MUSICAL PRAYERS: REFLECTIONS ON THE AFRICAN ROOTS
OF PENTECOSTAL MUSIC†

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Introduction

Yes, he had heard it all his life, but it was only now that his ears were
opened to this sound which came from darkness, that could only come
from darkness, that yet bore such sure witness to the glory of the light.
And now in his moaning, and so far from any help, he heard it in
himself...

James Baldwin1

This quote from James Baldwin reminds me of my own encounters
with God in worship services at a white, middle-class Pentecostal
church. While singing, I would forget myself as I sang songs of faith,
which filled my heart with joy, making me aware that I was in a
‘conversation with God’.2 Multitudes have experienced God through
Pentecostal music, especially in the midst of suffering, seeking meaning

† This article is dedicated to James Melvin Washington, who was the friend,
mentor and professor who inspired its writing. My years at Union Theological Seminary
were greatly enriched by his presence as much as by his knowledge. Although I
knew him for only two short years, the memory of his life will never leave my heart.

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as they confronted evil. Its style of music is a primary reason why Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing religious movements in the Third World.³

A complex synthesis of religious and cultural forces, primarily African, gave birth to Pentecostal music. African rhythm and ritual united with a Wesleyan piety to create the passionate music that still influences all Pentecostal worship services. While the Wesleyan influence on early Pentecostalism is well documented and widely recognized, the movement’s African roots have been too often neglected or even rejected. This neglect is largely the result of white racist attitudes toward African spirituality and an attempt by Euro-Americans doctrinally to control and to segregate African influences.

Pentecostalism is a unique movement, shaped by the community’s dramatic and direct experience of the Holy Spirit which influences every aspect of life from biblical interpretation and worship to social action. Like the spiritual music that carries it, Pentecostalism transcends definitions that try to capture it. White scholars, however, tend to define Pentecostalism in a ‘classical’ way, wherein Western doctrinal constructs take precedence over spiritual experience. For them, Pentecostalism becomes a doctrinal belief that baptism with the Holy Spirit is a gift of power for service and that the ‘biblical evidence’ of this is glossolalia.⁴ But since Pentecostalism is fundamentally a synthesis of African and Wesleyan spirituality, defining it based on C.F. Parham’s doctrine is deficient because it ignores a fundamental influence on Pentecostal formation: African and slave spirituality within the Black holiness movement.⁵

In 1901, students at the Bethel Bible School conceived the biblical evidence creed under the influence of Parham; therefore, defining Pentecostalism by doctrinal criteria forces a post-1901 date of origin on the movement. The majority of historians claim the 1906 inter-racial