

THE UNFINISHED TASK IN NORTH AMERICAN EVANGELISM AND ITS IMPACT ON SPIRIT-EMPOWERED CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

This study explores the state of evangelism in North America, particularly the Spirit-empowered church in the US. Charted through the history of evangelism movements, most of which originated in North America, this essay will look at those movements, their impact on the church, and some theological reasons why North America has not been more effective in its own evangelistic efforts.

Introduction

Before taking my present job in academia, I spent twenty years in ministry in a local Spirit-empowered church, seven years of which were as a lead pastor of a church of eighty people. These pastoral years were good, but hard. As much as I loved the people, as a small church, we struggled to grow in an area that boasted over 1,000 churches and many mega-churches. The challenges of the average pastor are immense, but what made my experience particularly frustrating was that in seven years as the pastor, we averaged less than one salvation per year. Of course, the Great Commission was a priority and we said we believed the baptism in the Spirit was for effective witness. We were very active in outreach ministry, conducting over a dozen outreaches per year. But these efforts yielded very few salvations. I found that many of my neighbor churches were reaching people at an astounding pace. In the end, I had to come to grips with the fact that some churches are better at reaching people than others.

The reality that some Christian traditions are better at evangelism than others is also playing out on the global stage. Spirit-empowered Christianity is demonstrating that it has a distinctive advantage in global church growth. According to Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo, Spirit-empowered Christianity (SEC) now numbers 644 million people worldwide, a growth of nearly ten-fold in the past half-century.¹ For many

Spirit-empowered denominations, growth is particularly significant in the Global South. For example, in Latin America, Pentecostals and Charismatics have grown from 4 percent of the Christian population to 29.4 percent.² There are similar trends in other regions of the world. In 2020, Spirit-empowered Christianity represented 35.7 percent of Christians in Africa, 30.3 percent of Christians in Latin America, and 19.5 percent of Christians in Asia.³ These global trends have contributed to SEC becoming the fastest-growing religious movement worldwide.

North America, however, is a different story for evangelism. Headlines declaring the decline in the church have been a regular occurrence in religious media. Since 1999, church membership in the US has declined from 70 percent in 1999 to 47 percent in 2020.⁴ This fact is particularly difficult to understand for those who study the unprecedented growth worldwide of Spirit-empowered movements.⁵ This study will explore the state of evangelism in North America, particularly the Spirit-empowered church in the US. Charted through the history of evangelism movements, most of which originated in North America, this essay will look at those movements, their impact on the church, and some theological reasons why North America has not been more effective in its own evangelistic efforts.

To the Ends of the Earth

Evangelism is a major tenet of the Christian faith. The idea that the whole world could be evangelized stretches back to the Gospels themselves with Jesus' famous prediction, "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14, ESV). The thrust of evangelistic efforts to reach the world in obedience to Jesus' Great Commission continued into every period of Christian history. In fact, David Barrett has documented 788 different formal plans to reach the world for Christ by Christian communities in the past two millennia.⁶ Yet, Barrett laments, all of these plans failed to finish the task in their generations.

The twentieth century opened with a significant re-emphasis on evangelism, which became the catalyst for a number of modern attempts to finish the task. In 1855, A. T. Pierson wrote an article in the *Missionary Review* with a "[p]lan to evangelize the world."⁷ Pierson's Northfield Conferences combined eschatological zeal with the missional impulse to preach the evangelical gospel to the ends of the earth before the coming of the Lord. This was followed by John R. Mott, the Methodist layman who published his classic work *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation* in 1900. Many missiologists were animated by his charge to mobilize the global Christian world to unite to reach the lost. The enthusiasm came to a head in 1910 at the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, where Protestant missionaries organized and committed

to completing the task of evangelism within a decade. While great energy was generated, it ultimately fell short of its goal, as others had done before. But Edinburgh did inspire the founding of other ecumenical movements such as the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council.⁸

The missionary impulses of Pierson and Mott naturally influenced the founding of the Pentecostal Movement in the early 1900s. Animated by an eschatologically motivated impulse, Pentecostals sought to reach as many people as possible before Jesus returned. Azusa Street Mission attendees were filled with the Spirit and spoke in unknown languages, with the expectation that they were empowered to take the gospel to the world. Though Spirit-baptism was an inner work of the Spirit, it was primarily concerned with the outward witness to the whole world. Taking the gospel to “every creature” was a top priority and the reason for the Spirit’s empowerment.⁹ Allan H. Anderson comments, “[Pentecostalism] is above all else a missionary movement—this premise enables us to understand the primary motivation for its global expansion through the twentieth century.”¹⁰ But the missional impulse often placed more emphasis on missionaries evangelizing the world rather than reaching their own continent of North America.

The evangelization impulse is seen clearly in the formation of the Assemblies of God (AG) in 1914, where one of its goals was mutual cooperation in the effort of preaching the “whole gospel for the whole world.” At the second General Council held in November 1914 at the Stone Church in Chicago, the AG committed themselves to prioritizing evangelism. They passed a resolution that said, “We commend ourselves and the movement to him for the greatest evangelism that the world has ever seen.”¹¹ Yet, over the next few generations, Pentecostalism remained relatively on the margins of the North American landscape. Between WWI and WWII, the AG stabilized but grew only marginally. It was not until the post-WWII era that significant growth took place as Pentecostals began to experience upward mobility in the post-war boom. It is in this era that departments of missions and evangelism were established, shifting the evangelistic enterprise to missionaries rather than serving as the overall mission of the fellowship.

In the post-World War II era, the US church saw a resurgence in attendance from 30 to 50 percent of the population.¹² Much of the mid-century growth was due to new forms of mass evangelism. Evangelicals like Billy Graham and Pentecostal healing evangelists like Oral Roberts pioneered the method of mass evangelism. Roberts, who became famous for mainstreaming healing on television, never saw healing as his primary mission. His ministry of deliverance was in the mode of the traditional evangelist. To emphasize this, in 1953, Roberts launched the “Million Souls Crusade” with the goal of winning a million souls to Christ per year. This was not secondary to healing for Roberts; rather, it was his “first, second, third and last goal. Besides that, I have no other.”¹³

A significant moment came in 1966 when Billy Graham and *Christianity Today* hosted the Berlin Congress on Evangelism, which brought together an international delegation of Evangelical missionaries and evangelists to re-ignite the church toward the unfinished task. The motto was “one race, one gospel, one task,” a theme that emphasized overcoming sectarian and racial walls that prevented the church from uniting in mission. Carl F. H. Henry commented:

If Christians around the world heed the plea of the congress to unite in a bold and winsome presentation of the Good News, the twentieth-century world will be spectacular, confronted with a prospect of peace and hope and joy that men and women of all races and lands may share.¹⁴

Following this congress was the Lausanne Congress on Evangelism in 1974 that began the Lausanne Movement focused on uniting Evangelicals toward the common goal of “total evangelism of the world.”¹⁵ It turns out that Lausanne was just the beginning of efforts to increase evangelism as the twentieth century was coming to a close.

Toward A.D. 2000

In the 1970s–1980s, leaders from several prominent Christian evangelism and mission movements converged to discuss an effort to coordinate world evangelization efforts leading up to A.D. 2000.¹⁶ The gathering included Keith Parks, David Barrett, Luis Bush, Thomas Wang, and Jay Gary, who met together to brainstorm on what it would take to “finish the task” prior to the turn of the millennium. The result is the following commitment:

In light of the unfinished task, but with a quiet confidence in the possibilities for the completion of world evangelization if Christians cooperate with one another; and in light of the fact that many Christian denominations and organizations are already using A.D. 2000 as a milestone; it is hereby resolved that in the near future a small world-level consultation of Christian leaders be convened to focus on A.D. 2000.¹⁷

David Barrett, the noted missiologist and statistician, did extensive research to document that there were some 250 initiatives between Pentecost A.D. 33 and 1900. In each case, efforts to evangelize the world were launched and fizzled within a generation.¹⁸

However, the momentum toward A.D. 2000 was gaining momentum as several significant efforts at world evangelism were already underway. One effort was led by

religious broadcasters who aimed to preach the gospel by radio to every nation by 2000. The Southern Baptist Convention launched their “Bold Mission Thrust” in 1976 with a target of world evangelization by 2000. In 1976, Ralph Winter started the U.S. Center for World Mission focused on unreached people groups. Roman Catholics also caught the evangelism vision in 1978 when Pope John Paul launched a major evangelism effort called “Evangelism 2000” led by Spirit-filled Catholic Tom Forrest. Also, in the late 1970s, Bill Bright launched the Jesus Film as an evangelism effort called “New Life 2000” to introduce every nation to Jesus in their native tongue.¹⁹ In 1980, the World Consultation on Frontier Mission was held in Edinburgh with the goal of “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000.” All totaled, some thirty different organizations and denominations had set their sights on evangelizing the world by A.D. 2000.

Decade of Harvest

In the various Pentecostal denominations, several major evangelism initiatives were also taking place. Each one recognized the importance of the upcoming millennial moment and placed an emphasis on the last decade as a special era of evangelism. Most notably was the AG’s “Decade of Harvest,” which focused on US evangelism based on foreign mission principles. Others included The Church of God (Cleveland, TN) initiative called “Decade of Destiny,” the “Mission 2000” effort in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, and the “Church Target 2000” initiative in the International Pentecostal Holiness Church.²⁰

Beyond these classical Pentecostal movements, the Charismatic renewal community was mobilized by Vinson Synan, the Pentecostal historian who became the leader of the Spirit-filled ecumenical evangelism movement called the North American Renewal Service Committee (NARSC). Synan joined with various Charismatic renewal communities to host a Global Congress on the Holy Spirit and World Evangelism Conference to take seriously the mandate of world evangelization.²¹ The NARSC leaders set a goal of reaching half of the global population with the gospel by A.D. 2000. For Spirit-empowered believers, the missional emphasis of the Spirit made the turn of the century a perfect target for finishing the task. Synan noted in 1988, “If Christians, who are filled with the Holy Spirit and who are given evangelistic gifts are not able to win the world to Christ, who else will be able to rise to the challenge? If not us, who?”²² Conferences continued through the 1990s until the final one was held in 2000, after which NARSC was dissolved and the various ecumenical Charismatic leaders went their separate ways.

As ecumenical convergence movements dissolved and cooperation for world evangelism once again waned, a new convergence movement was about to be birthed

out of the centennial celebration of the Azusa Street Revival in 2006. Organized by Church of God of Prophecy pastor and evangelist, William M. (Billy) Wilson, the Azusa Centennial brought together 50,000 people from 115 nations to celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Azusa and to pray for a fresh outpouring on a new generation for a new millennium. The Centennial was more than just another Holy Spirit conference. It was a convergence moment in which Spirit-filled leaders saw the value of cooperation towards reaching a new generation.

Out of the Azusa Centennial was birthed a vision for a new convergence of Spirit-empowered movements called Empowered21 (E21). Wilson assembled a Global Council of Spirit-empowered leaders who prayed and dreamed together about a goal for E21: “That every person on earth would have an authentic encounter with Jesus Christ through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit by Pentecost 2033.”²³ In the tradition of previous movements, E21 emphasized the purpose of the Spirit-empowered life was to evangelize the world with the gospel in obedience to the Great Commission. Today, it is mobilizing global constituents toward this goal through regional councils meeting on a regular basis to cooperate and consult together on how to “finish the task” in this generation. They have also developed a Global Evangelistic Alliance to collaborate toward the goal of reaching the world by 2030 and have organized a global conference in Amsterdam in 2023.²⁴ Their mission is not just to reach every nation, but “*every person on earth*” (emphasis added). Can this be accomplished in the next decade? That remains to be seen, but like previous movements, E21 is calling the church back to the mandate to evangelize the world for Jesus Christ in this generation. In similar fashion, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, also chaired by Wilson since 2019, has the focus of this mission to “unite and mobilize the global Spirit-filled family in completing the great commission of Jesus Christ.”²⁵

Despite the cyclical resurgence of these missional initiatives, Global Christianity has remained fairly static in the last fifty years. While Christians have increased from 1.2 billion in 1970 to 2.5 billion in 2020, that growth has failed to keep up with global population growth, with the percentage of global Christians remaining stagnant from 32.4 percent in 1970 to 32.3 percent in 2020.²⁶ The demographics of the global Spirit-empowered Movement today are no doubt impressive. But we must be realistic in our account of what is taking place. The reality is that despite the past century of convergence movements seeking to cooperate toward the goal of evangelization, the unfinished task remains largely unfinished, especially in North America.

The Unfinished Task in North America

Though the global Spirit-empowered Movement has seen tremendous growth in the past half-century, North American SEC has not kept pace with the world. Of the 644

million global Spirit-empowered believers, only 67 million are located in North America, placing North America fourth among the six continents.²⁷ While the total number increased from 2000–2020 by 14 million, the total percentage of believers declined from 12.1 percent to 10.5 percent. Overall, Pentecostals and Charismatics in the US have increased from 13.8 million in 1970 to 65 million in 2020, but have failed to keep up with population growth.²⁸

While much of the leadership for the global evangelistic efforts has been from North America, North American Christianity has not particularly benefitted from these evangelism initiatives. Many church statisticians have sounded the alarm that the church in the US is in decline.²⁹ The Pentecostal efforts at evangelism had mixed results leading up to A.D. 2000. For example, Edith Blumhofer and Paul Tinlin noted that the AG's Decade of Harvest fell well short of its goals of 5 million new converts and 5,000 new churches.³⁰ All totaled, AG adherents only grew by less than 400,000 during that decade and has climbed steadily to a modest, yet less than expected, growth of 1.1 million since 1990.³¹ At the same time, the goal of 5,000 churches was equally disappointing as the number of churches declined from 8,988 in 1990 to 8,801 in 2000, a net loss of 187 churches. The AG was not the only major Pentecostal denomination to struggle. The International Pentecostal Holiness Church saw moderate growth from 1,475 churches in 1989 to 1,868 churches in 2000, including an increase of over 60,000 members.³² While these gains were certainly welcome, they fell below their stated goals and expectations set by the millennial benchmark.

What these numbers tell us is that North America, while slowly growing, lags largely behind the global landscape of growth. For example, from 2009–2019, AG (US) adherents climbed from 2.9 million to 3.2 million, an increase of 13.1 percent.³³ Conversions over this same period climbed from 440,803 to 487,322, a growth of 10 percent.³⁴ The church is growing, but growth among ethnic minorities, rather than evangelization, is the leading cause. The total population of White adherents remained relatively flat—from 1,853,632 to 1,849,688—yet declined in total percentage from 70 percent to 56 percent. Over the same period, Hispanic adherents went from 428,747 (16 percent) to 739,001 (23.2 percent).³⁵ Yet, this is not to say that growth is directly tied to evangelism among ethnic populations. Ethnic language districts in 2018–2019 saw a decline of 5.1 percent in conversions.³⁶ This means that while the AG is experiencing more diversity, which is positive, growth has stagnated among most of its congregations overall.

In Canada, Pentecostals and Charismatics are not faring any better. The total number of Spirit-empowered believers more than tripled from 709,000 in 1970 to 2,300,000 in 2000.³⁷ Yet that growth has stagnated since, marking 2,500,000 in 2015. For example, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, perhaps the largest Pentecostal body, has seen only modest growth in the last twenty years, from 220,000 in 2000 to

240,000 today.³⁸ Michael Wilkinson notes that Pentecostalism reached its peak in 1991 with over 435,000 Pentecostal believers, but has since declined as many Pentecostals joined independent neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic groups like the Vineyard.³⁹ It is notable that Spirit-empowered believers have outnumbered Evangelicals for the past two decades as a percentage of the total population, but that percentage is comparatively small at 6 percent.

If there is growth in the Spirit-empowered Movement, it is taking place in the independent networks of Charismatic churches around North America.⁴⁰ These networks, sometimes called the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), operate by a different set of values than traditional Pentecostal communities. Brad Christerson and Richard Flory studied these networks and noted that they have a different missional focus than the traditional mission of evangelism. Primarily, they “[s]eek to transform society as a whole rather than saving individual souls and building congregations.”⁴¹ Contrasted with early Pentecostals who saw themselves as an end-time missional movement, Charismatic churches often focus internally on advancing the prosperity of believers and the church network itself to grow personally, organizationally, and societally. While these factors have drawn members from Pentecostal circles into their ranks, it has also appealed to the US’s ethos of neo-liberal self-actualization. These churches offer innovative religious experiences that can be customized in ways that benefit the religious consumer. In this way, the goals of building the kingdom are commoditized by offering personal enrichment and success rather than motivating individuals toward accomplishing evangelization for the gospel’s sake.⁴²

Factors Shaping North American Evangelism

Why has Christianity in North America been in decline while SEC is expanding globally? I want to suggest three factors that have challenged evangelism efforts among Spirit-empowered communities. These factors seem to have impacted every generation’s effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission. But, particularly for this new generation, these factors are increasingly central to any effort to reinvigorate evangelization in North America.

Premillennial Eschatology

Pentecostalism was birthed out of the phenomenon of baptism in the Holy Spirit. But this experience was set in a larger eschatological and restorationist metanarrative known as the “latter rain.” Pentecostals believed the emergence of the last days phenomenon of Spirit-baptism and speaking in tongues was a sign that the earth was in its final days before Christ’s coming. This dispensational metanarrative was semi-cessationist in that

it understood that what was lost during the decline of the church was being fully restored in anticipation of the coming millennial reign of Christ.⁴³

The latter rain eschatological paradigm presented Pentecostals with two competing tensions. On the one hand, Pentecostals imagined an increase in glory from the outpouring of the Spirit that would make evangelism possible before the coming of Christ. They believed the restoration of the baptism in the Holy Spirit was the beginning of a worldwide global outpouring to bring in the end-time harvest. Pentecostalism was not a movement that evangelized; it was thought to be God's primary vehicle of global evangelization.

At the same time, the eschatological narrative had an equally pessimistic orientation. Rooted in premillennialism, Pentecostals rejected the postmillennial idea of progress that expected the Spirit to renew the world through the church. Instead, the dispensational aspects of premillennialism convinced them that the conditions on the earth were to get worse, not better. Peter Prosser comments:

Dispensationalists became a self-fulfilling prophecy. With the present dispensation winding down, Pentecostals recognized that sin was increasing and wickedness. In not looking for change, except for the worse, everything around them and among them would naturally tend to get worse.⁴⁴

One can see how these ideas would stifle evangelistic efforts as a lost cause. This cognitive dissonance between evangelistic success and fatalistic failure has little been recognized in Pentecostal circles. But it is a key tension that has motivated, or demotivated, evangelistic efforts.

One turn in this orientation was to shift a view of the eschatological mandate: "This gospel shall be preached in every nation as a witness, then the end shall come" (Matt 24:14, paraphrased). On the positive side, this verse could imply that the gospel will be successful at some point when every nation is reached in fulfillment of the promise that "[t]he earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14). This verse would imply that the gospel could reach the whole world. However, the eschatological mandate could also be interpreted by those who have a fatalistic view by implying that a witness of the gospel must reach one portion of every nation of the world rather than succeed in evangelizing the whole world. This was the strategy in the A.D. 2000 approach, to make sure that every nation had some gospel witness in some form in order to fulfill the mandate. This was the approach taken by media companies such as radio broadcasters and television networks like Trinity Broadcasting Network.

But perhaps a third approach is warranted that would avoid the tensions inherent in both approaches to the eschatological mandate. What if the goal of reaching the whole world is not a prediction but rather a challenge to every generation to take responsibility for reaching the world they have inherited? In this way, the eschatological mandate is not a goal of evangelization, *per se*. It is the motivation for evangelization for each successive generation. The failure of previous generations to win the world for Jesus should not deter this generation from believing that such a goal is possible. Nor should that failure be used as an excuse to limit evangelization efforts to filling a quota of the evangelized among every people group. Jesus is still coming, and North America is still worth reaching. Every year, North America grows and changes. Just as the global population rapidly expands through globalization, population growth, and migration, the nature of the church's understanding of "every nation" continues to shift. Therefore, generational contextualization is extremely important, as each generation takes up the mandate in the ways that reach their generation. It is this idea that leads us to the next hindrance and possibility in evangelization.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit

One of the hallmarks of SEC is its belief in Spirit-baptism as an empowering encounter with the Holy Spirit to be witnesses (Acts 1:8). Early Pentecostals understood this experience in a missional way, so much so that the languages they spoke by the Spirit were thought to be explicitly for their missionary endeavors. However, this emphasis shifted in the Charismatic Renewal and independent Charismatic movements toward the personal benefits of Spirit-baptism above its missional benefits. As a result, self-improvement has become the goal rather than the salvation of the lost. I dare say this inward focus has lessened the Spirit-empowered believer's missional impulse to reach the lost. This has no doubt had consequences on personal evangelism and the overall growth of the past few decades.

Pentecostals have tended to focus highly on missionary endeavors for the expansion of Christianity globally. As Allen H. Anderson notes, "Just as Spirit Baptism is Pentecostalism's central, most distinctive doctrine, so mission is Pentecostalism's central, most important activity."⁴⁵ But, the baptism in the Holy Spirit was never supposed to be empowerment just for missionaries; it was the power of evangelization for everyday believers living missionally in their own contexts. Pentecostals were called to be missional, not just missionaries.

The good news is a significant shift has taken place in recent generations as younger people are more drawn to missional Christianity rather than simply gospel proclamation. While this trend excites fear in some that mission will replace evangelism, the truth is that global growth is taking place primarily because global SEC worldwide

is far more engaged with social issues than in Western contexts.⁴⁶ Because global missions work has successfully integrated the gospel and social engagement, this has filtered down to North American Pentecostal denominations, adding compassion ministry to their statements on evangelization.⁴⁷ Missionaries have long invested in missional partnerships as the means of contextualizing the gospel. Says Robert Priest, “A high proportion of mission today involves the synergy of global partnerships across such marked socio-economic divides, partnerships mobilized on behalf of human need and of Christian witness.”⁴⁸ If missions work is successfully rooted in compassion ministry, why would evangelism on the local level be any different?

The shift from “missions” to “mission” is an important one for the growth of evangelism in North America. Christians need to see evangelism not as a calling or office in the church, but as the daily mission of the believer. Robert Priest comments:

In contemporary understandings, the task of living missionally is thought to belong to all believers, not merely religious professionals. Furthermore, there is a pervasive recognition that missional presence is best accomplished through the full body of Christ and that lay Christians living out their various vocational commitments in ways that establish a visible Christian presence is a critical component of authentic witness.⁴⁹

Missional living is a Spirit-empowered concept. The idea that the Spirit makes people witnesses does not have to fit the old paradigm of evangelistic crusades and/or preaching on the street corner. The Holy Spirit empowers believers in every generation to live everyday lives in which the kingdom of God is present in power, in mission, in speech, in friendship, and in vocation.

What is taking place is a shift in what is understood as evangelism, especially among Millennials and Gen Z. It is apparent that this generation is struggling with conventional models of evangelism. A Barna Report found that 47 percent of Millennials believed it was “wrong to share their faith.” That is a sobering statistic. However, it does not tell the whole story. The study also notes that 96 percent of Millennials report that sharing their faith is important, and 94 percent say that people coming to Jesus is the “best thing that could happen” to a person they love.⁵⁰ As one Millennial reflected on evangelism:

It is certainly a tragedy that communication of this beautiful message of Jesus’ love and grace has become associated with colonialism, cheap manipulation, and obscurant dogmatism . . . evangelism, sharing of the good news of Jesus, honestly stands in need of holistic overhaul both of method and of content.⁵¹

Rather than seeing evangelism as an event done by ministers, Millennials and Gen Z see their lives as missional and want their lives to be engaged in things that matter. In this way, Craig Spring notes they are uniquely equipped to evangelize. “Millennial Christians have more non-Christian friends than any other prior generation. They’re more plugged into the reality of the world.”⁵² So evangelism is of high priority, but younger Pentecostals are looking for new models of evangelism that differ from outdated evangelization paradigms.

By way of contrast, personal evangelism among Boomer Generations has also continued to fall steadily. One Barna study notes that less than 50 percent of the Boomer Generation engages in personal evangelism, compared to 65 percent of Millennials in 2013. Says Barna, “While the evangelistic practices of all other generations have either declined or remained static in the past few years, Millennials are the only generation among whom evangelism is significantly on the rise.”⁵³ That statistic has grown even higher more recently as 80 percent of Gen Z has shared Christ with someone in the past year.⁵⁴ While on the surface it appears evangelism is in decline, there is reason to hope for the future of evangelism in this new generation, even if it looks different from generations past.

Politicizing the Gospel

One thing that is clear in North America is that the church has become less evangelistic as it has become more political. This is a huge problem facing Evangelicalism, including Spirit-empowered communities. While politics is by nature divisive, the exponential growth of Pentecostalism has somewhat benefited from North America’s overall stable political situation. As William Kay notes, church growth is often the result of stable political environments when the church can evangelize unhindered by governmental control.⁵⁵ The presence of political peace following WWII led to significant growth in Pentecostalism and led to the emergence of Charismatic renewal movements.

But political stability is far from what the US is experiencing today. While North America is largely free from military conflict on its shores, internal political polarization is causing great rifts in Spirit-empowered communities. This political climate has bled into the church, a phenomenon not experienced by early Pentecostals, who were fairly neutral on societal politics for the first few decades.⁵⁶ The movement towards conservative political alignment among Spirit-empowered churches mirrors trends in Evangelicalism. This became apparent in the US during the 2016 election and administration of President Donald Trump. While Evangelical ministers have served as presidential advisors in the past (both Republican and Democratic), the Trump administration was the first to marshal support from Spirit-filled ministers such as Paula White, Stephen Strang, Jentzen Franklin, and Lance Wallnau. Leah Payne and Erica Ramirez note that “Pentecostal-charismatic

faith-based media moguls have enjoyed unprecedented access to the White House during Trump's tenure. In return, they have showered the president with praise and loyalty."⁵⁷ The benefits of mainstreaming Spirit-empowered leaders were enormous. For the first time, Pentecostals and Charismatics, who in previous generations had been marginalized, were suddenly welcomed into the White House. The presence of Spirit-empowered leaders in presidential functions also meant that elements of Pentecostal spirituality were on full display in prayer meetings and rallies.

While Pentecostal denominations were not particularly vocal in support of President Trump, support from Charismatic ministers was no surprise to Arlene Sanchez-Walsh, who recognizes that prosperity-leaning Charismatic figures "appreciate showmanship, wealth, and spectacle."⁵⁸ President Trump's controversial style mirrored the leadership aesthetics of independent Charismatic ministers who celebrate their ability to "break away from constraints imposed by traditionally organized" groups, like Pentecostal denominations.⁵⁹ Many Evangelicals and Spirit-empowered believers admired him for just such a leadership style.

Whatever benefits were gained in the psyche of Spirit-empowered believers by this legitimization, the detrimental effects upon the witness of the church cannot be ignored, particularly with younger Christians. As the controversial candidate and president was lauded by many, others within the movement were disenchanted by a candidate whose past was littered with obvious contradictory values to Pentecostal morality and ethics. This cognitive dissonance, particularly in minority Pentecostal communities, was indeed disenchanting.⁶⁰ For many younger Pentecostals who were already struggling with a distaste for culture wars, the Trump presidency became enigmatic of the fatigue many have felt over the idea that Christianity should be aligned with political parties.

In abandoning the politicization of Christianity, younger Evangelicals have questioned Evangelical Christianity in North America as it exists today. Some studies show that Millennials and Gen Z are rapidly moving toward the "nones" category. It is true that a 2017 Pew Research poll found the "Millennials are more likely than older adults to take liberal positions on social and political issues."⁶¹ This is largely because younger generations are more ethnically diverse and tend to have a less conservative outlook on political and social policy.⁶² But it is more than that. Like early Pentecostals, they are rejecting the postmillennial impulse to Christianize the US through politics. They have a passion for seeing God's kingdom as a priority over any political or social kingdom.

Political conservatives often attribute the liberalization of the younger generation to the erosion of biblical worldview among US youth. But this is not a fair characterization, especially among Spirit-empowered communities. This generation appears to be outpacing older generations in their commitment to the core of

Pentecostal sensibilities. The Barna Group reports that 38 percent of younger generations rank speaking in tongues as part of regular worship services as a high priority, an amount over twice as much as the reported 14 percent of Boomers.⁶³ This phenomenon is exemplified by the prayer and worship movement led by Spirit-filled ministries at Bethel and the International House of Prayer. These two movements, and others like them, have ignited the spiritual passion of this generation, whose churches are arguably exhibiting more Pentecostal aesthetics than their Boomer parents.⁶⁴

Conclusion

As the religious landscape of North America continues to change, the church faces a crisis of decline that only vigorous evangelistic efforts can reverse. The Spirit-empowered Movement is leading the way globally as it effectively draws people into the kingdom of God. If the North American church wants to see similar results, it must draw on the things that have distinguished Pentecostal and Charismatic growth worldwide. First, now more than ever, baptism in the Holy Spirit is needed to empower the church to accomplish the evangelization of the world. We must realize that our next-door neighbors are equally as important to evangelize as the 10–40 window. Second, as the Spirit reignites believers' passion for evangelization, we understand we live in light of Jesus' coming and his Great Commission. God's kingdom is coming to earth. Our responsibility is to take the gospel to every nation before that kingdom comes. It is that urgency that keeps the church on task to fulfill the Great Commission. But it is also that eschatological orientation that buffers the church from trading the Spirit's passion for the kingdom for a false political kingdom on this earth. North American Christians need to evaluate how passion for political kingdom-building has hindered its witness. We need to embrace a vision of evangelism that is fueled by a passion for the kingdom of God above all other kingdoms that would distract us from fulfilling our mission. If each generation can take seriously its responsibility to take the gospel to every person's world, including our own continent, then we will answer the call to the global eschatological mission.



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Notes:

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