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## **A Socio-Rhetorical Study Of Acts Of The Apostles 2: The Origin Of Pentecostalism And Its Impact On The Spread And Practice Of Christianity From The Apostolic Era To 2024**

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### **Abstract:**

*This study explores the socio-rhetorical dynamics of Acts 2, the Pentecost narrative, and its profound impact on the development of Pentecostalism, a movement that has revolutionized Christianity in the modern era. Through a critical analysis of the text's literary, historical, and cultural contexts, this research reveals how the apostolic kerygma, mediated by the Holy Spirit, transformed the lives of individuals and communities, shaping the trajectory of Christian history. By examining the rhetorical strategies employed by Luke, the author of Acts, this study demonstrates how the Pentecost narrative functions as a paradigmatic event, redefining the boundaries of identity, community, and mission. The research also investigates how Pentecostalism, emerging from the Azusa Street Revival, appropriated and reinterpreted the Acts 2 narrative, creating a distinct theological and liturgical framework that emphasizes the experiential, charismatic, and missionary dimensions of the Christian faith. This study argues that the impact of Pentecostalism on Christianity has been profound, leading to a renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit's agency, the democratization of worship and ministry, and a reconfiguration of traditional ecclesiastical structures. Ultimately, this study contends that the socio-rhetorical analysis of Acts 2 and the impact of Pentecostalism on Christianity offer a nuanced perspective on the ways in which the biblical text continues to shape and be shaped by the diverse expressions of Christian faith in the modern world.*

**Key words:** Christians, Pentecostal, Apostolic, Modern world

## Introduction

Pentecostalism is a Christian Movement that places great emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecies. The Pentecostal Movement originated from the United States of America between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Within this epoch, Pentecostal figures such as Charles Parham and William J. Seymour are considered as catalysts for the global Pentecostal Movement. They created a distinct Movement that emphasized the gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly speaking in tongues and prophecies.

However, the Holy Spirit has been the *vivifier* of the Church from the beginning of Christianity. At various epochs of the development of the Church, different fathers of the Church have made tremendous efforts to relate the immense role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. This has guided Christians in their attempts in spreading and practising the Christian faith from the day the church was born to the present day.

In the light of the foregoing, this article sought to do a socio-rhetorical study of the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2, which captures the day of Pentecost, in which the Church was born. The article also excavated the impact of Pentecostalism on the spread and practice of Christianity, right from the day of the Pentecost to 2024.

## Understanding socio-rhetorical criticism

Socio-rhetorical criticism, according to Randolph, is a textually-based interpretative method that employs the use of programmatic strategies to invite social, cultural, historical, psychological, aesthetic, ideological and theological information into a context of minute exegetical activities. The socio-rhetorical critic therefore understands the term “rhetorical” to refer to the text as a literary object, that is, a story that must be read, and the term “socio” as referring to the text as a cultural artifact that must be opened to the past, present and future” (338).

It is pertinent to note that Socio-rhetorical critics recognize that written and oral forms of communication and their interpretations are social acts in which authors, speakers and readers all stand squarely within meaning making ideologies and communities. As a result, texts and their interpreters comprise a

multi-contextual location with multiple boundaries. Socio-rhetorical criticism responds to this complex labyrinth by drawing from a variety of interpretative approaches in order to configure readings that account for the greatest number of meanings and meaning effects that may not be configured by more narrowly circumscribed methods (342).

### **Asyntactic analysis of Acts of the Apostles Chapter 2**

Chapter two of the Acts of the Apostles narrates the event of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which marked the birth of the Church. Pentecost was a Jewish agricultural feast of harvest or first fruits, occurring fifty days after the Passover, which brought Jews and foreigners from all corners of the earth into Jerusalem. By divine plan, the feast occurred fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, on which the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles. The apostles were gathered, as they normally did, in the house and, suddenly, there came upon them a mighty wind and tongues as of fire, and sat upon each of the apostles and they began to speak in foreign languages. This marked the beginning of a new periscope. Here, the eleven disciples and Mathias, who was newly elected to replace Judas, represented the twelve tribes of Israel. They were to become witnesses to the Jews and Gentiles, all over the world.

*Tannehill*, commenting on the event of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, posits: "the use of 'tongues of fire' (v. 3) symbolizes the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the dramatic change in the disciples' lives" (23). Furthermore, *Conzelmann* states that, "the tongues of fire symbolize the purifying and empowering work of the Holy Spirit, preparing the disciples for their mission" (145). Commenting on verse 4, Gaventa opines, "the phrase 'as the Spirit enabled them' highlights the agency of the Holy Spirit in empowering the disciples for witness" (145). For Johnson, "The scene is depicted as a reversal of the Babel tale in Gen 11:1-9, where language barriers are overcome, symbolizing the universal scope of the gospel" (56).

According to *Kwame*, Luke's "use of 'devout men from every nation' in verse 5, emphasizes the universal scope of the gospel, highlighting the diversity of the audience" (245). "The phrase 'hear them speaking in our own languages' (v. 11) underscores the miraculous nature of the Pentecost event, where language barriers are overcome" (*Mugambi*, 173). Peter then arose and delivered the first Sermon of the Church in which he gave an excursus of what

was happening. He stood up along with the eleven and he addressed the people thus, “*Men of Judea and all of you who dwell in Jerusalem...*” (v 22). This was an indication of the unity of the Church as a single undivided unit, which was not built on segregation or division. He began by debunking those who saw them as drunks, because they spoke in tongues. He went on to explain to them the prophecy of **Joel 2:16**, where the prophet prophesied that “the day would come when God would pour out His Holy Spirit upon all people, their sons and daughters would prophesy, their young men shall see visions and their old men shall dream dreams”.

Furthermore, knowing that those listening were both Jews and Proselytes, Peter addressed them as, “*men of Israel*”. He then clarified his audience concerning the death of Jesus, which he said was not a consequence of human plot, but a fulfilment of God's eternal purpose. However, he did not exclude them from the blame of killing Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus, according to Peter, was a fulfilment of scripture because “death could not hold him captive” (2:24). Commenting on the literary genre of the Sermon, *Sanneh* opines that Peter employed the “African rhetorical device of 'call-and-response,' engaging the audience and emphasizing the prophetic fulfilment” (193). In verse 16, Peter stated, 'this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel'. This was a deliberate attempt to clearly bring to the understanding that there was “continuity between the Old Testament prophecies and the Pentecost event” (*Magesa*, 205).

Peter also made use of Irony. In verse 36, he said, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” According to Nyamiti, this clearly “underscores the dramatic reversal of fortunes, where the crucified Jesus is now exalted” (131). After the beautiful sermon, came the altar call where about, 3,000 people were converted and they began to live as a community of believers. With such great addition, there was a grave need for them to manage such a community. Therefore, the newly formed community lived together, “devoting lives to four activities: learning from the apostles, doing exploits for Jesus, serving one another and sharing their good” (*Adeyemo*, 1329).

## **Origin of Pentecostalism**

Here, the article looked at various epochs of history, making a review of various literatures relevant to the study as follows:

### **1. Apostolic era**

During the Apostolic Era, various Church Fathers wrote many works towards understanding the workings of the Holy Spirit. Robert and Donaldson quoted *Irenaeus*, in his work titled, "Against Heresies", where he states that "the Spirit of God, who is the creator of all things, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the same, who gave the gift of tongues at Pentecost" (1:396). By this statement, the role of the Holy Spirit was clearly emphasized by *Irenaeus*, with particular reference to the gift of tongues. In the same vein, Clement of Alexandria in his "*Stromata*" asserts, "the Holy Spirit, who is the same as the *Paraclete*, is the one who gave the gift of tongues at Pentecost" (2:304).

### **2. The Early Church**

In the Early Church, the Holy Spirit was given the pride of place as new converts were added to the Christian fold. Therefore, there was a need to understand the role of the Holy Spirit in order for believers to stand solidly as Christians. Therefore, Origen, in his work titled "On First Principles", translated by Butterworth, et al., posits that "the Spirit is the life-giving force that animates the Church, and was given at Pentecost" (24). Emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit also, Tertullian, in his works "*Against Marcion*" posits that "the Spirit of God, who is the same as the Holy Spirit, gave the gift of tongues at Pentecost" (3:447). These Fathers of the Church realized the immense role of the Holy Spirit in the church and enjoined the faithful to implore the Holy Spirit in all their faith affairs for guidance. Although the term "Pentecostalism" was not used, it was implied.

### **3. Medieval period:**

During the Medieval period, more emphasis was placed on enlightenment and this obviously influenced the theologies of the era. Thomas Aquinas, in his "*Summa Theologica*", wrote that "the tongues of fire at Pentecost symbolize the illumination of the mind" (2.2.2.1). The tone used by

Aquinas here seemed philosophical, yet it bears a deep theological undertone. Augustine, on the other hand, was more concerned with the role of the Holy Spirit pertaining to love. For Him, “the Holy Spirit, who is the finger of God, writes the law of love in our hearts”. By his Pentecostal nature, Gregory of Nyssa states that the “gift of tongues is a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence” (513).

#### **4. Reformation era:**

During the Reformation era (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries), Pentecostalism did not exist as a distinct Movement. However, the reformers and their contemporaries had various understanding and interpretation of the gifts as reflected later in the development of Pentecostalism. Here, some Puritan and Radical Reformers, like the Anabaptists, showed more interest in spiritual gifts and the charismatic dimension of Christianity. They emphasized the importance of personal experience and the leading of the Spirit. For instance, Menno Simons writes that “the Holy Spirit is the true teacher who teaches us all things” (647). This implies the leading role of the Holy Spirit. In the same vein, Martin Luther opined that the Holy Spirit “gives various gifts as He wills, to each one so that we may profit thereby” (241). For John Calvin, the Holy Spirit is not a mere spectator, but a true and active worker in the Church (241).

From the foregoing, it is observed that the reformation era paved the way for the birth of modern Pentecostalism. Although “Pentecostalism” as a concept and as a Movement was not in existence, the reformers had laid the foundation stone for its emergence.

#### **5. Modern era:**

This was the Era of the birth of Pentecostalism as a Movement. Pentecostalism has its roots in the United States of America in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The modern Pentecostal Movement is often traced back to several key events and figures. Notable among these figures is Charles Parham, who emphasized the importance of speaking in tongues as an evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He founded the Apostolic Faith Mission in 1895 and the Mission became a hub for early Pentecostal Movement

One of the events that sparked the emergence of Pentecostalism was the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 in Los Angeles, California, United State of America, championed by William J. Seymour. This revival is considered the catalyst for the global Pentecostalism. The focus of the revival was on the role of the Holy Spirit regarding speaking in tongues and Prophecy. Amos Yong, a modern Pentecostal wrote that "the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost inaugurates a new era of prophetic witness" (156). John Scott, on one hand, stresses that, "The Spirit empowers the church for mission and witness" (62). While Bruce, on the other hand, posits that "the Pentecost event marks the transition from the old covenant to the new" (71).

## **6. Contemporary Era**

Generally, Pentecostalism in the contemporary era is considered as one of the largest global Movements in Christendom, with over 500 million followers. This Movement is incredibly diverse, comprising different denominations, networks and independent Churches. The Movement places emphasis on personal experience of the presence of the power of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals, therefore, believe in the manifestation of the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, healing and prophecy.

Though Pentecostalism is seemingly independent in nature, adherents are becoming increasingly ecumenical, engaging in dialogue and cooperation with other Christians. For instance, Esau posits that "the Pentecost narrative offers a vision of unity and diversity in the Church" (123). Pentecostalism is characterized by a strong emphasis on evangelism and mission, with focus on spreading the Good News globally.

## **The Impact of Pentecostalism on the Spread and Practice of Christianity**

Pentecostalism emerged because of the unmet expectations of the members of the Mainline Churches. Therefore, *Ukpong* writes: "in Nigeria, below Islamic north, all the denominations are experiencing renewal; prayer and fasting and signs and wonders of healing and deliverance are common" (25). The Pentecostals sought to initiate an African mode of worship varied from the imported European mode of worship. They also initiated a mode of

worship different from that of the Mainline Churches. By so doing, they kindled a burning zeal in the hearts of their adherents to a deep spirituality. According to *Ukpong*, the Pentecostal Movement found great acceptance among the poor who were the greater majority, because the message was soothing their everyday conditions (25).

Another reason for the wide acceptance of Pentecostalism is the nature of the African cosmology. Africans generally seek solutions to their problems and demand immediate answers. For instance, in times of famine, the community gathers and the diviner consults the gods for the cause and solution to their problems. When this is done, they believe that their problems will be solved immediately. This was seemingly what the Pentecostals brought to their adherents and it found wide acceptance. Their charismatic nature of dancing before the Holy presence of the Lord was highly captivating, liberating their members from the “cold” western mode of worship and unbelief. They believe that one must not belong to the Pentecostal Church before they can have dreams and visions, because Christ is present everywhere.

### **Positive impacts of Pentecostalism**

At this juncture, this article focuses on the positive impacts of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. These include the following.

#### **1. Emphasis on the word of God.**

Pentecostalism has led to a renewed emphasis on the authority and inspiration of the Bible in Nigeria. It emphasizes personal encounter with the word of God, leading to a focus on individual's Bible study and reflection. Furthermore, it emphasizes contextual interpretation of the bible, taking into account the cultural and social dynamics as socio-rhetorical criticism entails.

Again, the Pentecostals challenged the traditional interpretation in Nigeria and focus more on the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating scripture and guiding interpretation. It has, as well, influenced biblical scholarship as more Pentecostal scholars are contributing tremendously to the field of biblical studies.



## **2. The Singing Ministry**

Pentecostalism has generally transformed the musical tone of the Nigerian Church since its outburst. Commenting on the impact of Pentecostalism on Music, Omodara opines that “Pentecostalism has revolutionized Christian music in Nigeria, introducing new styles, genres, and instruments that have transformed the sound of worship” (244). This has been achieved through series of gospel musical concerts and festivals, in which they motivate participants with awards.

## **3. Kerygma**

The Kerygmatic scheme of the Pentecostal Movement has also contributed immensely to the spread of Pentecostalism. Kerygma also means proclamation of the word of God. Commenting on the efforts of the Pentecostals towards the proclamation of the word of God, Anderson opined that “Pentecostalism has transformed the kerygma by emphasizing the experiential dimension of the gospel, making it more relatable and accessible to ordinary people” (123). Corroborating this point, Walter posits that "the Pentecostal Movement has redefined the kerygma by focusing on the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives, rather than just emphasizing doctrine or theology" (156).

In the same vein, Robert asserts that “Pentecostalism has expanded the kerygma by incorporating elements of oral tradition, storytelling, and testimony, making it more engaging and effective in communicating the Gospel” (90). In proclaiming the Word, Pentecostalism emphasizes on personal experience, emotional expression, and community participation, creating a more dynamic and inclusive proclamation of the Gospel.

The methods implored by the Pentecostal Movement have greatly impacted on the spread and practice of Pentecostalism, especially in Nigeria. Many bishops and priests have undergone rigorous training and have acquired so much knowledge but they lack the skills of adequately disseminating the word of God. They focus only on the Eucharist and forget that the people need to understand the Word. Many of the priests and bishops have become “sacramental machines” and have failed in the priestly duties of proclaiming the word of God. Therefore, the Pentecostals found in such naïve Christians a fertile ground for the proclamation of the Word. Therefore, Pentecostalism has saved such ignorant Christians from falling apart from the Christian fold.

#### **4. Spirituality**

Pentecostalism has positively impacted on the spiritual lives of their adherents. Their emphasis on a life devoid of sin and constant prayer has reawakened the spirituality of many Christians. Pentecostalism promotes a personal encounter of Jesus and experiencing the Holy Spirit. By so doing, many Nigerian Christians today seek to experience the manifestation of the Holy Spirit through music, healing, signs and wonder and prophecy. Therefore, they go after men and women of God and “spiritual masters” expecting that such encounters will yield positive results (Achunike 99).

Other aspects in which the Pentecostal Movement has positively impacted on the spread and practice of the Christian faith include, but not limited to, education, the use of the social media for Tele-Evangelism, integration of the lay faithful in running of Church affairs, use of fliers and devotional materials and training of the clergy.

#### **Negative impacts of Pentecostalism**

Inasmuch as Pentecostalism has positively impacted on the spread and practice of Christianity, it is not without flaws. Therefore the following can be viewed as some of the negative impacts.

##### **1. Prosperity Gospel**

According to the Pentecostal Movement, healing and deliverance are the intrinsic rights and privileges of every Christian. They believe that a Christian is not meant to suffer either poverty or sickness. They see nothing sacramental about healing, but as a normal ritual practice. For them also, poverty is not the portion of a Christian (Ukpong 39).

In Pentecostalism, “seeing visions, dreams and telling of prophecy are subtly entering into Christianity, in Nigeria” (40). This has led many Christians to be moving from place to place seeking solution to their problems. This practice obviously emanated from the African traditional practice of consulting a *dibia* in times of difficulty. This has negatively impacted on the spread and practice of Christianity, as members go to Church not for the purpose of worship but to seek signs and wonders and solutions to their problems.

## **2. Materialism**

In the process of positively impacting on the life of the faithful, Pentecostalism has become the instrument of amassing wealth by pastors. Many pastors have turned the pulpit to a medium of forcefully extorting money from the members and threatening them with the condemnation of hell fire if they do not give. They do not account for these monies to their members and no one dares to ask question. Their flamboyant life-styles are causing confusion among many Christians today who live in abject poverty, while their pastors live in mansions and fly in private jets. Therefore, some think of such pastors as “pulpit bandits.”

The multiplier effect of the foregoing is that flamboyant life-styles cause jealousy too among the clergy who live in remote places and have no access to basic amenities. As a result, they have fallen prey to this menace and are now forcing parishioners to contribute so that they can also live up to standard. This situation has made priests and pastors to treat parishioners according to their levels of contributions in the Church. Consequently, exploitation of the vulnerable and gullible members has become a normal situation among pentecostal and charismatic preachers. It is, indeed, a sorry situation that should not be heard of in the Church. Other negative impacts include the Holier than thou Syndrome, and religious tyranny.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the foregoing discussion has highlighted the significant impact of Pentecostalism on Christianity, particularly in Nigeria. The Movement has brought about a renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, and personal experience, leading to a proliferation of Pentecostal churches and a significant increase in Christian adherence.

However, the discussion has also revealed some negative consequences of Pentecostalism, including: Materialism and consumerism among clergy and adherents; Flamboyancy and prioritization of image and status among clergy; Emphasis on individual prosperity over spiritual growth and community development; Potential for exploitation and manipulation by clergy.

Despite these challenges, Pentecostalism remains a significant force in Nigerian Christianity, offering a unique and vibrant expression of faith that

resonates with many people. As the Movement continues to evolve, it is essential to address the negative consequences and promote a more balanced and holistic approach to faith, emphasizing both spiritual growth and social responsibility. Ultimately, the impact of Pentecostalism on Christianity in Nigeria serves as a reminder of the complex and multifaceted nature of religious expression, highlighting the need for ongoing critical reflection, dialogue, and collaboration among scholars, clergy, and adherents.

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