

# The Foundations of the Early Church and Their Parallels in the Growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria

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## Abstract

This study looks at the historical and theological roots of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, from early 20th-century Bible schools to its contemporary status as a vibrant religious movement. It employs a qualitative research design, combining historical records, church documents, and modern interpretations to present a detailed view of the growth of Pentecostalism. The study focuses on specific examples, such as Bible lessons in Lagos, Ijebu-Ode, and Ilesa, as well as the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, which were chosen for their historical significance and representativeness of varied settings. These stories demonstrate how grassroots initiatives, scriptural teachings, and lay leadership all contributed to the growth of Pentecostalism. The findings not only show striking similarities between Nigerian Pentecostalism and the Early Church, especially in their focus on faith healing, prayer, and Holy Spirit-led worship, but also how the contemporary Church adjusts to local cultural and sociopolitical contexts. However, the study identifies gaps in theological continuity, such as a lack of emphasis on sacramental rituals and community ethics, which raises serious concerns about the selective appropriation of Early Church traditions. Finally, the study indicates that the long-standing influence of fundamental Christian teachings has profoundly altered Nigerian Pentecostalism, establishing it as a transformative movement with substantial theological and socioeconomic implications for the Nigerian religious landscape.

**Keywords:** Pentecostal Christianity; Early Church; Bible classes; faith healing; Holy Spirit



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## Introduction

The rapid growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria has marked a dramatic shift in the country's religious landscape, affecting cultural standards, theological interpretations, and religious activities. Nigerian Pentecostalism, which is rooted in 20th-century socio-religious dynamics, has been compared to the Early Church because of its emphasis on spiritual fervour, evangelism, and community-building. Despite its significant effect, some crucial gaps remain in comprehending this movement's historical and theological foundations, notably its relationship to early Christian traditions. These gaps indicate the necessity for more investigation into how Pentecostalism in Nigeria has applied fundamental Christian ideas to local contexts while addressing socioeconomic and spiritual issues.

Existing literature provides unique insights into the development of Pentecostalism, with a focus on its historical beginnings, theological continuity, and sociocultural effect (Kalu 2008; Marshall 2009; Adesoji 2016; Adeleye, Aluko and Olowoyeye 2024). Scholars such as Anderson (2004) and Kalu (2008) have investigated the global and African components of Pentecostalism, emphasising its adaptability and attractiveness in a variety of contexts. Similarly, Hackett (2001) and Fatokun (2021) have emphasised the socioeconomic contributions of Nigerian Pentecostal churches, citing their involvement in education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation. However, much of this literature cannot answer questions concerning the selective appropriation of Early Church practices and theological coherence in Pentecostalism's fast rise. The study employs a qualitative research design, combining historical records, church documents, and modern interpretations to present a detailed view of the growth of Pentecostalism. It also focuses on specific examples, such as Bible lessons in Lagos, Ijebu-Ode, and Ilesa, as well as the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, which were chosen for their historical significance and representativeness of varied settings. These stories demonstrate how grassroots initiatives, scriptural teachings, and lay leadership all contributed to the growth of Pentecostalism.

This study uses an analytical framework founded on three major theoretical stances to offer a methodical and thorough investigation. First, Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria, like their apostolic predecessors in the Early Church, obtain credibility through spiritual gifts, divine calling, and miraculous displays. Weber's Charisma Theory provides a lens through which to view this process (Weber 1947, 358). The popularity of individuals like Joseph Sadare, John Aluko Babatope, Samuel Adegboyega, William F. Kumuyi and Enoch Adeboye, whose ministries are based on assertions of supernatural empowerment, is indicative of the influence of charismatic authority (Dow 1969, 306–308). Second, contextual theology explains how Nigerian Pentecostalism blends biblical teachings with native spiritual traditions to adapt Early Church ideas to local circumstances. This adaptation is part of a larger trend in African Christianity where theological ideas are reframed to fit the social context (Mokhoathi 2017). Third, historical institutionalism helps to trace the development of Pentecostal movements

from unofficial Bible lessons to organised church networks that have a national impact, emphasising the importance of institutional continuity and structure in maintaining religious growth (Thelen and Conran 2016).

### **The Christian Church and the Foundations of the Early Church**

The term “Church” has frequently been subject to various interpretations and misconceptions in both theological and ecclesiastical discourse. In the book of Ephesians, Paul makes it clear that the Church is made up of people whom God has chosen and redeemed, and in whom the Holy Spirit is at work. The first chapter of Ephesians emphasises that to be a member of the Church, a person must have repented of their disobedience against God, confessed their sins, and placed their trust in Christ for salvation from divine judgement. This fundamental component of the Church emphasises its community and spiritual nature, focusing on the redemption and purification of its members (Adeleye 2010).

The term “Church” is derived from the Hebrew terms “edah” and “qahal,” which signify “congregation” or “assembly” in the Old Testament (Ayorinde 2003). These expressions, which frequently allude to the assembly of Israelite men qualified for worship and sacrifice, capture the community and religious character of the gathering (Deut. 23:1). This notion is carried over into the New Testament, where the Church is portrayed as a spiritual community founded by Christ and strengthened by the Holy Spirit (Livingstone 1977). A group of believers bound together in Christ is referred to by the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is frequently translated as “church” in the New Testament (Ferguson 1996). However, a more thorough analysis of these phrases’ cultural context is necessary. For example, the influence of Greco-Roman societal institutions on early Christian assemblies implies that the idea of *ekklesia* had political undertones, representing a separate counter-cultural society (Hurtado 2017). Understanding the term’s dual origin enhances its theological relevance.

In the New Testament, *ekklesia* is used to refer to both the universal Church, which includes all Christians, and local congregations such as the church at Corinth or Thessalonica (Romans 16:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1). Theologically, the Church is more than a voluntary meeting; it is a divinely ordained community that receives its life and essence from Christ (Adeleye 2010). The Church’s relationship with Christ is crucial, as Christ is both its head and basis (Boettner 1991). However, the communal and sacramental features of the Church, as depicted in Acts 2:42–47 and 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, deserve further consideration. These passages emphasise behaviours like shared meals, social worship, and sacramental observances, which are sometimes overlooked in modern ecclesiological arguments.

The early Church was founded on a sequence of major events and teachings that affected its existence and growth. These foundations were built around the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. These events, combined with the work of the apostles, particularly Peter, were essential in creating the early Church.

The resurrection of Jesus confirmed Christianity's basis. According to Fatokun (2006), the Resurrection is essential to the Christian faith because it validates Jesus' divine nature and victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:14). The Resurrection is central to Christian theology because it not only confirmed Christ's divinity but also laid the groundwork for the Christian hope of eternal life. As the apostles testified to Christ's resurrection (Acts 4:33), the Resurrection also served as the foundation for their teachings. This theological centrality continues to be a source of unity among denominations and generates discussions regarding its interpretative emphasis, including how to strike a balance between its spiritual and historical dimensions (Wright 2003).

Another important event was Pentecost, when the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and the Church came into being. The Church was given the ability to carry out its mission of teaching and evangelism at Pentecost, which is seen to be the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to send the Comforter (John 16:7). Since Pentecost gave the Church its spiritual strength and the Resurrection offered fresh life, Fatokun (2006) contends that these two occasions form the cornerstone of the Church. Ferguson (1996) agrees, pointing out that Pentecost made it possible for the Church to change from a collection of disciples to a vibrant, Spirit-filled community (Acts 2:1–4). Even while these stories emphasise the Church's supernatural empowerment, further research is needed to fully understand Pentecost's sociopolitical effects, especially its ability to bring people together in a linguistically and culturally divided country. According to academics like Anderson (2004), Pentecost created a new inclusive paradigm that foreshadowed the Church's worldwide mission.

The founding and growth of the early Church depended heavily on the apostles. They were tasked with passing on Jesus' teachings to future generations in addition to serving as witnesses to his ministry, death, and resurrection (Matthew 28:18–20). Peter was a key figure in the early Church, especially during its early years, and is frequently regarded as the leader of the apostles (Acts 2:14; 10:34–48). Ferguson (1996) makes it clear that although Peter played a vital role, Jesus Christ—the “rock” upon which the Church was built—was the real basis of the Church (Matthew 16:18). The early Church was founded on the collective witness of the apostles, who served as the keepers of Christ's teachings, rather than on the testimony of any one apostle, claims Fatokun (2006). The doctrinal purity and expansion of the Church were guaranteed by their power in instructing, baptising, and coordinating the early Christian communities. Since they transmitted the theological principles outlined in the Scriptures, teachers played a crucial role in the early formation of the Church, as Acts 13:1 attests (Adeleye 2010:50–51). A more inclusive and varied leadership structure than is frequently acknowledged is suggested by the roles of early Christian leaders and less well-known apostles, especially women like Phoebe (Romans 16:1) and Junia (Romans 16:7) (Giles 2018).

Although the apostles had a significant role in founding the Church, Christ was nevertheless its ultimate basis. Ferguson (1996) contends that the affirmation of Jesus

as the Christ, the Son of the living God, is the cornerstone of the Church. Christ Jesus stated in Matthew 16:18 that this doctrinal truth is the “rock” upon which the Church is based. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul depicts Christ as the cornerstone, stating that the Church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” This emphasises that even though the apostles established the framework, Christ continues to be the major character and cornerstone of the Church’s existence and mission. However, by placing more emphasis on institutional or denominational identities, contemporary interpretations frequently weaken this Christocentric orientation, a tendency that necessitates fresh theological analysis (Barrett 2021).

Central occasions like the Resurrection and Pentecost laid the groundwork for the early Church’s development both doctrinally and spiritually. The establishment of the Church was greatly aided by the apostles, especially Peter, but Christ himself serves as the “rock” and cornerstone. The early Church would not have developed, or Christianity would not have spread as it did, without these fundamental occasions and lessons. According to Boettner (2006), the Church is of Christ, by Christ, and for Christ, and its foundation is found in the divine mission that Jesus started and the apostles continued, not in human institutions. Yet, the interplay between divine agency and human leadership, notably the apostles’ contextual flexibility, emphasises a dynamic relationship that modern ecclesiology sometimes misses (DeVries 2015). A greater engagement with these issues will enrich current uses of early Church ideas.

### **Apostolic Ministry and the Spread of the Gospel**

The apostolic ministry served as the foundational vehicle for the spread of Christianity in the early years following Jesus’ resurrection. The apostles, most notably Peter, Paul, John, and the other members of the Twelve, were not only preachers and teachers of Jesus’ message but also the primary witnesses to His life, death, and resurrection. Their mission to spread the Gospel across the known world was critical to the survival and expansion of Christianity, and their efforts continue to resonate with the global spread of the faith today, especially in contexts like the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria (Bauckham 2006; Dunn 1991).

The apostolic ministry’s core lay in the apostles’ personal witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This direct encounter with the risen Lord distinguished the apostles from other disciples or teachers in the early Christian movement. As seen in Acts 1:21–22, when the early Christian community sought to replace Judas Iscariot, one of the qualifications for apostleship was that the person had to have been a witness to Jesus’ resurrection. This emphasis on eyewitness testimony was crucial in establishing the apostles’ credibility and authority. Their direct experience with Jesus and their ability to testify to His resurrection formed the basis of the Gospel message they carried across regions (Hurtado 2003; Wright 2003).

The uniqueness of this testimony lies in its deeply personal and transformative nature. The apostles did not simply relay second-hand information or philosophical teachings; they preached from the depths of their experience, which lent a profound sense of immediacy and authenticity to their message. As Peter declared in Acts 4:20, “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” This personal conviction, rooted in their experience of the risen Christ, ignited a zeal that drove the apostolic mission and shaped the early Christian community (Stott 1994). The power of personal testimony as seen in the apostolic ministry is mirrored in contemporary Pentecostalism, especially in Nigeria. Many Pentecostal pastors and evangelists model their ministry on the apostolic emphasis on personal experience. For instance, personal testimonies of healing, deliverance, and encounters with God are central to the Pentecostal message in Nigeria, much like how the apostles’ testimony of the resurrection was foundational to the early Church. This reliance on first-hand experience as a source of spiritual authority can be seen as a continuation of the apostolic tradition, reinforcing the idea that direct experience of the divine remains a powerful tool for evangelism (Anderson 2004).

Apostolic authority extended beyond personal testimony to include leadership in the formation of Christian doctrine and the governance of early Christian communities. The apostles were entrusted with interpreting and teaching Jesus’ words and actions. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they began to articulate the theological implications of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection for the Christian community. Their teachings, which are preserved in the New Testament, laid the doctrinal foundation for the Christian faith, such as the understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the concept of salvation through faith in Him (Ridderbos 1975; Dunn 1991).

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) is an excellent example of the apostles’ role in resolving doctrinal disputes and guiding the early Church. The issue of whether Gentile converts had to follow Jewish law, particularly circumcision, was brought before the apostles for resolution. The Council, led by figures like Peter and James, ultimately decided that Gentile Christians were not bound by the entirety of Jewish law, marking a significant development in the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian faith. This decision was crucial in expanding the Gospel beyond its Jewish roots, allowing Christianity to become a global religion (Bruce 1990). Thus, it could be said that this apostolic leadership in doctrinal matters laid the groundwork for future church leadership structures. In contemporary Pentecostal movements in Nigeria, the role of church leaders, such as pastors and bishops, mirrors the authority exercised by the apostles. Pentecostal pastors, like the apostles, are seen as divinely appointed leaders whose teachings and decisions are guided by the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on Spirit-led leadership can be seen as a continuation of the apostolic model, where leaders are expected to rely on divine guidance rather than human wisdom alone (Kalu 2008).

One of the most defining features of the apostolic ministry was the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the apostles for their mission. The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) marked the official beginning of the apostolic ministry. Before

Pentecost, the apostles were often depicted as uncertain and hesitant, but after receiving the Holy Spirit, they were transformed into bold, dynamic preachers of the Gospel. Pentecost gave the apostles the ability to speak in different languages, which was a crucial tool for spreading the Gospel to the diverse peoples gathered in Jerusalem. More importantly, it marked the apostles' empowerment for miraculous signs and wonders, which were instrumental in validating their message and drawing large crowds to the Christian faith (Thiselton 2013). The Holy Spirit continued to play a critical role throughout the apostles' ministry, guiding them in their decision-making and providing them with the strength to endure persecution and hardship. As seen in the Book of Acts, the apostles often performed miracles, such as healing the sick and raising the dead, through the power of the Holy Spirit. These miracles served as visible signs that their message was divinely authorised, helping to establish their authority and credibility (Turner 1996).

This reliance on the Holy Spirit has a direct parallel with the contemporary Pentecostal movement in Nigeria. Nigerian Pentecostals, much like the apostles, emphasise the need for empowerment by the Holy Spirit for effective ministry. The Pentecostal emphasis on speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, and other gifts of the Spirit can be traced back to the early apostolic ministry, where the Holy Spirit played a central role in the spread of the Gospel. Pentecostal ministers in Nigeria often invoke the same language of divine empowerment used by the apostles, seeing their ministry as a continuation of the apostolic tradition (Ajayi and Familusi 2022). The apostles were not merely local leaders but were tasked with a global mission to spread the Gospel "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Beginning in Jerusalem, they gradually expanded their ministry to the regions of Judea, Samaria, and beyond, establishing Christian communities in both Jewish and Gentile territories. This missionary zeal was central to the apostolic identity. Paul, in particular, embodied this mission by travelling extensively throughout the Roman Empire, establishing churches in cities such as Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. His missionary journeys, recorded in the Book of Acts, illustrate how the apostolic mission extended far beyond the Jewish context and embraced diverse cultural settings (Wright 2003).

The apostles' missionary strategy involved more than just preaching; they established local leadership in the communities they founded, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Christian message. By appointing leaders like Timothy and Titus to oversee the fledgling churches, the apostles created a decentralised network of Christian communities that could continue the mission even in their absence. This method of local leadership and community-building was crucial to the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and beyond (Bauckham 2006). In the Nigerian context, Pentecostalism mirrors the apostolic mission's emphasis on expansion and community-building. Nigerian Pentecostal pastors, like the apostles, often engage in missionary work, travelling to different regions within and outside Nigeria to establish new churches and spread the Gospel. These missionary efforts are not confined to Nigeria but extend to other parts of Africa, Europe, and the Americas, reflecting the apostolic

mandate to spread the Gospel to all nations (Kalu 2008). This global outlook, rooted in the apostolic mission, continues to shape the identity of Nigerian Pentecostalism as a movement committed to evangelism and church growth (Uroko 2024).

The apostolic ministry serves as a powerful model for contemporary Christian leadership and evangelism, particularly in Pentecostal movements in Nigeria. The apostles' reliance on personal testimony, their authority in shaping Christian doctrine, their dependence on the Holy Spirit, and their commitment to spreading the Gospel across different cultural contexts all serve as key elements of the apostolic legacy. Pentecostal ministers in Nigeria often draw directly from this legacy, seeing themselves as modern-day apostles empowered by the same Holy Spirit that guided Peter, Paul, and the other apostles in the early Church (Kalu 2008). This apostolic ministry's impact on the spread of the Gospel is both historical and contemporary. Just as the apostles played a foundational role in the expansion of Christianity in the first century, so too do modern-day Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria play a critical role in the continued spread of the Gospel in the 21st century. This continuity between the Early Church and contemporary Pentecostalism highlights the enduring significance of the apostolic mission as a model for Christian ministry and evangelism (Anderson 2004).

### **Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria and Its Parallels with Early Church Practices**

Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria exhibits numerous similarities with the Early Church in areas such as evangelism, spiritual experiences, and community formation. These parallels highlight how Pentecostalism has integrated core principles of the Early Church, emphasising Bible-based teachings, reliance on the Holy Spirit, and fostering communal identity.

#### *Evangelism and Community Formation*

Evangelism is a fundamental principle of both Nigerian Pentecostalism and the Early Church. The apostles' passionate preaching of the Gospel, starting with the Pentecost event (Acts 2:1–4), propelled the growth of the Early Church. As a result of this evangelical fervour, tight-knit Christian communities were formed, marked by communal worship and a common religion (Acts 2:41–47). Pentecostal churches in Nigeria also place a strong emphasis on evangelism. They use a variety of outreach techniques, such as door-to-door evangelism and massive crusades, and frequently use contemporary technologies like social media and television broadcasts. Although both movements are dedicated to sharing the gospel, there are considerable differences between their approaches and settings. While Nigerian Pentecostalism works in a post-colonial, media-rich setting, addressing issues of social justice and development, the Early Church worked in the Roman Empire, where it faced persecution and relied on in-person encounters. According to Kalu (2008), Pentecostal congregations in Nigeria frequently follow the apostolic paradigm, but they do so in a very modern way. Additionally, the idea of resurrection, which was essential to early Christian evangelism (Idahosa 2004), is a powerful symbol of transformation and new life in Nigerian



Pentecostal preaching. However, some Pentecostal movements in Nigeria, especially those influenced by prosperity theology, connect worldly success with heavenly favour, implying a theological change rather than pure continuity since the Early Church emphasised suffering and martyrdom.

Both movements place a strong emphasis on fostering community. Meeting in homes, as the Early Church did (Acts 2:46), promoted closeness and support among members. Through small groups and house fellowships, Nigerian Pentecostal churches imitate this model by offering areas for discipleship, prayer, and worship. Nonetheless, the hierarchical social structure of the Roman Empire was very different from the dynamics of modern Nigerian society, which had an impact on how communities were formed in each setting. Similar to the Early Church's dedication to societal welfare (Acts 4:32–35), Nigerian Pentecostal groups regularly incorporate social outreach into their evangelistic activities, addressing issues of poverty, healthcare, and education. However, some scholars contend that rather than operating within an early Christian communal sharing framework, the financial systems of Nigerian Pentecostal churches—such as tithes and offerings—operate within a capitalist economic framework (Hackett 2001).

### *Reliance on the Holy Spirit*

A defining feature of Nigerian Pentecostalism and the Early Church is the involvement of the Holy Spirit. An important turning point for the Early Church was the Pentecost event, which was characterised by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the display of spiritual gifts (Acts 2:1–4). The significance of the Holy Spirit is also emphasised by Nigerian Pentecostalism, which sees it as necessary for spiritual life and empowerment (Anderson 2004; Ogunewu 2022; Adeleye, Aluko and Olowoyeye 2024). Nigerian Pentecostals, like their early Christian counterparts, frequently emphasise spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy as proof of the presence of the Holy Spirit (DeVries 2015; Gabriel 2015). Similar to early Christian customs, Pentecostal services in Nigeria usually include intense worship and prayer intended to invoke the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31). The compatibility of early Christian pneumatology with contemporary Pentecostal manifestations of the Spirit is questioned by critical scholarship. Despite claims that Pentecostals' practices recreate New Testament experiences, Anderson (2004) contends these practices are heavily influenced by indigenous African spirituality, which has always valued divine healing and prophetic pronouncements.

### *Bible-Based Teachings and Doctrinal Purity*

Scripture's authority is emphasised heavily in both movements. Nigerian Pentecostalism maintains that the Bible is the final authority for faith and conduct, whereas the Early Church relied on apostolic teachings and the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 2:42). But there is a big difference in how scripture is interpreted and applied. Some Nigerian Pentecostal leaders have extremely centralised power over biblical

interpretation, which restricts theological conversation. In contrast, early Christians disputed theological issues and engaged in communal exegesis (Acts 15:1–29). Furthermore, there are questions regarding the doctrinal continuity of early Christian teachings on humility, suffering, and communal sharing with the prosperity gospel, which is popular in some Pentecostal circles in Nigeria. Although Pentecostals see their study of the Bible as a return to biblical authenticity, some contend that the theological depth of early Christian beliefs is compromised by selective interpretation (DeVries 2015).

### *Social Transformation and Community Development*

Both the Early Church and Nigerian Pentecostalism emphasise social transformation and community development. The Early Church was deeply committed to meeting its members' material needs, practising communal sharing, and ensuring that no one was left behind (Acts 4:32–35). This practice was founded on the concept that faith should be expressed in practical acts of love and justice, fostering a sense of unity and equality within the Christian community. Nigerian Pentecostal churches have followed this approach, engaging in many sorts of social outreach, such as building schools, and hospitals, and providing welfare services for the underprivileged. These efforts demonstrate a commitment to holistic ministry, in which spiritual growth is combined with real gains in quality of life. According to Olanisebe and Olaniyi (2011), these initiatives are a reflection of early Christian concern for communal welfare and social justice. Numerous Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria, including David Oyedepo and Enoch Adeboye, have highlighted the significance of promoting programmes that tackle poverty and promote healthcare and education in order to contribute to the well-being of society. Similar to how the Early Church uplifted underprivileged populations, their effort has positioned Pentecostal congregations as social change agents.

Nigerian Pentecostalism has a huge socioeconomic impact, and churches are crucial to the empowerment of both individuals and communities. Hackett (2001) emphasises how Pentecostal churches generate jobs through their businesses, media outlets, and educational institutions. These initiatives go beyond simple charity, encouraging members to become self-sufficient and economically empowered. This is consistent with the Early Church's practice of combining resources to address community needs, as demonstrated in Acts 6:1–7, where organised systems were put in place to care for widows and the poor. Furthermore, the social impact of Nigerian Pentecostalism is influenced by its emphasis on moral discipline and personal accountability. By promoting virtues like diligence, integrity, and responsibility, Pentecostal doctrines enable followers to successfully negotiate socioeconomic obstacles. In addition to changing people's lives, this ethical framework promotes stability in society as a whole. There are clear similarities to the Early Church in that both movements place a high value on integrating faith and action, illustrating the close relationship between social change and spiritual rebirth.

However, while the emphasis on community development and social welfare is admirable, it raises serious concerns about the sustainability and inclusivity of these efforts. For example, the focus on prosperity theology in some Pentecostal circles may unintentionally marginalise the same people these projects seek to help, especially when money success is linked with spiritual favour. Addressing these issues necessitates a more comprehensive approach that strikes a balance between spiritual empowerment and fair and sustainable development, ensuring that Pentecostalism's social effect remains transformative and inclusive.

### **Bible-Based Teachings and the Growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria**

The growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is intricately tied to its emphasis on Bible-based teachings, study groups, and lay leadership. These practices mirror the early apostolic approach, where the teaching of Scripture was central to the formation and expansion of the Early Church. Pentecostalism in Nigeria has effectively utilised these principles to not only build robust congregations but also to ensure doctrinal purity and spiritual vibrancy.

#### *Bible Schools and Study Groups as Catalysts for Growth*

In Nigerian Pentecostalism, Bible schools and study groups serve as critical platforms for doctrinal formation and spiritual development. They echo the apostolic tradition of scriptural instruction, which was paramount in the Early Church. According to Fatokun (2006), establishing Bible schools across Nigeria has been instrumental in shaping Pentecostal practices and fostering the movement's rapid spread. These schools equip lay leaders and pastors with biblical knowledge and practical ministry skills, which they carry into their respective churches and communities. This model closely resembles the approach of the early apostles, who devoted themselves to teaching the believers and raising leaders from within the community (Acts 6:1–7). Boettner (1985) asserts that the Bible forms the core of the Church's mission and identity, and its centrality has facilitated the growth of various Christian denominations. In Nigerian Pentecostalism, this centrality is seen in the emphasis placed on scriptural literacy among both leaders and congregants. Bible study groups in many Pentecostal churches provide an avenue for members to deepen their understanding of the Scriptures and apply biblical principles to their daily lives. The widespread participation in these study groups fosters a culture of active engagement with the Bible, which in turn drives the growth and expansion of the church.

The focus on Bible-based teachings is also linked to the evangelistic zeal that characterises Nigerian Pentecostalism. Evangelistic efforts are often rooted in a clear presentation of biblical doctrines, particularly on salvation, healing, and spiritual gifts, which resonate with the lived experiences of many Nigerians. Anderson (2004) notes that Pentecostal evangelists in Nigeria frequently utilise biblical narratives of miracles and divine interventions to draw people into the faith, aligning their messages with the felt needs of their audience. This approach has proven effective in converting large

numbers of people and establishing new congregations. The Bible classes and teachings that led to the growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria in the 20th century are notable for their intense focus on prayer, biblical interpretation, and the experience of divine intervention, including healing and faith-based living (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997). These teachings significantly shaped the emergence of the Pentecostal movement. Below are some examples of Bible classes and teachings in Nigeria.

In Lagos, one of the key figures was Pastor Samuel Gbadebo Adegboyega, a civil servant who later became a leader in the Faith Tabernacle Congregation (FTC) and, eventually, The Apostolic Church (TAC). Adegboyega's biblical studies were shaped by his participation in evangelical revival campaigns led by Bishop James Johnson at St. Paul's Anglican Church, Breadfruit Street, Lagos. These teachings emphasised the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the efficacy of prayer through faith in Jesus Christ (Adegboyega 1978, 1–2). His later involvement in the Faith Tabernacle Congregation in Ibadan broadened his knowledge of faith healing and further solidified his commitment to prayer and biblical truth (Church Document 1979).

Another prime example of Bible-based growth in Pentecostalism is the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, which began as a small Bible study group led by Williams Folorunso Kumuyi. In 1973, while a lecturer at the University of Lagos, Kumuyi would gather a small group of 15 university students in his living room for Bible study. The group focused on deepening members' understanding of the scriptures and applying its teachings to their lives. Over time, this simple Bible study grew into a formal congregation, leading to the establishment of the Deeper Life Bible Church in 1982. The church's emphasis on holiness, rigorous Bible study, and personal devotion was inspired by early Christian practices, where teaching and community formation were central to the faith (Fatokun 2006).

This method of evangelism—through informal Bible study, leading to the formal establishment of a religious group—reflects the patterns seen in the Early Church. In the book of Acts, we see the apostles regularly gathering in homes to teach, pray, and fellowship (Acts 2:46). Kumuyi's living room Bible study echoes this tradition, highlighting the continued importance of small-group learning in the growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria.

In Ijebu-Ode, Joseph Sadare and a group of Anglicans began to hold regular Bible classes in response to social crises and illnesses, particularly the influenza epidemic. Sadare and others formed the Precious Stone Society, emphasising faith healing and biblical interpretation. The group became known for its prayer meetings and Bible studies, leading to members' eventual excommunication from the Anglican Church due to doctrinal differences regarding divine healing (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997). These activities catalysed the Pentecostal movement in the region (Adeleye 2010; Adeleye et al. 2024).

In Ilesa, John Aluko Babatope, initially an Anglican priest, established informal Bible study groups. He was known for his focus on faith healing, the efficacy of prayer, and biblical literacy. Babatope's Bible classes expanded throughout Ijesaland, and he eventually founded the first Bible school within the Apostolic Church in the region. His teachings inspired future leaders in the Pentecostal movement and contributed to the establishment of Sunday School and formal Bible training programmes in Nigeria (Adeleye 2022; Church Document 1993). These Bible classes and teachings across different locations created fertile ground for the growth of Pentecostal Christianity by emphasising personal faith, divine healing, and Holy Spirit-led prayer, elements that remain integral to Pentecostal theology today.

### *Lay Leadership and Doctrinal Purity*

The role of lay leadership in the proliferation of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is another important factor tied to Bible-based teachings. Many Pentecostal churches encourage the development of lay leaders who are deeply grounded in Scripture. This practice reflects the Early Church's reliance on lay ministers, who were chosen based on their understanding of the Word and their ability to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). Nigerian Pentecostal churches have adopted a similar model, where lay leaders are trained in Bible schools or through study groups and are subsequently entrusted with significant responsibilities in the church.

This emphasis on lay leadership has contributed to the rapid multiplication of Pentecostal churches, particularly in rural and underserved areas. According to Fatokun (2006), the decentralised nature of leadership within Nigerian Pentecostalism allows for greater flexibility in church planting and evangelism. Lay leaders, once equipped with a sound understanding of the Bible, are empowered to lead small groups, oversee local congregations, and engage in evangelistic outreach, thereby extending the reach of the church.

The centrality of Bible-based teachings also ensures that doctrinal purity is maintained across the Pentecostal movement. Many Nigerian Pentecostal leaders emphasise the importance of adhering to scriptural authority as a safeguard against false teachings and doctrinal errors. Adeleye et al. (2024) argue that the focus on Bible-based doctrine in Nigerian Pentecostalism reflects a continuation of early Christian principles, where scriptural fidelity was paramount in defining the faith community's beliefs and practices. Regular Bible study helps to ensure that both leaders and members are rooted in orthodox Christian teachings, minimising the potential for heretical deviations.

### *Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Scriptural Interpretation*

Another important aspect of Bible-based teachings in Nigerian Pentecostalism is the distinctive way Pentecostals interpret Scripture, often referred to as Pentecostal hermeneutics. This method of interpretation strongly emphasises the experiential dimensions of faith, such as the workings of the Holy Spirit, healing, prophecy, and

deliverance, which are interpreted as continuations of biblical experiences. Kalu (2008) points out that Pentecostal preachers in Nigeria frequently draw parallels between biblical stories and the lived realities of their congregants, making the Bible accessible and relevant to their immediate contexts.

Pentecostal hermeneutics, as described by Anderson (2004), allows for a dynamic interaction between the text of Scripture and the life experiences of the believer. This experiential approach to biblical interpretation is particularly attractive to many Nigerians, who often seek spiritual solutions to socio-economic and health challenges. As such, the Bible becomes not only a theological text but also a practical guide for everyday life. This practical engagement with Scripture, coupled with the charismatic expressions of faith, has been a major driver of Pentecostal growth in Nigeria.

### *Bible-Based Preaching and Spiritual Authority*

Pentecostal preaching in Nigeria is heavily grounded in Scripture, with many sermons drawing directly from biblical texts. Preachers often use the Bible to assert spiritual authority and offer solutions to the existential problems facing their congregants. As Hackett (2001) observes, Pentecostal sermons in Nigeria frequently centre on themes of spiritual warfare, divine favour, and supernatural breakthroughs, all of which are rooted in biblical promises. This form of Bible-based preaching resonates deeply with the spiritual expectations of Nigerian Pentecostals, many of whom turn to the Bible for guidance on how to navigate the complexities of life.

The centrality of Bible-based preaching also lends Pentecostal leaders a sense of spiritual authority, which they wield in both the religious and social spheres. Adeboye, Kumuyi, and Oyedepo—three of Nigeria’s most prominent Pentecostal leaders and others—frequently invoke biblical passages to affirm their spiritual mandates and direct their followers in matters of faith and daily living (Gifford 1998). This reliance on Scripture enhances the credibility of Pentecostal leadership and reinforces the church’s authority in the eyes of its members.

Bible-based teachings play a crucial role in the growth and proliferation of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Through Bible schools, study groups, and lay leadership, Pentecostal churches have managed to sustain a strong connection to the Scriptures, fostering doctrinal purity and ensuring the continued expansion of the movement. The dynamic interpretation of the Bible, coupled with charismatic expressions of faith, makes Pentecostalism an attractive and powerful force in Nigerian Christianity. The emphasis on Bible-based preaching further consolidates the authority of Pentecostal leaders, ensuring that the movement continues to grow in both size and influence.

### **A Critique of the Rise and Growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria**

The spread of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria has been closely connected with the preaching of the gospel and adherence to certain foundational practices of the Early

Church. Much like the disciples of old, early Pentecostals in Nigeria went about proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ, emphasising his mighty power and transformative ability. A significant factor contributing to the spread of Pentecostalism was the emergence of Bible expositors committed to teaching sound biblical doctrine, which resonated with Nigeria's young elites and intellectuals (Pew Research Centre 2006; Ngwoke 2024). Evangelists, inspired by their newfound faith, ventured into various communities across Nigeria, fulfilling the biblical mandate of global evangelisation (Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 1:8). This period of evangelistic fervour coincided with a wave of spiritual revival, where individuals delivered from various forms of bondage and healed from afflictions were eager to share their testimony of the Gospel.

The success of Pentecostalism in Nigeria can also be attributed to its emphasis on shared Christian fundamentals, including the centrality of the Bible, the name of Jesus Christ, and the cross as a symbol of Christ's atoning sacrifice. These elements, shared across various Christian denominations, have facilitated a form of unity in diversity, where no single denomination can claim a monopoly over essential Christian practices. Scholars have argued that this unity, grounded in humility, love, and a commitment to community development, has the potential to foster a spirit of justice and hope, making the Pentecostal church a template for positive social transformation in Nigeria (Mphikitso 2010; Ngutu 2021; Ngwoke 2024). This connection between faith and social responsibility is critical, as Pentecostal churches often emphasise not only spiritual growth but also the well-being of their communities.

Moreover, regular Bible teaching has exposed Pentecostal believers to key biblical doctrines, including the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9) and the necessity of evangelism (Matthew 28:19). This democratisation of ministry is a hallmark of Pentecostalism, where lay members are encouraged to engage in evangelism, spiritual gifts, and leadership roles without needing formal ordination. The concept that "every believer is a priest" has helped address the shortage of trained clergy, as local believers take on leadership roles within house churches and small fellowships (Gaiya 2002). These decentralised, community-oriented structures have contributed to the movement's resilience and ability to adapt to different social contexts, particularly in rural areas where traditional ecclesiastical hierarchies may not have a strong presence.

The role of Bible teaching and knowledge in Pentecostalism's rise is central to its growth trajectory. The phrase "From Bible class to Bible school; Bible school to Bible church" captures the essence of this progression. For instance, Babatope (1875–1950) in Ilesa, Southwestern Nigeria, exemplifies this transition. Babatope embraced the gospel and began teaching Bible classes that emphasised holy living and faith healing, drawing from passages like James 5:13–16. His classes eventually led to the formation of an informal Bible school, which attracted followers and laid the groundwork for Pentecostalism in Ijesaland and beyond (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997). This grassroots approach to ministry allowed for the multiplication of Pentecostal churches and ensured

that biblical knowledge was accessible to all, further fuelling the movement's expansion.

However, the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria has not been without challenges. The rise of unregistered Bible teaching classes, deliverance ministries, and gospel music ministries has led to concerns about the fragmentation of the church and the commercialisation of spiritual practices (Ukah 2003). While these developments reflect the creative energy and entrepreneurial spirit within Pentecostalism, they also raise questions about accountability and theological coherence. The proliferation of these ministries can sometimes blur the lines between genuine spiritual leadership and opportunistic ventures.

Furthermore, the socioeconomic context in which Pentecostalism grew cannot be ignored. The movement's appeal to marginalised communities, especially in urban areas, has been well-documented. Pentecostal churches have often provided a sense of hope and upward mobility for individuals facing economic hardship, offering not only spiritual deliverance but also social and economic empowerment (Marshall-Fratani 1998; Aluko and Peter 2023). This has led to the rise of prosperity theology within certain Pentecostal circles, where material success is seen as a sign of divine favour. While this aspect of Pentecostalism has drawn significant numbers, it has also attracted criticism for promoting a transactional view of faith, where wealth and success are prioritised over the gospel's deeper spiritual and ethical dimensions (Kalu 2008).

Moreover, the use of mass media, especially radio, television, and social media, has played a pivotal role in the expansion of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Churches like the Living Faith Church Worldwide (aka Winners Chapel), Believers' Loveworld (aka Christ Embassy), Deeper Christian Life Ministry, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God have effectively utilised these platforms to reach a broader audience, making their message accessible to millions beyond their immediate congregations (Hackett 1998). The media has thus amplified the impact of Pentecostalism, allowing its leaders to reach individuals across Nigeria's diverse ethnic and linguistic groups.

The rise and growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria are multifaceted, rooted in a combination of sound biblical teaching, spiritual revival, and the ability to adapt to Nigeria's socio-political and economic realities. However, the movement's rapid expansion, while positive in many respects, also presents challenges in terms of maintaining theological integrity and addressing issues of commercialisation. As Pentecostalism continues to shape the religious landscape of Nigeria, it remains a powerful force for both spiritual and social transformation.

## Conclusion

The rapid rise of Pentecostalism in Nigeria can be traced back to the foundational principles of the Early Church, particularly the emphasis on prayer, the power of the



Holy Spirit, and the experience of divine intervention. Throughout this study, we have explored how these elements, which were central to the growth of the Early Church after Pentecost, have found continuity in the practices and beliefs of Nigerian Pentecostalism. Key aspects such as the Resurrection, Pentecost, and the apostolic witness have served as theological cornerstones that shaped both early Christian and modern Pentecostal growth. The Early Church's witness of the Resurrection not only solidified the faith of early believers but also served as a testament to the power of divine intervention—an element that remains central to Pentecostal theology. Similarly, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost, which empowered believers to speak in tongues, heal the sick, and prophesy, mirrors the spiritual gifts emphasised in Nigerian Pentecostalism.

As the study has demonstrated, these early biblical experiences were mirrored in the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria through teachings and Bible classes in Lagos, Ijebu-Ode, Ilesa, and later in the Deeper Christian Life Ministry. Just as the apostles in the Early Church were driven by the Great Commission to spread the gospel and build communities of faith, so too have Pentecostal leaders like Samuel Gbadebo Adegboyega, Joseph Sadare, John Aluko Babatope, and William Folorunso Kumuyi been inspired to teach biblical truths, encourage faith healing, and lead through prayer and the Holy Spirit. The continuity of these spiritual themes—resurrection faith, Spirit empowerment, and the mission to evangelise—has driven the growth of Pentecostalism, establishing it as one of the dominant expressions of Christianity in Nigeria today.

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