On Being Pentecostal

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ................................................................. 7

**Part I – Our Beliefs** ................................................................. 11
  Chapter 1 – Our Very Present Help: God with Us. ....................... 13
  Chapter 2 – The Revelation of God: The Bible ............................ 23
  Chapter 3 – The Mighty God in Christ ................................. 35
  Chapter 4 – A Brand-New Life ........................................... 47

**Part II – Our Practices** ................................................................. 59
  Chapter 5 – The Beauty of Holiness ........................................ 61
  Chapter 6 – Then Sings My Soul: The Practice of Worship ............ 73
  Chapter 7 – Gifts of the Spirit .............................................. 85
  Chapter 8 – To the End of the Earth—The Pentecostal Mission ....... 97

**Part III – Our Stories** ................................................................. 103
  Chapter 9 – This Is Our Story: A Brief History of Pentecostalism .... 105
  Chapter 10 – As Many as the Lord Our God Shall Call ................. 117
Introduction

For some people “Pentecostal” is a new word. A century ago it was rarely part of the average North American’s vocabulary. However, its use has risen steadily, most often in reference to the fastest-growing segment of the Christian faith. Although it has become much more common in recent years, it is not a new word. Its roots go back to an ancient Jewish feast that celebrated the first fruits of the harvest. The Hebrews of antiquity were primarily an agrarian society and a successful harvest was critical to their wellbeing. They celebrated God’s blessing and provision for them with a feast, which fell on the fiftieth day after another important feast day, the Passover, hence its moniker. But for Christians, Pentecost takes on a different meaning. It marks the birthday of the church.
The Bible records the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the earliest believers on the Day of Pentecost. Per the instructions given to them by Jesus just before His ascension, the disciples—or followers of Jesus—gathered in Jerusalem to await the outpouring of the Spirit. Early on the morning of the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit fell upon 120 believers. The excitement of this experience spread throughout the crowds gathered from around the Mediterranean in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. (See Acts 2.) They were particularly intrigued by the ecstatic behavior and multiple languages spoken by those newly filled with the Spirit. When a curious crowd had assembled around the meeting place of the believers, Peter addressed the gathering to explain the experiences and actions of what would become known as the church.

These events took place shortly after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not only were the disciples attempting to understand the significance of the crucifixion and resurrection, but the broader Jewish population was also struggling to understand them. Peter associated the experiences of Pentecost with a prophecy given hundreds of years prior by the Hebrew prophet Joel. Peter reminded the crowd “this was that spoken by Joel.” This was the prophesied outpouring of the Spirit and it was for everybody. A significant portion of the crowd responded to Peter’s preaching and the church began to rapidly expand.

The Book of Acts records the experiences and teachings of this new movement. Because many of the key players of the Acts church were eyewitnesses to the life and teachings of Jesus, it follows that they would have the clearest insight into the way in which to worship Jesus. As a result the
church in Acts should function as a model to follow when attempting to build a church. However, over the centuries the institutional church lost sight of the Acts pattern. Just over a hundred years ago, a rising interest in the restoration of the Acts or apostolic church birthed the modern Pentecostal movement.

This short volume will serve as an introduction to Pentecostalism. It is divided into three parts. Part I covers four key doctrines of the movement. Part II introduces four distinctive practices. And in Part III, the authors attempt to share a brief history of the Pentecostal movement and to tell a number of stories of individual Pentecostals. Take a few moments of your time to learn what it means to be Pentecostal.
Part I

Our Beliefs
Our Very Present Help: God with Us

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever”
(Hebrews 13:9).

Eighteenth-century Christian philosopher William Paley was a leading proponent of natural theology. He is best known for his watchmaker analogy in which he compared a watch found on the side of the road to the physical world. Paley insisted that no one would doubt the watch had a maker. He then argued that the world is much more complex and therefore must have a designer. Paley understood that designer to be God. He went on to suggest that the way we gain insight into this God is by studying the world He designed. This is sometimes called natural theology.