

# Charismatic Churches: Offering a Parallel Gospel in a Post-Christian World

Ben Giselbach  
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“I like how your church emphasizes the Bible. I just like my church better, because it emphasizes the Holy Spirit.”

These are *actual words* I heard from a Pentecostal man who had been attending our church for a few weeks but eventually left disillusioned. He is one of several I have known who grew up attending various flavors of charismatic churches, and then happen to visit a church of Christ out of curiosity. Then, after witnessing one or two of our services, comment about how they’ve never heard so much preaching about Jesus or seen such an emphasis on Scripture anywhere else.

This particular Pentecostal man told me in conversation that he felt like he was being taught the Bible for the first time. Yet he couldn’t figure out why we talked so much about Christ, His atoning blood, sin, moral purity, and faithfulness to the Lord’s last will and testament. “Where’s the modern-style music—the swaying—the moving of the Holy Ghost—the sudden

manifestations of the Spirit? I'm just not feeling it."

**The charismatic movement** (increasingly referred to as "renewalist" these days) **covers a broad spectrum of evangelical Christendom, from vague prosperity-style preaching to extravagant displays of Pentecostalism and experience-driven worship.** What started as a local "revival" in Topeka, Kansas in 1901<sup>1</sup> has exploded into a movement of more than 560 million adherents worldwide.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the fastest growing religions in the world (especially in impoverished countries) with some Pentecostal denominations reporting an annual growth rate of 15%<sup>3</sup>. This movement is associated with famous names such as T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn, Paul & Jan Crouch, Joyce Meyer, Ken Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Al Sharpton, and John Hagee.

**I see it as a parallel gospel—a sort of alternate universe—with the appearance of Christianity (where Christian-sounding things are said and done) but without the inconvenience of actually teaching Christ's doctrine.** And the phenomenal growth of this movement testifies to the fact that our post-Christian, post-Bible society is hungry for this stuff. It's a production—a spectacle. The preaching is rarely more than a motivational jargon; waterless clouds swept along by winds offering encouragement without Biblical substance (Jude 12). The preacher may incorporate a verse or two of Scripture, but the lesson is either based on "the leading of the Spirit" or a preformulated point.

Speaking of the Spirit, modern charismatic churches are all about the Holy Spirit. "In discovering the heart of what motivates Pentecostals, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit remains the most central explanatory element."<sup>4</sup> One's spirituality is often measured in what is perceived to be one's spiritual gift, especially the gift of tongue-speaking. According to those in and coming out of Pentecostalism, tongue speaking is when you know you have arrived. In my experience, the focus in their assemblies is primarily on the Spirit, with Jesus being more of an afterthought. In fact, you often hear very little about Jesus and His last will and testament.

This is so foreign to Christianity in the first century. The Holy Spirit (much less His gifts) was not the supreme, ultimate theme of early Christian worship. The Holy Spirit is not the main focus of the Biblical narrative. And the Holy Spirit (including the gift of tongue speaking) was never an accurate metric for the spirituality of someone (there were some very unspiritual people who had extraordinary miraculous gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14).

**This is perhaps the most damning feature of Pentecostalism because we know the true Spirit's primary role is to *bring attention to Jesus, not Himself.*** "The Helper, the Holy Spirit [...] will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you," John 14:26;

“...He will bear witness about me,” John 15:26; “...He will not speak on His own authority,” John 16:13; “...He will glorify me,” John 16:14). **The Spirit’s role is to point us to Jesus.** If your church emphasizes the Spirit more than it does Jesus, then it isn’t the Spirit who is leading that church—it’s someone else.

The book of Hebrews (a defense of Christianity against Judaism, paganism, angel-worship, and pre-Gnosticism) is based on the preeminence of Jesus. God “**has spoken to us by His Son**” (Heb. 1:2). “**Pay much closer attention**” to Jesus (Heb. 2:1). “**Consider Jesus**” (Heb. 3:1). “**Fixing our eyes on Jesus**” (Heb. 12:2). What are you listening to? The concrete, objective words of Jesus, or what you subjectively perceive to be a manifestation of the Spirit?

Aside from the wrong teachings about the work of the Holy Spirit, it is this catawampus focus away from Jesus that is so dangerous. In many charismatic churches, the audience is led to believe that they are drawn into an intimate relationship with God through a so-called experience with the Spirit, perhaps during the music service, rather than through the blood of Jesus on the cross and obedience to His last will and testament.

One of the most stinging rebukes from Jesus was directed at the Pharisees, who attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit to the work of Satan (Matt. 12:22-32). The inverse is now happening today. Millions of people are being fooled into believing that the work of Satan is really the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is indeed a parallel gospel, almost custom-made for people who want the therapy of Christianity without much Jesus.

**At my church, we do talk about the Spirit. We worship Him. We glorify Him. But the Holy Spirit was not sent to speak for Himself, but to point us to Christ.** What we must demand in our churches is gospel preaching. We must demand the centrality of Jesus, because it is all about Him. And God has revealed the entirety of His will in the canon of the Old and New Testaments (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 1:1-2; Jude 3; Rev. 22:18-19). Give us the Bible. It is sufficient. It is all we need. Our relationship with God is only limited by our knowledge and submission to the revealed word of His Son.

## Footnotes

1. MacArthur, John. *Strange Fire*. p. 20
2. Vondey, Wolfgang. *Pentecostalism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury, 2013. p. 9
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 43.