. Similarly, while Black Pentecostals may have been content to embrace "unknowability" and "the refusal of having the final say," this did not extend to the lives of Black women whom Seymour sought to know and to control in this later time in his ministry. In this way we may consider him, too, to have fallen prey to the "settler colonial theological-philosophical" logic that was operative, in Crawley's view, in his white counterparts.

Therefore, we might summarize that in these early days of the movement, there was an inconsistent attentiveness to embodiment, power, and identity. Spirit-baptism, speaking in tongues, and revival, though being claimed to dismantle the hierarchies and exclusions common to humanity at the time, did not result in medium- to long-term change. The body indeed is revalorized most particularly in speaking in tongues, as the body becomes a tool for divine languages or for the divine gift of speaking other human languages. However, particular bodies experience disempowerment as the movement goes on and is formalized into denominations and factions. Parham's Pentecostalism drew his body into divine communion with God through speaking in unlearned foreign languages while allowing him to racialize Black bodies as inferior and inhuman. Seymour was mindful of racialization but not of his later complicity in the exclusion of female bodies. In both cases we see that attention to bodily particularity can work against equity and justice. When done within the wider understanding of the work of the Spirit, attending to bodily particularity can lead to a recognition that the variety of bodies drawn into the life of the Spirit signifies something of God's intention for humanity. When this attention is not sanctified, it leads to the dominance of the "colonial white gaze"³⁴ or the "male gaze,"³⁵ in which bodies deemed "other" are judged from a position of perceived superiority, treated with suspicion, and even hated. A "sanctified gaze" allows a community to view each other beyond the distortions of race, gender, and class to reimagine a holy community in which all bodies are welcome.

34 Peter Cruchley, "Ecce homo ...? Beholding Mission's White Gaze," *Practical Theology* 15, nos. 1–2 (2022): 64–65.

35 Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, "Biblical Bathing Beauties and the Manipulation of the Male Gaze: What Judith Can Tell Us about Bathsheba and Susanna," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, no. 2 (2017): 56–59.

3 Contemporary Pentecostalism: Dualisms, Spirituality, and Social Justice

It is my contention that these same problems of attending to bodies holistically—in terms of power, not just in relation to spiritual religious elements—continue to haunt contemporary Pentecostals in Britain, even those who present themselves as “progressive,” meaning that they recognize engagement with social and even political issues as part of their ministry.³⁶ Research by Robert Beckford and Valentina Alexander has already demonstrated Classical Pentecostals’ capacity to address social issues such as poverty or lack of opportunity for individuals, while not addressing the long-term political structures.³⁷ When political organizing does happen, as David Muir has shown,³⁸ it can best be described as rare and “ad hoc” and does not name or deal consistently with the ways in which people are classed, gendered, or racialized in society. In “progressive” pentecostal spaces in Britain today, concern for the poor can and often does sit alongside ongoing race and gender-based discriminations which are considered the norm and remain unchallenged in churches and beyond. These patterns of ongoing racial and gender-based inequities are not isolated to Classical Pentecostals in Britain, of course, and so the implications of this analysis are therefore important for Pentecostals and Christians across the board. In order to explore this in detail, I will focus on a case study of one church in the UK that belongs to the Assemblies of God Great Britain.³⁹

3.1 *The Case*

This classical pentecostal church fits in with the description of “progressive” Pentecostals as they feed the homeless and have been involved historically with the welcome of refugees. They recognize these ministries as core to their role

36 James Forbes, “Shall We Call This Dream Progressive Pentecostalism?,” in *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism* 1, no. 1 (1977): 12–15; Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 41–42, 213.

37 Valentina Alexander, “Breaking Every Fetter? To What Extent Has the Black-Led Church in Britain Developed a Theology of Liberation?” (PhD diss., Warwick University, 1996); Nicole Toulis, *Believing Identity: Pentecostalism and the Mediation of Jamaican Ethnicity and Gender in England* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997); Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2010).

38 David R. Muir, “Power in Black and Pentecostal: An Engagement with Bretherton,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (May 2020): 253–261.

39 The church’s name, the names of leaders, and other information that might enable it to be identified will be omitted.

in their local community and in the nation. Alongside this, the church leaders also encourage individual Christians to seek influence in various sectors of society, including politics, business, and education. In this sense, there is both a local response to immediate needs at the grassroots and a long-term strategy for influence on local and national levels. In some ways this could be considered a significant improvement on the earliest stories of the pentecostal movement. Whether at the Azusa Street revival or in the case of the Welsh revival—both of which have had a significant place in the development of pentecostal/charismatic Christianity in Britain—revival and the coming of the Spirit did not overall impact the social, economic or political reality of believers or others in the wider community. In fact, the evidence points to the pentecostal revival in Wales quashing the crucial work required to improve the status of education for local children.⁴⁰ While there were some outliers among Pentecostals—such as leaders from the Church of God in Christ who took part in the Civil Rights movement,⁴¹ or African Caribbean Pentecostals in the UK who launched housing associations or the Pentecostal Credit Union—overall, pentecostal spirituality disengages from social activism or political organizing. In light of this history, a classical pentecostal church seeking a positive influence on education for children is a continuation of a minority position within the movement, but one that is arguably growing in significance in more recent years.

However, despite the openness to addressing the issues of poverty, problems of inequity remain unnamed and unaddressed within its own doors. This church has a relatively large congregation that meets in one of England's largest and most diverse cities. Its city center congregation is predominantly white with about a third of the members being of African and African Caribbean descent. In the last three years the leadership model has changed from one white married couple as senior leaders to now having employed two more white married couples to serve as assistant and associate pastors. They are supported by a board that has one known Black member. The leadership model depends upon volunteers who serve as local pastors around the city running small groups. Here we find a few Black people, but not in proportion to the third of the congregation who are African or African Caribbean. There is an absence of Asian people or other minority ethnic groups entirely despite the diversity

40 "The Welsh Revival," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 99 (1905): 40.

41 L.E. Beaupre, "Saints and the 'Long Civil Rights Movement': Claiming Space in Memphis," *Journal of Urban History* 38, no. 6 (2012): 971–1002; Jonathan Langston Chism, "'The Saints Go Marching': Black Pentecostal Critical Consciousness and the Political Protest Activism of Pastors and Leaders in the Church of God in Christ in the Civil Rights Era," *Pneuma* 35, no. 3 (2013): 424–443.

of the city. There are a few white women named alone in certain roles, and it is unclear whether or not they are married.

On the one hand, the presence of women in the highest levels of leadership is something to be celebrated regardless of their race. But as I have argued elsewhere, the inclusion of “wives” is not the same as the inclusion of “women”:

analysing *how* women arrive at positions of power is essential to our exploration of the extent to which women are flourishing with progressive pentecostal churches ... The leadership couple model risks making leadership inaccessible for women who are not married to the senior pastor but have leadership potential, and for women who may be called to leadership in the church but married to men who are not—as has been seen in some cases historically. We can therefore conclude that while these churches may be spaces of flourishing for certain *wives*, they are not spaces of flourishing for all *women*.⁴²

With a heavy dependence on married couples in this particular church, some women may be excluded. It is also striking that there are only three Black women involved in pastoral care of a congregation which is one third Black, when the majority of those Black people will be women.⁴³ This is not to say that only Black women can care pastorally for Black women—though cultural competency and sensitivity are crucial to pastoral care as we will see below—but rather that the lack of Black women pastors suggests there are certain barriers to Black women’s development for leadership in this context. Research demonstrates that Black women are capable of and familiar with pastoral care and leadership, whether as lay or ordained people, within black pentecostal churches,⁴⁴ and so their absence here should not be considered normative.

In regard to the matter of race, the most senior staff, who are in paid full-time roles, are all white with limited volunteer input from Black people. This

42 Selina Stone, “Holy Spirit, Holy Bodies? Pentecostalism, Pneumatology and the Politics of Embodiment” (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2021), 231.

43 As with all racial groups, women are well known to comprise the majority of Christian believers and church members within Black communities in Britain. See Elaine Foster, “Women and the Inverted Pyramid of the Black Churches,” in *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, ed. Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis (London: Virago, 1992), 45–68.

44 Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “If It Wasn’t for the Women”. *Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); Toulis, *Believing Identity*; McDonald, “Pentecostalism.”

means in practice that the decision-making power rests entirely in the hands of white people, even in a congregation that is one third Black and a city that is even more diverse. This phenomenon, known as the “Guinness effect,” has been noted in the most recent popular work on race and power in British churches.⁴⁵ However, the consequences of white power over multicultural congregations goes beyond the issue of representation for its own sake to the problem of limited perspectives, voices, and ministry being offered to the entire congregation. This is exemplified, for example, in the church leaders’ failure to name and address what has been accepted as the racist murder of George Floyd in their sermons and church services in the subsequent weeks. Despite the demographics of their congregations, the global attention given to this incident and the outpouring of grief especially by Black people, the white leaders go on with service as usual:

In failing to name racism or the murder of George Floyd a second time, in a congregation which is at least a third black, the leaders exhibit what Robin DiAngelo describes as “white fragility.”⁴⁶ Rather than choosing the uncomfortable and prophetic work of calling out the sinfulness of white oppression which had been exposed at the time, this [sermon] is in fact an act of silence. The comfort of the white leaders and white majority is prioritised over the healing and pastoral care of their black members, and the uncomfortable but necessary work of challenging the dominant white perspective.⁴⁷

However, this is not solely a local congregation problem. Assemblies of God GB emerged as a predominantly white denomination in Britain in 1924.⁴⁸ While not being formally associated with Assemblies of God USA due to what William Kay describes as concerns about “American domination,” it made use of their literature and organizational structures.⁴⁹ AOG GB has grown increasingly diverse in the subsequent years due to the arrival of commonwealth citizens

45 The concentration of power among white people at the top of multicultural organizations including churches is known as the “Guinness Effect” in popular language. See Ben Lindsay, *We Need to Talk about Race* (London: SPCK, 2019), 105–106.

46 Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Race* (London: Penguin, 2019), 6.

47 Selina Stone, “Holy Spirit, Holy Bodies?,” 201.

48 Neil Hudson, “The Development of British Pentecostalism,” in *European Pentecostalism*, ed. William Kay and Anne Dyer (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 49–50.

49 William Kay, “A History of British Assemblies of God” (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 1989), 76, 81, 160, 248.

from West Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia who were Pentecostals or converted to pentecostal Christianity. In the UK, however, the diversity of the congregations and membership has not been seen in the national leadership. Since its inception, the denomination has never had a national leader who is not white, despite the many African, African Caribbean, and Asian members and senior leaders in the network. At the time of writing, the national executive team is made up entirely of white people and only one woman.

3.2 *Embodying Pentecost*

Despite the concern for the poor and for social and political influence that make the church in question “progressive” in some sense, it falls short of the holistic vision of a holy people who transcend the social patterns of inequity and exclusion. While there is a concern for those experiencing poverty, whose bodies are marked as “poor” in contemporary Britain, it is not born from a critical awareness of the bodies that are marginalized, excluded, and rendered unimportant, whether in the church or in wider society. Instead, the concern for the homeless and refugees in this case may well be rooted in a biblical imperative to care for “the hungry” or “the stranger” as seen in Jesus’s own words in Matt 25. This biblical literalism, while helpful on the one hand for encouraging the church toward social action, does not encourage even progressives, in this case, to imagine who else might be included in this category. In contemporary England there are many groups who might fit into “the least of these brothers and sisters” of Jesus, including minority ethnic groups who find themselves disproportionately faced with poverty due to racism and discrimination as well as women in the church and beyond. A critical response to the text in Matt 25 would also involve reflection on the ways the church itself may be complicit in the “othering” or the devaluing of particular groups of people even within its own walls.

By not attending to the problems of race, gender, and power, some Pentecostals today continue to fail to embody the radical inclusiveness of the Azusa Street revival that acted as a prophetic witness to the world. The solution to the problem of racial and gender hierarchies that remains a blight on even the supposedly progressive pentecostal church lies, I want to argue, in the resistance to Western binaries that limit understandings of the work of the Spirit.

As I have argued in my analysis of the Azusa Street revival, a dualistic perspective on the work of the Spirit that saw the body as a holy vessel for the Spirit but failed to recognize the work of the Spirit in challenging the devaluing of certain bodies eventually undermined the continuation of the radical work of the Spirit. Racial segregation and the stifling of women’s vocations were, I want to suggest, a direct result of this binary. This “pneumatic dualism” pre-

vented early Pentecostals from recognizing how the Spirit was reordering their community in ways that would bring about the life of all people and the body of believers as a whole. As early Pentecostals clung to binaries and hierarchies in which women were deemed inferior beings to men, and white people were viewed as superior in humanity and in spirituality to their black, Latino/a, and Asian siblings, the work of the Spirit was stifled. This inability to attend to the particularity of embodiment jars with Smith's reading of Pentecostalism as a postmodern movement in which the body is revalorized, particularities are recognized, and various people's stories are heard and welcomed.⁵⁰

The journey to "pneumatic integralism"—a holistic vision of the spirit's work in and among bodies that are valued differently in the world—depends on Pentecostalism drawing on the global roots that make it what it is, especially its African heritage. It is this shift that may move true Pentecostalism beyond the restrictions of modernity and its colonial legacies in a deeper and more consistent way than is proposed by Smith. The body, in this case, might be embraced and attended to not only in its materiality but also in relation to its social and political identities and experiences.

Speaking of Pentecostalism as a "global movement" often includes recognizing the many people who traveled from across the world to witness what was happening at Azusa Street and then began to pray for similar experiences in their home countries. It might also be said that the "global" aspect of pentecostal and charismatic Christianity can be seen in various revivals that took place in different parts of the world and at different times, independent of the Azusa Street revival, such as in India or Korea. In relation to contemporary Pentecostalism, the movement can be said to be global due to its thriving among the nations of the world often referred to as the Global South. However, Pentecostalism might be said to be global from its inception due to the many roots that form its spirituality in particular. In my own work I have traced the special importance of the Wesleyan Holiness tradition and West African spirituality. On the one hand, John Wesley promotes a positive view of the body as a tool for sanctification and worship, instructing believers to worship God "in your body and in your heart spirit."⁵¹ This also extended to a kind of social holiness that motivated Methodist involvement in the abolition of the slave trade.⁵² However, eventually, tensions between those who believed in a holiness that

50 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 50–51, 61–64.

51 "Sermon 2, 1 Kings 18:21," in *The Sermons of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes*, ed. Kenneth G.C. Newport (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2003), 122.

52 John Wesley, "Resolution of the Society for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade," *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 11 (1788): 208–209.

centered personal piety but did not overturn white supremacy, and those who believed in a radical opposition to slavery as a matter of Christian ethics, would lead to a split in American Methodism.⁵³

What might be considered an “African worldview” offers an antidote to such a dualistic perspective by recognizing the spiritual and material aspects of reality to be bound together and the line between the sacred and secular to be dissolved. Lewis Brogdon has argued, for example, that Pentecostalism’s alignment “with fundamentalism and evangelicalism” is responsible for the replacing of a holistic and communal spiritual emphasis with a dualistic and individualized one:

In slave religion, spirituality aided blacks on confronting and overcoming the evils of slavery ... and (for Seymour) segregation in the church. Denominational Pentecostal spirituality is confined to worship spaces and individualised experiences of empowerment. Particularly in black Pentecostal denominations, the loss of communal and social outlets results in a spirituality that empowers for worship in church but not for work in the world. With this brand of spirituality in place, many Pentecostals tolerate social injustices such as racism and sexism and, historically, have isolated themselves from social movements such as the civil rights movement.⁵⁴

I have argued in my own work that the dividing line between African communal cultures and the individualized cultures of Europeans can be overemphasized in ways that overlook some of the nuances of African spiritualities.⁵⁵ However, it is clear that for the West Africans who would be transported to America and the Caribbean to work as slaves, and their descendants, life was understood to be holistic, and this integrated perspective encouraged them toward resistance and revolution in embodied and spiritual ways. The person could not be truly free while the body was kept in chains—though colonial preachers preached the opposite each week. It was an integrated perspective in which the body and its freedom from hierarchies of domination and dehumanization mattered spiritually and theologically—a perspective that motivated the ministry of Sam Sharpe, an enslaved African and Baptist preacher who led what has been named “the Baptist rebellion” or “Baptist war” in Jamaica in

53 Morris L. Davis, “Methodists and Race,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism*, ed. Jason E. Vickers, 281–295.

54 Lewis Brogdon, “African American Pentecostalism,” 25–26.

55 Stone, “Holy Spirit, Holy Bodies?,” 45.

1831. Not content with the colonial theology that demanded that the enslaved African “obey their masters” as the Apostle Paul had written, they instead took their lead from the Exodus narratives in which God was seen to be the liberator of oppressed peoples in a literal sense. While revivals were taking place in the chapels run by Baptists and other nonconformists in the run-up to Christmas, Sam Sharpe was moving in these same circles, planning a rebellion. On one particular night a group of enslaved Africans waited behind after a prayer meeting to meet with Sharpe and hear his report on the abolition that had been enacted in parliament in Britain but had been ignored by the British slave and plantation owners in Jamaica.⁵⁶ The rebellion led by Sam Sharpe was African, Christian, anti-colonial, and planned under the cover of revival. It was, in fact, a revival of sorts, born from a holistic view of reality and thus of liberation and from a commitment to fight for the recognition of the humanity and dignity of African peoples.

It is by tapping into this holistic understanding of life and of freedom in the Spirit that Pentecostals may overcome the dualisms that allow the body to be oppressed socially and politically within the church and society. While Western theology has given the impression that life in the Spirit can be reduced to the spiritual, this is inconsistent with a “pneumatic integralism” that recognizes the need for holistic freedom for all of God’s people, in all areas of their lives. This is what continues to be absent in the theology of some forms of classical Pentecostalism today, and thus their progressivism is undermined. A truly progressive Pentecostalism cannot focus on addressing poverty in short-term ways while failing to address the racism and sexism that continue to mark the community of the saints. This is a Pentecost that is incomplete. Drawing on this African heritage in which bodily particularities, power, and justice form an integral part of Christian resistance and ministry depends upon the embrace and celebration of African peoples and their perspectives and indeed of all peoples whose worldviews jar with the dualisms of Western philosophy and theology.

56 Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009) 296, 299.