

## Soteriology at the Altar

Vondey, Wolfgang

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**Soteriology at the Altar:  
Pentecostal Contributions to Salvation as Praxis**

**Abstract**

The day of Pentecost serves as a central integrative theme for the practices, theological concepts, and biblical narratives nurturing Pentecostal soteriology. The so-called “full gospel” provides the basic contours for ritual reflection among Pentecostals and recognizes salvation as both initial metaphor for Pentecostal theology and principal theological theme. The foundational soteriological plot of Pentecost is appropriated by Pentecostals in diverse contexts through the foundational rite of the altar call and response. A Pentecostal reading of salvation from the biblical account of Pentecost and a subsequent articulation of Pentecostal soteriology cast in the image of Pentecost identifies the Pentecostal contribution to Christian soteriology as a persistent emphasis on salvation as praxis.

**Keywords**

altar call, conversion, gospel, Pentecost, Pentecostalism, ritual, salvation, soteriology

## Introduction

One of the dominant narrative accounts of Pentecostal theology, the so-called “full gospel,” proposes that four or five principal elements identify the theology of the movement. The fivefold gospel proclaims, often in kerygmatic form, that Jesus Christ is savior, sanctifier, Spirit baptizer, divine healer, and coming king (Dayton, 1987). The articulation of these themes underscores the dominance of “salvation” for Pentecostal theology not merely by its primary position in the narrative but by its distribution throughout (Thomas, 2010; Yong, 2005 and 2010). One could say that the full gospel is soteriological from beginning to end: all elements are potential entry points on the way to salvation. In other words, soteriology can be identified as the formal name for a narrative account of Pentecostal theology, which originates from, tends toward, and is supported throughout by the doctrine of salvation. Pentecostal soteriology, when shaped by the notion of the full gospel, consequently faces the twofold task of presenting salvation as an *initial* metaphor for Pentecostal theology (“Jesus is savior”) and as a *principal* theological theme that runs throughout Pentecostal thought and praxis as a whole.

Despite the importance of salvation for Pentecostals, few comprehensive accounts actually exist of Pentecostal soteriology (see Rybarczyk, 2004; Arrington, 1993; Duffield and Van Cleave, 1983). The main challenge to such an endeavor is the identification of a genuine “Pentecostal” element that can serve as the central integrative theme for identifying the practices, theological concepts, and biblical narratives nurturing Pentecostal theology. At the risk of stating the obvious, the name “Pentecostal” as a label for the theology of the movement suggests a close association with the day of “Pentecost.” Pentecostal theology from the perspective of this self-identification is reflected in an experiential spirituality rooted in the day of Pentecost and believed by Pentecostals still to be available as a continuation, repetition or expansion of that original experience. A Pentecostal soteriology therefore can be

constructed principally on the basis of the root image of Pentecost. However, this task places the hitherto unanswered demand on Pentecostal theology to articulate a biblical and experiential perspective of Pentecost that helps identify the foundational theological practices underlying Pentecostal soteriology. In this essay, I suggest that the soteriological plot of Pentecost is appropriated by Pentecostals in diverse contexts through the foundational rite of the altar call and response. The first part of this essay identifies the basic contours of ritual reflection among Pentecostals and its place in the articulation of Pentecostal theology. The second part narrates a Pentecostal reading of salvation from the biblical account of Pentecost. On this basis, the third part of the essay articulates a Pentecostal soteriology cast in the image of Pentecost. The final part elevates this discussion to the broader conversation on soteriology and crystallizes the Pentecostal contributions to both an understanding of and participation in the broader Christian notion of salvation.

### **A Ritual approach to Pentecostal soteriology**

The building of a Pentecostal soteriology proceeds necessarily from a particular set of practices and experiences. In other words, not all Christian practices can simply be considered Pentecostal, and there exists considerable debate about which practices are normative for Pentecostals. In order to avoid arbitrary selection, I suggest that the most genuine account of any Pentecostal theology emerges from practices and experiences documented in the corporate worship of Pentecostal communities. Undoubtedly, the worship service forms the wellspring of spiritual practices among Pentecostals from which doctrinal reflection can emerge (Martin, 2016; Ingalls and Yong, 2015). In order to construct a Pentecostal soteriology, we must therefore bring a comprehensive articulation of Pentecostal theology into dialogue with the Pentecostal practices of worship. Rituals, rites, and liturgy,

once foreign terms to Pentecostal worship, have increasingly become the focus of theological attention. Although Pentecostal theology cannot be defined absolutely by any particular ritual, doxological practices are closest to the ground of Pentecostal origins and the way Pentecostalism continues to be documented across the world. Among these practices, the altar call and response stand out as the climax of traditional Pentecostal worship (Vondey, 2016; Tomberlin, 2010; Albrecht, 1999). The summit and source of Pentecostal worship, rituals, and practices from which Pentecostalism can be grasped constructively, is the altar service. Contemporary ritual, historical, and phenomenological studies of world Pentecostalism affirm certain foundational rites oriented around the altar as consistent practices of the Pentecostal movement (Vondey, 2012; Lindhardt, 2011; Miller and Yamamori, 2007; Arweck and Keenan, 2006; Alexander, 1991). Other practices (and their doctrinal reflections) are readily integrated in the altar call and response rite. The foundational rites at the heart of the theological account given of Pentecostal soteriology therefore begin with the practices and experiences at the altar.

The altar call and response is practiced widely in contemporary Christian evangelicalism (Bennett, 2000), and the ritual is not an exclusively Pentecostal practice. It is therefore necessary to begin by identifying the particular Pentecostal “hermeneutics” of the altar and its soteriological dimension (Moore, 2016). Moreover, at the altar, Pentecostal soteriology emerges through several native, adopted, and enculturated rites. This emphasis of certain foundational rites should not be misunderstood as advocating that such practices are *the* rituals genuine to all contexts of global Pentecostalism, that they are the *only* rites of Pentecostals, that the descriptions given are *complete*, or that there exists some idealized notion of a *single* performance of the ritual. Pentecostals resist “ritual” as the strict ecclesiastical performance of a liturgical script within a fixed semiotic system of sacerdotal or sacramental regulations. Instead, Pentecostal rituals are often playful, improvised, and

unstructured (Vondey, 2013). My goal is simply to build a theological narrative that emerges out of a critical interpretation of foundational practices at the altar with a view to implicating their theological consequences, which in turn can lead to a revision and expansion of those practices along the much broader playing field of global Pentecostalism. In order to set forth a Pentecostal soteriology, I therefore begin with a Pentecostal reading of the biblical narrative identifying particular foundational experiences and practices on the day of Pentecost. This narrative identifies the spiritual underpinnings and motivations for Pentecostal theology and forms the seedbed for subsequent doctrinal reflection on Pentecostal soteriology. This reflection, analysis, and articulation of Pentecostal doctrine is then expanded to a conversation on foundational Christian practices as they are shaped by the particular contributions of the Pentecostal experiences and doctrines underlying them. The result is an expansion of the original, biblical practices of Pentecost and of Christian rituals as a whole. In this sense, the following account suggests that the inherent dynamic of Pentecostal soteriology from the perspective of Pentecost is aimed at an ecumenical narrative of the fullness of the gospel.

### **Salvation at Pentecost**

“Pentecost” arguably represents the foundational symbol for “Pentecostal” theology. The day of Pentecost is significant for Pentecostal theological reflection first and foremost for the experiences and practices recorded in the biblical texts of Luke-Acts (Mittelstadt, 2010). This preference for particular biblical texts is not indicative of the broad interests of Pentecostal theology. Nonetheless, a comprehensive biblical account of Pentecostal soteriology is not intended and beyond the scope of this essay. I do not mean to provide here a biblical theology of salvation or full interpretation of biblical passages concerning the day of Pentecost. Rather,

my intention is only to trace the narrative contours of Pentecost as symbol of Pentecostal soteriology and thereby to offer a symbolic plot for more detailed exegetical and theological discussion. My modest goal is to suggest a core narrative for Pentecostal practices from within the biblical account of Pentecost and thus to indicate a hermeneutic which can then be expanded to other biblical texts. A soteriological narrative of the day of Pentecost, I suggest, highlights the contours of a biblical altar call and response. This pattern can then be traced again in the contemporary practices of Pentecostals.

### *A Soteriological Narrative of the Day of Pentecost*

The biblical record of “Pentecostal” experiences is situated in the context of the celebration of Pentecost, a ritual event on the calendar of ancient Israel commemorating the reception of the Law (see Exod. 34:22; Deut. 16:10). However, the planned celebration meets with the fulfillment of the announcement, made by Jesus some days prior to the event, that an unusual significance would mark the coming days following his resurrection and ascension for those tarrying in Jerusalem (Luke 24:49) who are promised power from the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) and effective witness to the gospel (Menzies, 2004). The disciples accordingly assemble in preparation and prayer in Jerusalem (v. 14) and meet “all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). The events then unfolding during the day of Pentecost follow not the traditional expectations of the festival but are later interpreted by the apostle Peter as the unexpected fulfillment of the prophecy of the outpouring of God’s Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:16–21; see Joel 2:28–32). The unprecedented events of this Pentecost form an archetype of practices and convictions for Pentecostal soteriology, reshaped and multiplied today by the vast diversity of global Pentecostal expressions and lived experiences on the ground. Pentecost as the beginning of Pentecostal theology is not merely a thematic locus but elicits an experiential identification

with the biblical events of the day (Yong, 2011). The “plot” of Pentecost, the internal “logic” of the practices of the event, forms the foundation for any Pentecostal theological narrative (Hur, 2004).

1. From a soteriological perspective, the narrative plot of Acts 2 gleams with incidents of “conflict” and divine “interruption” (Hur, 2004: 183–91). The expected ritual character of the day is interrupted by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on “all of the disciples,” in a place “where they were sitting” initiated by the sudden sound of “a violent wind” filling “the entire house” (v. 2) and the appearance of divided tongues “on each of them” accompanied by the speaking in other languages “as the Spirit gave them ability” (v. 4). A crowd gathers at the sound of the languages spoken (v. 6) and articulates the disturbance of the day with expressions of confusion and bewilderment, amazement and marvel, culminating in a series of questions concerning the identity, origins, and abilities of the disciples and thus questioning the meaning of the entire affair (vv. 5–13) (see Brumback, 1947).
2. The apostle Peter employs the interruption caused by the outpouring of the Spirit and its physical manifestations as an opportunity for an explanation and interpretation of the events (vv. 14–36) to those drawn by the unusual occurrences (Keener, 1988). He proceeds with a proclamation of the gospel: the day of Pentecost is a witness to the crucified Jesus Christ who has been raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God, who has poured out the Holy Spirit on all flesh (vv. 32–33). The work of the disciples, now fulfilling Jesus’ anticipation of their witness to the gospel, proceeds in the power of the Spirit, proclaiming, exhorting, and testifying to the diverse population in attendance (vv. 38–40) of the “wonderful works of God” (v. 11). The audience, devout Jews from every nation (v. 5), astonished and perplexed by their witness of the events and the redefinition of their faith in light of Peter’s words, is “cut to the heart”



(v. 37) and raises the fundamental question regarding their own participation in the work of God: “What should we do?”

3. The apostle’s answer is a call to the audience to “repent, and be baptized” (v. 38) followed by the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. With this action, Peter beckons “each person” to “turn around” and to put into practice such “repentance” with an outward act of faith: water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. The call is coupled with a further promise to those who respond: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the audience, their children, and “all who are far away” (v. 39) (see Yong, 2005).
4. The plot ends with a collective response by the audience, several thousand who “welcome” the call, accept the Christian teaching, and enter into fellowship with the church (vv. 41–42). The response is accompanied by continued signs and wonders (v. 43). Teaching and formation, communion, water baptism, the breaking of the bread, the sharing of possessions, and the worship of God (v. 47) are all integrated in the comprehensive conclusion of the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

### *The Theological Plot of the Altar Rite*

This basic plot of the biblical events (interruption, proclamation, call, response) is reenacted in various forms among contemporary Pentecostals in a foundational rite frequently labeled the “altar call” (Albrecht, 1999: 165). The altar is a theological metaphor; most Pentecostal churches do not have a physical altar, neither in the sacrificial sense of the biblical writings nor in the eucharistic sense of the sacramental traditions (Pocknee, 1963). Rather, imitating the events of Pentecost, for Pentecostals, the altar is a ritual metaphor for the human encounter with God. Although historically and conceptually sometimes identified with a particular space and time of corporate worship, liturgy, and ritual, the Pentecostal altar is

generally a theological symbol of the kingdom of God, which is “neither here nor there” (see Luke 17:21) but which comes into existence, as on the day of Pentecost, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the participation of the community in response.

The altar as a ritual metaphor for a meeting of the human being with God has transitioned throughout Pentecostal history (Vondey, 2016). In classical Pentecostalism, derived from the plantation prayer grounds of African slaves, the camp meetings of the rural American south, and the influence of the Church of England and early Methodism, the altar can be identified by a walking of the aisle or jumping on pews or less dramatically the simple assembly of people at the end of a church building where the Word of God is preached (Vondey, 2010a; Murray, 1994). In charismatic churches with historical roots in the established liturgical and sacramental traditions, the formally established sacred space of the sanctuary, including the altar and tabernacle, often delineate the spatial boundaries of the divine-human encounter (Ryle, 2011). In neopentecostal communities, the idea of the “sacred space” with a central focus point (“altar”) is shifting from clear architectural identifiers at the back end of a church building to the more symbolically and experientially identified center of worship of the congregation (Gold, 2006). In the vast diversity of physical space found among Pentecostal churches worldwide, from megachurches to rooms in shopping malls, sheds on the outskirts of a village or open-air benches, the human-divine encounter is primarily identified by the congregation’s activity of worship (Miller and Yamamori, 2007). In all its variances, the altar is inherently an ecclesial metaphor emphasizing salvation as a ritual of the entire community in which the individual response to God is embedded. The altar call as a collective practice acknowledges the need of a ritual space for the entire community’s participation in ministry, preaching, prayer, anointing, repentance, conversion, miracles, and worship in various forms, including the laying on of hands, healing, exorcism, testimony, teaching or tarrying before the Lord, and the practice of spiritual gifts.

The altar call, reenacting the day of Pentecost, is typically an invitation issued by the pastor or evangelist to the congregation to “bring themselves” (their lives, faith, sins, circumstances, illnesses, problems, fears, hopes, etc.) to a meeting with God (Streett, 1984; Thompson, 1979). The call from the platform or the front of the church may be a general invitation or follow a specific emphasis of the service; at other times, the call may not be voiced explicitly from the leaders of worship but erupt spontaneously through a tongue, prophecy, or revelation in the congregation (Albrecht, 1999). The altar call can be made to begin a new dimension in the worship of the community, to initiate the main focus of the service, or to integrate other ritual practices (Green, 2012; Tomberlin, 2010). The acceptance of the invitation is displayed in some form of audible or visible response, often accompanied by other physical and charismatic manifestations of individuals or the entire congregation. The abundant participation of the worshipers includes sometimes a congregational move forward into the “holy place,” sometimes a gradual reorientation of some, at other times a jumping and running of the aisle by individuals. Responses vary from the assembly of the entire congregation at the altar to some remaining in their pews or falling on their knees in the aisle or stretching out their hands toward the perceived presence of God. The bringing of oneself to the altar may be the actual walk of a person or manifested only by a groaning in the spirit, a singing of the congregation into the presence of God, or the eruption of tongues and prophecies, prayers and songs, that in a manner of speaking bring the altar to the people. Pentecostals flock to the altar in expectation of a divine, often supernatural, interruption of their circumstances and in that sense of an initiation or repetition or revival of Pentecost in their own lives. The expectation of the altar involves as much the renewal of the individual as the transformation of the community. To welcome the altar call and to respond to the interruption of the Holy Spirit is to respond to the invitation of God and the proclamation of the gospel and to embark on a new life. The altar provides Pentecostal theology with a

foundational ritual environment of invitation, acceptance, and response that allows us to cast Pentecostal soteriology more widely in the image of the day of Pentecost. This expansion of Pentecost must eventually take into account the redemption of the whole of creation.

### **Soteriology in the image of Pentecost**

As a foundational ritual of Pentecostal theology, the altar call functions as a core symbol of salvation. The practice symbolizes that for Pentecostals an encounter with God is always soteriological, always redemptive, transforming, converting, correcting, and delivering. Moreover, salvation from the perspective of the altar is always an experience that requires active participation. The experience of God's redemptive presence and activity is manifested at the altar in the call of God and its invitation to respond. The prototype of this perspective is found in the biblical narrative of Pentecost and Peter's sermon, which accentuates the church's emphasis on a theological process by which salvation is realized. This process centers on the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:22–36): the rationale for Pentecostal soteriology is unequivocally the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The proclamation of the cross leads to a crisis among the spectators, who identify with the process of salvation presented in the gospel but cannot bring it to a resolution in their own lives (Cartledge, 2010; Miller and Yamamori, 2007). The Pentecostal reading of the biblical texts, much like the Pietistic tradition (Macchia, 1993), accentuates that the initial confrontation with the narrative of salvation results in a personal crisis, a challenge, a struggle, and confrontation with the human self and with God. The biblical narrative accentuates this crisis in the crowd's culminating question, "what should we do?" Peter's response crafts the parameters of today's Pentecostal soteriology: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will

receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (v. 38–39). Salvation in Christ is at Pentecost thoroughly related to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in its broadest dimensions (*everyone*), yet through a distinctive response (*repentance*) and experience (*baptism*) situated within the particular framework of God’s initiative (*call*) and act (*forgiveness*) (see Yong, 2005). The chief motivation for Pentecostal soteriology is therefore the potential that the objective historical reality of Christ’s death becomes an objective positional reality for the believer who can subjectively appropriate and experience Christ in the Holy Spirit (Fee, 1994).

Equally important as the going to the altar is a person’s return from the encounter with God. More exactly, it is the moment *between* the going and returning that marks a key soteriological event in Pentecostal theology, typically identified with conversion but described more broadly as the experience of being “saved.” A dominant metaphor used by Pentecostals for this conversion experience is found in Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:2–21 (Gause, 1980). In his exchange with the Pharisee, Jesus states, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” or “born anew” (v. 3). For Pentecostals, this “new birth” represents the regeneration of the individual through the personal, conscious appropriation and response to the “clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all humankind, as gift of God’s grace and mercy” (Vondey, 2010c, 163). While the notion of the new birth may have been adopted from Evangelicals, Pentecost as symbol defines the experience further as a decisive moment between the going to and returning from the altar, where divine invitation and human response meet in the encounter with the Spirit of Christ. Meeting Jesus at the altar marks the beginning of the soteriological direction of Pentecostal theology; a stepping forward into salvation by the Spirit as the entrance to the full gospel.

## *A Pentecostal Way of Salvation*

When Pentecostals say that salvation marks the beginning and overall direction of their theology, this should not be construed as a definitive Pentecostal order of salvation (*ordo salutis*). The full gospel as the framework for narrating Pentecostal key experiences may give the impression that the good news of Jesus Christ as savior, sanctifier, Spirit baptizer, divine healer, and coming king is marked by an uncompromising fivefold order. Indeed, classical Pentecostals have adopted in their history a Protestant *ordo salutis* that obscures the hospitality of the full gospel to many experiences as possible moments on the way to the “fullness” of the redemptive and transformative work of God (Studebaker, 2003).

Pentecostals accentuate the single importance of conversion for their theology, the centrality of Jesus Christ, and the pneumatological orientation reflected in the full gospel. However, a much broader palette of soteriological experiences becomes visible among Pentecostals worldwide that suggests that *all* elements of the full gospel are works of grace and thus possible entrance points to conversation and the way of salvation (*via salutis*).

Salvation in the image of Pentecost is the conscious response to the diverse proclamations of the full gospel. The heart of this response, and thus the core of the transformative moment, is the conversion of the person encountering the presence of God (Milton, 2015; Malogne-Fer, 2013; Wenk, 2000; Holm, 1991). For many Pentecostals, conversion consists of a hearing of the good news of Jesus Christ, a response in faith, and a definitive encounter with God, all typically subsumed in a unique personal testimony (Cartledge, 2010; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2009; Lawless, 1988). Pentecostals undoubtedly place the death and resurrection of Jesus at the heart of their soteriological witness. Classical Pentecostal pioneers widely accepted the theology that Christ’s work of salvation was

“finished” on the cross (Faupel, 1996). Many Pentecostals have typically embraced “Jesus” as the exclusive saving name of God in whom the whole content of salvation is subsumed (Reed, 2008). For Oneness Pentecostals, this strong confession has led to a christomonism widely rejected by trinitarian Pentecostals despite the recognition of different soteriologies among Pentecostal groups (Vondey, 2013). Faith in Jesus Christ is central to the new birth, yet the full gospel casts Jesus as savior amidst his proclamation as sanctifier, Spirit baptizer, divine healer, and coming king. Put differently, the Pentecostal response to the gospel is motivated by a broad range of personal and communal contexts that aim not always immediately at conversion, but often more immediately at the restoration or resolution of spiritual, physical, social, economic, and other problems or critical needs (Milton, 2015; Cartlidge, 2010). Hence, the walk to the altar is a conversion experience when it functions as an acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the continuing power and presence of God’s Spirit manifested in a response to one’s needs, petitions, prayers, and offerings. These manifestations are not salvific by themselves, and a healed body or restored relationship do not constitute conversion; they point to the need for a lingering at the altar, as Pentecostals put it, an extended or repeated response to the call of God that is justified only if the human being as a whole person has come to the faith. Conversion as the response in faith to the encounter with God at the altar within the framework of the full gospel is perhaps best described as “initial salvation” or an “initial participation in salvation,” (Jacobsen, 2003: 174–79) an “entry level” (Sanders, 1996: 58) that longs for its ultimate completion. The new birth emerges from a conflict of the existing life and nature of the world with the beginning of a new life, where conversion is the fundamental step towards restoration and renewal on the way to the fullness of redemption.

### *Theological Components of Pentecostal Soteriology*

The conflict apparent on the day of Pentecost is symptomatic for the need felt among Pentecostals for a radical and complete change symbolized by the new birth, which affects the human being in every imaginable way. This conflict is a separation from the “old” birth, the sinfulness of human nature affecting all who are first born into this world (Gause, 1980). The new birth is marked by a rupture and discontinuity with a person’s past habits, practices, cultures, and traditions (Robbins, 2004). The apostle Peter paints this conflict in pneumatological and eschatological terms (Acts 2:17–21) articulated in the full gospel motif by the portrayal of Jesus in the central roles of savior, sanctifier, Spirit baptizer, healer, and coming king (Althouse, 2010). While salvation is at the core centered in Christ, for Pentecostals, it is by the Spirit that Christ accomplishes his work and that salvation is made available in the present to the human being and to creation in multiple forms (Thompson, 2010). Christology is interpreted pneumatologically (and vice versa): from the perspective of Pentecost, the activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit are united in God’s work of redemption and its experience by the believer.

There are mutual implications of seeing the experience of salvation from a Pentecostal perspective “in stereo” (Habets, 2003:199) as the work of both Christ and the Spirit. The christological emphasis requires, on the one hand, the perpetuation of Christ’s atoning work across all dimensions of life through the Holy Spirit: personal, familial, ecclesial, material, social, cosmic, and eschatological salvation (Yong, 2005). The pneumatological orientation, on the other hand, requires that the redemptive act of Christ be maintained in its various present dimensions. Consequently, Pentecostal expressions of salvation manifest in some form a Spirit-Christology (Alfaro, 2010; Yong, 2005). Responsible for this direction are the concrete experiences among Pentecostals of the saving power of God manifested without dichotomy between Christ and the Spirit, a reading of the biblical texts, particularly Luke-



Acts, that speaks of the saving work of Christ in terms of the anointing with the Spirit, and a pneumatological interpretation of salvation that understands the Holy Spirit as the gift of regeneration. The result of this theological emphasis of joining together christology and pneumatology is a charismatic soteriology.

A charismatic soteriology from the perspective of Pentecost interprets the new birth as participation in the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39). Soteriologically speaking, the gift is the regeneration of the human person; pneumatologically, the Spirit is both the gift and the promise of this regeneration. The charismatic dimension identifies this pneumatological perspective on salvation as a concrete experience of the human being in a personal encounter with God, who at the altar offers regeneration as the gift of the Holy Spirit. The “moment” of conversion, often identified by Pentecostal testimonies with the exact date and time, refers to a person’s reception of the divine grace—a charismatic moment that can be manifested in manifold forms along the spectrum of the full gospel. The new birth is thus not another term added to the Christian soteriological vocabulary; it embraces the moments of redemption, atonement, reconciliation, expiation, justification, and others toward the expectation of having been granted access to the fullness of salvation.

Of course, the cultural diversity of Pentecostals articulates salvation in a variety of ways, often in the vernacular, sometimes through inherited Christian traditions, at other times with strong indigenous religious roots (Clarke, 2011). The altar calls people from all places and positions of life to an encounter with God. From the perspective of Pentecost, this call is a broad invitation confronting all creation with the particular gift of salvation provided in the person of Jesus and made present by the Holy Spirit poured out on *all* flesh. Nonetheless, the way to an encounter with God in Jesus Christ is as broad as the road to Pentecost. Two dominant metaphors for salvation in North American Pentecostalism are the participation in the divine life and the liberation from sin, both emerging with often different doctrinal

emphases (Coulter, 2008; Land, 1993). African American Pentecostals widely emphasize sanctification, divine healing, and personal piety as starting points for the path of salvation (Alexander, 2011: 61-63). The black Apostolic denominations, on the other hand, uphold water baptism as a prerequisite for regeneration (Richardson, 1980). Salvation among Pentecostal groups in Southern Appalachia means supernatural deliverance from the powers of the devil and the world ritualizing the promises of Mark 16:18 (Covington, 1995). In Latin America, to be born again can also be understood in terms of spiritual and ideological, economic and political deliverance (Chesnut, 1997). Pentecostalism in Africa has engaged African traditional religious thought in ways that emphasize empowerment as a prerequisite for the daily struggle for salvation (Ngong, 2010). Pentecostalism in Asia emphasizes the need for holistic salvation amidst the concrete situations of diverse religious and secular contexts (Anderson and Tang, 2005). Pentecostalism in New Guinea highlights salvation as a deliverance from existing cultic and spiritual forces (Strathern, 1991).

Further examples could be added, yet this list remains superficial and incomplete; it merely signals a desire among Pentecostals for a complete soteriology in terms of a materiality of salvation, which reaches the soul not only through inward repentance and spiritual conversion, as suggested by traditional Protestantism, but through a whole range of experiences marking the personal-spiritual, individual-physical, communal, socioeconomic, and ecological aspects of the full gospel (Volf, 1989). The reception of salvation in the image of Pentecost is manifested both cognitively and affectively; the human being “knows with certainty” (Acts 2:36) and is “cut to the heart” (v. 37) by the reality of God’s grace. The Holy Spirit is this divine grace manifested in liberating physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social passions (Solivan, 1998). Some Pentecostals have expressed these salvation experiences with the theological concept of the finite grasping the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*) (Cross, 2009; Macchia, 2007). The awareness of this encounter is the felt divine

embrace of the human person (Macchia, 2010). The effects of this encounter are not only instantaneous but progressive; the altar both calls to an encounter with God and releases the human person transformed by the experience into the world. Pentecostals go to the altar with the expectation to be transformed, and they leave the altar with the expectation to return. This extended notion of conversion and transformation at the altar protects Pentecostal soteriology from an exclusively anthropocentric reading of salvation (which is arguably present in much of the history of Pentecostalism). Nonetheless, it appears that one of the chief challenges for Pentecostals is to show that the Pentecostal way of salvation is ultimately as wide as the way of the Spirit.

### **Pentecostal contributions to salvation as praxis**

If soteriology is at the core of Pentecostal theology, then we can also say that the concern for salvation identifies the heart of Pentecostal contributions to broader Christian practices. In contrast to the tendency to identify salvation with a relational disposition of the human being toward God usually directed toward one's state after death and thus primarily a positional eschatological concern (see Pinnock et al., 1996), salvation "at the altar" identifies a present reality in which the future eschatological state is not only anticipated but already experienced and practiced. The experience at the altar represents the exchange of the divine invitation and the human response to the proclamation of the gospel. As a soteriological symbol, in this exchange of invitation and response, salvation is characterized fundamentally as an experience identifiable by personal, public, and ecclesial practices. In the experience of salvation, as nowhere else, it is evident that theology and religious practices shape one another, and that such practices represent not merely the motivation or application of

theological reflection. From the viewpoint of Pentecostal theology, salvation in all its dimensions is in the fullest sense theological praxis.

### *Dominant Soteriological Paradigms*

The prevailing Christian soteriological narrative in the West typically contains a rationale for why salvation is necessary (i.e., sin and the Fall), the process by which salvation is realized (i.e., the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ), the extent of human participation (i.e., baptism, confession, faith), and the final state of salvation (i.e., resurrection, glorification, eternal life) (Morris, 2014). The atonement traditions are primarily “objective” by locating the origin and effect of salvation in the activity of God, and most particularly in Christ, with little integration of the church’s mission in the world and the active participation of the world and the human being (Kärkkäinen, 2013). The church’s mission is here a fulfillment of Christ’s mission and thus exists as the continuation of the Incarnation as “God’s ‘embodied’ saving activity” (Webster, 2001: 226). Salvation, although historically accomplished by Christ, ultimately refers to a desired state in a future, post-mortem eschatology. The Pentecostal approach to soteriology is more subjective, that is, salvation is based on the gospel of Christ in terms of the participation of God in creation and of the human being in the divine work of salvation. Principally speaking, the focus of Pentecostal soteriology is not on salvation but on the savior, not on the act itself but on the actor: Jesus, at the heart of the gospel, is the initiator and example of a soteriological praxis that involves him as a person anointed with the Spirit on the essential ground that is common to all: his own existential transformation. In turn, the narrative of Luke-Acts suggests that the church’s praxis of salvation is based not solely on a view of the Incarnation and the cross but also on the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit. These reflections have led Pentecostals to sometimes critical opposition to contemporary soteriological practices of the West.

In contrast, salvation in the East is more closely tied to the concept of deification (*theosis*) as an ongoing process of transformation into the likeness of Christ. Deification, possible because of the image of God found in humanity but deterred by the Fall, is reinstated with the Incarnation and the joining of human and divine natures in Christ (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.3). The process of *theosis* is intended, as Eastern Orthodox theology might put it, to “begin here and now in the present life” (Ware, 1993: 236) in a “cooperation” between God and the human person so that “our voluntary participation in God’s saving action is altogether indispensable” (Ware, 1996: 34). This process is a human participation in the uncreated energies, the life, power, and glory of God. Here, salvation is the participation in the transformation of the divine life through a perpetual process of being saved. Human participation in this process, and the convergence of divine grace and human freedom, are at every point the work of the Holy Spirit (Ware, 1996). Although therefore entirely God’s gift, salvation is a continued process of repentance exercised by the human being who is thoroughly embedded in the life of the community: going to church, receiving the sacraments, prayer, reading the Scriptures, and following the commandments are central practices of deification (Ware, 1993). The Eastern view of salvation is eminently personal and practical; hesychastic and mystical on the one hand, as well as prosaic and active on the other. Moreover, this personal transformation always remains embedded in the ecclesiastical, liturgical, and sacramental practices of the Orthodox Church and thus heavily depends on its sacerdotal and institutional traditions (Morris, 2014). In this identification of salvation as praxis, Pentecostalism finds both its affinity to and distinction from the Orthodox tradition.

*The Theological Critique of Pentecostalism*

Pentecostal soteriology, although typically presented in the language of the West, is closer to the Eastern understanding of salvation as praxis (Rybarczyk, 2004). The theological point of convergence is most visible in the pneumatological dimension of salvation (Kärkkäinen, 2004). For Pentecostals, salvation as praxis is Spirit-filled at the core because such practices depend on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the gift of regeneration. That is, the human being participates in the work of redemption through a joining of the Spirit of God with the human spirit, and such participation is affective and experiential because “it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). Salvation is understood pneumatologically because of the Pentecostal emphasis on these experiences of salvation as experiences of the Spirit at the moment of conversion and beyond, and in a manner to which the believer’s spirit can clearly testify.

At the same time, Pentecostal experiences of salvation are based on a different theological outlook at the saving work of Christ from the perspective of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal perspective begins with a narrative of Jesus that is thoroughly imbued with the narrative of the Spirit. The Incarnation, as the entrance point for the eternal Son of God into history, is marked by a codetermining agency of the Son and the Spirit in the economy of salvation: The Spirit creates and unites the humanity of Jesus with the Son, and the Son’s action through Jesus is determinative for the Spirit (Studebaker, 2015). This pneumatological Christology is evident in Jesus’s life logically from the moment of the Incarnation. However, the ministry of salvation made possible by this union is manifested outwardly by Jesus’s obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Historically and practically, this public ministry begins not at Jesus’ conception but at his baptism and anointing with the Holy Spirit (see Acts 10:38). The Christian practices of salvation accordingly originate with the Incarnation only insofar as the event becomes, soteriologically speaking, public property with the baptism

of Jesus, so that the church and its practices are literally a continuation of the anointing of Christ (Mühlen, 1967). Consequently, for Pentecostals, the Incarnation and Pentecost are often insufficiently linked in theological reflection (Gabriel, 2011). Furthermore, while the history of the Holy Spirit in the earthly Jesus continues with Pentecost in the church, Christian soteriological practices have insufficiently accentuated the anointing with the Holy Spirit (Vondey, 2004). Pentecostalism, itself subject to the history of neglect (Studebaker, 2003), has emerged as a theological critique of Christendom and its neglect of the development of salvation as praxis cast not only in the image of Christ but in the image of Christ anointed with the Holy Spirit. From this image of Jesus as the messiah anointed with the Spirit, the reach of salvation extends beyond the human realm to the whole of creation.

The theological critique of Pentecostal soteriology is firmly embedded in an institutional critique of Christendom and its structured ritual and liturgical practices (Vondey, 2010a). Salvation, when understood as human participation in the saving work of Christ anointed with the Holy Spirit, demands liturgical practices that are open to the whole range of human experiences (Yong, 2005). The altar call symbolizes this broad entrance of human participation in the divine gift of salvation in the church. The altar rite highlights the tensions between private and public conversion, sacramental and spontaneous forms of initial confession, Calvinist and Arminian distinctions of divine and human initiative, and debates about the role of catechesis and spiritual formation (Bennett, 2000; Bruce, 1981). However, the immediate motivation of this practice is not the certainty of salvation but the initiation into participation with the full salvific work of God. The call to the altar is a call from the kingdom of God, from the throne of heaven, from Jesus Christ, through the church to the world, and in the Spirit back to Jesus Christ and to the kingdom of God. This soteriological plot involves a “meeting with God” where “the altar space functions symbolically as an *axis mundi* . . . [that] most clearly symbolizes and helps to focus the human-divine convergence”

(Albrecht, 1999: 133). The knowledge of salvation involves a “knowing the Lord” by the human person who engages in salvation with an epistemology that is thoroughly pneumatological because it is experiential and practical. In other words, salvation is not declared and received at a distance but is always directed toward the prospect of a face-to-face encounter with God. The praxis of salvation at the altar is itself the eradication of the distance between the human being and the Savior.

The altar call as a central theological ritual of Pentecostal soteriology reflects in the broadest sense salvation as a praxis of hospitality. The soteriological practices of the church and the human being are fundamentally a reflection of the abundant hospitality of God (Vondey, 2008). For Pentecostals, the paradigm of divine hospitality is Jesus Christ, whose embodied life of self-giving for the world is extended by the Holy Spirit toward the entire creation (Yong, 2008). The praxis of salvation proceeds as hospitality through the mode of exchange in “the redemptive economy of the triune God [who] invites our participation as guests and hosts in the divine hospitality revealed in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Yong, 2008: 127). Emulating the anointing of Jesus, the human person becomes obedient to the leading of the Spirit and thus remains not merely passive-receptive but becomes participatory in the divine work of salvation. For most Pentecostals, participation in salvation is bound up with human, sociocultural, moral, ecclesial, sacramental, and eschatological contexts in which we find ourselves not as owners of the divine hospitality but nonetheless as participants, witnesses, and enactors in the economy of salvation (Vondey, 2010b). Although the universal scope of Pentecostal soteriology cannot be traced within the confines of this essay, the metaphor of the altar can be cast in the terms of the divine hospitality to the cosmos. Nonetheless, the universal hospitality of God extended to all of creation always calls the human being to the particular altar of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. The altar call as a call to Christ is always a call to repentance, deliverance, and spiritual transformation albeit



cast beyond the narrow net of conversion and a strict order of salvation (Trask and Womack, 1994). Beyond this strict order, the full gospel embraced by Pentecostals is not four- or fivefold, in a closed sense, but open to other experiences “between” these diverse entrance points on the way to salvation of the whole creation.

## **Conclusion**

Two statements aptly summarize the preceding analysis: (1) all Pentecostal theological discourse is fundamentally soteriological, and (2) Pentecostal soteriology is always praxis. Connecting the two interests, Pentecostal theology spans the gap between Christ and history, and hence the way of salvation, with the central emphasis on the Holy Spirit. While this can be said for other Christian traditions, Pentecostal soteriology operates on the explicit assumption of the Spirit's immediacy in the world that invites and enables the human being to experience a saving encounter with God through Christ. More precisely, the experience of the hospitality of God epitomized in Jesus Christ is always an encounter with the immediacy of the Holy Spirit. The altar as a ritual metaphor of salvation represents the point of that encounter, the space and time, where the Spirit enables the human being to participate in the redemptive work of Christ. The altar is constituted by the practices of this encounter, which are as varied as the manifestations of divine hospitality: the altar is the holy and anointed habitation of God (Maurer, 1969), the place of Christ's sacrifice (Braun, 1924), the presence of the Word of God and of the Holy Spirit (Fisk, 1970), instrument of evangelization and the proclamation of the gospel (Schaper, 2001), the anxious bench of the sinner (Nevin, 1843), public confession of faith (Streett, 1984), invitation for baptism (Olbricht, 1961), gift of sacramental worship (Tomberlin, 2010), the eucharistic table (LaVerdiere, 1996), fellowship and revival of the faithful (Bennett, 2000), anointing of the church (Simmons, 1998), and thus

home to a myriad of soteriological practices. The altar stands as the source and summit of Pentecostal theology, a symbol of the salvific work of God into which all other theological concerns can be integrated. Pentecostal theology is thus by nature hospitable to the theological constructs of other traditions, inviting and transforming them through exposure to salvation at the altar as the central locus of the Christian life. We can then conclude that Pentecostal soteriology cast in the image of Pentecost is identical with soteriology as praxis because the salvific work of Christ continues in the Holy Spirit as the grace to respond in diverse ways to the call of God at the altar of the church. The promises of the full gospel at the altar are salvation, sanctification, Spirit baptism, divine healing, and the coming kingdom of God.

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