

PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT IN ETHIOPIA: HISTORY, THEOLOGY, AND SPIRITUALITY

Ayalew Tesema Mengesha, Rev. Dr.
MYS-Lecturer in Historical Theology

Abstract: This article examines the emergence, development, and theological features of Ethiopian Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. It traces the historical journey of the movements from early missionary encounters to indigenous revivals, highlighting its unique traits within the broader global Pentecostal tradition and its distinctive contextual characteristics. This analysis traces the American Pentecostal and Charismatic history, Ethiopian Pentecostal and Charismatic historiographic narratives, the researcher's observations, and testimonies. It then explores how the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements expounded the notions of Spirit baptism and the exercise of spiritual gifts. It also examines how these narratives contributed to the history¹ and how ecumenical relations sparked hermeneutical debates over Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts. The article posits that Ethiopian Pentecostal and Charismatic movements are a localized expression of global revivalism, influenced by local social, political, and spiritual factors. Ethiopian Evangelical² spirituality,³ emphasizing Gospel preaching and the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit, introduced a powerful spirituality focused on personal salvation, with a mission to impact society with the message of the Gospel and to live piously in accordance with its truth. Although Jörg Haustein and Tibebe Eshete have discussed the historical part, the theological debates on the teaching of the Baptism of the Spirit and the exercise of spiritual gifts are still under examination, calling for an assessment of the deeper theological and practical aspects of the movement and the spirituality that accompanies it. Evangelical churches offer different explanations and reflections, necessitating investigation and study of the matter. The research question that guides this work is: how does the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement shape the theology,⁴ spirituality, ecumenical relations, and societal role of Evangelicals? This article investigates the historical development, theology, and the impacts of these movements by adopting a mixed-methods approach to analyzing the literature review, biblical texts, empirical data, and personal observations. Its conclusion shall underscore the need for a framework that combines Scripture-centered mission with Spirit-led renewal to advance the ongoing development of Ethiopian Evangelicalism and the expansion of the kingdom of God in a multicultural context.

¹ In this article, the word refers to the history of the Ethiopian Evangelical churches discussed, mentioned, or quoted.

² The word "Evangelical" in this article refers to all Protestant Churches with the exception of a few (like The Seventh Day Adventist Church, The Apostolic Church), and are registered under the Council of the Gospel Believers' Churches of Ethiopia.

³ The Word "spirituality" again in this work refers to the evangelical religiosity and the central components of their religious practice.

⁴ This word refers to the doctrine of the respected churches brought into this research work.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has been a Christian nation since the fourth century. Other non-Christian religions and communities before or after the fourth century enjoyed the due respect and hospitality integrated with the community.⁵ The roots of Evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia date back to intermittent efforts by Protestant missions to reform⁶ the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewabedo* Church (EOTC) and evangelize unreached populations. While the German Protestant missionaries had been present in Ethiopia since 1634 with the coming of Peter Heyling, their efforts were often aimed at unreached populations. Their limited achievement in spreading the word of God failed to satisfy the spiritual hunger of the people of the time, and they were dependent on the openness of the political leaders of the period.⁷ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with its ancient roots and deeply entrenched traditions, has historically resisted reform, creating fertile ground for the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. The presence of Protestant missions in general was met with indifference by the population. The Imperial government adopted a religious policy that partly restricted where these missions could work and what they could do.⁸ By the mid-twentieth century, evangelical missions from the Lutheran, Baptist, and Mennonite traditions had achieved significant successes among Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups, establishing churches, schools, and training centers. Such achievement was possible because the mission strategy of social engagement went hand in hand with the national leadership strategy, which expected and encouraged missions to bring European civilization to post-Italian Invasion Ethiopia.

The imperial government thought that mission institutions must share their modern development experiences once their presence was tolerated and they had been granted permission to work in the country. The missionaries were determined to preach the Good News, establish churches, train native people to become ministers of the Gospel, distribute Christian literature, and translate the Scripture into the vernacular. They have trained nationals in various sectors. The Christianity these missionaries introduced emphasized the centrality of the Word of God for a daily Christian life, and a life of submission to the mediatory role of Christ as the sole source of salvation was a new focus. This emphasis provoked hostility against the Evangelicals.⁹ Nevertheless, although few in number, Evangelicals in their communities were known for their strict spirituality, founded on reading and living out the Scripture. And in the twentieth century, the emergence of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements elevated this scripture-centered spirituality to a new level.

⁵ Sergew Hable Selassie, "The Establishment of the Ethiopian Church," *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church Faith and Order*, accessed February 28, 2026, <https://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/ethiopian/prechristian.html>.

⁶ Religious reform refers to any provocation these movements brought into the religious life of the church.

⁷ Alemayehu Mekonnen, *Evangelical Identity and Mission in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus Seminary Press, 2013), 94.

⁸ Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 50.

⁹ The word "evangelical" has historically been attributed various meanings depending on the context. Despite the varied meanings in Europe and America, "Evangelical" in Ethiopia refers totally to all churches of Reformation tradition operating in Ethiopia with a specific missional and theological position as defined by David Bebbington.

THE EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS

PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT IN ETHIOPIA

What is the Pentecostal movement? When and how did it start in Ethiopia? What specific conditions gave rise to Pentecostalism in Ethiopia? What unique contributions did it make to the existing Protestant landscape? These questions are best answered by recognizing that no religious movement arises in a vacuum. Each movement builds on the legacy of its predecessors while introducing new elements that provoke reflection, correction, or renewal.¹⁰ Pentecostalism as a movement started in 1906 with the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, California. The movement relates to the event on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, in which the power of the Spirit descended on the praying disciples as promised by Jesus in Luke 24:47-49 and Acts 1:5, 8 and 2:1-6. The Azusa Street spiritual exercises in 1906 have been given numerous labels, such as "The Second Blessing"¹¹ and the "First force."¹² Yacob Godebo quoted James Dunn's assignment of the term "Pentecostal" to the Pentecostals of the twentieth century by saying, "Pentecostal means to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues in the same manner as those 120 people experienced on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem."¹³ Since the Azusa appearance, Pentecostalism has spread worldwide, although its impact has been hampered by several socio-political challenges. Some allude that its success is related to the Charismatic movement.¹⁴

Pentecostalism, as an offshoot of Evangelicalism, emerged in Ethiopia in the mid-twentieth century as a second wave of evangelical renewal.¹⁵ The rise of Pentecostalism followed evangelical missions that had already made significant inroads among Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups through evangelization and social development programs. The spiritual vitality introduced by the evangelical missionaries through the preaching of the Gospel, the establishment of churches, and social development was already operational in the country. The Pentecostal presence in Ethiopia is mainly attributed to the Swedish Pentecostal Missions in the 1950s and, later, to the Finnish Pentecostal Mission in 1959. Eshete contends that Pentecostalism in Ethiopia was known before the arrival of the Swedish and the Pentecostal mission as early as 1934.¹⁶ The history of the emergence and development of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia is widely narrated by Pentecostal mission historians from diverse perspectives, including the exploration of origins, expansion, key agents of expansion, and key figures in shaping the history.

The emergence of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia raises important questions about its theological lineage: to which Pentecostal traditions do Ethiopian Pentecostals belong? When discussing the Pentecostals' theological lineage, it is necessary to examine how they define themselves. Indeed, Pentecostal historians agree

¹⁰ Tibebe Eshete, *The Origins and Development of the Ethiopian Pentecostal Movement* (Addis Ababa: Evangelical Press, 2009), 126.

¹¹ Yacob Godebo, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: An Examination of the Person, Gift, and Works of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Teaching and Historical Christian Teaching and Practice Through the Centuries* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2025), 239.

¹² Obsa Teka Fogi, *Unwrapping the Gift of Grace: A Biblical and Theological Perspective* (Elgin, IL: Tenth Power, 2023), 43.

¹³ Godebo, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 241.

¹⁴ Godebo, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 243. Godebo, quoting E.Y. Alexander, states that Pentecostalism did not expand rapidly and did not move steadily until the emergence of the Charismatic movement. "The Pentecostal movement was not successful before the rise of the Charismatic movement as such."

¹⁵ The reason for categorizing the movement as the "second" is to differentiate between the early missionaries' penetration of the country in preaching the gospel as the first evangelical renewal and the later Pentecostal and Charismatic movement that followed.

¹⁶ Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 150.

that from the start, Pentecostals were divided into two groups: classical and non-classical. This categorization signifies theological and practical differences that have emerged within Pentecostalism since its inception. The Wesleyan position, which serves as the root for Pentecostalism, involves a three-stage initiation. In it, the baptism of the Spirit is the third stage following conversion and sanctification; whereas the classicals, on the contrary, follow a two-stage initiation, referring to the baptism of the Spirit as the second step, with conversion and sanctification placed together as the first.

Sanctification, in this framework, is viewed as a second work of grace, achievable through the interpenetration of the Holy Spirit. Spirit baptism is understood as a third work of grace, evidenced by speaking in tongues. This pneumatological epistemology—Pentecost as a continuous event—serves as a hermeneutical lens for interpreting Scripture and Christian experience.¹⁷ However, internal debates persist. W. H. Durham challenged the three-stage model, proposing a two-stage view in which conversion and sanctification occur simultaneously.¹⁸ Others questioned the necessity of tongues as the sole evidence of Spirit baptism. J. E. Stiles, for example, suggested that those who receive Spirit baptism rise to a “higher class” of Christians, while those without tongues are of an “inferior quality.”¹⁹ This hierarchical view has been both influential and controversial. Early Pentecostals taught two methods of receiving tongues: spontaneous visitation by the Spirit and intentional effort during prayer. The latter approach, which involves uttering syllables not known to the speaker, raises theological concerns about human agency in divine experience. Critics argue that this method shifts the focus from God’s initiative to human effort, undermining the doctrine of grace.²⁰ According to Walter Hollenweger, Charismatics resolve this tension by emphasizing surrender to this divine empowerment. They taught that believers should cease speaking known languages during prayer, lapse into silence, and then speak in faith, trusting the Spirit to shape their utterance.²¹ This approach restored the emphasis on divine agency and spiritual authenticity.

As observed in conversations with classical Pentecostals, they perceived that both non-Evangelicals and Evangelicals do not give due attention to the phenomenon of Pentecost in Acts 2 and do not recognize that it should be practiced today by believers. Mainline churches resisted the notion that tongues were essential, while Pentecostals insisted on experiential evidence. This doctrinal divide remains a defining feature of Ethiopian Evangelicalism.²²

Pentecostalism introduced a new model of Spirit-led spirituality, focusing on personal piety, the exercise of spiritual gifts, and experiential transformation. Pentecostalism in Ethiopia has become one of the most dynamic religious forces transforming the theological landscape and spiritual practices of Evangelical churches. It sets the agenda for Evangelicals and non-Evangelicals by introducing a new insight (a personal experience of the power and gifts of the Spirit) into the notion of “personal salvation.” It questions the mass conversion practice known to non-Protestants. Although Pentecostalism was new to the Ethiopian public, it emerged as a second wave in the history of Ethiopian Evangelicalism, introducing a more experiential and Spirit-centered spirituality. Distinct in its emphasis on the baptism of the Spirit as a second, subsequent experience, on exercises of the spiritual gifts, on personal transformation, and on experiential faith, it captured the minds and hearts of its hearers, especially students at higher education institutions. Why did the movement

¹⁷ Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 47.

¹⁸ Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 215.

¹⁹ J. E. Stiles, *The Gift of the Holy Spirit* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1926), 12.

²⁰ Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, 217.

²¹ Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, 218.

²² Eshete, *Origins and Development*, 152.

start in the mid-twentieth century, and what specific context made it successful? One important reason may be a felt need for practical religiosity. Mekonnen contends;

The Pentecostal movement started in 1960. During this time, many people, especially those in the urban areas, were ready for a change in religion. They had lost trust in the power of shamans. They were tired of the empty rituals and the liturgical worship of the Orthodox Church. What the people were looking for was a spiritual power that met their needs. An existential theology geared to the needs of the people was the need of the hour.²³

Eshete contends that the Ethiopian students of that period, who differed greatly in social, political, and religious practice, were influenced by Western education, and were disillusioned with religious practices of all sorts, sought a more authentic and transformative spiritual experience, and happily cherished Pentecostal practices. Eshete contends that the search for authentic religious practices among youth was a felt need among these students.²⁴

It must also be emphasized that Pentecostalism was not an exogenous religion but an intelligible response to existential dissatisfaction. It was a spontaneous, self-initiated, sociopolitical movement arising from the deep consciousness of Ethiopian youth who were seeking ways to rescue religious truth and to find a genuine articulation of faith.

Alemayehu Mekonnen identified one fundamental issue: Ethiopian religiosity, which perceives the Deity as distant and unreachable, is often mediated through spiritual beings, creating a spiritual vacuum in the lives of many Ethiopians.²⁵ Pentecostalism acted as a bridge between the distant God and the faithful by preaching simple faith and demonstrating God's power through the baptism of the Spirit and the gift of speaking in tongues as a sign.

One of the most significant outcomes of this movement was its impact on young people—particularly high school and university students—who had been exposed to the Gospel through mission institutions in cities like Addis Ababa, Harar, Hawassa, and Nazareth.²⁶

Pentecostalism openly proclaimed that the gifts of the Spirit were not confined to the apostolic era but remained available to believers today. The Pentecostal movement attracted thousands of disillusioned Christians who were seeking a deeper, more personal experience of God. Many converts testified that they left their traditional churches because they were spiritually unfulfilled. Pentecostal teachings on radical transformation, spiritual gifts, and personal holiness offered a compelling alternative. As a result, Pentecostalism became one of the most dynamic and effective evangelistic forces in the country.²⁷

THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT IN ETHIOPIA

What is the Charismatic movement? The answer to this question comes from the history of the American Charismatic movement. The Charismatic movement originally referred to practices such as the baptism of the

²³ Alemayehu Mekonnen, *Cultural Change in Ethiopia: An Evangelical Perspective* (Oxford: Begum Books International, 2013), 94.

²⁴ Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 189.

²⁵ Mekonnen, *Cultural Change in Ethiopia*, 94–95.

²⁶ Jörg Hauste, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia: A Historical Introduction to a Largely Unexplored Movement," in *Multidisciplinary Views on the Horn of Africa*, ed. Hatem Elliesie (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2014), 90–92

²⁷ Tormod Engelsen, "Pentecostalism and Student Movements in Ethiopia," *Missiology* 31, no. 2 (2003): 130.

Spirit and the exercise of speaking in tongues among non-classical Pentecostal Churches. The movement began in 1959/60 by Dennis Bennet, an Episcopalian minister who experienced the baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues. The designation “Charismatic” emerged later and is interpreted as a second wave of classical Pentecostalism. When it comes to theological and historical affiliations between the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, there are two views. The first sees the Charismatic movement as a continuation of the Pentecostal experience, in line with classical Pentecostals. The second views both as distinct yet related in expressions and practices. The distinctiveness lies not in the experiences but in the theological frameworks of the established churches that accommodated the movement.²⁸

This theological framework differs from denomination to denomination. Obsa Teka Fogi, in his summary of research in the Central Synod of EECMY, argued that Pentecostals and Charismatics differ widely in their theological explanations of the practice of the baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues.²⁹ We can pose a question here. What is the basic relation between the Pentecostal and Charismatic experiences? Both involve the phenomena of the Spirit of God, and practitioners from both refer to the same terminology: “baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues.” Where the first refers to the unique manifestation of the Spirit of God in the baptism of the Spirit, the second refers to speaking in tongues as a spiritual gift, thereby giving rise to the Charismatic movement. The Charismatic movement refers to the use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in Christian worship. Charisma (*karisma*) is the verbal noun of the verb *karizomai* (to give a gift of grace). Charisma is grace, and the spiritual manifestations are called (*karizmata*) gifts of grace (1 Cor 12-14 and Rom 12).³⁰ These two phenomena of the Spirit, as recorded in Scripture, were viewed both as separate movements and as interrelated—at least in time and practice, not necessarily in theology.

The Charismatic movement is an interdenominational movement seeking to promote church renewal rather than a recovery of spiritual power, emphasizing the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.³¹ Historically, the movement is related to Pentecostalism, but it is not a separatist movement, as most of its proponents have insisted on remaining within their denominational teachings and practices while seeking renewal.

When did it emerge in Ethiopia? In the Ethiopian context, the Charismatic movement emerged slowly over time.³² While Pentecostal influences had a quick and dominant impact, the experience of the baptism of the Spirit slowly but steadily affected individual Christians here and there. So, churches began to study their own traditions and theology and to respond to the challenges posed by classical Pentecostalism.

Obsa opines that, despite the differences in history and theological emphases, the two movements have helped “the church to its God-intended sense of a joyful personal relationship with God and deep care for people unreached by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”³³ The focus on personal faith, the exercise of spiritual gifts—particularly speaking in tongues as a sign of the reception of the baptism of the Spirit—was introduced into mainline churches through interpersonal relationships, pulpit sharing, prayer fellowships, annual

²⁸ Godebo, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 247.

²⁹ Fogi, *Gift of Grace*, 32–34. Noticing the context, Obsa noted that there are three evangelical interpretations of the practices: the Evangelical Baptists’, the Pentecostals’, and the Lutherans’.

³⁰ Fogi, *Gift of Grace*, 43.

³¹ Godebo, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 245. The Charismatic movement was viewed as a “Distinct movement”, mainly focused on the renewal of the church of Christ.

³² Although locating a specific date of the emergence of the movement is hardly possible, 1980 and the following decades are counted as the date.

³³ Fogi, *Unwrapping the Gift of Grace*, 39–40.

conferences, and persuasive communicators. Therefore, the Ethiopian Charismatic movement in the strict sense was rather a “spiritual renewal” in which members of mainstream churches sought to make their denominations spiritually vibrant, morally upright, and mission-oriented, empowered by the Spirit’s visitation and the practice of spiritual gifts. The same kind of tone is observed in others’ remarks that counted it as a renewal of the Christian church. “Whatever Charismatics are bringing forth is not a new statement of doctrine, but a fresh experience of it.”³⁴ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s report underlined the same position when describing the intentions of the first Lutheran Charismatics, “Lutheran Charismatics, like their counterparts in other denominations, explain that their goal is not to separate from the organized church but to assist in [revitalizing] the church by bearing testimony to the remarkable work the Lord is doing in their own lives through the power of the Spirit.”³⁵

Leaders desiring to be spiritually vibrant and to exercise spiritual gifts among the “spiritually renewed” individuals in mainline churches initially used language and practices rooted in Pentecostal theology. However, over time, they adhered to their own theological traditions and developed their practices within those frameworks. The Charismatic movement within the Ethiopian Evangelicals demarcated the theological boundaries between Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal over time as new theological and historical descriptions of the practices. Although developed in mainline churches that preached the necessity of personal salvation through the Gospel, Pentecostal promulgation of the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit also provoked resistance to their claims and the genuineness of their experiences. Ethiopian Charismatics embraced spiritual gifts while retaining denominational affiliations. Robert Culpepper, when narrating the early twentieth-century realities of the Charismatics, opines that, although historically connected with Pentecostalism, “the Charismatic movement, instead of encouraging those who came under its influence to form a new Pentecostal denomination or to join an existing one, urges its adherents to remain within their own churches and denominations and to act as spiritual leaven within them.”³⁶ Their integration of Spirit baptism, speaking in tongues, prophecy, and free-flowing worship practices into existing ecclesial frameworks created new theological tensions and opportunities for renewal. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements redefined Ethiopian Evangelicalism, introducing a Spirit-centered spirituality that began to shape the nation’s religious landscape in 1980 and continues to do so to this day.

OVERVIEW OF ETHIOPIAN PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC SPIRITUALITY

The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements emerged in the context of the Christian Church's doctrine and practices. The pressing issue was what sort of spirituality it is employing within the existing Christianity. The word “spirituality” is indeed a fluid term, interpreted differently in different contexts. It carries with it historical and theological themes or practices developed to address contextual needs. In the case of evangelical Christianity, generally speaking, it may refer to the emphasis of the centrality of the Scripture, the need for

³⁴ Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: Discovering How God Speaks and Heals Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

³⁵ Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1972).

³⁶ Robert H. Culpepper, *Evaluating the Charismatic Movement: A Theological and Biblical Appraisal* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977), 10. He underlined that those within the Charismatic movement usually retain the distinctive doctrinal teaching of their denominations. In describing the Pentecostals’ social engagement, the same stance has been noted by the Swedish Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches, *Pentecostal Transformation and Social Engagement: A Research Overview* (September 2022).

evangelization, the exercise of the power and the gifts of the spirit, the necessity of conversions, and the centrality of the Cross of Christ in all matters of life and social engagement as part of the mission of the church.

From a spiritual perspective, Ethiopia is a melting pot of various beliefs: Christianity (Ethiopian Orthodox, Catholics, and Evangelicals), Islam, and traditional religions. These faiths coexisted, and the social and political context has supported or accommodated them. A paradigm shift occurred when Pentecostals emerged, claiming that the baptism of the Spirit was necessary for missions and the ministry of the Church. The focus of this spirituality is a Spirit-empowered, Christ-centered, mission-oriented way of life marked by experiential encounter, charismatic and vibrant worship, holiness, and eschatological expectation. This spirituality emphasized personal experience over institutional experience. Indeed, making the Spirit central is a common tradition among several religious groups. Those who encountered the Holy Spirit in personal ways claimed to have exercised the gift of speaking in tongues. The first generation of the movement was influenced by Pentecostal literature obtained through mission institutions and international sources, which helped shape their theological imagination and spiritual aspirations.³⁷ While those claimed personal experiences were transformative, they were not entirely unprecedented. Christianity had already existed and was functional in Ethiopia before this student revival.³⁸ What made the student movement distinctive was its boldness in breaking the long-prevailing silence in mainline churches about the exercise of spiritual gifts. At the beginning of the movement, the use of spiritual gifts was generally viewed as the practice of the early church and as something never to be experienced again. Nevertheless, later, spiritual gifts were embraced by the movement and integrated into the Pentecostal and the Charismatic spiritualities as necessary elements of theology and practice.³⁹

Almost all Protestant churches are now deeply influenced by Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity and have adopted central Pentecostal propositions in their theological statements and regulations. The Baptist KHC, for example, whose founding organization, the Sudan Interior Mission, was decidedly anti-Pentecostal in the 1970s, now holds several views aligned with the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, primarily regarding the exercise of spiritual gifts.

The next section explores the specific features of Ethiopian Pentecostal and Charismatic spirituality, highlighting both the commonalities with global Pentecostalism and its unique local expressions. Ethiopian Pentecostal and Charismatic movements can be easily defined as a spirituality based on hearing and believing the gospel and, most importantly, on the exercise of the power and gifts of the Spirit. This spirituality is more defined as a discourse between subjectivity and objectivity, requiring discernment of what is normative. This challenge, however, is elucidated in different theological and missional trajectories by both Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations. Below are tools that will help the reader gauge the similarities and differences arising from these movements.

³⁷ Tormod Engelsen, "Mission, Pentecostalism, and Ethiopian Identity," *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjonsvitenskap* 68, no. 3 (2014): 196. Engelsen opines that there were three international (Finnish, Swedish, and Kenyan) sources to make the Ethiopian movement tap with the international connections, though this has been highly objected to by Pentecostal historiographers locally.

³⁸ Eshete, *Origins and Development*, 118.

³⁹ Hausteim, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," 120.

THE FEATURES OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS

The Ethiopian Pentecostal movement shares several features with global Pentecostalism, while also exhibiting unique characteristics shaped by its historical and cultural context. These features can be broadly categorized into three domains: mission-oriented spirituality, experiential transference, and doctrinal emphases.

MISSION-ORIENTED SPIRITUALITY

Ethiopian Evangelical spirituality, despite its varied expressions and explanations, is the fruit of the Reformation heritage. The mainline churches, such as the Ethiopian Kale Heywet and Mekane Yesus, trace their roots to Reformed, Lutheran, and Pietist traditions that emphasize key theological tenets such as *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *soli Deo gloria*. These traditions also promote spiritual renewal through intimate fellowship with the Holy Spirit, forming a Spirit-centered approach to life and ministry.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the perception and practices of "this spirit-centered approach" are expressed differently among Evangelicals, including the Spirit's vivid work in the preaching of the Gospel, the Spirit's presence in liturgical services, and the individual's experience in private life and ministry. Pentecostal spirituality is heavily marked by a passion for mission. In classic Pentecostalism, the notion of "the second coming of Christ," one of the five tenets, is given high priority, and the church is always mindful of it. For that reason, the world is perceived as soon-to-be doomed and eternity as at the door preceding the glorified return of Christ, hence making witnessing to the Gospel so urgent. This theology, seemingly frightening, carries with it the task of mission—preaching the Gospel as quickly as possible with no time or opportunity wasted. One striking example of this is the remarkable growth of Evangelicals in Ethiopia, which has now reached over 30 million.⁴¹

A SPIRITUALITY BORN OUT OF EARNEST INQUIRY

One striking similarity between Ethiopian Pentecostalism and early American Pentecostalism is their origin as student movements. In Topeka, Kansas, Charles Parham's Bible school students sought evidence of Spirit baptism through scriptural inquiry, leading to the practice of speaking in tongues.⁴² Similarly, Ethiopian high school and university students—scattered across cities like Asmara, Harar, Hawassa, and Addis Ababa—engaged in deep spiritual inquiries that were informed by missionaries⁴³ and Pentecostal literature⁴⁴ and through which they sought authentic Christian experience through prayer, fasting, and study.

However, the role of the missionaries of the Swedish and Finnish Pentecostal missions should not be overlooked or neglected. Like Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:2), they had prepared young Ethiopians to seek and

⁴⁰ Engelsviken, "Mission, Pentecostalism," 196.

⁴¹ "The Church is one of the biggest among the Evangelical Churches in the country. At this moment it consists of more than four thousand sixty-eight (4068) local churches and eight thousand nine hundred forty seven (8947) daughter churches serving with in forty- two (42) regions." Ethiopian Full Gospel Believers' Church official website, accessed April 13, 2026, <https://etfullgospel.com>.

⁴² Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 42.

⁴³ Eshete, *Origins and Development*, 148.

⁴⁴ Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 163 and 168.

pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. For this, "the Ethiopian Pentecostal churches heavily underscore the debt of gratitude they owe to the Finnish missionaries."⁴⁵

People of Orthodox or Muslim background were influenced by Western education and modernization. They critiqued traditional religious structures and yearned for reform. Their spiritual hunger was intensified by the sociopolitical upheavals of the time, including the rise of Marxist ideologies among university elites.⁴⁶ The convergence of experiences between the Topeka and Ethiopian students lay in their theological approaches: the former was guided by structured biblical teachings, while the latter was driven by an existential yearning and grassroots revivals.

INTERCONNECTED IN ORIGIN AND MODE OF EXPANSION

One important similarity between the Charismatic movement in the United States of America and in Ethiopia is that neither had any preconceived plan to become a movement. Yet, due to the enormous impact the Pentecostal experience had on people's lives, it spread like wildfire, calling people to be part of the blessings. Although mainline churches in both contexts, such as the Episcopal Church in America, the Ethiopian Kale Heywet churches, and Mekane Yesus churches, hesitated to accommodate the new ideas, they soon realized the change in the spiritual dynamics demonstrated by members who had experienced the gifts of the Spirit, and they accommodated these new ideas. For example, an Episcopalian minister in California in 1960 was drawn to the practice after witnessing a couple's experience in his church.⁴⁷

Similarly, in the Ethiopian case, intellectuals from non-Pentecostal theological institutions were drawn into the movement through personal encounters with Spirit-filled believers. In the same manner, the Ethiopian Charismatic movement relied primarily on interpersonal witness and indigenous church initiatives. The movement grew through grassroots fellowships, student ministries, and the quiet influence of Spirit-filled believers within mainline churches.⁴⁸ Most mainline Protestant churches recognized and integrated the practices, becoming Charismatic while retaining their doctrinal heritage.⁴⁹ The establishment of churches like the Ethiopian Full Gospel Believers' Church and the Meserete Kristos Church exemplifies this organic expansion. One notable example is the *Yesemay Berhane* ("Heavenly Light") fellowship in Nazareth, a student-led group that practiced Spirit baptism and the exercise of spiritual gifts. Their influence led the Mennonite Meserete Kristos Church to adopt Charismatic practices, following negotiations and theological reflections.⁵⁰ Jorg Haustein notes that leaders of the Nazareth Mennonite Church, which served as the national center for Mennonite operations, welcomed the students and eventually integrated their practices into the church's life.⁵¹ Annual summer conferences organized by the Swedish Pentecostal Mission in Hawassa and the Meserete Kristos Church in Nazareth offered intensive Bible study, preaching, prayer, and counseling.⁵² They provided spiritual nourishment and theological grounding for believers facing persecution under the communist regime.

⁴⁵ Mekonnen, *Cultural Change in Ethiopia*, 93.

⁴⁶ Eshete, *Origins and Development*, 149.

⁴⁷ Godebo, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 245.

⁴⁸ Mekonnen, *Cultural Change in Ethiopia*, 99.

⁴⁹ Haustein, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," 19 and 86. Here, Haustein argues that "Though the intensity of the Charismatic influence varies from church to church and region to region, all have centrally accommodated the Holy Spirit revival movements in their theological discussions and regulations."

⁵⁰ Haustein, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," 108.

⁵¹ Haustein, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," 110.

⁵² Eshete, *Ethiopian Pentecostal*, 154.

Another mode of expansion was the establishment of youth centers and hostels for university students. The Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus were at the forefront in providing accommodation, literature, and fellowship opportunities for young believers. Eshete recalls that Hibret Amba Kale Heywet Church in Addis Ababa was initially founded in 1950 as a student fellowship center for Imperial Haile Selassie University.⁵³ Decades later, it became a local church within the Ethiopian Kale Heywet denomination and gained a reputation as a Charismatic hub, especially under the leadership of figures like Pastor Gosaye Desalegn. The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus also provided a student dormitory for university students to foster a conducive atmosphere for educational engagements and, at the same time, nurture their spiritual lives through studying the Word of God, fellowship, and prayer. Nevertheless, this enormous fruition is never without theological and practical contradictions and challenges.

THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND IMPACTS

The rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic spirituality in Ethiopia has not only transformed worship practices but also provoked deep theological reflection. Ethiopian Evangelical churches currently registered with the Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers' Churches have risen to close to 4,000, with an additional 1,000 ministries.⁵⁴ Many of these Evangelical ministries are Pentecostal or Charismatic. It is presumed that the majority of them fall in the Pentecostal category. Perhaps, Obsa's categorization of the Evangelicals as evangelical Baptists, Pentecostals, and the Lutherans⁵⁵ may help in this regard, but the list has grown a bit since the emergence of neo-Pentecostals and indigenous churches, which have added to the category.⁵⁶ This uniqueness of historical and theological heritage has complicated the theological diversity. Although Pentecostal and Charismatic movements share a common history, both locally and globally, theological divergences emerge, especially as those in the Charismatic movement respond from their biblical, theological, and denominational positions.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE SPIRIT

The Pentecostals prefer a narrative of the Spirit from what may be called the "Pneumatological-Christology narrative."⁵⁷ This is to say, the Pentecostal narrative of mission and ministry always centers on Christ. Yet, to them, what is equally important is the power and the gifts of the Spirit. It had been common among the Pentecostals to start any conversation with the question: "Have you been baptized by the Holy Spirit?" And whatever the response, the conversation continues until a person affirms acceptance.

In contrast, among the Charismatics, the narrative preference comes from what may be referred as "Christological-Pneumatology narrative." A Charismatic, although he celebrates talking about the exercise of the Spirit, prefers to talk about Christ first, and would ask if a person has a personal relationship with Jesus: "Have you received Jesus as your personal savior?" The Charismatics prioritize talking about Christ before mentioning the exercises of the gifts. So, any conversation about the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit is always

⁵³ Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 162

⁵⁴ Mentioned in the report of the General Secretary to the 5th General Assembly of the Council, February 2026. EFGBC official website.

⁵⁵ Fogi, *Unwrapping the Gift of Grace*, 33.

⁵⁶ Neo-Pentecostal, in this context, means churches that sympathize with new perspectives called "Third wave," and the Indigenous Churches are those established by so-called visionary men and women who practice syncretic practices.

⁵⁷ Here, "Pneumatological-Christology" refers to any discussion of conversation that inclines more to Spirit-centered narrations.

in a Christological context and continues with a pneumatological narrative—this we call “Christological Pneumatology.”⁵⁸

In both cases, at the heart of the theological difference lies the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and the Church. Pentecostals emphasize Spirit baptism as a distinct and essential experience, often evidenced by speaking in tongues. This experience is viewed not merely as a doctrinal affirmation but as a transformative encounter that empowers believers for ministry, holiness, and spiritual warfare.⁵⁹ Charismatics, while affirming the gifts of the Spirit, often adopt a more integrative approach—adopting the practices of spiritual gifts within a denominational tradition. The Charismatics seek to retain their denominational heritage while embracing spiritual renewal. This creates a theological tension: Pentecostals tend to view Spirit baptism as a dividing line between nominal and authentic Christians, while Charismatics emphasize spiritual growth within existing ecclesial frameworks. Pentecostal insistence on experiential Christianity has led to challenges against both Orthodox and Evangelical claims to Christian identity. Believers who do not exhibit spiritual gifts—especially tongues—are sometimes regarded as spiritually deficient.⁶⁰ This has provoked resistance from mainline churches, which argue for a broader understanding of Christian maturity and reject the notion of spiritual elitism.

The debate extends to the nature of spiritual gifts themselves. Are they normative for all believers, or are they distributed according to divine discretion? Ethiopian Pentecostals often lean toward the former, while Charismatics and mainline Evangelicals advocate the latter. Such differing explications of the Spirit's work influence preaching, discipleship, and ecclesial polity, contributing to fragmentation and renewal across the Evangelical spectrum.⁶¹

TEXTUAL PREFERENCES

Pentecostals and Charismatics use different biblical texts as the foundation for their theology and practice. For example, Dunn contends “that Acts 2 and Acts 8 are the key passages that provide Pentecostals with strong biblical grounds for their doctrine.”⁶² Charismatics base their exercise of the gifts of the Spirit on well-known texts like Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

The difference in interpretation arises from the selection of biblical texts for the appropriation of theological stances, with some texts taken as normative and others as prescriptive. Nevertheless, both Pentecostals and Charismatics use all these biblical texts. In the case of the Pentecostals, these selected texts indicate a theological instance of “a continuing Christian experience,” a “pattern for all Christians of all generations to be baptized in the Holy Spirit” and to receive “second stage blessing.”⁶³ Whereas the Charismatics, like the Lutherans, believe that they have received the Holy Spirit in Baptism, they state that believers experience the power and the gifts of the Spirit.⁶⁴ The teaching on the gifts of the Spirit is biblical (Rom 12:9; 1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4:11). Both traditions represent two ways of exercising the promise God gave to the Christian church,

⁵⁸ Fogi, *Unwrapping the Gift of Grace*, 43. Quoting Peter Hocken, Gogi argues that the characteristics of the Charismatics are focused on Jesus, and experiencing spiritual gifts refers to “a deep yielding to Jesus.” “Christological Pneumatology” refers to the narrative preference and practices common among the Charismatics.

⁵⁹ Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 47.

⁶⁰ Eshete, *Origins and Development*, 152.

⁶¹ Eshete, *Origins and Development*, 153.

⁶² Godebo, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 241.

⁶³ Godebo, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 243.

⁶⁴ Fogi, *Unwrapping the Gift of Grace*, 32.

although the ways of understanding and experiencing it differ greatly. Yet, these traditions do not represent two kinds of Christians within the NT community.

UNIQUENESS OF CHARISMATIC SPIRITUALITY

Elsewhere, I mentioned that the theological and practical impacts of both Pentecostal and Charismatic practices are distinct. In the Ethiopian context, the Pentecostals are the dominant form among Evangelicals, and Pentecostal spirituality and practices have influenced many. Charismatics, on the other hand, ground themselves firmly in their theological traditions by opposing certain Pentecostal teachings on the Baptism of the Spirit, which are sometimes defined and taught differently. The following theological explanations are rendered in various forms by the Charismatics, as noted from their preaching and teachings.

Charismatics believe that salvation is entirely the work of God and does not require any preconditions, understanding it as regeneration that takes place in baptism. They also hold that every baptized person has already received the Spirit and does not need another baptism, although believers may be filled with the Spirit's power as God wills. Regarding the sign of the Spirit, they teach that no external signs are necessary, since the reception of the Spirit is the work of divine power entering the human situation and cannot be determined by individuals. In terms of sanctification, Charismatics affirm that a person is sanctified at the moment of justification but must live this out practically through the Word of God and the power of the Spirit. They also believe that Christ is a healer who works through His Word and sacraments, the prayers of church ministers, and the community of saints. Finally, they maintain that Christ may return at any time, but believers should not attempt to calculate the date; instead, they should continue faithfully in their daily lives as they await His return.

PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC IMPACT IN ETHIOPIAN ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

We have discussed the Ethiopian Pentecostal and Charismatic movement history in previous sections. The emergence of both movements has pushed Ethiopian churches to examine their own theological positions and practices, and at the same time, to adopt what is biblically and contextually important.

The Baptist KHC, for example, whose founding organization, the Sudan Interior Mission, was decidedly anti-Pentecostal in the 1970s, published a revision of its Doctrinal Statement in 2004, which defines Pentecostal terms like "baptism in the Holy Spirit" and regulates in detail Charismatic practices, like speaking in tongues, prophesy, or laying on of hands. The ECMY officially welcomed the Charismatic movement in 1993 and found it compatible with its own Lutheran teachings and traditions. In 2008, the church published a liturgy reform that outlines several issues regarding Charismatic practices but, in general, affirms their use when properly applied.⁶⁵

Charismatic practices challenged the Mekane Yesus church. It is a mission-related church that emerged and grew out of an era which may be called the dispensation of the Word. The word "dispensation"—excluding the North American theory of history—defines the period of the Ethiopian Evangelical movement through the lens of Ethiopian Evangelical historiography. The dispensation of the Word refers to the era of missionary evangelization and social development, beginning with Protestant missions in the 16th century and continuing through the 20th century. This period emphasized biblical literacy, theological education, and

⁶⁵ Hausteim, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," 109–127.

institutional growth. Missionaries sought to reform the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and evangelize unreached populations, often through schools, clinics, and development programs.

Since the 1970s, through the emergence of the Pentecostal and later the Charismatic movements, a new era was introduced—the era of dispensation of the Spirit.⁶⁶ This era emphasizes spiritual gifts, personal piety, and experiential Christianity. It challenges the institutional and intellectual focus of dispensation of the Word by calling for a renewed emphasis on divine empowerment *by* the power and the gift of the Spirit and supernatural ministry.⁶⁷

These dispensational frameworks are not mutually exclusive but reflect differing theological priorities. The dispensation of the Word laid the foundation for biblical engagement and ecclesial structure, while the dispensation of the Spirit introduced vitality, renewal, and prophetic witness. Some churches resist the emphasis on the Spirit, fearing emotionalism or doctrinal instability. Others criticize the dispensation of the Word for its perceived dryness and lack of spiritual power. The challenge for Ethiopian Evangelical spirituality is to integrate these dispensations — to affirm both the authority of Scripture and the vitality of the Spirit.⁶⁸ This integration requires a robust hermeneutic that honors the historical legacy of missions while embracing the contemporary movement of the Spirit. It calls for theological reflection that is both biblically grounded and contextually relevant, capable of addressing the spiritual hunger of a new generation while remaining faithful to the Gospel.⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

Ethiopian Evangelical spirituality, as revealed in Pentecostal and Charismatic practices, sparked a spirituality among both Evangelicals and other societal bodies. Both movements emerged as mustard seeds, with an unnoticed and unrecognized presence, and both eventually brought new religious and social consciousness among the Ethiopians. Socially, college and university students who were the first to respond to the movements catalyzed the unnoticed presence of the kingdom of God, influencing society to turn to salvation by faith rather than works and to the promise of God's gift of power for salvation.⁷⁰ Enlightened by the Gospel's message and empowered by the Spirit, Evangelical spirituality became an alternative hope for the marginalized, the literate, and the religious elites of the time. Through intense prayer meetings, Bible study, and the exercise of the gift of the Spirit, Pentecostals and Charismatics paved the way for a reform of religious structures, life, and ministries among leaders and laypeople, and brought liberty and hope to the oppressed in spirit.⁷¹ Evangelical spirituality is a liberating force for society at large and for the Church.⁷² The emphasis on personal piety, spiritual gifts, and experiential transformation offered a compelling alternative to the institutional and intellectual focus of earlier evangelical missions.

While rooted in global Pentecostal traditions, Ethiopian expressions of religious practices developed unique features shaped by cultural, historical, and theological dynamics.⁷³ The movements provoked theological debates, particularly around Spirit baptism, tongues, and ecclesial identity, that continue to influence

⁶⁶ Mekonnen, *Evangelical Identity*, 94.

⁶⁷ Eshete, *Origins and Development*, 154.

⁶⁸ Eshete, *Origins and Development*, 156.

⁶⁹ Engelsviken, *Pentecostalism and Student Movements*, 138.

⁷⁰ Mekonnen, *Cultural Change in Ethiopia*, 100.

⁷¹ Mekonnen, *Cultural Change in Ethiopia*, 98.

⁷² Eshete, *Origin and Development*, 160.

⁷³ Engelsviken, "Pentecostalism and Student Movements," 139.

church life and doctrine. They also introduced hermeneutical tensions, as believers grappled with integrating the Word and the Spirit, tradition and renewal, and structure and spontaneity.⁷⁴ As Ethiopian Evangelicalism moves forward, the challenge is not merely to choose between Pentecostal and Charismatic paradigms, but to discern a faithful path that honors both the legacy of missions and the movement of the Spirit. This requires theological humility, ecclesial openness, and a commitment to contextualized discipleship.⁷⁵ In this ongoing journey, Ethiopian Pentecostal and Charismatic spirituality stands as a testament to the dynamic interplay between global faith and local expression—a movement that continues to shape the future of Christianity in Ethiopia and beyond.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. St. Louis: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1972.
- Alemayehu Mekonnen. *Cultural Change in Ethiopia: An Evangelical Perspective*. Oxford: Begum Books International, 2013.
- . *Evangelical Identity and Mission in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus Seminary Press, 2013.
- Culpepper, Robert H. *Evaluating the Charismatic Movement: A Theological and Biblical Appraisal*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977.
- Deere, Jack. *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: Discovering How God Speaks and Heals Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.
- Engelsviken, Tormod. "Pentecostalism and Student Movements in Ethiopia." *Missiology* 31, no. 2 (2003): 123–140.
- . "Mission, Pentecostalism, and Ethiopian Identity." *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjonsvitenskap* 68, no. 3 (2014): 163–182.
- Ethiopian Full Gospel Believers' Church. Official website. Accessed April 13, 2026. <https://etfullgospel.com>.
- Haustein, Jörg. "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia: A Historical Introduction to a Largely Unexplored Movement." In *Multidisciplinary Views on the Horn of Africa*, edited by Hatem Elliesie, 109–127. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2014.
- Hollenweger, Walter J. *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.
- Land, Steven J. *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.
- Obsa Teka Fogi. *Unwrapping the Gift of Grace: A Biblical and Theological Perspective*. Elgin, IL: Tenth Power, 2023.
- Sergew Hable Selassie. "The Establishment of the Ethiopian Church." The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church Faith and Order. Accessed February 28, 2026. <https://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/ethiopian/prechristian.html>.

⁷⁴ Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, 220.

⁷⁵ Mekonnen, *Evangelical Identity*, 96.

Stiles, J. E. *The Gift of the Holy Spirit*. Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1926.

Swedish Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches. *Pentecostal Transformation and Social Engagement: A Research Overview*. September 2022.

Tibebe Eshete. *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009.

———. *The Origins and Development of the Ethiopian Pentecostal Movement*. Addis Ababa: Evangelical Press, 2009.

Yacob Godebo. *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: An Examination of the Person, Gift, and Works of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Teaching and Historical Christian Teaching and Practice Through the Centuries*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2025.