

*Pentecostal Currents in American Protestantism*, edited by Edith Blumhofer, Russell Spittler and Grant Wacker

reviewed by [Jeffrey Gros](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

The 20th century may be recorded as the ecumenical century, but it certainly will be noted as the century of the Pentecostal renewal, both as a new church phenomenon and as a charismatic impulse within Catholicism and classical Protestantism. Like the friars of the 13th century in Europe and the Baptists and Methodists of 19th-century America, Pentecostals have triggered a realignment of the Christian community. This volume is an important contribution to the study of that development.

A religious movement or a church is as much formed by its environment as it is by any rational theology. The overall purpose of this volume is to focus on two moments in this interplay: the turn-of-the-century emergence of the classical Pentecostal churches within the evangelical and holiness subculture, and the emergence of the charismatic renewal within the traditional Protestant churches in the middle of the century. The editors' thesis is that "classical Pentecostalism . . . was primarily a pietistic and only secondarily a theological protest," and that "despite their sharp contrasts in style . . . the Pentecostal and charismatic movements also exhibit important continuities."

The book begins with a theological, almost homiletic discourse on "Corinthian/Gnostic" spirituality by veteran scholar and ecumenist Russell Spittler. He provides ample Pauline admonition for all Christian communities and movements, Pentecostals among them. The volume ends with a masterful overview of the scholarship on Pentecostal beginnings. This particular contribution is important because it summarizes the debates among scholars in the field as to the origins, analyses and influences of Pentecostalism and of charismatic strands of faith.

The first major section of the volume includes essays on the rise of the Pentecostal movement and its institutionalization in churches and theologies. Grant Wacker analyzes the sibling rivalry within the "radical evangelical" subculture, as he calls it, from which Pentecostalism emerged and in which the most direct tensions were felt. It is within these holiness, Baptist and other marginal Christian communities that the

fire of the revival took off, and that's where it engendered the most tension and realignment. Other essays in this section provide case studies of the Pentecostal impact on the Protestant missionary movement in China, social variables and community response, and the shift from an early theological literature that was drawn to orthodoxy to a more narrowly evangelical stance in the second generation. These essays, though case studies, disclose directions of much wider implications.

The second major part includes essays related to the midcentury charismatic movement in traditional Protestant denominations. Case studies explore such topics as the charismatic women's movement, Women's Aglow Fellowship; charismatic healer Kathryn Kuhlman's relationship with Pittsburgh's First Presbyterian Church; and the cultural commonalities among Southern Baptists and charismatics. All of these analyses point to the ambivalence in American religion about spirit-filled Christianity, and the institutional alignment that it has caused. The variety of the institutional responses, from accommodation to rejection, demonstrate the way in which the charismatic experience has raised questions not only of theology but also of church order.

These studies leave the reader with a thirst for similar readings of the situations in other parts of the world or with larger sections of the Christian community, such as Catholicism and Orthodoxy. However, the methodologies brought to bear here provide a basis both for healing painful memories and for building bridges to once isolated groups which now loom large as members of the Christian family.