

Prospering Souls in a Time of Want? American Pentecostals in the Great Depression

History Interest Group

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Introduction

During the height of the Great Depression, Classical Pentecostal emphases on spiritual power, victory, and the world to come came face-to-face with a physical set of realities almost too difficult to bear. While living out the eccentricities of their minority faith was difficult even in the best of times, this new calamity had the potential to push the still-young movement to its breaking point. Understanding how they interacted with the crisis of their time will be helpful, therefore, in understanding more about the shape of early Pentecostalism and its evolving and solidifying theological stances. But this is not the only benefit. Today an ever-increasing percentage of Pentecostal believers hail from economically disadvantaged parts of the world or from amongst groups occupying the lower rungs of the economic ladder of prosperity. Though each in their own way is unique, they are armed with the same focus on spiritual power, victory, and world to come as early American Pentecostals during the Great Depression. By investigating the latter, therefore, this paper hopes to provide insight into Pentecostal responses to economic crisis and desperation. Such insights may help spark a constructive conversation with contemporary Pentecostalism even as it details some of the ways Pentecostal theological response to poverty was first constructed.

This paper will help demonstrate that Pentecostals faced the challenge of the Great Depression in ways both common to all who lived through it and unique to their own faith and practice. An examination of their public rhetoric shows that while the crisis impacted their economic well-being and raised serious questions, it did not ultimately distract them from their larger spiritual aims. In this, the Pentecostals demonstrated—yet again—a version of the piety and pragmatism highlighted so thoughtfully by Grant Wacker in *Heaven Below*.¹ Here piety was king, but not without the persistent voice of pragmatism raising important questions. While ready to dedicate time and energy tackling the specifics of the developing financial impact, the bulk of their attention was nevertheless elsewhere. The Depression would neither bring them down nor consume them, for their focus was on another horizon.

To this day, the Great Depression remains the single most devastating economic crisis to envelop the United States. Though other downturns had inflicted themselves upon the country in the decades previous and a few have since, none has had the severity or infamy of the years following October 1929. From that point onward, the economic disaster widened as the years of the Hoover administration pressed on into the early 1930s. As historian David M. Kennedy writes about late 1931 and early 1932:

It was now the third winter of the Depression. In the long-blighted countryside, unmarketable crops rotted in fields and unsellable livestock died on the hoof...haggard men in shabby overcoats, collars turned up against the chill wind, newspapers plugging the holes in their shoes, lined up glumly for handouts at soup kitchens...tens of thousands of displaced workers took to the roads...those who stayed put hunkered down, took in their jobless relatives, kited the grocery bills at the corner store, patched their old clothes, darned and redarned their socks, tried to shore up some fragments of hope against the ruins of their dreams²

¹ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 10.

² David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 85-6.

Nearly every American was affected in some way. Though the crisis eventually passed, it was not before a significant amount of suffering. The effects of the "bold, persistent experimentation"³ of Roosevelt's New Deal and—arguably more helpful in alleviating the economic situation—the stimulus of the Second World War were, in the earlier months of the 1930s, still a while off. In its wake the Great Depression left a great scar upon the national psyche and, together with the coming war, presaged great changes in the size and scope of the federal government.

In the first years of the crisis, the Hoover administration was faced with an unprecedented and still unfolding disaster. Unemployment was rising, finances careened out of control, and average American citizens faced increasingly dire straits. In the first months of 1932, unemployment was around 20 percent, with the populations of some cities (Chicago and Detroit) closer to 50 percent.⁴ Americans were hurting, and some of these Americans were the Pentecostals. A sect of Christianity then only three decades old, they like others had little individual control over the economic forces wreaking havoc on their families' lives. Though their faith was strong, their collective poverty grew. As the Depression slowly but surely metastasized in the years after 1929, its impact was painfully felt amongst them.

In an effort to understand Pentecostal responses to the Great Depression, I spent time surveying the magazine *Pentecostal Evangel*. I paid specific attention to each of the issues from the stock market crash in 1929 through the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. These few years represented the worst of the Depression. I also broadly surveyed issues of the *Evangel* discussing key terms from this time through the onset of the Second World War in 1941.

³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia - May 22, 1932," The American Presidency Project, accessed February 15, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=88410>.

⁴ Kennedy, 87.

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Published weekly in this era, the official magazine of the Assemblies of God is replete with sermons, devotionals, editorials, and other material republished from elsewhere. While it is the only magazine I reviewed for this project, both its volume of material and accessibility made it a helpful starting point. Those wanting to continue this historical investigation should naturally turn to other sources as well. I am also aware of the additional problem that the *Evangel* as an official denominational magazine may be rather proscribed in its viewpoints. In its positions and perspectives one may legitimately ask whether it was a reflection of the rank and file or represented an attempt to shape its people. Even so, I believe it represents a helpful spectrum of some of the theological and rhetorical possibilities open to Pentecostals of the time.

Framing the Issue

The question of how best to understand the Depression is an academic one for us. It was a much more visceral problem for Americans of the era. How they looked at the challenge of their times both reflected their worldview and established important patterns for how they would respond. To illustrate Pentecostal's framing of the crisis, I will provide four examples to help us better comprehend how Pentecostals understood their time.

First in this list is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Great Depression as an eschatological marker. Restorationist and millenarian at its core, early Pentecostalism readily embraced the idea that the Lord would return at any moment. Eagerly awaiting His coming, they interrogated world events for hints about the *eschaton*. As a tumultuous world crisis, the Great Depression was a prime target for such analysis. In 1931, for instance, comments appeared focusing on their present situation:

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So in these days of political and industrial and religious chaos, when men's minds are perplexed and bewildered, and nations are 'in distress'...these days of Bolshevik blasphemy, and the increasing perils of tyrannical Fascism and anarchic Communism; when the shadow of the coming Superman, the 'Man of Sin,' is so plainly discernable, it is time for the people of this old storm-tossed drifting world to seek the Lord and to hear His Word! Keep your eye on God's great Time Clock of Prophecy and note the hour!⁵

In light of growing Communist and Fascist responses to a world in tumult, the *Pentecostal Evangel* made claims about the inadequacy of humanity's answers and the promise of Christ. By 1932 the increasing pitch of the Depression plainly pointed readers to the coming of the Lord. In front page article entitled "The Increasing Pressure and Its Significance," F. F. Reidenbach wrote "we are clearly conscious today of the pressure internationally, ecclesiastically, economically, and spiritually. The pressure is getting greater all the time. One day it will reach the breaking point. We read, 'For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout.'"⁶ The times, it seems, called for divine resolution. Even a year after Roosevelt took office—a man who is referred to as "sympathetic...[and who] has a vision of the situation...speaking kindly and urging people faithfully to, fall in line with the great program... dealing tenderly, thoughtfully, cautiously for us all," author J. N Hoover warns that "the study of world conditions...seems to be developing into "the Mark of the Beast."⁷

As these early Pentecostals interpreted their experiences prophetically, they also spiritualized the crisis. It seems there was little that happened which did not warrant a turn from an earthly reality towards a heavenly one. The Depression, while significant, was not the main trouble facing the believer. In May 1930, for instance, the *Pentecostal Evangel* directly referenced the stock panic that had ravaged the nation. Rather than assuage fears in that moment,

⁵ Frederick W. Childe, "What Time is It?," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, April 25, 1931, 6.

⁶ F. F. Reidenbach, "The Increasing Pressure and Its Significance," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, September 3, 1932, 11.

⁷ J. N. Hoover, "The Days of Noah and Now, and the Mark of the Beast," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, January 30, 1934, 1, 8.

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though, they simply used it as an opportunity to discuss the better option of investing in the Kingdom of God. Referencing a *Sunday School Times*' discussion of a "New England shoe manufacturer" who gave to missions, he is quoted as saying "I was thinking the other day of those poor fellows who lost their all in the stock panic. What I have put into this work abroad has not been lost and can never be lost."⁸ As the crisis continued into 1931, reference to the stock market demanded immediate reflection on treasure in heaven: "I further wished I could persuade that poor rich man who is so wretchedly miserable, to invest his remaining twenty million dollars in the work of God laid up in heaven where it will not be subjected to stock exchange fluctuations and take to itself wings like the twenty million he has lost, where it will never depreciate."⁹ Not long after Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933, readers of the *Evangel* could further read that "When all banks are closed (for these notes are written in the time of the bank holiday), faith is better than funds."¹⁰ No opportunity to point heavenward was ignored, it seems. After all the *Evangel* mused, "I don't believe Elijah would have been disturbed if all the banks in Israel had broken."¹¹

A third way Pentecostals grappled with the Depression was by means of semi-allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Here, well-known biblical stories were utilized in parallel with contemporary times. Such efforts constituted an attempt to ground biblical lessons of trust and faith in the here and now. In December 1930, for instance, King Uzziah's reign is referenced: "It was at a season of great national depression in Israel, at the time of the death of the great king Uzziah, that Isaiah was given a vision of the Lord on a throne. Praise God, He still lives and

⁸ Ernest Gordon citing manufacturer, *Sunday School Times*, quoted in "Supporting Scores of Native Workers," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, May 24, 1930, 9.

⁹ Stanley H. Frodsham, "Closing Days at Central Bible Institute," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, May 30, 1931, 8.

¹⁰ "The Editor's Notebook," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, March 25, 1931, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

reigns."¹² In 1933, a Sunday School lesson on Ruth is connected as well. In the introduction to the teaching, readers are told: "This story has not only the dark background of the period of the Judges, but also a rather sad beginning. During a time of depression in Judah, Elimelech of Bethlehem and his family emigrated to Moab."¹³ Two years later Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi helps illustrate the judgment of God with clear parallels to their own time: "There came a famine in the land of Israel. Men in their prosperity forsake God, and God has to bring His judgment upon the earth, for in the days of His judgments they learn righteousness."¹⁴ One suspects an extended metaphor referencing the years before the Depression is at work here. Such parallels continue in another example from 1935, in the story of Elijah and the widow in I Kings 17. Here is the example is not one of sin and judgement, but of trust:

Fear is the constant antagonist to God's best. Fear paralyzes faith, and ties God's hands, shuts up the heavens, keeps back the latter rain, and leaves the servant of God a spiritual pauper. As the widow obeyed the man of God, her death knell refused to ring and she and her family and Elijah were kept through the time of depression that existed in their day."¹⁵

The theme of provision helps point us to a fourth way the Pentecostal Evangel framed the economic situation: a place and moment in which God's presence persisted. Traditional notes of comfort in the midst of suffering emerge here. A 1930 article entitled "Encouragement for the Depressed," though not directly referencing finances, captured some of this mood. "The cry of the weak saint," the article reminds readers, "causes the Father to sending ministering angels and to show forth the power of His Son through the Spirit."¹⁶ Encouraging words at any time, these may have had even more impact here. Financial testimony from no less than Lillian Trasher¹⁷ and

¹² "The Editor's Notebook," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, December 13, 1930, 4.

¹³ Myer Pearlman, "The Sunday School Lesson," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, July 29, 1933, 11.

¹⁴ Stanley H. Frodsham, "The Sunday School Lesson," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, July 6, 1935, 11.

¹⁵ A. A. Blakeney, "Putting God First," August 10, 1935, 1.

¹⁶ "Encouragement for the Depressed," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, May 17, 1930, 1.

¹⁷ Lillian Trasher, "Thou God Seest Me," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, December 13, 12/13/1930, 1, 11.

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a story of God’s provision from the wife of Donald Gee both appear in December of that year as well. The latter takes care to note, “Here we raise our Ebenezer, and by God's grace we shall continue living this happy life of service, looking to Jesus, the Author and the Finisher, the source of supply for all our needs. Hallelujah!”¹⁸

A year later, a September 1931 issue features two examples of testimony in the midst of depression. One was connected to giving at a camp in the Potomac region—“considering these times of depression...nothing less than miraculous”¹⁹—and another pointed to a healing which could teach “the hope of the resurrection”²⁰ in the present crisis. In 1932, as the Depression was at its fiercest, the *Evangel* sought to assuage its readers further, plainly noting that God is equal for every economic situation.²¹ It utilized Psalm 107 as a means of discussing this, calling it “a special word of comfort for these days” in which the Lord “everytime brought them out of their distresses.”²² In July of that year another testimony tied numbers in attendance at an evangelistic meeting to God’s work in the Depression. While “at first many thought times were too hard to have a meeting,” the testimony proclaims that “God wonderfully supplied.”²³

The Depression: Its Cause & Purpose

Pentecostals, as we have seen, framed the Great Depression in light of eschatology, read it in terms of larger spiritual issues, aligned it with the biblical narrative, and saw it as an opportunity for God’s provision. Such orientational approaches are helpful in order to understand their thinking. Beyond each of these, however, lies perhaps a bigger question: what was the

¹⁸ Mrs. Donald Gee, “Our Christmas Dinner,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, December 20, 1930, 6.

¹⁹ “In the Whitened Harvest Field,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, September 26, 1931, 16

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹ “The Editor’s Notebook,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, June 25, 1932, 4.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “In the Whitened Harvest Field,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, July 2, 1932, 13.

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cause or purpose of the Depression? As Pentecostals grappled with this in the pages of the *Pentecostal Evangel*, certain keys answers emerge.

First among these is, unsurprisingly, eschatological. We have already spent a significant time addressing how reflections on the end times transfixed Pentecostals when considering the Depression (and just about everything else). When asking themselves where God was at work in the tumultuous events of the early 1930s, the answer was clear: He was preparing the world for its end. An amalgam of biblical, political military and economic themes coalesce in some sense around this conviction. “The world is moving towards Fascism; the religion of Fascism is loyalty to the State, represented by a dictator; the greatest of sins, therefore, will be disloyalty to the State. Such will be the religion of Antichrist,”²⁴ a 1932 edition claims. It goes on to reflect on the “world crisis of hitherto unknown proportions and aspects”²⁵ represented by the Depression. What, in their estimation, did it all mean? Nothing less than that “we are living in the days when prophecy of the end-time is becoming very plain to all, for it is being fulfilled.”²⁶ How exactly it would all work was the stuff of conjecture and analysis. But that the events of their time—economic and otherwise—connected to both tribulation and blessed hope was not to be denied. And, lest the Pentecostals be accused of being too reactively apocalyptic, it is worth noting that the times in which they lived—including not only the Depression but also the rise of Communism and Fascism and the echo of war drums—were particularly troubling. The recourse to reflection on the last things was not, in other words, to be unexpected.

Other answers to the purposes of God in the midst of the Depression era reflect on sin and its consequences. Sometimes this judgment for sin was directly from God, while at others it

²⁴ “The Passing and the Permanent, *The Pentecostal Evangel*, March 25, 1933, 5.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

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was simply a matter of sinful humans caught up in their own devices. Regarding the latter, one can read in an April 1931 *Evangel* about “the wholesale robbery of the people’s money by folks whom they have trusted. During the past ten years there have been 6000 bank failures in this country—nearly 1000 last year. Of course not all these failures have been due to dishonesty, but alas, a great many have.”²⁷

The bulk of the attention given to judgment, however, is not humanity’s self-inflicted wounds. It is God’s action punishing of sinful people and connects well with long-held practice of the jeremiad. The Depression is, as an article in 1932 indicates, the price and penalty we pay for neglecting “home, church, and Bible.”²⁸ In May of that year, one William T. Ellis is quoted using a picturesque metaphor explaining what is taking place: “an over-ruling Power has taken a naughty world into the woodshed for a chastening.”²⁹ Though specific judgment for sin is not mentioned in a June 1932 piece, God is certainly the actor: “Overturning, overturning, overturning, until He comes whose right it is to reign.”³⁰ This is the work of God, in which “many of the great of earth have been brought low.”³¹ In a longer form piece in September of 1932, the idea of judgment is stated plainly in a front-page article by evangelist Edith Mae Pennington: “I believe in studying the Word of God that it is God’s judgment in the land.”³² From this perspective, God’s work in a world made prostrate was clear.

Another posited purpose for the Depression is tied closely to and deepens the idea of judgement, even as it takes it in a new direction. In the Pennington piece mentioned above, for instance, she comments on how previously Americans had “plenty of money to spend for

²⁷ “The Editor’s Notebook,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, April 11, 1931, 4.

²⁸ David Burris, “Making the Pentecostal Sunday School Go,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, April 2, 1932, 6.

²⁹ William T. Ellis, in “The World Crisis,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, May 14, 1932, 9.

³⁰ “The Editor’s Notebook,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, June 18, 1932, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Edith Mae Pennington, “Jesus Christ, the Solver of Financial, Physical, and Spiritual Problems,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, September 24, 1932, 1.

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pleasures and for amusements of the world, but they have not had time or money for God...God has been left out of their hearts and lives and plans. God is now calling a halt in their lives."³³ Inherent in this statement is that judgment involves learning something. An emphasis on punishment can therefore give way to something more akin to chastening. Judgement thus forms a kind of divine pedagogy whereby the Lord's people are taught an important lesson. Here too is a connection to the time-honored tradition of the American jeremiad. In December of 1932, for instance, the *Evangel* utilizes an Old Testament narrative to talk about God's purpose in the midst of the Depression. Speaking of the time after the return of Israel from the Babylonian captivity, it noted "God had a purpose in the discipline of depression He was bringing on the people—it was that in their distress they might turn to Him."³⁴ Three years later a printed testimony echoes this theme by plainly stating "Praise the Lord for the Depression."³⁵ Tying together both healing and a rededication to Christ, it seems God had a purpose in it all for one "Mrs. Burr." Earlier in 1935, Alice Luce thoughtfully reflected on the Lord's work and purpose in times of "darkness":

No picture is admired which is all sunshine and brightness; it is the combination of light and shade which brings out the loveliness of the landscape. Thus in the pathway of our lives, God has to combine sunshine and shadow, prosperity and adversity, and He promises to give us the treasures of darkness. Isa. 45:3. Difficulty is the very atmosphere of miracle—it is miracle in its first stage. If it is to be a great miracle, the condition is not difficulty but impossibility."³⁶

Embracing such ideas speaks to both a certain maturity in faith, even as it does a sober reflection of their times.

³³ Ibid., 7.

³⁴ "The Editor's Notebook," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, December 10, 1932, 4.

³⁵ "I am the Lord that Healeth Thee," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, February 23, 1935, 7.

³⁶ Alice Luce, "Seed Thoughts," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, January 26, 1935, 4.

Prosperity is a sub-theme at work in and related discussions. Though it can appear as a positive—a late 1936 article wishing “A prosperous new year to you!”³⁷—discussions of prosperity can have added complexity. In the words of a 1934 Pentecostal Evangel, “It is the kindness of the Lord to take away the riches of some, because He knows they are inclined to trust in them.”³⁸ The danger posed by prosperity and the Lord’s definite use of poverty is surprising at first glance. Nevertheless it makes sense when one considers the active role played by God in the Pentecostal worldview and their continual grappling with the grinding economic crisis surrounding them. “When prosperity is not used for God it becomes a snare. Whenever you have what belongs to God and you do not use it for God, it becomes a snare,”³⁹ they wrote in 1936. Four years later, material prosperity is called a “test.”⁴⁰ For Pentecostal readers, it seems, this was an important message: “We are not to seek wealth or health, prosperity or success, ease or comfort, spirituality or fruitfulness in service simply for our own enjoyment or advancement or popularity, but only for Christ's sake—for His glory.”⁴¹ As the United States had fallen in depression after an apparent time of worldly well-being but spiritual inadequacy (a likely reference to the 1920s), the Pentecostal Evangel urged them to accept the situation as meted out by God. Only by learning from it could they—and by extension the country—move forward successfully.

³⁷ “Holding Faith to the Faithful Word,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, December 26, 1935, 8-9.

³⁸ “The Editor’s Notebook,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, January 20, 1934, 4.

³⁹ Robert A. Brown, “Foes shadows,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, October 19, 1935, 2.

⁴⁰ J. Bashford Bishop, “The Sunday School Lesson,” April 6, 1940, 10.

⁴¹ *The Kneeling Christian*, excerpted in “How Shall I Pray?,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, January 11, 1937, 1.

Responding to the Depression

Responding well to the reality of the Depression connects closely to the way in which the crisis was framed and the purposes which it assumed to fulfill. At least three categories of suggested responses filter their way through this era. First among these points to faith and trust. Unsurprising as it is deeply Christian, this prescribed attitude likely represents the position of many church groups at the time. Pentecostal eschatology seasons some of the discussion: despite "last day testings," readers of the *Evangel* were reminded in 1932 that these were also "days of ripening, days of proving the faithfulness of God! Hard times develop heroes."⁴² Trust and faith are implicit here and elsewhere. The article goes on to say that "for the child of God...the best is yet to come."⁴³ "The present economic stress," the *Pentecostal Evangel* explained in 1933, may haunt believers with "the specter of need," but that should not dislodge their trust.⁴⁴ Our God, author Laura Davies Holt encourages readers, "is yearning always to fill us with His supply for every emergency and has assured us that even before we call He will answer."⁴⁵

Evoking the children of Israel in the wilderness, readers are instructed to avoid murmuring. Dwelling on our problems is defined as unhelpful. Dwelling on Christ is the answer. By trusting in God, the *Pentecostal Evangel* writes in mid-1939, anxiety will diminish. Though by this late date the Depression was no longer at its worst, the retrospective it provided through the story of one "Mrs. Luffe" allowed the opportunity to prove a stated theory. While the reprinting of her testimony from the Buffalo, New York *Courier Express* makes it unclear

⁴² "The Editor's Notebook," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, January 2, 1932, 4.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Laura Davies Holt, "Our Supply and Its Source," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, March 25, 1933, 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

whether she is a Pentecostal or not, her approach was classic: "I got it in my mind that it was just a test of faith and I wondered what would happen."⁴⁶

While in some cases trusting in God can be a natural corollary to a life of faith, at other times such trust represents a more radical change. In this is the second kind of Pentecostal response to the Great Depression: repentance and revival. Here, notions of divine judgment and chastening form a calling to which the believer must respond. In issues during 1930⁴⁷ and 1932⁴⁸, for instance, the *Evangel* calls to mind an economic crisis of an earlier generation, a depression in the 1850s. Citing the revival that sprang out of it, readers are reminded that "in 1857-1858 they prayed and God worked. Now in the year 1932 let us do as they did. The God who answered them and swept this globe with revival then will do the same again today provided we pray."⁴⁹ A February 1931 issue features a front-page essay by Adele Carmichael with a title that asks a poignant question: "What will bring prosperity back to this country?"⁵⁰ The logical response is "returning to God brings revival; revival brings blessing; blessing brings prosperity in every way; spiritually, physically, and temporally."⁵¹

In 1931 a letter from a medical doctor describes the Depression as nothing less than a "pandemic."⁵² It is a sickness and a crisis—that beckons us to return to go "back to God and the Bible."⁵³ As the country entered the Roosevelt era beginning in 1933, references are made to both the President and First Lady. Whether or not these purported statements are accurate is

⁴⁶ "A Worker of Modern Miracles," [Buffalo, NY] *Courier Express*, May 31, 1939, quoted in "The Wonderful Word," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, July 15, 1939, 12.

⁴⁷ "The Editor's Notebook," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, August 3, 1930, 5.

⁴⁸ "The Editor's Notebook," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, February 27, 1932, 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Adele Carmichael, "What Will Bring Prosperity Back to this Country?," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, February 7, 1931, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² H. W. Felts, "A Doctor's Cancer Healed," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, 12/5/1931, 8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

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immaterial in this case; that they are printed here is important. Eleanor Roosevelt is quoted as follows in November 1933: "government by itself, no matter how wise, can only do so much" and that America needs "a great spiritual revival."⁵⁴ Her husband is similarly quoted in 1938: "In religion lies the hope of our country and of the world...I doubt if there is any problem, social, political or economic, that would not melt away before the fire of such a spiritual awakening."⁵⁵ Of their political program, the *Pentecostal Evangel* quoted a member of the Roosevelt administration claiming that the New Deal would not persist unless human hearts changed.⁵⁶ For the publishers of the *Pentecostal Evangel*, language like this underscored that spiritual realities connected well with godly repentance and revival.

A third possible response to the Depression takes us in a rather different direction. Here, the conversation is more pragmatic. Faced with the mounting problems of the economic situation, the *Pentecostal Evangel* directly addresses the symptoms. More than once, they reflect on prosperity and health. In February 1930 Fannie Rowe wrote an article entitled "How to Prosper and Be in Health."⁵⁷ Over the next two weeks she continued the conversation under the same title.⁵⁸ Though this is at least in part coded to spirituality as per our discussion of repentance, the language is most definitely attuned to this-worldly concerns.

Connected with the deeply felt personal effect of the Great Depression are passionate and repeated reminders of the missionary situation. Indeed, concerns about funding for missionaries during this period are perhaps the most repeated and persistent references to the ongoing crisis.

The conversation moves in at least two directions. First, the alarm bell is struck. In 1930, for

⁵⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt, quoted in "The Passing and the Permanent," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, November 18, 1933, 5.

⁵⁵ Franklin Roosevelt to Gypsy Smith, quoted in "Others: A Digest of Christian Thought," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, December 3, 1938, 10.

⁵⁶ Henry Wallace, quoted in "The Passing and the Permanent," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, June 23, 1934, 5.

⁵⁷ Fannie Rowe, "How to Prosper and Be in Health," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, February 15, 1930, 8.

⁵⁸ Fannie Rowe, "How to Prosper and Be in Health, February 22, 1930, 8-9; Rowe, "How to Prosper and Be in Health, March 1, 1930, 8.

instance, the missions section notes: "Let us pray very definitely that the black column illustrating 1930 offerings may surpass the grey columns of 1929 instead of falling below their level. It is not only a matter of money, but an indication of the progress of the cause of Christ."⁵⁹ In March, the giving chart is again mentioned, "note that the black column is shorter than it was this time last year. More missionaries to provide for but less funds for the purpose!"⁶⁰ In April, those who have "responded to splendidly to...recent appeals for missionary offerings" are praised, as the author is happy "to see the black column rising as illustrated in the chart."⁶¹ By this point, however, it had still not match the progress of the 1929. Later in 1930, Missions Secretary Noel Perkin issued a plea for a Christmas offering for missionaries, making clear to note "it is only right to let you know that again last month we fell short some \$3,000.00 of what is required."⁶² In the midst of such entreaties, the faithful of the Assemblies of God seem to have responded. In this second set of comments related to missionary funding, constant reference is made to how well the work is being funded considering the times. In October 1931, for instance, they lauded an increase over the past twenty-four months from the two years preceding those.⁶³ In early 1932, the *Pentecostal Evangel* was proud to point out that "while the denominational [i.e. non-Pentecostal] missionary work has been declining, we praise God that He has raised up fifteen faith missions, all of them standing for the fundamentals of the faith, who have been enabled to send forth and to support on the field no less than 2,208 missionaries."⁶⁴ In praising God for the "funds for our Pentecostal missionaries to keep up as well as they have,"⁶⁵ a kind of

⁵⁹ "The Gospel in Foreign Lands," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, February 22, 1930, 10.

⁶⁰ "The Gospel in Foreign Lands," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, March 22, 1930, 10.

⁶¹ "The Gospel in Foreign Lands," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, April 19, 1930, 10.

⁶² Noel Perkin to Evangel Readers, *The Pentecostal Evangel*, November 1, 1930, 11.

⁶³ "The Editor's Notebook," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, October 31, 1932, 4.

⁶⁴ "World Wide Missions," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, January 23, 1932, 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

triumph emerges that is both spiritual and financial. The expected response even in the Depression is to continue the work of God.

Attempts by Pentecostals to practically address financial realities intrude in at least two other examples during this time. More than once, the *Pentecostal Evangel* seemed to try and help its readers make ends meet by suggesting the sales business. Specifically mentioned are sales related to the *Evangel* itself or the Gospel Publishing House, both denominational enterprises. Of the former, a 1931 issue of the *Pentecostal Evangel* noted “We receive many requests for prayer from faithful brethren who are out of employment; and...suggesting a plan which we believe will be helpful,”⁶⁶ namely selling the flagship newsletter of the Assemblies of God. After all, they wrote, “Those who have tried this plan with other magazines have had success. Few will refuse to give the small sum asked for them. After a few days' experience one can easily sell 100 a day, thus making a profit of \$3.20—not too bad for a day's earnings, and a great deal better than nothing.”⁶⁷ Closer to the Christmas season, the *Evangel* posted an advertisement offering “a chance for the unemployed to earn money until Christmas.”⁶⁸ After all, it claimed “more Christmas cards are sold during depression than at any other time.”⁶⁹ Such deeply practical—and potentially self-serving—options are present in the midst of more spiritual concerns.

Another example of this practical response to crisis would be the unique case of the 1931 General Council meeting in San Francisco. As a national gathering of ministers and denominational leaders, this was an important event. Even so, cross-country travel carried with it a not insignificant financial cost. For many early Pentecostals, of course, this would have been a great opportunity to step out in faith and trust the Lord for provision just like many missionaries.

⁶⁶ “A Plan for the Unemployed,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, February 21, 1931, 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁸ “A Chance for the Unemployed to Earn Money Until Christmas,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, 10/17/1931, 20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

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Indeed, one would expect that this kind of language would have been front and center in Pentecostal conversation. Notably, though, the *Pentecostal Evangel* specifically rejects this line of thinking, encouraging its readers to plan ahead financially. “A Timely Word from Pastor R. J. Craig” reminds readers that “NO ONE should come in the hope of earning money for the return trip or even think of earning a livelihood upon arrival, or of continuing in California unless self-supporting, for this would only entail unnecessary suffering.”⁷⁰ Seen in sum, practical concerns like missions giving, suggestions for making ends meet, and even ministerial travel conveyed a measure of worldly wisdom, even if each was in service of a spiritual reality.

Overall Themes

Seen together, Pentecostal interactions with the Great Depression—at least as observed in this limited sample—are illustrative. Their approach and response to the crisis seems, in sum, to follow both general American lines while maintaining some uniquely Pentecostal aspects. I will comment on these in turn. Before doing so, however, a word about the content of the *Pentecostal Evangel* overall during this period.

Both in shared cultural remembrance and historical fact, the Depression of the early to mid-1930s constitutes one of the greatest challenges faced by the American people. From the panic of the stock market crash to the unemployment crisis to the Dust Bowl, it was truly a convulsed era. One could go on for some time highlighting each of the heavy challenges facing citizens of the time. And, to be sure, echoes of this appear in the pages of the *Evangel*. They frame the challenges, reflect on God’s purposes within, and suggest ways in which readers could

⁷⁰ R. J. Craig, “General Council, San Francisco, California: A Timely Word from Pastor R. J. Craig,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, August 1, 1931, 12.

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respond. Indeed, one would expect no less from a United States-based journal writing during these trying times.

What is notable, therefore, is not that these issues are discussed, but that they are mentioned so infrequently. From later 1929 through April 1934,⁷¹ whole issues go by with no mention of the Depression. While, as we have seen, the topic comes up from time to time in articles and editorials, it gets nowhere near the attention one would expect. The stock market is almost never mentioned. The word “depression” is present but not ubiquitous, and Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt are barely referenced. During many issues during this five-year period it is almost as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening economically. Much more frequently one can read missionary testimonies, stories of evangelism, reports of healings, an almost obsessive analysis of the Zionist movement, concerns about global Communism and Fascism, and the ever-present and often related set of topics related to the end times. At least in terms of frequency, these are some of the topics that drew most Pentecostal attention during the time.

This concentrated lack of focus on the Depression may be interpreted variously. It can be a sign, for instance, that the editors of the *Pentecostal Evangel* were consciously apolitical in their approach, at least when it came to domestic affairs. So too their priorities—evangelism, mission, eschatology, Christian living—tended towards the more specifically spiritual, into which calculus something as earthbound as the specifics of the Depression and its relief may have been distracting. There may even be a sense in which the *Evangel* sought to draw readers’ attention away from the gloom of the world to the glories of Heaven. Such an aim

⁷¹ Using the full text search of the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center (<https://ifphc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publicationssearch.fulltext>), issues of the *Pentecostal Evangel* from 1933 to 1941 were searched for words including: depression, stock market, prosperity, New Deal, & Roosevelt.

implies that too much attention to unemployment, grinding poverty, and growing despair would have simply been representative of a lack of faith.

Whatever the specific reason, the *Pentecostal Evangel* largely ignores the Great Depression during its height. While the topic comes up, it garners nowhere near the attention paid to other matters. Such an approach demands thoughtful consideration for the larger truth it reveals. What I mean is this: a lack of focus on the Great Depression simply means that great value was seen in many other priorities. These other emphases underscore the important reality that Pentecostals had their eyes on Heaven. While they clearly and in very specific ways were bound to the realm of this earth, their majority of their attention was elsewhere. Though unable at times to leave behind the practical, the spiritual always drew them upward.

Piety Seasoned With Pragmatism

This deeply pious world seasoned and mixed in with earthly and more pragmatic concerns echoes the now-classic formulation of Grant Wacker in *Heaven Below*: ““The genius of the Pentecostal movement lay in its ability to hold two seemingly incompatible impulses in productive tension. I call the two impulses the primitive and the pragmatic. The nuances of each will become apparent in due course, but for now we might simply think of them as idealism versus realism, or principle versus practicality.”⁷² Though there he writes about Pentecostals living at least a decade prior to the Depression, I believe the contours of this schema persist. I see expressions of piety and pragmatism following largely expected lines in the way that the *Pentecostal Evangel* addresses the Depression. Piety, for instance, is what leads the editors to pay little attention to the economic crisis compared to its ever more frenzied eschatological

⁷² Wacker, 10.

speculations or analyses. So too their continual emphasis on missions work and printed articles on the spiritual life of the believer have a lot to say about their leading priorities.

Even in places where the Depression is referenced, it is done so—as we have seen—in a way to satisfy their craving for end times hypothesizing. In other instances, the spiritualizing of the crisis turns a major world event into what appears to be just another opportunity to encourage people to turn their eyes towards Heaven. Spiritual interpretations of the causes of the Depression and its divine purpose draw believers to repentance and call to mind a piety in which events on Earth have meaning not in themselves but mostly as signs.

Having said this, there is more to the story. For insofar as the Pentecostals embraced a deeply spiritual vision, they did not do so to the exclusion of all else. Pentecostals during the Great Depression were neither apocalyptic Gnostics nor mystical obscurantists. To claim this would be too far. It was in the same magazine that saw the anti-Christ behind every corner and spiritualized the economic troubles of its readers that obsessed over its missions fund and, from time to time, provided tangible ways for its readers to earn a little extra money. The *Pentecostal Evangel* sold advertisements on its pages, proof enough they had the sense to know when to use the world's methods. So too they could turn from spiritual theorizing about the Depression to words of comfort and peace for readers who suffering in privation and want.

To be more specific about what I mean, the Pentecostals were pragmatic. As Grant Wacker argued and I here concur, their piety and spirituality never functioned on its own but was indelibly linked with a this-world sensibility. They were deeply eschatological in their hopes and dreams even though they were figuring out how it all worked in the meanwhile. Their spiritual aims were triumphant at the same time concerns were voiced about the effect of the Depression on personal finances and missions giving. They exhibited piety as they interpreted their

economic situation as a spiritual crisis, yet were not above doing so as they went about the business of running a magazine.

Even when they grappled with a question like prosperity, the tension and connection between piety and pragmatism persisted. As they spoke of the possibility of achieving such well-being, they betrayed elements of concern for the cares of this world. Yet prosperity had its shadow side. As they called financial comfort and well-being into question and, at times, framed it as a negative they made a deeply spiritual claim. In such instances, they sought to simultaneously transcend and condemn what was even at its best a potential worldly temptation and at worst the cause of their calamity. Prosperity itself, though good, was in light of the Depression connected to deeply spiritual problems.

Conclusion

If weighed in the balance, piety appears to have consistently outweighed pragmatism—even though the latter was clearly present. Pentecostals continued to look at the Great Depression in their own unique way, regarding its ongoing temporal effects with something almost approaching ambivalence. This is not because they were unaffected or for them it did not matter, but because in the final equation it was only one of the things God was up to. The work of missionaries, matters of personal faith, the emphases of the full gospel message: each of these trumped economic concerns each and every time. Where they overlapped discussion could and did often occur, but there is no doubt where the center of gravity lay. Even when the crisis was at its worst and the *Evangel* addressed it head-on, this more direct approach was limited, especially in comparison with the many other themes present in its pages. Such actions seem characteristic of a cadre of believers who would quite consciously have claimed to be Spirit-empowered to “be

about their Father's business," (Luke 2:49) slowing down only when necessary to catch their breath.

It goes without saying that this is a conversation which beckons further exploration. There is no doubt that more could be said about American Pentecostals during the Great Depression. This brief study, after all, has only briefly touched upon Pentecostal interaction with the crisis. It does, however, provide an interesting place from which to observe Pentecostals as they encountered a crisis not unique to them but common to vast segments of their American contemporaries. As these first-generation Spirit-filled believers grappled with their times, they can appear to their contemporary Western inheritors as inspirational, woefully shortsighted, and/or some combination of the two. For all the foreignness inherent in the things they chose to ignore or attend to, there is nevertheless something deeply familiar about their approach. While the Depression was a concern, it was not the final concern of their lives. Like many Pentecostals facing similar circumstances in the years since and around the world today, their focus was on another horizon. As further research continues, it is my hope that such conclusions are tested and expanded with an eye towards not only the United States of decades past, but the vast numbers of Pentecostals who face crises greater than the 1930s each and every day of the ongoing 21st century.