

The 'successful' church? The growth of Pentecostalism worldwide in the twentieth century

James Williams

In explaining the rise of Pentecostalism there is a temptation for the Christian historian, whether they write from inside or outside the Pentecostal movement, whether they are sympathetic to Pentecostalism or not, to desire too quickly an answer to the question, 'can we attribute this to the action of God?' Part of the problem is that there is such diversity within a vast group like 'Pentecostals'. Another part of the problem is that if we do give theological reasons the stakes are high. It feels quite risky, not only because it is insufficiently nuanced but also because God's approval (not merely his sovereign involvement or superintendence) is being directly implicated in a vast and complex phenomenon, as when Zimmerman, a Pentecostal leader, says:

Once again God had honoured His ancient promise in a time of deep darkness. This then, is the explanation for the remarkable growth of the Pentecostal movement. Men have tried to adduce all kinds of reasons for it in terms of sociology, psychology, ecology, and economics. But nothing short of the almighty power of God responding to the contrition of His faithful remnant could have produced such results.¹

Another aspect to the problem of reading and interpreting particular providence through history is that faithfulness to God does not necessarily result in numerical growth and thus numerical growth cannot simply be caused by God's blessing on a faithful people.² Val Fotherby's *The Awakening Giant*, a popular history of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, contains many uncritical versions of this type of explanation. Thus the failure of the FGBMI to thrive in this country in the 1960s and 70s is ascribed to poor organisation and the lack of men available for leadership, but 'the major reason was the lack of Spirit-filled people in the UK'.

This is not the place for deep discussion of ecumenical issues, but it seems clear that the numerical expansion of Eastern Orthodoxy into Russia at the end of the first millennium and of Roman Catholicism into South America and the Philippines in the Early Modern period did not represent the triumph of Christ – nor for that matter does today's filling of stadiums and mega churches by Protestant preachers of the prosperity gospel. Sometimes the 'successful' church is the small, struggling one that that keeps going and stays faithful in doctrine and practice despite its small numbers. But perhaps that is a counsel of despair, and a Pentecostal would not think in this way. Certainly I have not come across this point in any Pentecostal literature I have read. Perhaps that is not surprising: thus far, Pentecostals have had to worry much less, if at all about slow growth and

¹ Zimmerman, Thomas F., 'The Reason for the Rise of the Pentecostal Movement', *Azusa Street and Beyond: Pentecostal Missions and Church Growth in the Twentieth Century*, ed. L. Grant McClung (Bridge, 1986), 58.

² Val Fotherby, *The Awakening Giant: The Miraculous Story of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International* (Marshall Pickering, 2000).

retrenchment than other denominations. Only in Costa Rica has there been any net drift from the church (back to Roman Catholicism) and only in a few places do writers urge caution about desire for respectability and watering down of Pentecostal distinctives being among factors preventing growth. As we shall see, the notable confidence of Pentecostal discourse is one possible contribution to the movement's success.

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Quite aside from these issues of theological opinion, there is the philosophy of history to consider. Needless to say, Christian professional historians have argued about the possibility of 'Christian' history, variously understood. One attempt by a believer in the academy to unpack the practice of history is Mark Noll's distinction between ordinary history and providential history.

The contrast between the two is not that providential history is theological where ordinary history is not. Rather, both are theological, but with the theology arising from different aspects of God's person and work. Thus, a theology for ordinary history arises mostly from considering creation, providence, and the broader implications of the Incarnation, while a theology for providential history is tied more closely to the specific divine activities in beginning, sustaining, and completing human salvation.³

This is extremely helpful, as are his illustrations of what might count as an example of each type of history – for example, concluding that the Reformation had certain effects on the ethics, psychology, politics and science of Europe verses concluding that the Reformation manifested a special work of God's grace in restoring the gospel. The question remains, however, as to how we should read God's providence through history. If he opts for 'ordinary history' what if a (Christian) historian cannot provide an adequate 'ordinary' account of something? Does he lament the poverty of the sources and the intrinsic weakness of historical imagination, or does he turn to a 'supernatural' explanation to make up the difference? If so, how does he avoid practising God-of-the-gaps explanation? An uncharitable reading of Zimmerman's quote, cited above, suggests that this is what his approach amounts to. While the historian can avoid using providence simply to make up what is lacking in ordinary explanation if she acknowledges God as the guarantor of all history, knowledge, communication and so on, this dissolves the wall between Noll's two categories. And it leaves us where we started asking 'is this movement of God?' except that now we have to contend with trespass against various philosophies of history and explanation as well as with our theological biases along the Reformed-Charismatic spectrum. This is a particular problem for Reformed cessationist writers about Pentecostalism. Why *are* they so successful? Is God with them in a special way – and if so, *is* that because they are open to more of his gifts than the rest of us are?

Having exposed some underlying issues, without resolving them (they will recur throughout), let us now consider some of the reasons that have been proposed to explain the remarkable growth of Pentecostalism across the world, beginning with a brief survey of that growth over the last 100 years.

³ Mark A. Noll, , 'A Theological Understanding of "Ordinary History"', *Christianity and History Newsletter* 19 (2000), 8.

What has happened and why?

There were several smaller proto-Pentecostal revivals and incidents of people claiming to have received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in the decades leading up to the Azusa Street Revival of 1906. The Shearer Schoolhouse Revival of 1896, the Welsh Revival of 1904-5, a Bible School in Topeka, Kansas, and the influence of various people with prominent ministries of healing are usually cited in this regard. But it was the events in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, that were to spark the major spread of the new ideas, teachings and practices.⁴ By the end of 1906 there were approximately 14,000 Pentecostals; ten years later there were approximately 140,000 in the United States alone. By 1956 there were more than ten million across the globe, rising to 51 million (plus 11 million Charismatics in the mainstream denominations) by 1982.⁵ South America has witnessed some of the most remarkable growth: by 1930, Pentecostals constituted 10% of Brazilian Protestantism, a proportion that has risen to way over 70% today. Several Pentecostal denominations in Brazil each baptised more than 100,000 people a year through the 1990s.⁶ Meanwhile, in Chile, 12% of the population were Pentecostals by 1960. Across the continent, while non-Pentecostal Protestants doubled in number between 1974 and 1986 Pentecostals quintupled.⁷ The largest church in the world is a neo-Pentecostal church in Korea, which boasts millions of Pentecostals as a result of 'the most rapid church growth in the world' in the 1970s.⁸ Like South America, Africa has seen sustained and diffused growth, something that began in 1908 with John G. Lake's (a healing evangelist) five-year mission tour of South Africa. In that half-decade, 625 churches were established, with over 100,000 Pentecostals in them. This movement spread northwards into countries like Malawi, which got its first Pentecostal churches in 1929 and now has over 1,000 churches grouped into 211 Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations. Nigeria and Kenya also have vast numbers. At the turn of the millennium it was estimated that there were 465 million Pentecostals and Charismatics across the world, comprising a full quarter of the church.

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The amazing evangelistic focus of the early Pentecostals was a necessary condition for this amazing growth: 'early Pentecostalism was

⁴ See Allan Anderson, 'The Azusa Street Revival and the Emergence of Pentecostal Missions in the Early Twentieth Century', *Transformation* 23:2 (2006), 107-19 and L. Grant McClung, 'Explosion, Motivation and Consolidation: the Historical Anatomy of a Missionary Movement', *Azusa Street and Beyond: Pentecostal Missions and Church Growth in the Twentieth Century*, ed. L. Grant McClung (Bridge, 1986), 7, 12, 18.

⁵ McClung, 'Explosion, Motivation and Consolidation', 3. Ulf Strohbahn quotes even higher estimates: 64 million by 1970, representing 6% of the worldwide church. Ulf Strohbahn *Pentecostalism in Malawi: A History of the Apostolic Faith Mission* (Kachere Series, 2005).

⁶ Waldo César, 'From Babel to Pentecost: A Social-Historical-Theological Study of the Growth of Pentecostalism', *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*, eds. André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani (Hurst, 2001), 25.

⁷ Karl-Wilhelm Westmeir, *Protestant Pentecostalism in Latin America: A Study in the Dynamics of Missions* (Associated University Presses, 1999), 14.

⁸ C. Peter Wagner, 'Characteristics of Pentecostal Church Growth', *Azusa Street and Beyond: Pentecostal Missions and Church Growth in the Twentieth Century*, ed. L. Grant McClung (Bridge, 1986), 126.

primarily and fundamentally a missionary movement'.⁹ Without the willingness of hundreds, even thousands of men and women to leave their homes, the international impact of Pentecostalism would have been much slower. Based on the teachings of Charles Parham, early Pentecostal missionaries believed that the tongues given to them were in fact foreign languages specifically imparted to equip them for world mission. Although this proved almost universally false, that did not prevent a wave of willing evangelists from leaving Los Angeles and sailing all over the world in the first decade after the 1906 revival. Having discovered that xenolalia (languages of the nations) was not what they had, many of these badly-prepared missionaries quickly turned their attention to established overseas workers (who spoke their language), teaching them about the 'new Pentecost' and thereby facilitating a faster initial international growth.¹⁰ These Pentecostals were able to go out with such speed from Azusa Street and the subsequent places of revival because they did not stop to make preparations: missionaries, whole families even, went out 'by faith', possessed only with zeal and with no complex denominational or parachurch procedures to follow. This is not to say that there was no oversight – and there was certainly much prayer – only that what oversight there was encouraged fast sending-out. So, the Pentecostal Missionary Union was set up in a vicarage in Sunderland on 9th January 1909, and sent out its first missionaries on 24th February 1909!¹¹

The high drama of the conversion experience in Pentecostal churches (partly because of the prominence given to a dualistic metanarrative of darkness and light, and partly because of the physical manifestations of Pentecostal worship) also serves to emphasize the radical change that takes place in the new Christian.

The focus on mission and evangelism can itself be unpacked a little further. It does not exist in a vacuum, but is sustained by various theological beliefs and by the practice of a new way of life. These things are shared with much of the rest of evangelicalism, though tend to be described, felt and lived-out in a more intense fashion by Pentecostals. Pentecostals have a very high view of Scripture, and tend towards a literalistic hermeneutic in which following (copying) the apostles and the early church is considered paramount: 'If miracles and mission were good enough for the apostles, they are good enough for us.' Many writers have noted that Pentecostals are inspired by eschatological fervour – more often than not, a type of dispensational premillennialism, with its emphasis on the imminent return of Christ, which thereby impels Pentecostals to action. This willingness to talk eschatologically has struck a chord with numerous tribal groups across the world, notably Andean peasants,¹² and has only slightly abated since 1906 and a century more of history without the parousia. The high drama of the conversion experience in Pentecostal churches (partly because of the prominence given to a dualistic metanarrative of darkness and light, and partly because of the physical manifestations of Pentecostal worship) also serves to emphasize the radical change that takes place in the new Christian.

⁹ Anderson, 'The Azusa Street Revival', 108.

¹⁰ Anderson, 'The Azusa Street Revival', 112-16.

¹¹ McClung, 'Explosion, Motivation and Consolidation?', 17.

¹² Westmeir, *Protestant Pentecostalism in Latin America*, 58.

The personal decision in favour of Pentecostalism appears to have a much more radical meaning than conversion to other religious groups. Converts not only break away from a previous religion and the 'world', but also consecrate the majority of their non-working lives to participation in church services and activities. The convert also takes up the new responsibilities implied by his conversion; for example, becoming a missionary, evangelising members of his family and current colleagues at work, taking a significant part in the benevolent activities of the church, paying monthly tithes in voting to candidates in political elections according to his pastor's recommendations.¹³

Moving from Satan to God, switching sides in the vast spiritual war, gives a tremendous boost to the Pentecostal's sense of self (not in terms of pride, but in terms of a secure foundation for understanding her life and then elaborating upon that). The radical new perspective itself impels the new believer to share his or her new-found faith. Radical conversion expressed in a radical way is fuel for mission. This is not a Pentecostal distinctive, so it might be fairly said, to practice 'providential history' for a moment, that one reason for the global growth of the movement is that it often is underpinned by orthodox, evangelical Protestant beliefs.

It is evident that Evangelicalism as a recognizable movement in the Protestant world has had a strong doctrinal component from its earliest days. The preaching of evangelical doctrines on the Gospel, on seeing salvation, and the atonement and the blood once shared, on the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, all of these have contributed strongly to evangelical vitality and impact. The Pentecostal challenge raises the question as to the extent to which evangelical theology has done justice both to the spiritual reality in evangelical revivals and to their basic biblical convictions.¹⁴

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One of the main distinctives of Pentecostalism is its emphasis on the miraculous – not in the abstract, but as the experienced work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers and their communities. Signs and wonders, particularly healings, are linked to evangelism and mission; to Pentecostal plans for numerical expansion as well as personal experience. Pentecostal biographies and testimonies abound with tales of the miraculous and the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Even the most sceptical observer of Pentecostalism would have to admit that many millions of people across the world believe that miracles have taken place in Pentecostal churches and rallies (even if in fact they have not) and this, not surprisingly, affects the power of Pentecostal evangelism and the extent of its growth. What is slightly harder to explain is how, in a theological context pregnant with the expectation of the miraculous, when the miraculous fails to materialise in the desired manner, that problem is dealt with in way that does not

¹³ César, 'From Babel to Pentecost', 26.

¹⁴ Peter D. Hocken, 'A Charismatic View of the Distinctiveness of Pentecostalism', *Pentecostalism in Context: Essays in Honour of William W. Menzies*, eds. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 104.

¹⁵ For example, Colin Whittaker, *Seven Pentecostal Pioneers: The Inside Story of the Pentecostal Movement and its Present-Day Influence* (Marshall Pickering, 1983).

undermine growth. One explanation, from a German Pentecostal leader in Malawi, runs as follows:

Healing did not always happen. Not everybody was healed and even those who were healed were not immune to sickness for the rest of their lives. As important as the actual healing was, I would argue, that there was another element even more decisive in the process. The call to come forward and be prayed over moved the seeker into an atmosphere of concrete spiritual expectation. An encounter with God is offered. It is a non sacramental link to the spiritual world. This is a mystical experience linked with freedom of expression and manifestation. A comparison with other churches or the traditional African religious set-up shows the uniqueness of Pentecostalism's spiritual manifestations in Malawi. The meetings were pew-centred compared with the pulpit-centred approach of the Protestant churches or the altar-centred Roman Catholicism. It is not an experience apart from the word of God, but founded in the biblical record and actually seen as an application of the Gospel.¹⁶

That picks up again the Biblicism of the movement, noted above, but also highlights another distinctive: the offer of a largely unmediated spiritual experience to all. Pentecostalism strongly emphasises the priesthood of all believers, and this sense of empowerment and significance is of tremendous importance in explaining its appeal, particularly among the poor and disenfranchised in the Developing World.

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Missiologists connect this appeal with the fast raising-up and acceptance of local leaders in new Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal missionaries have been much readier than those of other denominations to hand over leadership to indigenous Christians, who have in turn been fast in raising their own support for those leaders.¹⁷ The sending of Pentecostal missionaries has also tended to avoid the trap of spreading particular forms of Anglo-Saxon culture around the world because so many of the early Pentecostals were not white. In fact, the ability of early Pentecostalism to practise racial desegregation in worship services and local churches gave it tremendous appeal. This was bound up in the Pentecostal lived-out critique of various social hierarchies and norms that caused social discontent (and are at root anti-gospel).¹⁸ As one historian rather colourfully put it:

In retrospect we can also describe the Azusa Street revival as the principal point in Western history at which the pulsating energy of African-American spirituality, wedded by years of suffering to the Christian promise of the kingdom of God, leaped across the racial barrier and became fused with similar motifs in the spirituality of poor white people. It marked the breaking of the barrier that western civilisation had so carefully erected

¹⁶ Strohbahn *Pentecostalism in Malawi*, 61.

¹⁷ Allan Anderson, 'Global Pentecostalism in the New Millennium', *Pentecostals After a Century: Global Perspectives on a Movement in Transition*, eds. Allan Anderson and Walter J. Hollenweger (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 218.

¹⁸ Anderson, 'Global Pentecostalism in the New Millennium', 214.

between the cognitive and emotional sides of life, between rationality and symbol, between the conscious and unconscious strata of the mind.¹⁹

A related feature that has contributed to Pentecostalism's success: its ability to cross cultural borders with relative ease. Pentecostalism has certain black-and-white truths associated with it, but it is a remarkably diverse movement. It appears to have the perfect blend of dogmatism and flexibility to permit rapid growth. Part of its success lies in this capacity to embody the open-endedness of a global network of flows, a composite of heterogeneous elements flexible and indeterminate enough in meaning to allow their setting to work in a multitude of contexts, yet offering at the same time a stable collection of narrative formulae and well-organised structure which provide solid anchorage for individuals at large in the frightening sea of possibilities and frustrations.²⁰

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Specifically, Pentecostalism also speaks the 'spirit world' language of many indigenous peoples. It is (and has always been) quick to connect with animistic cultures, and to engage in open spiritual warfare. The 'power encounters' of Pentecostal missionaries in South America and Africa demonstrate to onlookers and seekers that here is a group of people who are willing and able to stand up to the dark forces that oppress them. Pentecostals actively combat animism, fatalism, witchcraft and so on in a prayerful and confident fashion.²¹

Pentecostals have been so good in adapting to most cultures that many writers contend that there is a special affinity between Pentecostalism and features of late modernity, especially globalisation. Pentecostals have been very quick to use new media for spreading their message – this has been very effective in Nigeria and Korea, among many other countries, both developed and developing. Pentecostalism's narratives of salvation work well in giving people a sense of identity in a shifting and uncertain world. The secular commentators express it in one way, highlighting again the paradoxical rigidity and flexibility of Pentecostalism...

The battle between the forces of darkness and the Holy Spirit that expresses a fundamental ambivalence in terms of the boundaries implied by the stark distinction between good and evil, between saved and the lost. The notion of a fixed identity, whether conceived in local or transnational terms, sits uneasily with the idea of global spiritual warfare in which the boundaries ever shifting, fronts advancing and retreating. The ambivalence of such definitions of evil and affliction also means an enormous flexibility to the creation of local forms of closure and opposition. Exclusive or inclusive notions of

¹⁹ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Addison Wesley Longman, 1994), 100, cited in Strohbehn, *Pentecostalism in Malawi*, 24.

²⁰ Corten and Marshall-Fratani, *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 3.

²¹ See Westmeir, *Protestant Pentecostalism* and Strohbehn, *Pentecostalism in Malawi* for many examples.

Pentecostal identity are thus mobilised much more in response to contact and according to any predetermined dogmatic and institutionalised position. This situation, coupled with the perpetual translation of the individual struggle to salvation into a struggle to the public space, allows for the expression of extremely diverse forms of local political mobilisation, and relations with the nation-state which range from complicity to direct opposition.²²

A Christian commentary would also need to draw attention to other gospel issues: Pentecostalism does not limit itself to 'soul saving' without transformation; healing of family relationships is expected of converts; new moral communities are established; financial prudence is taught and practised and so on.²³ Pentecostals emphasise that the work of the Holy Spirit needs to touch every area of life. Though the Pentecostal movement as a whole has not yet touched the intellectual realm in a special way, it has encouraged its believers to experience holistic change in all areas of their lives. Many Pentecostals call this 'the full gospel' – the claim that Christ's work through the Holy Spirit not only makes atonement but equips us to combat physical ills, economic ills and, in some cases, political ills (though most Pentecostals tend to emphasise Romans 13 and the political status quo plus a heavy dose of moralism). This works particularly well in an African context, where the general consensus is that healing and spirituality should go together. The 'full gospel' of healing and personal transformation is conceptualised in a way that empowers everyone in the congregation: this feeds the anticlericalism at the heart of Pentecostalism, encouraging everyone to be a minister (using spiritual gifts in corporate worship and other times of fellowship) and evangelist as the Holy Spirit changes them.

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Some of the emphasis on transformation seems less than Biblical, though it has contributed to growth. Much of the recent expansion of (neo-) Pentecostalism has come about through association with the prosperity gospel. An astoundingly positive slant is put on this brand of Pentecostalism by some writers, who link it to more orthodox aspects of Christian teaching:

The emphasis on miracles of health and prosperity which are at the heart of the new wave implies a new relationship between the experience of conversion and the conception of salvation. Conversion, or 'getting born-again', is still conceived in terms of radical transformation of the self through rupture with a sinful past. An intensely private and emotional experience, it is a moment of great personal freedom and empowerment, where the possibility of 'all things becoming new' opens itself up to the first time to the individual. Yet the question follows of how to realise the project of transformation that this event announces. Getting born-again is an event of rupture, with the self as it was, but also with the world as it is. Retreat from the world and sectarian behaviour was the typical mode of realising this rupture in an ongoing way, and salvation was deferred until the near arrival of the millennium. However, believers no longer retreat among themselves in order to maintain the purity of their beliefs and their moral rigour, far from the temptations and

²² See André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani, 'Introduction,' *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America* (Hurst, 2001), 11.

²³ See Westmeir, *Protestant Pentecostalism in Latin America*, esp. 110-18.

corruption of the world of sin. Salvation is now resolutely this-worldly, and the evidence of new life has become as much material as spiritual. Moral rigour and strict personal ethics have not been superseded, yet the notion of transformation has been broadened to include the possibility of material change in everyday life.²⁴

As stated, this summary does not actually require the distinctive false teachings of the prosperity gospel, only an emphasis on living out the genuine gospel in this world. Nevertheless, in reality, Pentecostal growth in the last 30 years has been bulked out by false teaching that panders to the desire for material comfort. Ironically enough, this teaching finds fertile soil among many of the poorest people of the world. Though it arose among middle-class white American Pentecostals in the 1960s and 1970s, it has been exported globally along with other unsavoury aspects of US consumer culture.

Conclusion

‘Ordinary history’ does not seem up to the task of explaining the rise of Pentecostalism. The convoluted prose of some sympathetic secular commentators is evidence of the insufficiency of their theories to account for the breadth and vast size of the growth. Even when we ‘correct for inflation’ through prosperity gospel teaching, Pentecostalism (and the associated Charismatic movement) still represents the most amazingly rapid church growth movement since the time of the apostles. Yes, there are economic and cultural conditions that go some way to explaining its rise, but there is something more than that. Even looking at the teachings of the movement, which offers a better type of explanation than a type of social determinism, is not enough, unless we grant that the teachings are true. And the extent that Pentecostalism preaches and lives out the gospel (which, as an evangelical, I define in an evangelical way) it invites the blessing of God.

In this light, it may be that the history of Evangelicalism is in some way the struggle – the Divine struggle – for Pentecost to break out. The African-American element in the origins of Pentecostalism would then represent the insertion of a worldview and practise largely unaffected by post-Enlightenment rationalism and individualism. If this interpretation is on the right lines, the Evangelicalization of Pentecostalism, as it has been called, represents at one and the same time contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, the acceptance of fundamental biblical principles that are essential for authentic spiritual growth, and on the other hand, yet another attempt to curb and constrain the divine largesse into restricted theological categories.²⁵

This quote shows the tension in this sort of examination of another Christian movement. It is very hard to prevent bias from creeping in. However, although I started this research slightly sceptical about a good section of Pentecostalism, and although I started this essay with an attempt to be ‘careful’ about historical explanation, I have to conclude with providential history, and with praise to Christ for His work in parts of the church that I have not spent much time in. The rise of Pentecostalism is impossible to explain without a good dose of the providential: where the gospel is preached, God grants repentance unto faith. He has done this through Pentecostals on a grand scale.

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²⁴ Corten and Fratani, ‘Introduction,’ *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 6-7.

²⁵ Hocken, ‘A Charismatic View’, 105.

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