The Newer Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches: The Shape of Future Christianity in Africa?

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The New Factor in African Christianity

The role of a new and rapidly growing form of African Christianity, here called “newer Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches” (NPCs), is increasingly being recognized. This movement, which has only emerged since 1970, is fast becoming one of the most significant expressions of Christianity on the continent, especially in Africa’s cities. We can’t understand African Christianity today without also understanding this latest movement of revival and renewal. Ogbu Kalu calls it the “third response” to white cultural domination and power in the church, the former two responses being Ethiopianism and the Aladura/Zionist churches. I would argue that this newer Pentecostal and Charismatic movement is not fundamentally different from the Holy Spirit movements and the so-called “prophet-healing” and “spiritual churches” that preceded it in the African Initiated Churches (AICs), but it is a continuation of them in a very different context. The older “prophet-healing” AICs, the “classical” Pentecostals, and the newer Pentecostal churches have all responded to the existential needs of the African worldview. They have all offered a personal encounter with God through the power of the Spirit, healing from sickness, and deliverance from evil in all its manifestations, spiritual,

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1 This article is adapted from Chapter 8 of my forthcoming book, African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the Twentieth Century (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000). I have opted for “newer” rather than “new” because some of these churches have been established for almost three decades.


4 The terms “African Independent Church” and “African Indigenous Church” have been replaced more recently with “African Initiated Church” or “African Initiated Church,” all using the now familiar acronym AIC.
social, and structural. This is not to say that there are no tensions or differences between the “new” and the “old” AICs, which will be obvious in this article. In a study of NPCs in northeast Zimbabwe, David Maxwell points out that many Christian movements in Africa (and, in fact, all over the world) have begun as movements of youth and women. The new churches give opportunities not afforded them by patriarchal and gerontocratic religions that have lost their charismatic power. As Maxwell points out, even the older Pentecostal churches, whether AICs or founded by Western missions, “can lose their pentecostal vigour” through a process of bureaucratization and “ageing.”

The entrance and pervading influence of many different kinds of NPCs on the African Christian scene now make it even more difficult, if not impossible, to put AICs into types and categories. It is becoming increasingly difficult to define ‘Pentecostal’ precisely, and if we persist with narrow perceptions of the term, we will escape reality. In the West, a limited, rather stereotyped and dogmatic understanding of “Pentecostal” fails to recognize the great variety of different Pentecostal movements in most of the rest of the world, many of which arose quite independently of Western Pentecostalism and even of Azusa Street. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movement is better understood as a movement concerned primarily with the experience of the working of the Holy Spirit and the practice of spiritual gifts. In this sense, in Africa the term would include the majority of older AICs, those classical Pentecostals originating in Western Pentecostal missions, and those newer independent churches, “fellowships,” and “ministries” in Africa that are the focus of this article. It is in this sense that we refer to these various movements as “newer Pentecostals” and, of course, the term “Pentecostal” would also apply to a great number of other, older kinds of AICs that emphasize the Holy Spirit in the church. The classical or denominational Pentecostals (such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of God) are also a very active and growing phenomenon throughout Africa and undoubtedly played a significant role in the emergence of some of these newer groups. But as these were founded by missionaries mostly from Britain and North America—although with more African involvement in leadership and financial independence than was the case in most of the older missionary-founded churches—these classical Pentecostals cannot be regarded primarily as African initiated movements, even though most of their proliferation was due to the untiring efforts of African preachers.