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The Spirit and suffrage: The process of electing ecclesial leaders from the Early Church to contemporary Pentecostal churches

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Background: The selection of ecclesial leaders has historically combined spiritual approaches with procedural systems of suffrage, producing selection procedures that are both pneumatic and institutional. From episcopal elections in the Early Church to contemporary African Pentecostal practices, the process of choosing bishops and similar leaders reflects an interplay between divine inspiration and human-made interventions.

Objectives: This article examines ecclesial elections by comparing patristic sources, particularly the 3rd-century Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus, with the Constitutions on electoral practices of the Church of Pentecost and the Assemblies of God Ghana. It seeks to show how spiritual authority and electoral procedures combine to produce legitimate leaders.

Methods: Grounded in political theology and Max Weber's sociology of authority, the study employs comparative textual analysis of patristic writings and contemporary Pentecostal Constitutional documents, interpreting ecclesial elections as both sacred and secular rituals.

Results: The analysis reveals that the Early Christians and Ghanaian Pentecostals rely on the Holy Spirit in selecting leaders while simultaneously employing consensus-building, negotiation, lobbying and competitive suffrage. Election procedures, therefore, adopt a hybrid practice in which spiritual and institutional procedures jointly build legitimacy.

Conclusion: Ecclesial elections function as theological-political enactments of governance rather than purely spiritual or administrative mechanisms for leadership succession.

Contribution: By placing patristic ecclesiology in dialogue with Ghanaian Pentecostal practice, the study offers new insights into the dynamic continuity of legitimacy, authority and accountability within contemporary African Pentecostal Christian expression.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; election; Church of Pentecost; Assemblies of God; Apostolic Traditions.

Introduction

The election of ecclesial leaders in Christian history has rarely been a purely spiritual act. Even within early Catholic and Orthodox traditions, episcopal appointments drew clergy, laity and civic power into the same arena, so that the practical demands of consent tested theological ideas of vocation, coalition and order (Chadwick 2001:45–48). However, this history complicates later portrayals of early Christian unity by showing that discernment was never disembodied; it was carried out through procedures and public negotiations that could fracture the church (Rapp 2005:2–5), a process this work takes into account in the electoral process of the 3rd century Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus.

Moving back to the 1st-century church in the New Testament, the roots of hybrid interaction between spiritual discernment and communal procedure already existed. In Acts 1:12–26, the Jerusalem community selected a successor to Judas through qualified nomination, communal prayer and the casting of lots. The narrative presents leadership discernment as neither purely charismatic nor merely administrative but as a spiritually interpreted communal process. Likewise, in Acts 13:2, the Holy Spirit instructed the church at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul for missionary work. The response was enacted corporately through prayer, laying on of hands and communal commissioning. Divine direction, therefore, operated through communal

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process rather than bypassing it. Nonetheless, recognising that the 1st century church and the 3rd century Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus both attest to contested church elections does not, in itself, resolve a deeper ecclesiological question. That is, how Christian communities continue to speak credibly of divine guidance when leadership selection must pass through human procedures. This unresolved tension forms the conceptual bridge between early Christian practice and contemporary Pentecostal electoral governance.

Therefore, Pentecostal churches in Ghana function not only as spiritual communities, but also as public institutions, which are involved in the election of their leaders. Pentecostal churches in Ghana, as a term, are a subdivision of African Pentecostal Christians. This refers specifically to Christians belonging to denominations rooted in the classical Pentecostal tradition, emerging from the Azusa Street Revival of 1906, characterised by Spirit baptism, glossolalia, divine healing and pneumatological emphases (Kalu 2008:3–7). Both the Church of Pentecost (CoP) and the Assemblies of God, Ghana (AG-Ghana), belong to this tradition. The term differs from African Independent Churches (AICs), which are a broader category encompassing African-initiated movements, including churches such as the Ethiopian-type and Zionist type, the Musama Disco Christo Church (MDCC) and the African Faith Tabernacle Church. These AICs often integrate African cosmological and ritual elements into ecclesial practice (Anderson 2001:11–17; Meyer 2004:447–451). African Pentecostal Christians may share with AICs a commitment to African ecclesial agency, but differ in doctrinal genealogy, formal constitutional structures and explicit Pentecostal pneumatology (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:86–91; Gifford 2004:3–8; Asamoah-Gyadu 2013). The term delimits the analytic scope of this study rather than ranking these traditions against one another.

Therefore, within this context of Pentecostal churches in Ghana, two denominations are particularly significant, namely the CoP and the AG-Ghana. They are among the largest Pentecostal bodies in Ghana, and both have codified constitutions governing leadership qualifications, voting structures and succession. For example, the CoP constitution requires that the Chairman should be a minister 'not below the office of Apostle or Prophet' and must be elected through nomination by the Executive Council and approval by a General Council through secret ballot (The CoP 2016:38–39). Voting is explicitly regulated through majoritarian thresholds, requiring two-thirds approval, and subject to repeat balloting if consensus fails (The CoP 2016:39).

Similarly, the AG-Ghana Constitution positions the General Council as 'the highest decision and policy-making body' (AG-Ghana Constitution 2016 :18), and sets out detailed governance structures involving executive presbytery, regional councils, district councils and elected officers (AG-Ghana Constitution 2016:19–21). Leadership appointments, ordination and administrative oversight are located within formalised institutional frameworks that emphasise procedural accountability (AG-Ghana Constitution 2016:19–20). However, these church constitutional procedures are not merely administrative. They are the church's attempt to translate calling into a form that can survive disagreement, where thresholds, councils and ballots become tools for turning contested preferences into an outcome that can be received as legitimate.

These organisational arrangements complicate portrayals of Pentecostal leadership as the product of charismatic spontaneity alone. They illustrate that even Spirit-centred ecclesial communities adopt bureaucratic systems to regulate the distribution of authority, manage conflict and secure legitimacy. This raises a theoretical problem: *If Pentecostalism is a movement built on claims of divine immediacy, why do its institutions so often depend on bureaucratic mechanisms of voting, nomination, thresholds and constitutional regulation?* Scholars suggest that the answers lie in the need to transform an unstable charismatic authority into stable organisational power (Robbins 2004:127–130; Weber 1978:246–254). This tension between charisma and bureaucracy is especially pronounced in Pentecostal ecclesiology, where spiritual language coexists with managerial practices. Elections are portrayed as 'Spirit-led' processes; nevertheless, their outcomes are mediated through procedures such as secret ballots, nominations, eligibility criteria and constitutional safeguards (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:86–90). The result is neither a collapse into secular politics nor a triumph of unmediated spiritual decision-making; rather, an ongoing negotiation of competing logics of legitimacy.

These dynamics are embedded in a wider socio-political landscape. Studies of African Pentecostalism demonstrate that growing public visibility has intensified expectations that churches will exhibit ethical governance and transparent leadership practices (Kgatle 2024:122). Conversely, political significance also heightens competition, lobbying, ethnic considerations and factional alignments within church elections (Haynes 2017:5–8). As such, the religious–political interface shapes both the conduct and meaning of ecclesial elections.

The central problem is therefore not whether churches are spiritual or political, but how they construct mechanisms through which the Spirit is believed to speak, and how those mechanisms are embedded in organisational structures that enable collective decision-making. By analysing ecclesial elections as hybrid forms of 'Spirit-bureaucracy', the article engages ongoing debates in political theology concerning how religious authority is constituted and sustained in institutional contexts (eds. Cavanaugh, Bailey & Hovey 2020:15–19). The study is grounded in Weberian sociology, political theology and African Pentecostal studies, enabling a nuanced understanding of how churches construct and negotiate authority through ritualised practices of leadership selection. This article, therefore, examines the politics and theology of church elections by placing three case studies into constructive dialogue: (1) the Early Christian episcopal

elections (3rd century Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus), (2) the CoP, and (3) the AG-Ghana.

Research methods and design

Church electoral systems

Rather than assuming that electoral practices in Christian settings operate as neutral administrative mechanisms or purely pneumatic discernment, the study treats them as textually mediated constructions of ecclesial order, sacramental authority and institutional rationality (eds. Cavanaugh et al. 2020:15–19; Swinton & Mowat 2006:21–23). Formal ecclesial documents encode normative visions of authority, koinonia and governance; the research relies on textual analysis to interpret how leadership is discursively organised and theologically legitimated. A qualitative, interpretive and comparative design underpins the research. Comparative methodology is employed not to determine causal progression or evolutionary development among ecclesial systems, but to generate 'thick description' that illuminates the symbolic, ritual and theological meanings embedded in ecclesial texts (Geertz 1973:5–6). In line with Swinton and Mowat's argument that qualitative theological research must interrogate how communities construct meanings of identity and authority (Swinton & Mowat 2006:33), this study approaches ecclesial texts as performative theological artefacts, rather than as neutral institutional records.

Three cases were selected through purposive sampling, based on their theological significance, documentary richness and analytic suitability for interpreting ecclesial discourse on leadership. The Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (early 3rd century) was chosen because it represents one of the earliest extant ecclesiastical manuals prescribing procedures for the selection, examination and liturgical ordination of bishops, presbyters and deacons (Bradshaw 2002:112–118; Stewart-Sykes 2001:35–39; McGrath 2013). Scholars have emphasised that the Apostolic Tradition functions as a normative text articulating a post-apostolic ecclesiology that sought to stabilise communal identity and doctrinal coherence through episcopal office (Brent 2009:90–94; Rapp 2005:1–6).

The Constitution of the CoP was also selected because it codifies leadership within a contemporary Pentecostal denomination through constitutional rationality, apostolic identity and pneumatological discourse, reflecting the institutionalisation of charismatic authority within African Pentecostal ecclesiology (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:86–91). The constitution of the AG-Ghana was included because it represents a structurally differentiated ecclesial polity grounded in representation governance, stewardship and doctrinal accountability, drawing on a transnational denominational tradition that integrates ecclesial order and agency into formal systems of oversight (AG-Ghana Constitution 2016; McGee 2018:221–228).

The study relied on two categories of data, that is: (1) primary ecclesial documents, and (2) secondary scholarly literature. These texts were treated not simply as administrative records but as theological artefacts encoding ecclesiological assumptions about charisma, vocation, liturgical authority and institutional order (Bradshaw 2002:115–118). Documentary analysis was selected because textual sources in ecclesial contexts simultaneously reflect normative theology, organisational logic and ritual imagination, and therefore constitute a critical site for the examination of ecclesial governance (Smith 1998:41–44). In interpreting ecclesial texts, the study assumes that leadership is discursively constructed through theological language, narrative framing and ritual prescription, and that textual prescriptions function as theological representations of ecclesial self-understanding (eds. Cavanaugh et al. 2020:15–19). Comparison was directed towards illuminating how different ecclesial systems conceptualise leadership within distinctive theological and organisational horizons, without evaluating their empirical functioning.

Religious authority

Political theology, as a disciplinary field, names the critical inquiry into the constitutive relationship between theological convictions and political order, contesting the liberal assumption that religion and politics inhabit separate, self-enclosed domains. The term entered modern scholarly discourse through Carl Schmitt's (1985:26) controversial observation that all significant concepts of modern political theory are secularised theological concepts, a claim that has since generated sustained theological debate across Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal traditions (eds. Cavanaugh et al. 2020:3–7; O'Donovan 1996:3–7). Political theology is not, therefore, simply the application of religious language to political questions. Still, it is the deeper argument that questions of sovereignty, authority, legitimacy and governance are always already shaped by theological imaginaries, whether acknowledged or suppressed. Within the African Christian context, this framing carries particular weight. Katongole (2011:23–28) presses this further, insisting that African political theology must reckon with the colonial inheritance that shaped, and continues to distort, the governance structures of African churches themselves. It is within this tradition that this study examines Pentecostal ecclesial elections as theologically saturated enactments of power rather than neutral administrative procedures.

Within African Christianity, political theology provides a crucial lens because churches exercise considerable social authority, moral influence and institutional power, often rivalling political actors (Haynes 2017:1–12). In this context, processes of leadership selection become theological enactments of communal sovereignty, not neutral administrative procedures.

The literature highlights that African Pentecostalism has shifted away from a political devotionalism towards explicit engagement with civic life, public discourse and political mediation (Gifford 2004:186–191; Okyere-Manu 2020:18–22). However, scholarship has focused primarily on external

political involvement, such as voting, advocacy or public morality, while paying far less attention to how internal ecclesial processes operationalise political theological ideas through election, succession and institutional governance.

There is limited work analysing how Pentecostal churches theologically justify and institutionalise governance systems, especially regarding elections, legitimacy and authority. This study, therefore, applies political theology to examine elections as theologically infused practices of power, grounded in divine discourse yet mediated by institutional procedure.

Pentecostalism as public religion

Research on African Pentecostalism consistently demonstrates that Pentecostal churches have become influential actors in national politics, civil society and public morality (Gifford 2004:185–197; Haynes 2017:9–12). Scholars argue that Pentecostalism shapes political subjectivities, moral dispositions and civic participation, often exercising authority beyond doctrinal boundaries (Kgatle 2024:122; Okyere-Manu 2020:18–20).

These developments complicate church leadership, because leaders now function as both spiritual overseers and public institutional actors. Consequently, church elections are increasingly expected to reflect accountability and transparency, even when framed within narratives of Spirit-guidance. Lauterbach (2024:156–159) describes this as a dual regime of legitimacy grounded in both divine calling and procedural norms.

However, this duality generates tension. Haynes (2017) notes that Pentecostal governance is susceptible to factionalism, patronage, regional politicisation and leadership competition (Haynes 2017:8–10). These dynamics challenge idealised narratives of Spirit-led leadership and raised critical questions about power, representation and authority. Although scholars have identified political engagement and governance challenges in African Pentecostalism, they have not examined how electoral procedures mediate tensions between public expectations of democratic accountability and internal theological claims of divine direction. This article addresses this gap by exploring elections as arenas in which Pentecostal churches manage simultaneous demands for spiritual authenticity and institutional performance.

Elections as ritualised performances of authority

The phrase 'secular rituals' requires clarification. Following Kertzer (1988:9–12), the term does not imply that ecclesial elections are emptied of theological meaning. Rather, it designates the observable, socially performed and symbolically structured dimension of elections that generates authority independently of, though never entirely apart from, their pneumatological framing. Wherever repeated, patterned symbolic action transforms contested preferences into legitimate outcomes and invests certain persons with public authority, and ritual is operative (Bell 1992:69–74; Kertzer 1988:9–12). In the ecclesial context examined here, secular rituals include such procedural performances as nomination, balloting, threshold-counting and public announcement. These are analysed not to diminish their spiritual meaning but to examine how procedural mechanisms do theological work, and theological claims are embedded in political performance.

Elections in Pentecostal churches are not neutral bureaucratic actions; they are symbolic performances of authority that enact theological, institutional and political realities. Leadership candidates are expected to demonstrate spiritual anointing, moral credibility and organisational capacity, while voters are asked to enact discernment, loyalty and collective responsibility.

Scholars of ritual studies argue that organisational decision-making processes operate as 'performative mechanisms that produce legitimate authority through symbolic acts' (Bell 1992:69–74). Within Pentecostalism, this performativity takes a particular form because ritual is grounded in expectations of divine involvement, prophecy, prayer, discernment, even when mediated through ballots and committees (Kaunda 2024:7–10).

Moreover, these divinely led elections also reveal conflicts, competing prophetic claims, factional mobilisation, lobbying and negotiation. In this respect, leadership transitions expose the political economies of Pentecostalism, in which actors strategically deploy spiritual and organisational resources to secure institutional outcomes (Haynes 2017:8–10).

Existing scholarship has not adequately theorised elections in African Pentecostalism as ritualised negotiations of legitimacy, where spiritual and political rationalities collide, coalesce and become institutionalised. This article, therefore, treats elections as critical events in which authority is not merely transferred, but constructed, narrated, contested and authenticated.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

Electing ecclesial leaders

The comparative analysis of the Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus, the Constitution of the CoP and the AG-Ghana demonstrates that ecclesial elections function as a theological and institutional technology for the formation of authority, rather than as transparent reflections of divine will or democratic neutrality. Instead of treating elections as functional transitions of leadership, the data depict them as ecclesiological events in which koinonia, sacramental authority and organisational governance are enacted simultaneously, giving rise to complex dynamics of negotiation, conflict and symbolic performance.

Furthermore, historical evidence reveals that episcopal elections were neither peaceful nor consensual. Chadwick (2001:45–48) documents repeated episodes of factional

rivalry, clerical competition and civic unrest, indicating that ecclesial discernment frequently generated public contestation. The election of Ambrose in Milan (AD374) was often reimagined in theological literature as a Spirit-led acclamation unfolded amid street protests, political lobbying and imperial intervention (Chadwick 2001:129–132). As Brent (2009:90–97) notes, such events destabilise idealist narratives of apostolic succession by demonstrating that episcopal authority emerged not through spontaneous pneumatic consensus, but through ritualised negotiation between church, community and empire.

The Apostolic Tradition, attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (early 3rd century), is one of the most significant sources for understanding early Christian ecclesiology in a post-apostolic context. Relative to the selection of bishops, the text prescribes that a bishop must be 'chosen by all the people' and examined for moral and doctrinal suitability before being ordained through prayer, the laying on of hands and liturgical anointing (Hippolytus 2001, cited in Stewart-Sykes 2001:35–39). Rapp (2005:1–6) argues that the Apostolic Tradition is not merely theological but organisational, representing a strategic attempt to mitigate conflict and consolidate unity during periods of doctrinal fragmentation.

Overall, the Apostolic Tradition demonstrates a hybrid ecclesiology, in which charisma is institutionalised, pneumatology is litigated through procedure, and *koinonia* [fellowship] is ritualised through public acclamation. The text, therefore, reveals a theological system that translates divine vocation into organisational authority, rather than simply recognising it.

The Donatist controversy

One of the evidential historical examples of how elections in the church could threaten ecclesial unity is the Donatist controversy of the 4th century. In North Africa, after the Diocletian persecution (303–305CE), the disagreement centred not merely on doctrinal construct, but on the qualification of a contested election (Kelly 1977:193). Caecilian was elected bishop of Carthage in 311AD. Nevertheless, his induction was officiated by Felix of Aptunga, who was accused of being a *traditor* [traitor] for surrendering the sacred texts during the Great persecution (Frend 1952:20–23; Schaff 1910:366–367). An opposing faction disagreed with Caecilian's election, since he was ordained by one who had allegedly compromised his faith by presenting the scriptures to save himself from martyrdom. The opposing side then appointed Majorinus, and later Donatus, as rival bishops, thereby creating a schism (Chadwick 2001:177–182).

The controversy demonstrates how elections, when questioned on moral grounds and sacramental theology, could become a basis for ecclesial separation. The heart of the controversy was not merely personal rivalry, but challenging theological visions of the Church. The Donatists, therefore, maintained that the Church must be a community of the faithful people, and that the potency of the sacramental depended upon the integrity of the minister (Chadwick 1993:171; Frend 1952:2–3, 140–142). Augustine of Hippo writes against the Donatists, defending the validity of the sacramental due to the doctrine of grace. He posits that the efficacy of ordination and sacrament is derived from Christ and not based on the personal worthiness of the bishop (Augustine, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* [Against the letter of Parmenianus]; see Rapp 2005:223–230).

Significantly, the disagreement quickly surpassed the ecclesial boundaries and drew imperial settlement. Emperor Constantine had to call for synods at Rome (313) and Arles (314) to arbitrate the matter, where they both ruled against the Donatist Movement (Chadwick 1993:171–172; Frend 1952:144–149). Unfortunately, these rulings against the Donatists could not unite the church; rather, the rivalry was exaggerated, leading to a schism in North African Christianity for over a century (Chadwick 2001:183–188). The involvement of Emperor Constantine exposes how church elections can attract public and political interests, capable of calling for civil conflict and inviting state interference. The Donatist controversy, consequently, proves that elections in the Early Church were not only considered based on divine calling alone, but also procedural. The elections faced some challenging processes based on theology, morality, integrity, identity and political interference.

The Donatist schism provides a paradigmatic case from the Early Church of how ecclesial elections may become challenged when theology and procedure do not align. It shows that where electoral apparatuses, whether ancient or contemporary, are not handled well, they could destabilise even a church organisation. It implies that when there is no clear balance between Spiritual qualification and institutionalised procedure in the election of church leaders, it can affect the stability of the religious image.

The Church of Pentecost

The CoP represents a contemporary Pentecostal adaptation of apostolic ecclesiology, in which leadership is grounded simultaneously in charismatic hierarchy and constitutional rationality. The constitution restricts eligibility for the office of Chairman to ministers 'not below the office of Apostle or Prophet' (The CoP 2016:37), embedding a theology of apostolicity and pneumatic authority within formal governance. As Asamoah-Gyadu (2015:86–90) argues, African Pentecostal movements often reconstruct apostolic identity as a theological legitimiser, while deploying charismatic hierarchy to stabilise institutional authority.

The electoral process is procedural; thus, candidates must be nominated by the Executive Council, subjected to a secret ballot and approved by a two-thirds majority of the General Council (The CoP 2016:38–39). The supermajority threshold functions symbolically as a collective discernment, implying that unity, rather than numerical victory, constitutes valid leadership. However, Kgatle (2024:122–125) notes that

Pentecostal rhetoric of consensus often masks underlying political dynamics, especially where thresholds intensify negotiation, lobbying and factional alignment.

The concentration of evaluative power in the Executive Council generates structural tension between the charismatic ideal of communal discernment and the institutional reality of elite control. The constitution does not provide formal mechanisms for complaints, appeals or electoral dispute resolution, beyond vesting interpretive authority in the Council itself. This logic reflects a theology in which conflict resolution is grounded in submission, holiness and spiritual obedience, rather than procedural contestation, a dynamic commonly noted in the study of Pentecostal governance (Haynes 2017:5–8).

Thus, CoP elections constitute sacramental performances of legitimacy, in which charismatic authority is ritualised through procedure, institutional hierarchy is disguised by theological rhetoric, and unity is enacted symbolically, even where actual contestation persists.

Assemblies of God Ghana

The AG-Ghana adopts a different ecclesiological model, grounded in representational governance and bureaucratic accountability. Leadership eligibility is determined by ministerial standing, doctrinal fidelity and service record (AG-Ghana Constitution 2016:19–20), reflecting a theology of stewardship, pastoral competence and congregational representation rather than charismatic rank. The General Council is designated as 'the highest decision and policy-making body' (AG-Ghana Constitution 2016:18), in contrast to CoP's apostolic hierarchy.

However, AG-Ghana sacralises electoral outcomes by framing elected leaders as divinely appointed, thereby converting democratic selection into pneumatological vocation. Okyere-Manu (2020:18–20) argues that this sacralisation can impede accountability, because criticism of elected leaders becomes a challenge not only to governance, but also to spiritual legitimacy. Moreover, the constitution provides no robust process for dispute resolution beyond council deliberation, creating a procedural environment in which dissent is morally perilous and structurally constrained.

Assemblies of God, Ghana, therefore, illustrates a hybrid polity in which democratic mechanisms coexist with theological sanctification, producing internal accountability in theory but limited juridical oversight in practice.

Discussion

The Spirit and suffrage

From the foregoing, authority emerges through ritual performance rather than procedural neutrality. In the Early Church, episcopal legitimacy was constituted through liturgical enactment, communal acclamation and imperial arbitration; in CoP, charismatic hierarchy is stabilised through constitution ritual; in AG-Ghana, democratic procedure is sacralised through pneumatological narrative.

In all three systems, conflict is not eliminated by election processes but ritualised, redirected and masked through theological language. Unity is symbolically enacted through supermajority thresholds, public acclamation or divine narrative, rather than empirically realised. Authority is sacralised through narrativised legitimacy, Ambrose as 'God's choice', CoP leaders as apostolic, AG-Ghana leaders as God-appointed, revealing the mythopoeic dimension of ecclesial governance, in which theological narrative transforms political outcomes into spiritual necessity.

The findings show that ecclesial elections function as liturgical technologies of power, designed to stabilise authority, domesticate conflict and produce legitimacy through ritual performance. Leadership transitions do not merely reflect spiritual discernment or democratic procedure; they perform and reproduce theological order, translating charismatic claims into institutional authority. Nonetheless, these systems remain structurally fragile because they rely on theological narratives to resolve conflicts that procedural mechanisms cannot fully address. Elections, therefore, do not simply transfer authority; they produce it through sacramental enactment, theological narration and institutional design.

The CoP and the AG-Ghana operate as theological-political technologies that construct, stabilise and contest authority. Rather than treating elections as administrative mechanisms, this discussion interprets them as symbolic enactments of legitimacy through which charisma, institutional rationality and communal identity are negotiated (eds. Cavanaugh et al. 2020:15–19; Weber 1978:241–254). The analysis situates the three cases comparatively, drawing attention to both continuities and divergences and engaging counter-arguments within scholarship on early Christianity, African Pentecostalism and political theology. In so doing, it advances the claim that ecclesial elections are not merely 'church procedures', but ritualised modes of governance that perform theological and social order (Bradshaw 2002:112–118; Rapp 2005:3–7).

Apostolic Tradition to contemporary Pentecostalism

A consistent pattern across the three cases is the emergence of hybrid authority, in which divine vocation is mediated, authorised and constrained through institutional regulation. In the Apostolic Tradition, episcopal leadership was legitimised through public election, doctrinal scrutiny and liturgical consecration, demonstrating that charisma, though theologically foundational, required procedural enactment to become institutionally effective (Stewart-Sykes 2001:35–39). Hippolytus' instruction that the bishop must be 'chosen by all the people' presupposes a pneumatological claim; nevertheless, its execution reveals what Rapp termed as

'institutional mediation of pneumatology', the translation of divine calling into recognisable ecclesial authority (Rapp 2005:1–6).

Critically, the Apostolic Tradition did not reject charisma; it regulated charisma through form, embedding sacramental authority within liturgical and communal structures. Brent argues that this represented 'a post-apostolic attempt to discipline charisma through institution, without extinguishing it' (Brent 2009:90–94). Weber's notion of 'routinisation of charisma' is therefore only partially explanatory, because Hippolytus does not 'shift from charisma to law'; he creates a hybrid where charisma is *performed through law* (Weber 1978:241–254).

The analysis suggests that CoP reproduces this hybrid model in a neo-apostolic idiom. Its eligibility restriction to ministers 'not below the office of Apostle or Prophet' (The CoP 2016:37) grounds legitimacy in charismatic vocation, while nomination, balloting and two-thirds thresholds reproduce rational-bureaucratic procedures for legitimising leadership. As Asamoah-Gyadu observes, African Pentecostal churches often 'institutionalise charisma without secularising it', translating charismatic office into constitutional identity (Kaunda 2024:7–10).

Meanwhile, AG-Ghana foregrounds representative democracy, placing authority in the General Council and emphasising accountability, stewardship and competence (AG-Ghana Constitution 2016:18–21). Notwithstanding, the theological discourse of divine ordination, which often frames elected leaders as God-appointed, reveals that bureaucratic procedure is subsequently sacralised, rather than replacing spiritual legitimation (Okyere-Manu 2020:18–20).

Thus, in each system:

1. Hippolytus ritualises charisma through liturgy and communal consent.
2. The CoP restricts charisma through hierarchical gatekeeping.
3. Assemblies of God, Ghana rationalises charisma, and then re-sacralises the result.

The data suggest that routinisation does not extinguish charisma; instead, charisma is reconstituted symbolically and normatively through regulated procedures, creating a durable hybrid, rather than a linear transition (Kgatle 2024:122–125; Weber 1978:241–254).

Elections as performative rituals of legitimacy

Across the three cases, elections operate not merely as mechanisms of leadership succession but as ritualised performances of legitimacy, unity and ecclesial identity. In Hippolytus, episcopal acclamation functioned as a public ritual that symbolically enacted communal assent and koinonia, even when socio-political conflict lurked beneath the surface (Chadwick 2001:45–48). Bradshaw argues that such ritualisation was designed to 'transform charismatic potential into sacramental office', embedding leadership within public, embodied acts of collective affirmation (Bradshaw 2002:112–118).

Modern Pentecostal systems reproduce this ritual logic. In CoP, the supermajority requirement is not simply a procedural safeguard, but a liturgical mechanism that dramatises unity, symbolically representing divine consensus even when achieved through negotiation, lobbying, or strategic withdrawal (Haynes 2017:5–8; The CoP 2016:38–39). The 'liturgical imaginary of unanimity', which idealises harmony while managing conflict, reflects a continuity with early Christian practice (Bradshaw 2002:115).

In AG-Ghana, legitimacy is enacted through representational ritual: The General Council deliberates, votes, and announces the outcome; subsequently, theological rhetoric sanctifies the decision, transforming a majoritarian result into divine appointment (McCauley 2013:765–768). This process does not merely legitimise outcomes; it converts democratic procedure into sacred narrative, a phenomenon also observed in Catholic and Anglican traditions (eds. Cavanaugh et al. 2020:15–19). A critical implication is that elections produce unity performatively, even when consensus is 'performed rather than experienced'. Elections, thus, do not reflect cohesion; they stage cohesion through ritual, narrative and theological imagination.

Institutionalisation, conflict and the limits of legitimation

While institutional systems aim to stabilise authority, they frequently produce structural vulnerabilities. In late antiquity, episcopal elections often provoked violence, schism and imperial arbitration, revealing that institutionalisation did not neutralise conflict; it reconfigured conflict into new, institutional forms (Chadwick 2001:52–56). Rapp notes that episcopal procedures emerged 'precisely because charismatic conflict threatened ecclesial unity', yet procedures themselves became sites of contestation (Rapp 2005:3–7).

Similarly, CoP seeks stability through hierarchical control, restricting eligibility to apostolic office and concentrating evaluative power in the Executive Council (The CoP 2016:37–41). However, this structure risks producing exclusionary politics, creating systems of patronage, competition, and disaffection among ministers without access to charismatic rank (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:86–91). Because appeals mechanisms are absent, dissent is expected to be resolved through spiritual submission rather than procedural arbitration, mirroring early Christian assumptions that holiness, rather than legal appeal, resolves conflict (Haynes 2017:7–10).

In AG-Ghana, representational structures promise broader inclusion, but weak conflict resolution mechanisms and the sacralisation of office risk silencing dissent. Critique becomes

morally hazardous, particularly where disagreement is interpreted as a violation of divine authority (Okyere-Manu 2020:18–20). Gifford documents similar dynamics in African mainline and Pentecostal denominations, where dissent is suppressed under the guise of spiritual unity (Gifford 2004:185–191). Thus, institutionalisation stabilises authority, but does not eliminate conflict. It ritualises conflict, transforming it into silence, acquiescence or symbolic harmony.

Public religion, democracy and Pentecostal political agency

The political effects of ecclesial governance extended beyond church walls. Pentecostal denominations in Ghana are major shapers of public morality, civic engagement and political discourse (Gifford 2004:185–191; Okyerefo 2014:91–95). They do not simply reflect civil society; they constitute civil society, offering alternative institutions of representation, welfare and political mobilisation (McCauley 2013:761–787). However, the governance models examined above reproduce hierarchical control, elite gatekeeping and ritualised consensus rather than deliberative accountability (Haynes 2024:192–198). Thus emerges a paradox: churches that call the nation to transparency, accountability and anti-corruption often operate internally through restricted eligibility, elite nomination and sacralised electoral outcomes.

Church of Pentecost's charismatic hierarchy reinforces a theology of leadership as spiritual paternalism, while AG-Ghana's sacralisation of democratic outcomes risks suppressing dissent in the name of divine legitimacy. These patterns mirror broader African political cultures marked by charismatic populism, hierarchical authority and symbolic consensus (Gifford 2004:190–193). If ecclesial elections discourage critique and sacralise office, churches may undermine their moral credibility as advocates for democratic virtue, not because they lack public influence, but because their internal structures model an alternative political ethics. In this sense, Pentecostalism does not merely 'participate' in politics; it models political imagination, shaping the norms by which leadership is envisioned, legitimated and challenged.

Counter perspectives and critical debate

Some scholars challenge institutionalist readings of African Pentecostalism, arguing that charismatic authority remains personalised, kinship-based and relational, even when constitutional documents exist (Meyer 2004:452–455; Ojo 2020:58–62). From this vantage, ecclesial constitutions are 'performative artefacts' rather than operational systems, deployed for external credibility while informal authority remains dominant.

Conversely, Asamoah-Gyadu argues that institutionalisation in African Pentecostalism represents genuine organisational innovation, stabilising authority and mitigating charismatic excess in large, transnational movements (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:90–93). From this view, constitutions are not veneers; they are mechanisms of stewardship and self-regulation. The tension between these positions reveals that African Pentecostal governance must be understood as a dynamic assemblage of formal structure, informal practice and theological narrative, rather than reducible to either bureaucracy or charisma.

Theoretical and practical implications

Theologically, ecclesial elections constitute ritual-institutional mediations through which Christian communities perform divine vocation, translating charismatic claims into organised authority (eds. Cavanaugh et al. 2020:15–19).

Practically, the three cases expose both the innovative and problematic dimensions of ecclesial governance, especially around inclusion, accountability and conflict management. Practically, Pentecostal denominations may need to strengthen procedural transparency, broaden eligibility and develop dispute resolution mechanisms that do not rely solely on spiritual submission (Haynes 2017:7–10). Failure to do so risks institutional fragility disguised as theological unity, a pattern observable in both late antique and contemporary ecclesiology.

Across historical and contemporary contexts, ecclesial elections do not merely recognise legitimacy; they produce and perform it through ritual, theology and institutional design. Authority is not given; it is enacted. Unity is not discovered; it is dramatised through liturgical performance. Taken together, the Apostolic Tradition institutionalised charisma through ritual, CoP ritualises hierarchy through constitutional mechanisms, and AG-Ghana sacralises democracy through a theological narrative. Thus, ecclesial elections constitute a privileged site for analysing the contradictory entanglement of charisma, institution and ritual, a negotiation that reveals both the creativity and fragility of Christian governance, both historically and within African Pentecostal modernity.

Conclusion

Ecclesial elections from the Apostolic Tradition through to the Constitutions of The CoP and AG-Ghana are best understood as theological-political technologies rather than purely pneumatic events. Across these disparate contexts, 'Spirit and suffrage' do not stand in simple opposition; they are braided together in hybrid arrangements through which churches seek to stabilise compelling authority, manage conflict and secure continuity.

By placing patristic episcopal selections in critical dialogue with Ghanaian Pentecostal constitutionalism, the study has shown that charisma is not replaced by bureaucracy but translated into institutional form through election, examination, thresholds and sacralised outcomes. This comparative move complicates romanticised narratives of Spirit-led harmony, but it also unsettles reductive portrayals of Pentecostal leadership as unmediated authoritarianism.

Rather, ecclesial polities emerge as negotiated settlements in which pneumatological claims, legal-rational procedures and communal expectations continually reconfigure one another.

Moreover, the analysis has exposed a tension with significant ecclesiological and civic implications: churches that speak prophetically to the state about transparency and accountability often inhabit internal structures that ritualise consensus while constraining contestation. This does not simply discredit Pentecostal public witness; instead, it presses a constructive question back to the churches themselves, whether their own electoral practices can more visibly embody the integrity and responsibility they commend to wider society.

Methodologically, the study has been limited to textual analysis of three documentary-rich cases. Nevertheless, it opens a field for further empirical work on how these constitutional logics are inhabited, resisted or reinterpreted in lived practice. In sum, ecclesial elections matter not only because they choose leaders, but also because they disclose and enact the kind of political theological communities African Pentecostal churches are becoming.

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