

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PENTECOSTAL PRAGMATISM?

Paulinus Ikechukwu Ogara

Department of Social Sciences and Humanities
Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu
Email:ikeogara@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper evaluates the dilemma of “Pentecostal Pragmatism”: the convergence of Pentecostal spirituality with a market-driven insistence on immediate material efficacy and worldly utility. It argues that this pragmatic fusion compromises the theological and doctrinal integrity of the faith by reframing spiritual experiences as transactional means to measurable socioeconomic outcomes. The central problem lies in a structural contradiction: this outcome-oriented framework brings Pentecostalism’s traditional emphasis on eschatological transcendence, moral formation, and divine gifts into direct conflict with a results-oriented demand for tangible personal wealth and status. This tension introduces three critical vulnerabilities: it fosters a consumerist, “my-will-be-done” mentality that prompts believers to seek quick supernatural fixes; it increases the risk of spiritual exploitation among vulnerable adherents; and it incentivizes rapid doctrinal adaptability that erodes core religious identity to meet shifting market preferences. While acknowledging Pentecostalism’s operational success in dynamic evangelization and global growth, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the paper contends that prioritizing immediate utility compromises long-term moral formation and traditional Christian ethics. Methodologically, the argument proceeds through philosophical theology and conceptual analysis, evaluating the implicit functionalism of pragmatic Pentecostal praxis against the normative frameworks of historic Christian traditions—such as classical Catholic catechesis—which emphasize theological orthodoxy and structured spiritual formation to resist market-driven modifications. The paper concludes that navigating the contemporary religious landscape requires analytical discernment to integrate practical responsiveness while subordinating functional pragmatism to the preservation of core Christian foundational principles.

Keywords: Pentecostal Pragmatism; Theological Integrity; Consumerism; Functionalism; Philosophical Theology

Introduction

In the domain of philosophical theology, the fusion of Pentecostalism and philosophical pragmatism—termed “Pentecostal Pragmatism”—presents a critical subject for analysis. Traditional Pentecostalism is historically anchored in an eschatological

pursuit of spiritual transcendence, moral formation, and the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. Conversely, pragmatism prioritizes immediate utility, empirical efficacy, and practical consequences. The convergence of these two distinct paradigms has birthed a highly influential, outcome-oriented theology that has reshaped the global religious landscape, particularly within Sub-Saharan Africa.

Scholarship on African Pentecostalism highlights its vibrant, contemporary preoccupation with immediate deliverance, physical healing, and material prosperity (Resane, 2022). This pragmatic promise of tangible breakthroughs has fueled an unprecedented explosion of mega-churches and independent ministries across the continent, with countries like Nigeria witnessing the establishment of thousands of highly competitive congregations (Igboin, 2020). However, this rapid proliferation has forced a profound existential crisis upon historic, liturgical institutions. Established bodies, most notably the Catholic Church, find themselves caught in an acute tension between maintaining centuries-old theological orthodoxy and adapting to a shifting religious marketplace that demands instant, material results (Gathogo, 2022).

This study undertakes a critical philosophical examination of this phenomenon to address a foundational question: What is the fundamental dilemma of Pentecostal Pragmatism? This article argues that while the movement fluidly addresses contemporary socio-economic anxieties, its core defect lies in how it forcibly collapses the boundary between the sacred and the utilitarian. By treating divine intervention as a transactional mechanism for socio-economic mobility, Pentecostal Pragmatism compromises the doctrinal integrity of Christian theology. It effectively subordinates long-term moral formation to immediate, material utility. Drawing on the intersections of philosophical theology and institutional sociology, this paper exposes how this transactional faith ultimately transforms religion from an internal ethical framework into a market-driven commodity, altering contemporary perceptions of faith and tradition.

Problem Statement

Traditional Pentecostalism is anchored in an eschatological pursuit of spiritual transcendence, moral formation, and divine charismata. However, the contemporary rise of "Pentecostal Pragmatism" has shifted this focus toward a market-driven prioritization of material success, utilitarian outcomes, and commercialized miraculous manifestations. The central problem is that this pragmatic fusion compromises the ethical and doctrinal integrity of the faith, effectively subordinating long-term moral formation to immediate, tangible wealth and status. Left unexamined, this theological distortion leaves religious scholarship without a framework to evaluate how transactional faith destabilizes traditional Christian ethics and alters societal perceptions of sacred value. Consequently, this study addresses that framework gap within philosophical theology by analyzing how contemporary religious expressions

manipulate classical theological doctrines through a pragmatist lens, ultimately transforming faith from an internal ethical framework into an external, transactional commodity.

Literature Review: Understanding Pentecostalism

The Meaning and Theological Core of Pentecostalism: Pentecostalism is a global Christian movement distinguished by its profound theological emphasis on the immediate work of the Holy Spirit and the necessity of direct, experiential encounters with the divine (Warrington, 2022). Rooted historically and liturgically in the biblical narrative of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–6), the movement operates on the conviction that the original outpouring of the Spirit was not a static, historical event, but a perpetual template for continuous spiritual empowerment available to all contemporary believers. This enduring accessibility is often conceptualized through the biblical metaphor of the "latter rain" (Joel 2:23–29; Acts 2:16–21), signaling a democratic, trans-generational dispensation of spiritual gifts—such as prophecy, divine healing, and glossolalia—that transcends traditional boundaries of gender, age, and hierarchy.

A foundational doctrine separating Pentecostalism from historic mainline Christian theology is its distinct conceptualization of how the Holy Spirit initiates his primary work in a believer's life (pneumatological initiation). While classical Christian traditions view regeneration and sanctification as the immediate internal fruits of water baptism and conversion, Pentecostals advocate for a subsequent, definitive spiritual milestone termed the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Kgatle, 2020). This "second baptism" mirrors the ecstatic, empowering phenomenon experienced by the early disciples. By prioritizing this experiential dimension over rigid ecclesiastical ritual or purely intellectual assent, Pentecostalism establishes an existential framework where faith must be tangibly felt, witnessed, and manifested in the life of the believer.

Historical Origins and Diversity in Pentecostalism

The historical genesis of global Pentecostalism is conventionally traced to early twentieth-century American revivalism. The movement originated during a prayer meeting on January 1, 1901, at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, where a student named Agnes Ozman exhibited glossolalia (Synan, 2019). Under the theological direction of Charles Parham, an independent holiness evangelist and faith healer, this phenomenon was framed as the primary biblical evidence of Holy Spirit baptism. The movement gained global momentum through the subsequent Azusa Street Revival (1906–1909) in Los Angeles, California, spearheaded by the African-American preacher William Joseph Seymour. Characterized by racial egalitarianism and intense ecstatic manifestations, the Azusa revival attracted thousands of seekers, serving as the primary catalyst for the international dispersion of Pentecostal theology.

Despite its singular historical root, contemporary Pentecostalism exhibits a highly fragmented and diverse ecclesiastical landscape, spanning a wide spectrum of theological orientations from radical legalism to progressive liberalism. Nevertheless, critical commonalities unify this diverse movement (Akanbi, 2020). Central to all factions is a strict adherence to biblical inerrancy and infallibility, which directly informs their liturgy and praxis. For instance, Pentecostal worship is globally characterized by its kinetic vitality, relying on high-decibel music, powerful sound reinforcement, and spontaneous congregational participation expressed through dancing, clapping, and vocal declarations.

Furthermore, this literalist hermeneutic justifies a broad array of localized doctrines and rituals. Pentecostals routinely utilize consecrated physical objects—such as anointed water, olive oil, prayer cloths, and handkerchiefs—as material conduits for miraculous interventions, drawing a direct scriptural parallel to the apostolic acts recorded in Acts 19:11–12. Depending on regional denominational configurations, these biblically derived practices range from tithing (Malachi 3:8–10), child dedication (Mark 10:13–16), and the ordination of women (Joel 2:28–29), to more extreme localized phenomena such as foot-washing (John 13:14–17) and ritual snake handling (Mark 16:18).

Key Values and Characteristics of Pentecostal Spirituality

Pentecostal spirituality is structurally defined by five core characteristics that govern its theological and liturgical identity, as identified by Calvin and Rybarczyk (2007). First, it privileges individual subjectivity, asserting that the Holy Spirit operates as an active, unmediated presence in the daily life of the believer. Second, it maintains a strict, unyielding commitment to personal holiness and puritanical morality, which historic scholarship notes provides an accessible ethical framework across diverse socio-cultural stratifications. Third, traditional Pentecostalism is fundamentally defined by an ascetic "otherworldliness" rooted in a radical, imminent eschatology; the expectation of the parousia historically fostered a deliberate detachment from worldly accumulation and secular ambitions. Fourth, a rigorous commitment to biblical literalism drives the movement's praxis, validating its unique expressions through direct scriptural mandates. Finally, liturgical spontaneity serves as a defining hallmark of its worship, where highly volatile, unpredictable services are intentionally designed to yield to the immediate, democratic promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Cumulatively, these spiritual values reveal an underlying functionalism that directly targets the immediate existential anxieties of the marginalized. By transforming abstract theological dogmas into concrete, felt experiences, Pentecostalism operates as a highly responsive religious apparatus. Its contemporary global prominence rests precisely on this capacity to offer immediate supernatural solutions to physical, psychological, and social crises, anchoring its charismatic appeal in the persistent pursuit of a direct, tangible encounter with the divine.

Pragmatic Elements of Pentecostalism

The global resonance of Pentecostalism is intrinsically linked to its operational functionalism, which incorporates distinct pragmatic elements that dictate its theological axioms, liturgical structures, and sociological manifestations. Analyzed through the lens of philosophical theology, Pentecostal praxis functions as a highly plastic, result-oriented system where abstract doctrinal configurations are systematically subordinated to empirical, lived outcomes. This emphasis on experiential validation mirrors the foundational tenets of pragmatist epistemology, which posits that the veracity of any theological proposition is directly contingent upon its practical, experiential fruitfulness (Oliverio, 2021).

At the core of this convergence is the Pentecostal prioritization of physical, psychological, and existential healing through localized pneumatological intervention. This unrelenting demand for tangible, material breakthroughs directly mirrors Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatic maxim: that the meaning of a belief is entirely delineated by the practical effects it produces in objective reality (Peirce, 1877). Rather than demanding passive intellectual assent to esoteric dogmas, Pentecostalism reconfigures faith as an active, therapeutic mechanism. This posture aligns seamlessly with William James's formulation of the "will to believe," which legitimizes religious convictions based on their immediate, life-enhancing utility and psychical value to the individual subject (James, 1902).

Similarly, the cultivation of charismata—such as glossolalia and prophetic utterances—serves a profoundly utilitarian purpose within the community. Far from being merely symbolic, these ecstatic states function as democratized tools that provide empowerment, socio-spiritual cohesion, and existential security to adherents. This functionalist employment of religious experience treats the sacred not as an external metaphysical essence, but as a heightened quality of human experience that actively harmonizes the individual with their socio-cultural environment (Kgatlle, 2020).

Furthermore, the institutional expansion of the movement is accelerated by its inherent adaptability. Pentecostal structures frequently evolve to address the cultural contours of their immediate environments, utilizing modern media and targeted social support systems to address community needs. From a structural-theological perspective, this institutional plasticity represents a form of socio-religious problem-solving, where the organizational machinery of the church is consistently reconstructed to meet the pragmatic needs of the collective (Akanbi, 2020).

In effect, Pentecostalism's heavy reliance on subjective experience and immediate utility introduces specific theological vulnerabilities. When the verification of religious truth is focused heavily on personal experience and tangible outcomes, the ecclesial framework becomes highly susceptible to doctrinal shifts. By emphasizing the

intersection of divine intervention and human utility, the pragmatic elements within Pentecostalism create a model of faith centred on practical results—a development that invites ongoing ethical and philosophical reflection within the tradition.

Pentecostal Pragmatism: A Critical Appraisal

A critical appraisal of Pentecostal pragmatism requires a balanced examination of this orientation's functional and results-driven approach to religious life. Pentecostal pragmatism, as an interpretive and operational logic within contemporary Pentecostal expression, has expanded rapidly across the contemporary religious landscape. However, its prioritisation of immediacy, utility, and tangible outcomes introduces distinct theological vulnerabilities that warrant critical scrutiny.

A central tenet of this pragmatic orientation is the emphasis on resolving human problems and providing tangible solutions through faith. This has, in many instances, created the perception that a church's relevance is contingent on its ability to meet individual needs. While addressing real-life difficulties through faith is important, this operational framework can foster an anthropocentric 'my-will-be-done' mentality, conditioning adherents to demand immediate adjustments to their personal circumstances (Ogara, 2009). This shift manifests clearly in the ubiquitous 'prophetic declarations' and 'decree-and-declare' liturgies common in modern Pentecostal services. In these rituals, prayer is repositioned: instead of a submissive petition to a sovereign God ('Thy will be done'), it becomes a mechanistic tool where the believer's spoken words are expected to command immediate spiritual and material realities.

An important question is whether the essence of Christianity should be validated primarily by its capacity to resolve practical problems. This pragmatic orientation places pressure on faith communities to demonstrate effectiveness in problem-solving. When these expectations are not met, the resulting impatience often drives believers to switch churches in pursuit of swift supernatural interventions. This constant migration behaves exactly like a spiritual gig economy, where believers treat pastors as private service contractors rather than spiritual shepherds.

Another issue is the tendency for religious practices and doctrines to adapt continually to the changing desires and preferences of congregations. Much as adaptability reflects a desire to remain relevant, even so, this behavioural pattern introduces a consumerist dynamic into the religious sphere, where faith is continuously assessed by its immediate, short-term utility. A religious system which constantly modifies its core tenets to align with shifting market demands risks losing its essence (Ogara, 2009). Scholars evaluating this trajectory observe that it reduces theological discourse to a consumer-driven marketplace where demanding themes such as repentance, suffering, and eschatology are systematically hollowed out or 'cherry-picked' because they fail to attract religious consumers (Arthur, 2021).

By contrast, classical ecclesiastical traditions respond to these shifting religious demands through intensive catechesis and a reliance on systematic theology. They prioritise long-term doctrinal continuity and structured spiritual formation which equip their adherents with a firm foundation and enable them to discern and resist market-driven influences that might compromise core tenets. Scholarship warns that this unchecked commercialisation threatens the spiritual centre of global Christianity, as ministries increasingly commodify the divine to secure mass appeal amid competitive religious landscapes (Ukah, 2021).

Despite its negative sides, the operational merits of Pentecostal pragmatism remain distinct. Its dynamic evangelisation strategies, structural plasticity, and focus on the practical dimensions of faith have driven its global expansion and capacity to engage diverse demographics. For instance, in rapidly urbanising regions of the Global South, where state infrastructure and social safety nets are non-existent, the Pentecostal church steps into the vacuum acting simultaneously as a mutual-aid society, a business networking hub, and an emotional sanctuary. As Kukah (2019) observed, traditional institutions must recognise that Pentecostal movements gain immense traction precisely because they directly confront the immediate, practical challenges of local African communities.

However, Kukah simultaneously cautions that this pragmatic focus can easily morph into a superficial ‘prosperity gospel’ that obscures the true, selfless mind of Christ. These qualities demonstrate how religious structures can directly address existential anxieties and serve as a source of reflection for other Christian traditions. As Gabriel and Neumann (2022) wrote, Pentecostalism’s raw experiential power succeeds precisely because its hermeneutics centre on a direct, somatic experience of the divine, restoring a vital emotional and psychological sanctuary that hyper-rationalised traditional frameworks often overlook.

Putting everything together, while Pentecostal pragmatism has addressed immediate needs and contributed to the expansion of faith communities, it raises concerns about consumerism, spiritual exploitation, and doctrinal integrity. Its insistence on tangible, material breakthroughs directly reflects a functionalist view of divine agency and makes the meaning of a spiritual belief entirely dependent on the practical effects it produces in objective reality (Resane, 2022). Also, Pentecostalism reconfigures faith as an active, therapeutic mechanism and legitimizes religious convictions based on their immediate, life-enhancing utility and psychical value (Warrington, 2022). The need to balance pragmatism with a firm commitment to preserving the core values and teachings of Christianity remains a challenge for this orientation.

Conclusion

The appraisal of Pentecostal pragmatism reveals distinct institutional strengths as well as specific theological challenges. Its pastoral strategies are effective in attracting adherents, and its emphasis on the practical dimension of faith demonstrates a direct responsiveness to human need. However, the unchecked pursuit of expedient solutions risks overshadowing the foundational doctrines that underpin religious traditions. In the quest for contemporary relevance, the historical tenets of the Christian heritage must be preserved, as they constitute the core of its spiritual identity. Therefore, in navigating the relationship between pragmatism and faith, analytical discernment is necessary. This approach allows the operational successes of Pentecostalism to be recognized while protecting Christian foundational principles. It is within this balance—this integration of pragmatism and theology—that a faith capable of addressing practical needs while maintaining spiritual depth can be sustained.

References

- Akanbi, S. O. (2020). The fragmentation and ecumenical challenges within contemporary African Pentecostalism. *Journal of African Christian Studies*, 6(2), 45–61.
- Arthur, J. A. (2021). The gospel of prosperity and its concept of development: A Ghanaian Pentecostal-charismatic experience. *Religion*, 51(1), 90–104.
- Calvin, M. J., & Rybarczyk, T. L. (2007). Spirituality, Pentecostal and Charismatic. In *The new international dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements* (pp. 60–61). Zondervan.
- Dewey, J. (1902). *The school and society & The child and the curriculum*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gabriel, A. K., & Neumann, P. (2022). *Theology of experience and Pentecostal hermeneutics*. Eerdmans.
- Gathogo, J. M. (2022). The shifting landscape of African-Pentecostalism in Kenya. *Theologia Viatorum*, 46(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v46i1.121>
- Igboin, O. B. (2020). Historical-theological analysis of Pentecostal Christianity's growth in Nigeria. *Review of African History*, 13(2), 22–35. [1]
- James, W. (1907). *Pragmatism: A new name for some old ways of thinking*. Longmans, Green, and Co.

Kgatle, M. S. (2020). *Spirituality and philosophy in African Pentecostalism: An insider's perspective*. Routledge.

Kukah, M. H. (2019, October). Address on the growth and challenges of the church in Africa [Public lecture]. Rome, Italy. Reported in Crux Catholic News, "African bishop says Catholic Church can learn from Pentecostals".

Ogara, P. I. (2009). *United we stand*. Enugu: Life Apostolate Publications.

Oliverio, L. W. (2021). *Theological hermeneutics in the Pentecostal tradition: A philosophical approach* (2nd ed.). Brill.

Peirce, C. S. (1877). The fixation of belief. *Popular Science Monthly*, 12, 1–15.

Resane, K. T. (2022). The Positive Confession Movement and its influence and legacy on the Neo-Charismatic Movement. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 103(34), 1–11. doi.org

Synan, V. (2019). *The holiness-pentecostal tradition: Charismatic movements in the twentieth century* (2nd ed.). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Ukah, A. (2021). Commodifying God in the Nigerian public space: Pentecostalism and religious marketing. *African Theology Worldwide*, 14–29.

Warrington, J. (2022). *Pentecostal theology: A theology of encounter* (2nd ed.). T&T Clark.