

# Neo-Pentecostalism and its Intrinsic Animistic Connection

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- *That church constantly talks about money. Nevertheless, many folks testify that its teachings help them to overcome difficult situations.*
- *Its leadership distributes tangible items to its members and visitors. The pastors assert that the objects provide them with divine blessings and protection from evil.*
- *People pack out the auditorium multiple times a week. The adherents demonstrate a fervor for God.*
- *Although some of its tactics are questionable, the church seems to do more good than harm. Hence, its presence facilitates the gospel cause.*

Anecdotal comments like the ones above are commonplace in global south contexts. The depicted church falls into the classification of Neo-Pentecostal. At a minimum, the ideas of this movement have altered the congregation's discourse and practices to where it appears more Neo-Pentecostal than any of its Pentecostal or historical-evangelical forbears ever dreamt.

Evangelical leaders raise sincere questions about churches that fit into this category. They may ask themselves, "*What are these groups teaching and*

*doing? Have their pastors found the key to church growth that we can imitate? Should my congregation avoid their practices? If so, why? How should our church vet professing believers who come from a Neo-Pentecostal background if they want to join our membership?”*

What to do? Where to start?

Throughout my missionary service of nearly three decades in Brazil, I have observed firsthand the continued growth and proliferation of the Neo-Pentecostal movement, which preceded my arrival.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon continues to change the evangelical landscape, influencing both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal denominations. The oldest and largest Neo-Pentecostal denomination in Brazil, The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, happens to be the most successful one to extend its global footprint. Its leadership boasts of having affiliated churches “in almost 150 countries throughout the world,” which surpasses the geopolitical reach of McDonald’s Restaurants.<sup>2</sup>

When I speak with Christian leaders serving in other majority world contexts, they also attest to similar traits and challenges in their respective cultural contexts. Their testimonies confirm what scholars affirm. Neo-Pentecostalism is a global phenomenon.

This article introduces Neo-Pentecostalism so that missionaries or students of missions may start to acquire a better understanding of this global phenomenon. To accomplish this objective, the essay describes Neo-Pentecostalism, identifies its primary traits, addresses concerns with the movement, and highlights its dilemmas for the missionary task<sup>3</sup> related to evangelism, discipleship, healthy formation of churches, and leadership

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<sup>1</sup> The third period or wave of Pentecostalism in Brazil symbolically began in 1977 when three young Pentecostal pastors started holding services in a former funeral home, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God traces its origin to this place. This location and date also mark the advent of the Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal Movement in the popular evangelical imagination.

<sup>2</sup> [Igreja] Universal [do Reino de Deus], “Nossa história”, *Universal*, n.d., available at: <https://www.universal.org/a-universal/nossa-historia/>.

<sup>3</sup> International Mission Board, *Foundations*, 2nd ed. (Richmond: IMB, 2018), 7, 75-98.

development. The topic consequently ties to this current edition of the *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* given the movement's animistic bent and appeal.<sup>4</sup>

## Description And Characteristics

No one denomination or cultural context embodies Neo-Pentecostalism. Hence, groups under the influence of this movement often differ from one another by nuancing their beliefs and practices. Moreover, discourses and praxes may vary from one context to another (e.g., Brazil vs. Mexico; South Korea vs. China; Uganda vs. South Africa). Nevertheless, Norwegian theologian Sturla J. Stålsett provides this excellent summary, in light of an examination of its globalized manifestation:

Neo-Pentecostalism is a new form of Pentecostal religion in which spiritual warfare, exorcisms, immediate healings and personal prosperity in this world have replaced traditional Pentecostalism's emphasis on speaking in tongues; on strict, pietistic morals; and on Jesus' second coming and eternal salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Stålsett's definition brings to the surface what 'new wave' or 'third wave'<sup>6</sup> Pentecostalism both emphasizes and lays aside. As a consequence, he implies its three principal traits, which merit elaboration.

First, *the accentuated prosperity-theology message* holds that Christians, through faith, can and should enjoy divine healing, health and success in

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<sup>4</sup> Animism is the belief that spiritual beings and forces control human affairs for good and ill. Thus, a person seeks to discern these influences to leverage or counteract them toward his desired outcome.

<sup>5</sup> Sturla J. Stålsett, "Introduction: Pentecostalism growth and global transformations", in: Sturla J. Stålsett, ed., *Spirits of Globalization: The growth of Pentecostalism and experiential spiritualities in a global age* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Terms commonly used for Neo-Pentecostalism which distinguishes the movement from the previous two Pentecostal periods.

this lifetime. The atonement of Jesus Christ offers emotional and physical benefits, as well as eternal salvation, to those who believe.<sup>7</sup> This premise stands paramount to the Neo-Pentecostal hermeneutic. While the prosperity-theology message precedes Neo-Pentecostalism, churches associated with the movement serve as the major carrier of this viewpoint among global south nations.

Second, the perspective of *specialized spiritual warfare* sees forces and spiritual entities<sup>8</sup> possess the power to enslave people and thwart their flourishing. Thus, a process of deliverance, often including exorcisms, provides liberation to individuals, even if they are Christ followers, from malignant influences. Afterwards, prescribed methods maintain evil influences at a distance that in turn opens the divine door for progress in this life, as the person grows in faith and obedience. The spiritual benefits of keeping maladies at bay and receiving blessings come from churches with these *specialized* ministries that treat difficult and impossible personal and familial situations.

It is important to perceive the *symbiotic relationship*<sup>9</sup> that exists between the accentuated prosperity message with specialized spiritual warfare. Moreover, the fusion of these two traits makes Neo-Pentecostalism appeal to people in fear-based cultures where such phenomena such as the evil eye, ancestor veneration and witchcraft permeate. While these concerns may seem superstitious, missionaries and anthropologists call this thinking and patterns of behaviors animism. To summarize, “the animistic perspective

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. David W. Jones; Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 69-71; 89-92. Eric W. Kramer, “Possessing Faith: Commodification, Religious Subjectivity, and Collectivity in a Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal Church”, doctoral dissertation (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), 187.

<sup>8</sup> Depending on the society, spiritual entities may include God, gods, demons, Satan, angels, ancestors, ghosts, jinns, totems and spirits related to nature. Spiritual forces are inanimate powers that may encompass matters such as astrology, witchcraft, evil eye, magic and certain objects.

<sup>9</sup> Although this term comes from biology, the analogy fits well to describe the interdependence of these two traits, as one organism depends on the other for survival.

of reality believes that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, individuals must “discover which beings and forces are impacting them, in order to ward them off and to employ their power,” which leads to achieving desired outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

To offer an analogy, the specialized spiritual warfare trait in Neo-Pentecostalism finds rich soil where folk and traditional religions prevail and shape the worldview of the populations. The accentuated prosperity message, while the most notable Neo-Pentecostal characteristic, functions as fertilizer in societies where the animistic worldview holds a significant sway over the target population.

The last Neo-Pentecostal trait consists of the *elimination or lessening of traditional Pentecostal behavioral norms*, which earlier groups emphasized.<sup>12</sup> While Neo-Pentecostals do not condone a libertine lifestyle, ambitions in this life and progress toward personal goals in this life take a more prominent role to the detriment of preserving one’s salvation to the end by complying with the established behavioral norms as set by the ecclesiastical community.<sup>13</sup>

## Gospel Infractions

Before I continue, I wish to state that I am not Pentecostal or charismatic, nor am I anti-Pentecostal or anti-charismatic. To reiterate, the subject at hand centers on Neo-Pentecostalism that has spread over the last five decades and changed the evangelical landscape in the majority world. While this “new

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<sup>10</sup> Gailyn Van Rheen, Anthony Parker, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 313.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Pentecostal soteriology emphasizes the conformity of a sanctified life on the part of the professing believer to denominational customs and behavioral lifestyle expectations, until his time on earth concludes or the Lord Jesus returns.

<sup>13</sup> The practice of speaking in tongues – often accompanying one’s salvation/sanctification among Pentecostal forerunners – also seems to take on lesser weight.

form of Pentecostalism”<sup>14</sup> consists of “continuations” from its Pentecostal precursors, its “discontinuations”<sup>15</sup> cause significant concern and merit scrutiny.

Neo-Pentecostalism indeed poses serious challenges to the missionary task. This section calls attention to four perils that take place when the movement’s ideas and practices gain more space in the pulpit and the pews.

**1. Overreaching eschatology** – In addition to the interpretive challenges of many biblical texts, Neo-Pentecostal proponents overreach by teaching – and often demanding – the effects of heaven on earth in this present age. This raised expectation creates confusion and exaggerated prospects for their hearers. The subjective promises also provoke disappointment when expected hopes never materialize.

The biblical record, no doubt, reveals divine blessings for those who fear God and follow His ways (e.g., Ps 1; 34.8-18). Furthermore, Christians affirm that they are rich through Christ’s poverty and suffering (2 Cor 8.9). The Triune God is on mission to reconcile all things to Himself and make all things new (2 Cor 5.17-18; Rev 21.5). Nevertheless, to what extent should the promises of the kingdom and human flourishing be expected in this present age replete with plagues, wars, injustices and natural calamities?

Disciples of Christ indeed experience God’s blessings because of His favor, their obedience, and other means of grace, which the Spirit ministers to believers in the context of covenant community. That being stated, the full effects are to come when He recreates a new heaven and earth (Rev 21). Until then and with sin’s manifold presence in and around believers and

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<sup>14</sup> Sturla J. Stålsett, “Introduction: Pentecostalism growth and global transformations”, in: Sturla J. Stålsett, ed., *Spirits of Globalization*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Paulo Ayers Mattos, “An Introduction to the Theology of Bishop Edir Macedo (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God): A Case Study of a New Brazilian Pentecostal Church”, unpublished master thesis, Indianapolis: Christian Theological Seminary, 2002, 1, 107. Mattos’ use of continuations and discontinuations centers on Macedo’s theological perspectives, and, thus, the denomination that he founded. Nevertheless, the terminology fits well for assessing Neo-Pentecostalism.

satanic forces against them, the redeemed await the full culmination of God's kingdom on earth.

**2. A poor understanding of human suffering** – The overreaching eschatology frequently ties to Neo-Pentecostalism's simplistic and deficient view of theodicy. To summarize, why do humans, and even Christ's disciples, suffer?

The Scriptures reveal that evil ties back to the fall when Satan was present and active in Eden. Furthermore, the enemy still provokes temptation and causes suffering; thus, vigilance and prayer are mandated necessities (1 Pet 5.6-9). Satan rightly holds the title of the father of all lies and murderer. He blinds people to the gospel (Jn 8.44; 2 Cor 4.4) and thwarts the plans of missionaries and delays angels' intentions (e.g., 1 Thes 2.18; Dan 10.11-12).

However, a biblical survey on theodicy shows other reasons for tribulations, besides or in addition to demonic activity. Some causes come from man's own rebellion and the sins of others – in the present and times past (e.g., slavery, fathers' examples, heresy, prejudice). Moreover, the Scriptures attribute suffering and hardship, especially among believers, to God himself and His purposes which He intends for the good of the elect and the accomplishment of His eternal plan (e.g., Rom 8.28-30; 2 Cor 4.7-12; Jas 1; Heb 12; 1 Pet 4.12-19).

The tendency to attribute every personal and familial hardship to Satan or another demonic entity oversimplifies the predicament of human misery. The one-dimensional assessment consequently leads to viewing evil more as a contagion which to avoid. This matter once again brings up the subject of animism.

**3. An unredeemed worldview** – The gospel, once heard, comprehended and received, goes about redeeming a person's perspective on life, including one's view of self and the spiritual realm. However, the Neo-Pentecostal narrative and praxis subjugate its adherents to subjective, self-induced motivations and animism.

Not all reasons for receiving divine assistance in Neo-Pentecostal environments and mediumistic religions size up as impure (e.g., resources for medicines to aid a sick child; desire for a spouse to return; acquisition of a needed job to provide the needs of one's family; cure of a continuous ailment). On the other hand, the constant pointing to a malignant spiritual being or witchcraft provoked by a neighbor, the handing out of spiritually charged objects, and the prescribing of specific rituals smack of paganism or syncretistic religions. These tactics fall short of a biblical worldview and ethic that come from the faithful preaching of the gospel.

While Neo-Pentecostalism may seem to resolve the “the excluded middle” regarding the spiritual realm,<sup>16</sup> its proponents err on the polar-opposite side making it “an expanded middle” in which their focus is Satan and demons and not God and the gospel.<sup>17</sup> As such, churches within the movement teach and propagate a mutated form of evangelical animism. What's more, the groups relegate the gospel to a lesser issue or, at worse, present a distorted gospel, as the next dilemma notes.

**4. A troublesome soteriology** – Neo-Pentecostalism's emphasis on the accentuated prosperity theology message and its fusion with the alleviation of demonic-induced misery in reality leads to another gospel (cf. Gal 1.6-9). While I recognize that to some this may sound judgmental and harsh, this section offers a justification for my readers' critical reflection.

Without a doubt, Neo-Pentecostal pastors and their literature tirelessly speak of faith. They sometimes refer to “trusting in Jesus as your Savior.” However, when dealing with how to acquire eternal salvation (i.e., eternal life,

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<sup>16</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, Jan. 1982, 43. Hiebert pointed out to western missionaries their tendency to omit the spiritual realm when taking the gospel message to their target people. He exhorted them to take seriously their own understanding of this neglected second dimension of the unseen world if they aim to articulate the claims of Christ in such a way that answers the questions and daily concerns of populations who understand spirits as playing as an integral part of their everyday affairs.

<sup>17</sup> Scott A. Moreau, “Syncretism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Scott A. Moreau, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 363.



justification of sin, coming into the kingdom), explanations on the ground are ambiguous at best but often redefined by the fusion of the prosperity-theology message with the specialized spiritual-warfare strategies.

What a person must accomplish to receive alleviation from evil, individual progress and/or protection in this life determines Neo-Pentecostal soteriology. As a result, faith in the minds of adherents practically equates to sacrifice, which implies human effort, a system of prescribed rituals and the giving of tithes and offerings. In this manner, Neo-Pentecostalism presents the characteristic of a cult in that the discourse replaces the New Testament teaching of how one acquires salvation through repentance in the Lord Jesus and faith in His merits alone.

Personal conversations with an untold number of Neo-Pentecostals in the Brazilian context confirm the above appraisal. When queried about their basis for their salvation, sympathizers almost never mention the name of Jesus. This soteriological quandary also raises two pertinent questions. How can one be saved without Jesus? How can a church be evangelical if it fails to faithfully preach the message of Jesus to its hearers and explain how to receive the gospel which God offers and reveals in His Word?

## **Applications and Assessments for the Missionary Task**

Missionaries and national pastors alike must make gospel-based judgments as to who belongs to the evangelical mission force, who belongs to the mission field and who are enemies to the Christian mission advance. The Great Commission cause does not permit neutrality.

Assessments should start with evaluating churches and denominations in their respective cultural contexts. In this realm, gospel-committed believers would benefit to learn from their historic Protestant forebears who often spoke of the biblical marks of the true church.<sup>18</sup> Among the New Testament

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<sup>18</sup> Certain Protestant confessions of faith and clarifying documents (e.g., church manuals) highlight the biblical marks as identified in this section. Certain ones also include church

signs, two stand out as prominent from which the others derive. These marks center on the faithful preaching of the Word, including the correct articulation of the gospel of Christ and its implications for being a disciple,<sup>19</sup> and the correct administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>20</sup>

To illustrate the applicability of the biblical marks of a church, John Calvin instructed that “we need real discernment” to “not be misled by the name ‘Church.’”<sup>21</sup> If a band of professed believers makes this claim, he insisted that the group “must be put to the test” to ensure the faithful preaching of the Word of God and celebration of the ordinances, according to the institution of Christ.<sup>22</sup> If it fails to show these two New Testament signs, Calvin warned that “we must avoid such a sham.”<sup>23</sup>

In light of the previous section, Neo-Pentecostalism results in one of two dismal situations regarding the two primary marks of a true church and, consequently, the missionary task. As Neo-Pentecostal teachings and practices gain a foothold in the pulpit and in the hearts of its hearers, either the group has fallen into the category of a false church or is moving in that tenuous

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discipline as the third mark. Whether two, three or more marks, these articulations demonstrate a common way of thinking that arose among Protestants to discern true churches from false churches (which adulterate the message of Christ and stand against the cross (Gal 1.9; Phil 3.18). See: “The Belgic Confession” [1561], §29; “The Second Helvetic Confession” [1566], §17; “The ‘Orthodox Creed’ [of General Baptists of the Midlands, 1678]”, §30; Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church* [1697] (Pensacola: Chapel Library, 2018), p. 4; R. C. Sproul, *What is the Church* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> International Mission Board, *Foundations*, 47-58.

<sup>20</sup> As a complement, see the definition of a local church and “the twelve characteristics of a healthy church,” as affirmed by the International Mission Board’s staff and missionary personnel. *Ibid.*, 59-64.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Tony Lane; Hilary Osborne, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1986), book 4, chap. 1, §11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

direction.<sup>24</sup> The first scenario requires denouncing the congregation and protecting believers and non-believers alike from its malignant teachings.<sup>25</sup> The second situation necessitates biblical instruction and warning to leaders and congregants alike so they can make course corrections before it is too late.<sup>26</sup> The biblical duty of admonishing especially pertains to an association of churches in which the memberships care about the well-being of others and hold to a common confession, which, in turn, permits their continued and responsible cooperation.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the biblical record orientates believers to distinguish the deceived from the deceivers. This apostolic posture helps the pastor and fellow church members to extend compassion and practice patient evangelism to the victims while denouncing false teachers who mislead their subjects and confound the gospel of Christ (Mat 7.15; 9.36; 2 Cor 5.14-20).

In conclusion, evangelism, discipleship, healthy church formation and leadership development (four of the six components of the missionary task) require a biblical understanding of the gospel and the church and the deliberate preservation of both. Sadly, Neo-Pentecostalism, along with its animistic

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<sup>24</sup> For an excellent explanation on the purity spectrum that delineates true churches from false churches, see chapter 45 of: Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 1072ff.

<sup>25</sup> Seventeenth-century Baptists agreed with their Protestant pedobaptist counterparts that no church was perfect. They affirmed: “The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error”. However, they also understood there was a line in which a church becomes an enemy to the cause of Christ and association with that group would be impossible. “Some [churches] have degenerated so much that they have ceased to be churches of Christ and have become synagogues of Satan.” *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith: in Modern English*, Stan Reeves, ed. (Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2017), chap. 26, §3.

<sup>26</sup> The late IMB missionary Randy Arnett provided an exemplary attempt to help Baptist churches in Sub-Saharan African contexts comprehend the subtleties of Neo-Pentecostalism and respond appropriately. Randy Arnett, *Pentecostalization: The Evolution of Baptists in Africa* (Eldon, Missouri: self-published, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> “And altho’ there may be many errors in such a visible church, or congregations, they being not infallible, yet those errors being not fundamental, and the church in the major, or governing part, being not guilty, she is not thereby unchurched; nevertheless she ought to detect those errors, and to reform, according to God’s holy word.” “The ‘Orthodox Creed’ [of General Baptists of the Midlands, 1678]”, §30.

propensities, poses as a significant, contemporary threat to the missionary task due to the gospel infractions committed by its proponents. Recovering the historic Protestant paradigm of the biblical marks of true churches can help missionaries and their national partners make needed assessments of Christian-based groups around them and their own churches. As a result, they will be more equipped to serve those they evangelize and disciple.

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<sup>28</sup> The revised 1619 edition is entitled “The Confession of Faith of the Reformed Church”.

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