
A Pentecostal Pneumatology for Discipleship

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Introduction

In my own life I have observed that for many Christians in Pentecostal and evangelical traditions, the emphasis in discipleship is on reading the Bible and praying every day. This is foundational for Christian growth, but discipleship clearly includes more than this. While discipleship is rightfully defined primarily in christological terms as following Christ, from a Pentecostal perspective, discipleship should also include being shaped by and engaging in the work of the Holy Spirit. To this end, this article draws on themes from pneumatology to inform the aims and practices of discipleship. While recognizing that this does not exhaust the aims of discipleship and likewise does not present a full Pentecostal theology of discipleship, a focus on pneumatology demonstrates that discipleship should include an emphasis on sanctification, witnessing, and transforming experiences of the Holy Spirit.

Common understandings of discipleship

After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his remaining disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), or more simply to “disciple” people (in Greek, *mathēteusate*, is a verb in this verse).¹ One might describe this action as discipleship. While the primary connotations of the Greek verb *mathēteuō* (disciple) are of a pupil being instructed,² Christians usually use the word “discipleship” to describe the boarder process of being formed as a Christian into a mature follower of Christ. Michael Wilkins, for example, remarks, “when we speak of Christian discipleship and discipling we are speaking of what it means to grow as a Christian in every area of life” which implies “the process of becoming like Jesus Christ.”³ Similarly, Dallas Willard observes that for Jesus’ first followers, discipleship “meant to go with him, in an attitude of observation, study, obedience, and imitation.” Therefore, since Christians today cannot be *with* Jesus in the same way his first disciples were, Willard proposes, “the disciple is one who, intent

1. In the Greek text, “disciple” is also a verb in Matt 27:57 and Acts 14:21 and a participle in Matt 13:52.

2. Walter Bauer and William F. Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609.

3. Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 41.

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upon becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in his ‘faith and practice,’ systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end. By these decisions and actions, even today, one enrolls in Christ’s training, becomes his pupil or disciple.”⁴ Also expressing this focus on Christ from within the Lutheran tradition, Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes the “cost of discipleship” through “adherence to Christ,” obedience, and self-denial.⁵

A Pentecostal turn to the Spirit

From a Pentecostal perspective, becoming like Christ and, therefore, discipleship, must include becoming a person of the Spirit, like Jesus was. In other words, from a Pentecostal perspective, pneumatology must inform the aims and practices of disciple-

4. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 6-7.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995 edition), 59.

ship. The Pentecostal emphasis on pneumatology does not mean abandoning Christ or Christology in one's theology of discipleship. While often known for its emphasis on the Spirit, Pentecostal theology and worship also contain a christological focus, with a "full gospel" emphasis on *Jesus* as saviour, healer, sanctifier, baptizer (in the Spirit), and coming king.⁶ In addition, in ecumenical dialogue, Pentecostals also emphasize that discipleship is about "following Jesus."⁷

At the same time, an emphasis on experiencing the person and work of the Spirit is core to the Pentecostal movement.⁸ Accordingly, Pentecostals naturally emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in discipleship. Indeed, this is also a way that Christians become more like Jesus. After all, Jesus is the Christ (Greek, *christos*) because he has the anointing (Greek, *chrisma*) of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus himself claimed, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19).

Jesus Christ was anointed with the Spirit at his baptism (Mark 1). This fulfills Isaiah's prophecy that the "Spirit of the Lord will rest on him" (Isa 11:2). From that point on, the Spirit was consistently present in Jesus' life for it was regarding his baptism that John the Baptist said the Spirit would "come down and remain" on Jesus (John 1:33). As a result, Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1), performed miracles "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14), and is said to have received the Spirit "without limit" (John 3:34). The presence of the Spirit was foundational to the life and work of Christ, and therefore discipleship should also include being shaped by and engaging in the work of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Moreover, the Spirit of Christ is the one who unites us with the one that disciples follow: Jesus. As Jackie Johns observes, "the Spirit would be for the church what Jesus would be if bodily present . . . Through him Jesus was experienced in the life of the church and the later Christian" and because of this, Christians today are, in some sense, "no further removed from the ministry of Jesus than the first generation of believers."¹⁰

In turning to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in discipleship, I am not aiming to develop or propose a uniquely Pentecostal approach to discipleship. First, giving attention to the Spirit in

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discipleship is not unique to contemporary Pentecostalism. In ecumenical dialogue, Pentecostals and Catholics have equally observed that "the patristic writers of the pre-Nicene period reflected both Pauline and Lucan priorities in their description of the Holy Spirit's empowering work in discipleship and formation."¹¹ Second, I recognize that the aim in discipleship is not to make Pentecostal disciples or Lutheran disciples, but disciples of Christ. As Mark Cartledge has cautioned, one must not allow discipleship and even pneumatology to become subordinate to one tradition "such that diversity of expression is minimized for the sake of conformity to a particular style or approach to church life."¹² Instead, discipleship "must essentially become ecumenical."¹³ At the same time, I do wish to acknowledge and draw on the strengths of the Pentecostal tradition. And there is no doubt that Pentecostal churches that are thriving do so "primarily because of their emphases on belief, experience, conviction and commitment to what the Spirit of God is doing in the world."¹⁴

The Holy Spirit and sanctification

The heart of my argument here is that pneumatology should shape our understanding of discipleship. Given that developing a full-fledged pneumatology is beyond the scope of this article,

6. Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel* (Systematic Pentecostal and Charismatic Theology, 1; London: T & T Clark, 2017), 6–8.

7. Karen R. J. Murphy, *Pentecostals and Roman Catholics on Becoming a Christian: Spirit-Baptism, Faith, Conversion, Experience, and Discipleship in Ecumenical Perspective* (Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, 28; Leiden: Brill, 2018), 272–273.

8. Allan Heaton Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 6.

9. Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., *Sculptor Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019).

10. Jackie Johns, "Christian Formation and Discipleship," unpublished paper, 11, quoted in Murphy, *Pentecostals and Roman Catholics on Becoming a Christian*, 274.

11. "On Becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings with Some Contemporary Reflections," the *Report of the Fifth Phase of the Catholic-Pentecostal International Dialogue* (1998–2006), 120. Available online at <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/pentecostali/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/2006-divenire-cristiano--prospettive-bibliche-e-patristiche/testo-del-documento-in-inglese.html>.

12. Mark J. Cartledge, *The Mediation of the Spirit: Interventions in Practical Theology* (Pentecostal Manifestos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 9.

13. Wolfgang Vondey, "Pentecostal Identity and Christian Discipleship," *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research* 6 (1999): 6. Available online at <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj6/vondey.pdf>.

14. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "The Promise Is for You and Your Children: Pentecostal Spirituality, Mission and Discipleship in Africa," in *Mission Spirituality and Authentic Discipleship*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Kenneth R. Ross (Oxford: Regnum Studies in Mission, 2013), 26.

I will focus on two pneumatological themes that Pentecostals have consistently emphasized in discussions regarding discipleship, namely sanctification and empowerment.¹⁵ Wolfgang Vondey, for example, remarks, “Without sanctification there is no true discipleship.”¹⁶ Through sanctification, the Spirit leads disciples away from sin into expressing love. The Spirit consistently inspired the Hebrew prophets to call the Israelites out of sin toward obedience to the Lord (e.g., 2 Chron 24:20). And Ezekiel, specifically, looked ahead to a day when God would put his Spirit in them, enabling them to follow his decrees and laws (Ezek 36:25-27). Today, the Spirit of God makes believers more like Christ as God transforms them into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). The Spirit sets people free from sin and creates virtues in believers (the fruits of the Spirit, Gal 5); the Spirit empowers Jesus’ followers to forgive others and to love their neighbors as “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5).

Discipleship must teach believers to value and engage in the path of sanctification. Some might wonder if there is anything for the disciple to contribute to their sanctification, since sanctification is the work of the Spirit. After all, a believer can not force the work of the Spirit in sanctification any more than they can control any other work of the Spirit. At the same time, Lutheran theologian Cheryl Peterson observes that while the Spirit’s work in *justification* is indeed “an unconditional gift,” the Spirit’s work in *sanctification* involves human cooperation.¹⁷ The apostle Paul explains, disciples must actively choose to “walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16) or “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25) as they either live “according to the sinful nature” or “in accordance with the Spirit” (Rom 8:5, 12-14).

One practical implication of the Spirit’s work in sanctification is that disciples should be formed within the church, in fellowship with other believers. In other words, disciples cannot be disciplined alone, solely through an individual relationship with God and perhaps their favorite preacher on YouTube (this may be more of an issue for Pentecostals than Lutherans). When people become believers, they are “all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body” (1 Cor 12:13) who are then to engage together in “the fellowship of the Spirit” (2 Cor 13:14). Furthermore, Christians receive spiritual gifts, at least in part, “for the strengthening of the church” (1 Cor 14:26), and so they must exercise those in fellowship with other Christians. At times, difficult relationships with other Christians can cause pain, but disciples must still “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Disciples should learn to value and protect the church, because the church continues to be a people who are “being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:22). As a result, Paul refers to the church (that

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is, the people, not buildings) as “God’s temple,” and he warns believers that “if anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him” (1 Cor 3:17). Clearly, the Spirit leads disciples to value their participation in the church.

A second practical implication of the Spirit’s work in sanctification is that discipleship should cultivate a concern for justice and caring for the oppressed. The Hebrew prophets expected that “the Spirit of the Lord” would “rest” on the Messiah, that the Messiah would act with righteousness and justice as he gave “decisions for the poor of the earth” (Isa 11:1-4), and that he would “comfort all who mourn” (Isa 61:1-2). As the fulfillment of these prophecies, Jesus was anointed with the Spirit to minister “to the poor” and “to release the oppressed” (Luke 4:18). As a result, Jesus is known for reaching out to the Samaritans (a group that was despised by Jewish people in the first century), the poor, those who the religious people condemned as “sinners,” and others who were oppressed. Following the Spirit-inspired example of Christ, when the first Christians were “filled with the Holy Spirit, . . . God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:31, 33-34). Likewise, disciples today can “keep in step with the Spirit” by advocating for and ministering to oppressed people in our own contexts, whether they are racially oppressed, physically oppressed, or even religiously oppressed.

Spirit-empowerment

The most consistent theme of Pentecostal pneumatology and discipleship is that the Spirit empowers believers for witness. The most prominent biblical verse in Pentecostal pneumatology is likely Acts 1:8: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses.” Just as Jesus ministered “filled with the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14, cf. Acts 10:38) as he healed people and drove out demons, believers today can continue the ministry of Jesus in the power of the Spirit of Jesus.¹⁸

15. Murphy, *Pentecostals and Roman Catholics on Becoming a Christian*, 284.

16. Vondey, “Pentecostal Identity and Christian Discipleship,” 5.

17. Cheryl M. Peterson, *The Holy Spirit in the Christian Life: The Spirit’s Work for, in and through Us* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 62.

18. Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke’s Charismatic Theology* (JPTSup, 16; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

Given this empowering work of the Spirit, discipleship should form believers to witness to others with both their words and their actions. Like the Hebrew prophets who “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21), Jesus said that he received the Spirit “to preach” and “to proclaim” good news (Luke 4:18). Likewise, the first Christians were “filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31). And so, disciples today should ask God to empower them by the Spirit and engage in sharing the good news about Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. Moreover, the Spirit can give believers the boldness to proclaim the gospel in the face of persecution, even to the point of martyrdom, as was the case with Stephen (Acts 7:54-60).¹⁹

The empowering work of the Spirit also enables disciples to proclaim the gospel through their actions, including the use of spiritual gifts. This, of course, includes less dramatic gifts such as encouraging and giving (Rom 12:6-8), but it also includes those that might seem more extraordinary, such as healing, miracles, or speaking in tongues (1 Cor 12:8-10). J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu remarks, “that the power of Christ is effective to heal and deliver is one of the greatest lessons that Pentecostal Christianity teaches the church of Christ today in its attempt at continuing his mission and discipleship in the world.”²⁰ Empowered by the Spirit, Jesus drove “out demons by the Spirit of God” (Matt 12:28) and did miracles from raising the dead to multiplying food. When Jesus told his disciples that they would be “clothed with power from on high” when they received the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49), this also included empowerment to do miracles like Jesus. As a result, after Pentecost, “everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles” (Acts 2:43). Miraculous gifts of the Spirit can serve as a form of witness as they serve as “signs” pointing people to the truth of the gospel message (Rom 15:19). Therefore, in the first century, when “the apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people . . . , more and more men and women believed in the Lord” (Acts 5:12, 14).

The gifts of the Spirit are “eschatological, proleptic, signs of a kingdom of joy where sorrow, death and sin are put down and banished.”²¹ As a result of this, a disciple may be tempted to become triumphalistic, expecting complete success and victory in this life. However, the eschatological nature of the believer’s present experience of the Spirit should enable disciples to recognize that “the powers of the age to come are already in some measure present in signs and wonders—but only a measure.”²² In other words, one needs to hold in tension the reality that while Spirit has been “poured out” (Titus 3:6; Rom 5:5), Christians only “have

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the first fruits of the Spirit” now (Rom 8:23). These are the first fruits of the beginning of a full harvest (i.e., the Spirit) that is yet to come, just as the Spirit is the seal and deposit that guarantees what is yet to come (see 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-14, 4:30). Recognizing this eschatological nature of the work of the Spirit can help disciples acknowledge, for example, that their prayers will not always result in immediate healing, as they still anticipate their eventual full healing or “redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23) by means of the Spirit at the resurrection.

Experiencing the Holy Spirit

In this discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit, it has been implicit (and at times explicit) that the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of disciples can not just be assumed—again, disciples need to actively choose to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). One should not assume that because one is a Christian the Holy Spirit will automatically work sanctification and empowerment in the life of a disciple. Moreover, the eschatological nature of the work of the Spirit points to the reality that disciples should expect to *experience* the Spirit in their lives in a changing and increasing way. The first Christians did not just have the Spirit idly dwelling within them. Rather, they experienced the dynamic work and presence of the Spirit. This experience of the Spirit is integral to the formation of a disciple of Christ. As Asamoah-Gyadu contends, “the basis for discipleship is life in the Spirit of God not in the knowledge of God. In concrete terms, this calls for people born of the Spirit and not born out of educational paradigms.”²³ This recognition of the importance of experiencing the Holy Spirit for discipleship is not unique to Pentecostalism. Catholics agree that a “vital and personal relationship with the living God” is foundational to discipleship.²⁴ And from within the

19. Martin W. Mittelstadt, *The Spirit and Suffering in Luke-Acts: Implications for a Pentecostal Pneumatology*, (JPTSUP 26; London: T&T Clark International, 2004).

20. Asamoah-Gyadu, “The Promise Is for You and Your Children,” 19.

21. Stephen J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (JPTSUP, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 177.

22. Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (JPTSUP, 21; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 110.

23. Asamoah-Gyadu, “The Promise Is for You and Your Children,” 19.

24. “On Becoming a Christian,” 137.

Lutheran tradition, Cheryl Peterson calls her readers to “revival,” by which she means a bringing-back-to-life—that is, a call to experience the Holy Spirit as “the one who awakens, makes alive, and renews us.”²⁵

There are many ways that disciples can experience and be formed by the Holy Spirit. This might happen, for example, as the Spirit speaks to them. While the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed reminds believers that the Holy Spirit “spoke through the prophets,” Pentecostals emphasize that “the Spirit is a personal, immediate, dynamic and perfect guide. He speaks and so must be listened to. This demands developing a personal relationship with him, learning to recognize and respond to his guidance.”²⁶ And, of course, Pentecostals believe that disciples may experience the Spirit if they pray in tongues (1 Cor 14:14). Pentecostals sometimes refer to tongues as a sacramental sign, in as much as tongues are an audible sign of the empowering presence of God in the person of the Spirit.²⁷

One theme in pneumatology that Pentecostals regularly emphasize is the need to experience baptism in the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals regard Pentecost not only as a unique event in redemptive history; they also expect that believers today can participate in the ongoing nature of the Pentecost event as they encounter the Spirit in their own lives. They expect, then, that the event of Pentecost can be repeated, in some ways, as the Spirit continues to be poured out on “all who are far off” (Acts 2:39). Many Pentecostals regard Spirit baptism as an event that typically happens subsequent to conversion and which can be followed by “many fillings” of the Spirit.²⁸ Other Pentecostals describe Spirit baptism more broadly as encompassing the Spirit’s work in saving, sanctifying, and empowering believers for witness and, eventually, even being raised by the Spirit at the return of Christ.²⁹ Aside from their differences, both use the metaphor of being baptized in the Holy Spirit to express how believers can experience an “intensification of the divine presence” as an “increasing of the giving away of the divine Spirit.”³⁰ Therefore, Pentecostals continue to call all “Christians to a Spirit baptism as a fresh experience of power for witness with charismatic signs following.”³¹

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25. Peterson, *The Holy Spirit in the Christian Life*, 154.

26. Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 47.

27. Frank D. Macchia, “Tongues as a Sign: Towards a Sacramental Understanding of Pentecostal Experience,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15.1 (1993): 61–76.

28. For example, Anthony D. Palma, *The Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MI: Logion, 2001), 174; William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 48.

29. For example, Frank D. Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Amos Yong, *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 93, 100.

30. Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 269–270.

31. Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*, 60.

32. Cited without reference to the original source in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995 edition), 93.

33. Peterson, *The Holy Spirit in the Christian Life*, 138, 147.