

Pentecostalism's dark side: Troublesome teachings and practices

by [Roger E. Olson](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

I was raised in a tiny Pentecostal denomination, the Open Bible Standard Churches, founded in part by disillusioned followers of 1930s revivalist Aimee Semple McPherson. My parents were Open Bible pastors, many of my uncles and aunts were missionaries, and one uncle served as the denomination's president.

During my late teens and early 20s I was the quintessential Pentecostal preacher-boy. I first spoke in tongues at age 14, raised my hands in exuberant worship at revivals and camp meetings, witnessed to my friends at school and tried to convince Christian friends that they needed the "sign gift" of speaking in tongues to be fully Spirit-filled.

But in my high school years I began to be bothered by some Pentecostal teachings and practices. Eventually my doubts and questions led to a difficult departure from the spiritual movement of my youth; I became a Baptist immediately after graduating from a Baptist seminary at age 26. I recall breathing a great sigh of relief when I finally exited the Full Gospel movement, as we liked to call Pentecostalism. And yet, my heart was heavy because it meant leaving my spiritual home. And I knew my loved ones were all praying for me to recover my spiritual fervor.

Over the years I've met many other men and women who grew up in the thick of North American Pentecostalism and left it under similar circumstances and for similar reasons. Although the movement has matured since I turned in my Pentecostal credentials, it has a ways to go before it becomes a fully healthy and health-giving part of the Christian community.

I say this without rancor or bitterness, and I do not intend any harm to Pentecostal churches or individuals. The movement is still relatively young as religious movements go; I have confidence it will continue to mature. Some of my dearest friends are Pentecostals; I admire them for their passion and self-denial in the face of subtle persecution. In many places being Pentecostal is still wrongly considered

tantamount to being a “hillbilly Holy Roller.” People who think that way should take a look at the parking lots of many suburban Assemblies of God churches.

In this centennial year of American Pentecostalism’s founding, however, I feel compelled to register some concerns about its enduring immaturity as a movement. Some non-Pentecostal religious scholars, such as Harvey Cox (*Fire from Heaven*) and Philip Jenkins (*The Next Christendom*), have succumbed to “Pentecostal chic”—a kind of romantic view of Pentecostalism as a much-needed spiritual movement of the poor and oppressed that fills the Western world’s “ecstasy deficit.” Missing in some of these accounts is an awareness of the movement’s dark side.

Endemic to Pentecostalism is a profoundly anti-intellectual ethos. It is manifested in a deep suspicion of scholars and educators and especially biblical scholars and theologians. Yes, there are some Pentecostal scholars who are respected outside the movement: Russell Spittler served as a dean at Fuller Theological Seminary for years; Gordon Fee taught New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver and produced highly regarded volumes in biblical studies; Amos Yong holds a Ph.D. from Boston University and teaches in the doctoral program at Regent University Graduate School of Divinity. Yet too many Pentecostal leaders hold even their own scholars at arms length and view them with suspicion. Merely being a member of the Society for Pentecostal Studies often brings a Pentecostal scholar’s commitment to the movement into question.

This is without doubt the main reason I drifted away from the movement and eventually broke from it. I was not satisfied with the pat answers I was given by my mentors and teachers to questions I had about Pentecostal doctrines and practices.

For example: Billy Graham was and is a great hero to most Pentecostals, but he says he has never spoken in tongues. Is he not Spirit-filled? My questions on this issue were deftly turned aside, and subtle aspersions were cast on my spirituality merely for asking such questions. In the end, I was told that Graham is fully Spirit-filled even if he has never spoken in tongues. He’s the one exception. But were I to take up a career teaching theology in a Pentecostal college (I was told), I couldn’t teach that there might be exceptions to that distinctive doctrine. The cognitive dissonance wrought by this and other answers boggled my mind.

Not all Pentecostals are anti-intellectual or revel in incoherence. But a deep antipathy to critical rationality applied to theology is a hallmark of the movement.

Too often spiritual abuse in the form of shame is directed at those, especially young people, who dare to question the teachings of highly placed Pentecostal ministers and evangelists.

I was one of the first Open Bible members to attend seminary and, like most Pentecostals who did that, I left the movement. I felt pushed out for wasting my time on intellectual pursuits rather than becoming a missionary or evangelist. Today evangelical seminaries are full of Pentecostal youths. Many of them still find doors closed when they return to their home denominations for ordination or for leadership positions in churches. Pentecostal scholars too often have to work outside Pentecostal institutions and live in the shadows and on the margins of the movement.

Shaking off this anti-intellectual attitude won't be easy for the movement; it is part of Pentecostalism's DNA. A good beginning would be to draw those Pentecostal scholars who work on the margins into the movement's centers of power and leadership. Honest and open dialogue between Pentecostal leaders and the movement's own intellectuals—with promises there will be no negative consequences—could help shake off some of the mutual suspicion and fear that haunts their relationships. And Pentecostal leaders need to pledge never again to subject eager, faithful and intellectually inclined young people to shame merely for asking tough questions about Pentecostal distinctives.

Another part of Pentecostalism's dark side is rampant sexual and financial scandals. From early Pentecostal leader Charles Parham to Aimee Semple McPherson to Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, the movement has been wracked by charges of misconduct, many of which have been substantiated by investigators.

In recent days a new scandal has been brewing over the conduct of Atlanta-based megachurch pastor Earl Paulk. Allegedly the Pentecostal bishop-pastor of the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit engaged in sex with several parishioners over a period of years. One accuser claims that he told her sex with him was necessary to revitalize his ministry and that he also lured her to engage in sex with a visiting pastor. Another woman brought a lawsuit claiming Paulk had sex with her when she was a teenager. Although Paulk has denied such charges and so far no verdicts have been delivered, the number and weight of the accusations add to the impression that not only Paulk but Pentecostalism has a problem with scandals.

Other Christian movements have suffered similar scandals, but Pentecostalism seems particularly rife with them. Insiders know some of the reasons. Deeply embedded within the Pentecostal movement's ethos is a cult of personality; charismatic leaders are put on pedestals above accountability and are often virtually worshiped by many of their followers.

Too few courses in basic ethics are required in Pentecostal colleges (perhaps because many Pentecostals, especially older ones, assume that being Spirit-filled guarantees right behavior), and too many pastors handle the churches' money and travel alone without having to account for their whereabouts or activities. It's the movement's own dirty little secret: sexual promiscuity and financial misconduct are rampant within its ranks, and little is done about this unless a scandal becomes public.

Several Pentecostal denominations have instituted policies to handle cases of pastoral moral turpitude and financial misconduct, but they have found those policies hard to enforce. At least one Pentecostal denomination has a policy that forbids investigation of charges that are more than five years old. One can only wonder why the leaders decided on that limit.

There is no body that regulates independent churches and ministers, but Pentecostal leaders could work harder to expose their colleagues who transgress and to warn their flocks (and others) against them. Far too much nervousness about powerful television and radio preachers infects well-intentioned and ethically sensitive Pentecostal leaders. It's time for the movement to own up to its sometimes sleazy history and go the extra mile in cleaning house in the cases of ministers and evangelists who are less than honest and chaste. It should not be left to publications like *Christianity Today* and *Charisma* to reveal scandals involving Pentecostal ministers, evangelists and denominational executives.

Still another aspect of Pentecostalism's dark side is its tendency to condone dishonesty on the part of influential and popular evangelists and ministers. One day I was browsing through the books at a publishers' overstock sale and came across the autobiography of a Pentecostal evangelist who held tent revival meetings in the small Midwestern city where I grew up. I remembered his rather farfetched sermon illustrations of miraculous occurrences in his life and ministry. The book contained a chapter on a miracle that supposedly happened during his revival in our town.

When I read his account of the incident I was shocked but not surprised; I had encountered enough similar evangelistic stretchings of truth to know they are rampant in revivalist and perhaps especially in Pentecostal circles. According to the evangelist, a high wind caused by a tornado reduced buildings around his revival tent to rubble but left his tent undamaged. He even claimed that local television crews filmed the aftermath of the storm and his intact tent.

What I vividly recall is a windstorm that sent men from our church to the tent in the middle of the night; they held it down as the winds whipped its sides. But no tornado touched down near it and no buildings around it were destroyed. I would have remembered if they had been. That evangelist is probably still traveling around telling his tall tales and whipping up fervor and offerings. Denominational leaders to whom he is accountable need to challenge his exaggerations and insist on honesty. To the best of my knowledge they have not done so.

Playing fast and loose with truth is rampant in Pentecostal circles, and is excused and even joked about as “speaking evangelistically.” Numbers are inflated and stories of healings exaggerated if not invented. To be sure, many Pentecostal ministers are honest and truthful. One thinks of noted Full Gospel pastor, speaker and writer Jack Hayford, who was labeled “The Pentecostal Gold Standard” by *Christianity Today*. Would that all Pentecostal ministers were as squeaky clean and honest as Hayford. The movement’s leaders could do more to ensure that.

As a former insider, I know that Pentecostal leaders reading this article are defensively bristling at what they know is true about their movement. Telling it publicly either inside the movement or to outsiders is considered traitorous behavior. As one denominational leader told me, “If you see a problem among the leaders you should pray to God about it and keep it to yourself; you have no business challenging them or making it public.” This is a common attitude among Pentecostals.

A favorite Pentecostal saying is “Touch not God’s anointed” (a paraphrase of Psalm 105:15). The saying is meant to forbid criticism of the movement’s leaders. When I was a boy the worst label my parents and Pentecostal relatives could put on a person within the movement was “critical” or “negative.” Too often Full Gospel leaders insist on total, abject loyalty and uncritical acceptance of whatever they say. Too many Pentecostal organizations lack any structure for safe criticism of dysfunctional behavior, aberrant teaching or abusive practices on the part of leaders

and powerful ministers.

Pentecostal leaders need to take the next step in the movement's maturation process and institute safe means of criticism and correction within their organizations. They need to become more self-critical and less defensive of leaders' positions and pronouncements. A hallmark of spiritual abuse is treating the person who dares to point out a problem as the problem. Such behavior is widespread in Pentecostal circles. Full Gospel leaders can prove that their movement is coming of age in its second century by establishing means by which their denominations and organizations can nurture healthy self-examination, allowing constructive criticism with impunity even by younger members.

One example of this happening is the "Memphis Miracle." Some Pentecostal leaders knew that racism plagued their movement and determined to do something about it. They did little while the older guard was still alive, but once the senior leaders who practiced racism (e.g., by excluding black denominations from the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America) died or went into retirement they exposed the problem and proposed a radical solution: disband the PFNA and ask African-American Pentecostal leaders to start a new umbrella association for Pentecostal cooperation and, if they wanted to, to invite white Pentecostals into it. That is what happened. The new group founded in Memphis in 1994, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of North America, includes approximately 40 denominations and networks of churches. It was started by black Pentecostals, who graciously invited their white brothers and sisters into it. This is a model of the kind of self-criticism that should characterize a maturing Pentecostal movement to a greater extent.

In spite of exposing the continuing dark side of the movement born on Azusa Street a century ago, I love Pentecostalism. They say you can take the boy out of Pentecostalism but you can't take Pentecostalism out of the boy. Most of the formerly Full Gospel men and women I know still remember fondly the excitement and passion of the movement. Some of us listen to Pentecostal music on CDs and occasionally raise our hands or clap to its ecstatic words and beat. But I long to see the movement that taught me to love Jesus and the Bible mature further in the ways I've outlined here. It is happening, but too slowly.