



# SIGNS & WONDERS

**WHY PENTECOSTALISM**  
IS THE WORLD'S FASTEST GROWING FAITH

**PAUL ALEXANDER**

FOREWORD BY MARTIN E. MARTY



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Paul Alexander

*Foreword by*  
Martin E. Marty

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*To all who allow the Spirit to guide  
them into paths of peace.*



# FOREWORD



Since I am what many Pentecostals would call an “outsider” to their cultures and theologies, I have to introduce myself. For over fifty years I have been teaching and writing books and articles about Christianity (and sometimes other faiths). Most of the research and writing has dealt with North American Christianity, and includes some accounts of the rise and development of Pentecostalism and various charismatic movements. More recently my attention turned to a larger scene as I wrote a smallish book, *The Christian World: A Global History*. In the latter chapters of the book, as sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America became the focus, Pentecostalism—though I had to treat it all too briefly—showed up as a face of the future of much of Christianity. One cannot deal fairly with twenty-first century Christian history without giving an ever-greater place to Pentecostalism.

Dazzled as I am by stories of Pentecostal growth and success, I remain outside the movement. Being the “other” at many kinds of Christian gatherings is not a new situation. There are 38,000 Christian denominations at latest account, but every few minutes that number changes. While many of these denominations represent families of churches or are parts of coalitions, councils, or partnerships, the number of Christian phenomena remains almost incomprehensibly huge. When I attended and reported on the Second Vatican Council, though I share the

basic faith and the creeds and stories, I was a “non-Catholic” presence. In the Eastern world, the Orthodox think of me as “the other,” and, vice versa I have to add. When I am part of a convention or congress self-labeled “Evangelical,” I get introduced as “this year’s non-Evangelical representative.” I respond by noting that ordinarily I am the only person in the room who belongs to a church body with the word “Evangelical” in it—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

That may be more autobiography than you need or want, but I hope those paragraphs help set the stage for what follows, and can serve as a kind of invitation to an audience that does not share all the presuppositions of the actors on stage. Similarly, I hope that those readers who are Pentecostal will remember that their word and world and workings need translation—which is what Paul Alexander’s book offers—if that audience is to make some sense of Pentecostalism. My guide in these matters is the philosopher Spinoza, who wrote that when he set out to understand complex phenomena, he made a sedulous effort not to laugh, not to cry, not to denounce, not to judge, but to understand. In that spirit I have read much Pentecostal literature, met with Pentecostal scholars, attended gatherings, always sympathetically, but never to the point that I am led to shared convictions.

Perhaps some winced when I described myself as an “outsider.” The Pentecostal reach, scope, and mission is generous and expansive, and in many ways it may not want to condemn anyone to outsiderhood or the status of the stranger. One can almost hear a hearty “y’all come!” from Pentecostals and a quiet narrative base invitation from Professor Alexander. What I meant by stressing the “stranger” status is to remind readers of the hermeneutical situation. By hermeneutics here is meant an endeavor to understand a phenomenon—and Pentecostalism is certainly a phenomenon!—by observing carefully, parking one’s presuppositions at the door insofar as that is possible—and by being aware of how such differing presuppositions color what is said and done.

To take an illustration of ecumenical importance. Christians believe in baptism—I am speaking of what Pentecostals would call “the first baptism,” with a second one to follow—but they bring different interpretations of the biblical narratives, commands, and promises. Give all the biblical texts that allude to baptism to a Christian from an infant-baptizing community on one hand and the same text to one who believes that only older children and adults should be baptized by immersion. Give the same text to believers in “Catholic” and “mainline” Protestant traditions who baptize in various forms, though always with water. Have some of each attend the same seminary, the same conferences, the same gatherings, and let them then converse. A year goes by, and then a lifetime. Some from either camp may convert to the other, and all will profit from joint study. But assumptions that participants bring color what they find and how they interpret it. It is not that only one set is prejudiced and the other not. Nor, let me hasten to add, is there seldom movement from one camp to another, though conversions do occur; how else could Pentecostal movements gain new millions, not all of them babies!

It is urgent that Christians everywhere work (and are graced) to understand “the other.” In their various bodies they make up one-third of the population of the world, and pray and engage in mission to gain more to the fold. If they are ignorant of each other, mistrustful of others, unwilling to keep each other in prayer, grieve at the losses of others, or fail to celebrate the joys and victories of others, they harm the Christian cause and stand in the way of the movement of the spirit. Does this spirit of understanding and welcome undercut the efforts to clarify and expound the faith? Do friendly reaches across boundaries mean that conviction has to be lessened, and that everything has to turn soft and mushy? Not at all. Whoever confesses participation in the Body of Christ, and who celebrates “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” can turn his or her back on others or fail to accept the gift and share the tasks with others, misses out on so much and thwarts the movement of the spirit.

A committed Lutheran, I am also a committed ecumenist. Some would say that it is important to draw boundaries. We all know, tragically, that there are boundaries between and among Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. These can become barriers on both and all sides of these sects, and schisms, spite, and even hatred can rule. Asked why I am curious about Pentecostalism, am awed by its appeal (especially in the “poor world,” where growth is so impressive), and beguiled by the diversity it represents, I answer, “for the same reason I am interested and hope to feel welcome in the circles of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and other parts of the church which are not my natural home.”

So I urge the reading of Paul Alexander’s *Signs and Wonders* as a second-best introduction to Pentecostalism, the first being “being there.” He offers a clear narrative line, issues helpful explanations, and gives something of the experience one recognizes at Pentecostal events or in Pentecostal ventures. While I have studied the Pentecostal experience as it has been analyzed by biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, historians, psychologists, anthropologists, phenomenologists, and liturgiologists—what a cluster of scholarly “sects” we have engendered and enjoyed—most of them keep the reader or observer at a distance. They tend to be “objective” and “reductionist,” meaning that they “reduce” what they are studying to something else. (So Pentecostalism is reduced to something being explicable as a movement of the poor or, formerly, the uneducated, or the psychologically needy.) Alexander is not “objective,” though he is fair-minded, and he is not a “reductionist,” because he takes Pentecostalism seriously on its members’ own terms. That is why one may learn, or why I learned, much from it.

Not that I left my analytical hat and skeptical spectacles in the next room as I read. “Try the spirits!” is a biblical command and an injunction to historians, who are not to be gullible, nor to accept every conflicting thing because somebody utters it or claims it. So I have to say that I winced in some stories,

winked when some explanations asked too much of me, kept my fingers crossed as I turned pages—and yet was strangely moved and, again, figuratively taken by the hand and walked through Pentecostalism in the Bible, in Christian history, around the globe. The book is simple but not simplistic, moving as it does between technical subjects made comprehensible and obvious topics rendered subtly.

In a couple of cases the author talks about Pentecostal swindles or scandals; there have been enough of these to embarrass the movement. Still, when hundreds of millions of Christians are part of it, one has to expect some shocks. Think of the Catholic-clergy sexual scandals, also a blight on a part of the church which numbers a billion faithful and semi-faithful. In a couple of cases he seems unconvinced of the authenticity when something drastically beyond the norm occurs, as in the case of some healing. Yet at other times he reports sympathetically and shows that he regards a phenomenon as valid and compelling. He is especially good at accounting for Pentecostal surges and successes. I might have liked some more attention to the works of mercy, and sometimes of justice, which characterize Pentecostal congregational and individual lives in many places. Maybe they'll receive their due in a Volume II.

For those of us who keep our guard up as we hear extravagant claims, it is valuable to read someone who drops his guard. In the nineteenth century it was said of a skeptical modernist theologian that it is frustrating to be told in advance what to believe. Alexander does not frustrate, and allows the believers to speak for themselves as they witness to and manifest what will strike fair-minded “other” Christians as signs of the Spirit.

Martin E. Marty



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This book was not my idea, and sometimes it takes someone else to see the possibility of a book in you that you never knew you had. Sheryl Fullerton has that gift, and I will be forever grateful. Sheryl is an amazing executive editor at Jossey-Bass who said no to me when I pitched a book about Pentecostals, peacemaking, and social justice and in the same breath asked, “But why is Pentecostalism such a fast-growing faith?” I offered her a few thoughts, and she said, “Write a book about that.” Thank you, Sheryl.

I never could have written this book if I didn’t have the heritage of being raised in the vibrant (and sometimes odd) Pentecostal faith. So I gladly acknowledge all the folks in the Sedan Assembly of God in Sedan, Kansas, where I spent thousands of church services growing up, and Wheat State Camp where I went every summer. The churches, college, and seminary I attended shaped me into a born and bred Pentecostal. Even though I rejected Pentecostalism and distanced myself from it during my twenties, I am thankful for the inspiring and empowering aspects of this global movement that the process of writing this book helped me discover anew.

I am also deeply indebted to people at Azusa Pacific University for the flexibility and schedule they provided for me so that I could write, and I especially appreciate the conversations with my colleagues that strengthened this book. Special thanks to Arlene Sanchez-Walsh and Don Thorsen for particularly helpful insights.

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My family helped me before I ever started writing and then offered advice, memories, critiques, and inspiration all the way through the process. I so thoroughly appreciate the love and prayers of Grandma and Grandpa Alexander, Grandma and Grandpa Smith, Grandma and Grandpa Bird, Grandma Velma, Mom, Dad, Mark, Joy, Breleigh, Judah, Levi, Rodney, Betty, Ronda, Rick, Teri, Jason, Jorilyn, and Raegan. I'm glad we're family.

The highlight of my writing days at home was having my children occasionally peek around the door of my office-bedroom with a grin and announce, "Only two more hours and you have to quit working." And without fail they would show up at 5:00 P.M. on the dot to pull me into the backyard to play tag or into the living room in hopes of some video game time. We tried not to miss any bike rides, library Saturdays, or games of baseball or Dinotopia to get this book done, but sometimes a trip home from Sea World included me pulling out the laptop in the car and finishing up a chapter while Deborah drove and Nathan and Kharese read. So I want to say a humongous thank-you to my children for bringing me sandwiches, drawing pictures for me to sticky-tack around my desk, and never ever letting me forget that they are much more important than this book.

Finally, I happily acknowledge the patience, encouragement, and stimulating insights of my wife and muse, Deborah. Whenever I would read a passage to her, she'd spout off some witty remark that often sparked a new idea, and she graciously helped create space for me to reflect. This book would not be possible without her. Thanks.



# SIGNS & WONDERS



# CHAPTER 1

## JUST ASK: A WORLD OF MIRACLES AWAITS

Expect a new miracle every day.

—Oral Roberts

When I was a kid, growing up on a farm in Kansas, my younger brother, Mark, and I loved to swim in our pond out in the pasture. We would jump and dive off the dock into the deep, cold water, swim back, and climb up the old aluminum ladder that we had stuck in the mud and leaned against the rickety pier. We had truck and tractor inner tubes we floated on and a canoe we would paddle around in.

When I turned twelve, I think it was, I got a new waterproof digital watch for my birthday. One hot summer afternoon not long after that, Mark pushed an inner tube out away from the dock for me to dive through. As I dived through the tube, the valve stem caught my watch and ripped it off my wrist. My heart sank; I swam back to the dock and told Mark what had happened. I then started diving to the bottom of the pond, which was more than eight feet deep at the end of the dock, running my hands through the mud, trying to find that watch.

After diving several times with no luck, I was exhausted, frustrated, and ready to give up and go back to the house. Mark, being a good little Pentecostal boy, suggested that we pray. I didn't feel like it, but being a good Pentecostal big brother, I agreed. Mark prayed a very simple prayer: "Dear God, please help us find Paul's

watch. In the name of Jesus, amen.” He raised up his little head and looked me right in the face, grinning, with his eyes sparkling as if it were Christmas morning. He suggested that he swim back out with the inner tube and put it in the exact same spot for me to dive through again. Doubting that this would work or that we’d ever find the watch, I nevertheless directed him from the dock—a bit farther out, a bit to the right—until he had placed the inner tube perfectly. I backed up, ran down the dock, dived through the inner tube, and then swam to the bottom of the pond with my eyes squeezed shut and my hands spread wide open until they hit the cold squishy mud. My right palm landed directly on my watch; I didn’t even have to move my hand around to find it. I grasped it tightly and swam back to the surface, hardly believing what had just happened. Mark and I ran back to the house and talked all over each other telling our mom.

That story has become a little legend in our family. But legend though it may be, it’s not an odd or unbelievable event in the lives of Pentecostals. Like Mark, most Pentecostals expect things like this to happen and love to tell stories about the miracles and healings. Just this past Christmas, I told the tale of my lost-and-found watch to my in-laws in Texas while we were all sitting around the dinner table eating stew and cornbread. Ronda, my sister-in-law, immediately said, “Remember the bone spur on my knee that disappeared?” and Betty, my mother-in-law, interjected, “And don’t forget the burns on Deborah’s leg that were healed.” Grandma then told about the time that Grandpa laid his hands on their van and prayed for it one morning—which was the morning they were almost killed by an out-of-control eighteen-wheeler “with smoke boiling everywhere” that “screeched within two feet of the back of our van.” When asked why he had prayed that morning, Grandpa replied, “I just felt impressed to do it. Never done it before and never done it since.” Betty then told us about when her uncle had a spider bite so bad that he swelled up and was going to die. There was no doctor, so his father prayed for the boy, who was healed immediately.