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Early Christian spirituality of elections: Implications for contemporary Pentecostals

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Background: Elections play a pivotal role in the polity of Pentecostals in matters of leadership and problem-solving. At the root of Pentecostal theology is the Holy Spirit as the denominator and guide for both spirituality and politics. Early Christian Pentecostal practices form a bedrock from which the current Pentecostal adherents derive their normative experiences.

Objectives: This article reveals that problems within Pentecostalism are ancient and that an adequate model for solving them is available in the Word of God. With keen interest in the strategy employed when problems arose and the roles of both the human and the divine in solving them, this article presents a clearly articulated template for guidance.

Methods: Using a text-immanent approach that draws on impulses from discourse analysis and a multidimensional approach to Acts 6:1–7, this study reflects on both the methods used then and their implications for elections within Pentecostals today.

Results: This study reveals that just as pre-eminence in elections is given to the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and Faith, which resulted in unity, growth, and coercion in the church, the same components are still relevant and significant in elections and problem-solving within the current Pentecostal movement.

Conclusion: Central to the Pentecostal problem-solving and working of the Holy Spirit is the Word of God, the Holy Spirit himself, and faith. When this trinity is applied well, the church will experience growth both numerically and in the kind of people who come. The church will be healthy, and people's needs will be met.

Contribution: This article identifies the components crucial to the health of the Pentecostal church, enabling it to adequately fulfil its mandate to reach the lost and equip the found, unlike the current setup, which is characterised by divisions, confusion, and a lack of coherence.

Keywords: elections; Word of God; Holy Spirit; faith; Pentecostal; problem solving; unity.

Introduction

Politics can be challenging to define, particularly because it involves complex variables.[1] Heywood (2001:2) defines it as 'the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live'. The variables at play include both conflict and cooperation. Heywood (2001) contends that the existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs, or opposing interests gives reason for disagreements about the rules under which people live. Just like all organisations, the church and more specifically, the Pentecostals in Africa.[2] They are also involved in their own politics to navigate their internal business within their context.

At the centre of politics is the phenomenon of elections. Both in the circular arena and in the church, elections have been used to appoint leaders to resolve conflicts and provide overall leadership. Elections play a pivotal and central role in the democratic process and are used in the implementation of the democratic process. Katz (1997:3) rightly posits that 'elections are the defining institutions of modern democracy, the device that makes democracy possible'.

From its inception, the church has had to contend with rival opinions within her, competing needs, and the need to follow a system to address issues that arose. This is true of Acts 6:1–7.

1.Some of the definitions on politics imply that it deals with a way of ruling divided societies by a process of free discussions and without undue violence (Crick 2000); (Poulantzas 1973) the capacity of a social class to realise its specific objective interests; (Easton 1979) the authoritative allocation of value; (De Jouvenal 1963) man moving man; (Lasswell 1936) who gets what, when, how and (Gerth, Mills & Turner 1948) the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance regardless of the basis on which the probability arises.

2.For further discussion on Pentecostalism and Politics (see Afolayan, Yacob-Haliso & Falola 2018; Burgess 2012; McCauley 2015; Wariboko 2018).

This early community of believers had a conflict to resolve despite being in the immediate corridor of the Spirit's dispensation. The early church was dynamic and used different methods and systems to govern, guide, and resolve conflicts among its members. Elections in Pentecostal politics, just like Pentecostal theology, are biblical by nature.

The aspect of politics this article focuses on is elections. The phenomenon of elections is critically investigated, with keen interest in the modalities and outcomes of the early Christian believers; and thereafter, implications will be drawn for the current Pentecostal movement's elections.

Research methods and design

This article utilises a modified form of Robbins (1996a, 1997) methodology. The vocabulary of this methodology guides this article in arriving at a well-rounded understanding of early Christian elections, which provides a basis for deriving implications for the current Pentecostal movement.

The exegetical approach starts with a discourse analysis as a quest to get inside the text. Unlike traditional exegesis, which deals with word studies, lexical analysis, textual criticism, form criticism, and source criticism, this article will replace all that with a discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis[3] provides a structure for the entire article by identifying different semantic networks that enhance a better understanding by determining the argument and rhetoric of the writer. As part of the inner-textual reading, the spirituality of elections among the early Christian believers will be studied through the contemplative reading of the text.

This spirituality[4] investigation is important because it deepens our understanding of what spirituality may have been evoked in them when they heard the text: *What kind of experience or expectation and excitement was created when the Apostles said to them, 'We will not ignore the Ministry of the Word and wait on table'?* and *What would being 'filled with the Holy Spirit and the Word' mean to them in the 1st century Judeo-Hellenistic world?*

The focus of this section will be on both the spirituality and embodiment of the text. What did they experience when they heard these expressions? This texture is well encapsulated by Van der Merwe (2015a), who states:

> '[*A*] few remarks on the idiosyncrasy of texts pave way for the legitimate exploitation of spiritualities [*lived experiences*] embedded in biblical texts which should be regarded as an addition to the biblical hermeneutics and which have to serve as a catalyst for the embodiment of the reading text.' (p. 1)

This inner textual work will be followed by the intertextual[5] reading of the text. This texture takes the interpreter a step beyond the confines of the text into its environs. In this texture, elections will be viewed in the Graeco–Roman world, Judaism, the Old Testament, the New Testament, and lastly within the text's socio-historical context. The last section compares this election in the then-and-there with the election in the here-and-now of Pentecostal churches, using the Assemblies of God in Botswana church as a test case. Implications for the current Pentecostal church will be derived and applied.

Inner texture

Linguistic relations semantic relations

Please refer to Figure 1 for more information.

Semantic relations (a) 'the Word of God'

Close semantic relations between Acts 6:2 and 6:7 of the pericope under investigation are observed. The Word of God is linked to both the primary business of the disciples and to the growth of the church, espoused through the addition of Priests to the body of believers:

> **6.2.2** Οὐκ ἀρεστόν ἐστιν ἡμᾶς καταλείψαντας τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ [Word of God] διακονεῖν.
>
> **6.7.1** Καὶ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ηὔξανεν [and the Word of God grew]

Semantic relations in this cluster are created by the repetition of λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ [Word of God]. The first reference to the 'Word of God' was in relation to the priority of the work of the disciples. In order to solve the problem, the Apostles

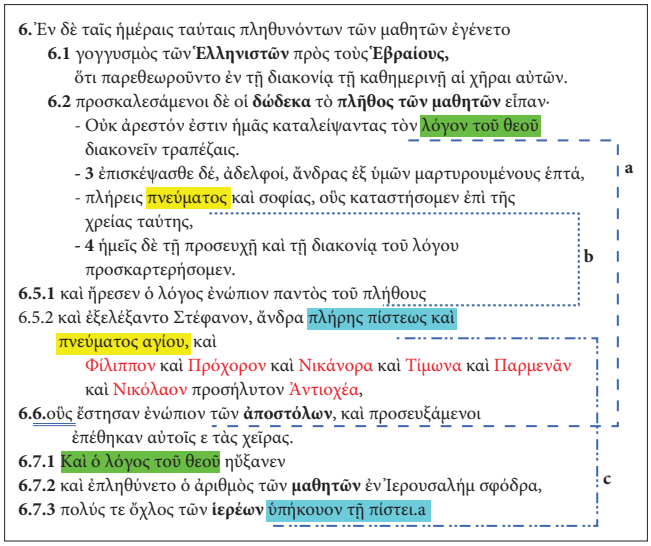

FIGURE 1: Semantic relations.

3.On discourse analysis, the structure of the pericope follows the structure and criteria espoused by Van der Merwe (2008). As a way of dealing with a pericope adequately, it is divided into cola, structural markers, syntactic and semantic relations marked and lastly grouping cola into clusters and blocks. This clearly illuminates the repetition and marks out important themes in the text.

4.On the definition of Christian spirituality and various concepts, see also Holder (2012:130-131); Frank (2013:132–133); Van der Merwe (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c); Aleshire (1989:209–214); Kimble (2014:377–378) and Hartog (2015:158–161).

5.Robbins (1996a:40) notes that the intertexture as 'the interaction of the language' in the text with 'outside' material and physical 'objects, historical events, texts, customs, values, roles, institutions, and systems'.

gathered 'all the disciples', because the problem involved all the disciples. The disciples wanted 'total participation in its solution' (Jamieson, Fausset & Brown 1997). They noted that it would not be right for them to neglect God's Word (v. 2) and wait on tables. Therefore, even though the church faced a problem, it is interesting to note that the disciples were quick to put everything in perspective, that is the place of the Word of God in relation to conflicts. It must take precedence and eminence.

The second mention of the Word of God in this pericope is directly connected to the summary church's growth. At the centre of this growth is the spread of the Word of God and its impact: the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and many priests became obedient to the faith.

The place and role of the Word of God are clearly depicted in the context of Pentecostal politics. It must always be preeminent and allowed to achieve its intended purpose of bringing people to the obedience of the faith.

Intertextuality of the 'Word of God'

The centrality of the Word of God in the work of the church was modelled by the life of Jesus Christ. At the synagogue, when he was handed the scroll, he said 'The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor' (Lk 4:18). This would become the overarching quest of the messiah. He went about preaching the Word of God, and his entire ministry was about preaching.

When he was to leave the earth after accomplishing all that he desired, he now gave over this task to the disciples: 'All authority has been given me in heaven and on earth, go therefore and make disciples of all nations. teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you' (Mt 28:18–20).

The disciples understood this as their primary task, one that should be pivotal and preeminent in all decisions. Even in the midst of an existential threat, any solution must be anchored on making this important task a priority. Prioritising the preaching of the Word of God in all politics led to the desired outcome. Acts (6:7) 'the Word of God spread, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith'.

Central and pivotal to all Pentecostal politics must be the desire for this outcome, in which the Word of God is prioritised and given pre-eminence, resulting in significant growth, such as 'multiplication' in (v. 7). This is the role that politics, i.e. elections and problem-solving, should bring to the church.

Semantic relations (b) the 'Spirit'

Close semantic relations between v. 3 and v. 5 are created by the repetition of the word πνεύματος [Spirit] in the pericope under investigation. The requirement for the candidates was that they be filled with the Holy Spirit.

πλήρεις πνεύματος καὶ σοφίας [full of the Spirit]
καὶ πνεύματος ἁγίου [the Holy Spirit]

As the leaders of this community of believers, the disciples proposed that the members choose seven men among them to administer food distribution. In the same vein, the apostles laid down qualifications for the seven to be chosen. They were to be full of the Holy Spirit, 'they were to have manifested a special degree of allowing the spirit to work in them' (Jamieson et al. 1997:179). The proposal the Apostles suggested pleased the congregation, and it is worth noting that the congregation elected, not the leaders themselves. They were successfully elected, and the first to be mentioned was Stephen, who was full of the 'holy Spirit and faith'.

Intertextuality of the 'Spirit'

One of the characteristics that the disciples advanced as a requirement for the people to be chosen was that they must be 'filled with the Spirit'. Polhill argues that 'they were to have manifested a special degree of allowing the Spirit to work with them' (1992:181). This endowment and empowerment by the Spirit were not a new or isolated request; it formed the core normative Pentecostal experience.

Before his departure, Jesus had instructed the disciples to tarry in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. He asserted that 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you: you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem (Ac 1:8)'. That promise was fulfilled because in Acts 2:4 it is recorded that 'they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance'. This normative experience was to be a denominator for any effective work within the church as the Spirit gave empowerment.[6] The Pentecostal movement of today sees itself as a direct descendant of this initial spiritual empowerment, albeit through the Azusa[7] Street revival.

They were able to choose seven men who were full of the Holy Spirit, and these men solved the problem for good.

Semantic relations (c) 'Faith'

The third close semantic relation is established by repeated mention of faith. This is mentioned in v. 5 and v. 7:

ἄνδρα πλήρης πίστεως [full of faith]

τῶν ἱερέων ὑπήκουον τῇ πίστει [Obeyed the faith].

Faith is here used as a noun. Lyon (1988:761) defines faith as a 'simple trust in God or in the Word of God and at times faith almost becomes equivalent to active obedience'. Faith relates to the fullness of the gospel content. In this pericope, it was both a requirement for the election and a sign that the priests had attained it.

6.On the Spirit empowerment, also see: Strongstad (1984), Menzies (2000) and Fee (1991).

7.More on Azusa Street, see Robeck (2007), Anderson (1996), Clark (2005) and McGee (1988).

Intertextuality of faith

Faith was the common denominator throughout the book of Acts and the entire bible. In the book of Acts, faith wrought miracles (Ac 3:1–10) and also brought salvation to those who had it. The disciples valued a person who trusted God and was also full of the gospel. Such a person has a wealth of examples to emulate when they are faced with different situations.

From this section, it is clear that the disciples, and indeed all believers, have made it a priority that, when they have a problem to solve, these three things will be at the forefront: the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and Faith.

Spirituality and contemplative reading

In this section, much consideration is given to the spirituality that could have been evoked when they heard the disciples say, 'it is not desirable that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables' (v. 2) and also when they said to the disciples, 'seek out from amongst yourselves seven men' (v. 3). The experience they had is made clear in (v. 5): '[*T*]he saying pleased the whole multitude'. They experienced joy and unity of purpose, and their effectiveness was recorded as 'The Word of God spread and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith (v. 7)'.

Intertexture of elections

This texture concerns itself with the text's 'rich configuration of the texts, cultures and social and historical phenomena' (Robbins 1996b:40). Therefore, this section deals with how elections were conducted in Judaism as represented by the Old Testament, Hellenistic Judaism as represented by Philo and Josephus, early and latter Palestinian Judaism as represented by Rabbinic literature and Qumran. This text provides the immediate context for a clearer understanding of elections in Acts (6:1–7).

Old Testament

The initial orientation of the Old Testament was that God was the leader, and He directed the affairs of man as He saw fit. He called whosoever he chose to leadership as he did with Moses at the burning bush in Exodus (3:7–10) 'So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt'. In essence God related with them as their legitimate leader; henceforth, when they later requested the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel (8:5), they said, 'You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations'. This request displeased the prophet, and when he took it to God in prayer, God also showed his disappointment with this request 'it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king' (1 Sm 8:7). To God, this request meant they forsook him, and God encouraged Moses to listen to the people and give them a king.

Interestingly, God does not absolve Himself completely but involves Himself in this quest by choosing Saul as their King. This harmony between God and the people in their quest for a leader would permeate the entire Old Testament. When Saul was presented to the people, they shouted, 'Long live the king' (1 Sm 10:24). This pattern of cooperation between God and people in choosing leaders would continue with David, Solomon, and subsequent leaders. Therefore, in the Old Testament, election was made by God, and the people approved it. The qualifications were with God, who accordingly chose by looking at the heart.

New Testament

This is the only election by mass in the New Testament, especially with nominations preceding the exercise. Elsewhere, as in the case of Timothy, appointment to leadership was by prophecy, and just as in Acts (6:1–7), there was a laying on of hands (1 Tm 4:14).

Hellenistic Judaism

Gleanings from Philo and Josephus provide a window into Hellenistic Judaism. Although many details of the elections are not provided, Brittain (2001:5) alleges that Philo himself was 'elected scholarch in 110BC as an upholder of the radical scepticism's predecessor Clitomachus, attributed to his master Carneades'.

According to Josephus, the proceedings of the Aristotelian society on the election of an executive committee provide a clear model of elections in antiquity. They propose that elections must be held by ballot, with nominations ratified by two people, and that there should be room for a vacancy. 'The committee shall co-opt a member to serve' (Aristotelian Society 1888:378).

Socio-historical texture – The people of elections

An understanding of elections will not be reached until the people of those elections are investigated and identified. This text introduces the first group as widows; they were recipients of the church's benevolence. The Jerusalem church was comprised of:

a. Ἑλληνιστῶν and Ἑβραίους [widows]

Besides being widows, they were part of the Jerusalem church. Actually, 'the main distinction between the two groups was probably linguistic' (Bruce 1988:120). This linguistic difference has also been accompanied by differences in social and cultural practices, which could not have been the main point of contention.[8] The difference was that the Hellenistic[9] widows were Jewish and habitually spoke the Greek language and attended Greek-speaking synagogues, whereas Hebrew

8.For a further discussion on the persistence of tensions between the Hellenists and Hebrews that started in the early Hellenistic period and persisted into the Roman period, see also Marshall ([1972] 1973:271–287) and Hengel (1974).

9.Hellenists as a description is also found in Acts 9:29 and 11:20. Witherington (1998:242) concurs that the reference is to the 'Diaspora Jews living in or around Jerusalem (or their descendants) for whom Greek is their spoken language, and who attend the synagogue where Greek was the language of worship'.

widows spoke Aramaic (or Mishnaic Hebrew) and attended Hebrew-speaking synagogues (Bruce 1988).

The point of contention was not doctrinal but a practical issue. Acts 6:1 clearly displays the problem that 'the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food'.

b. Δώδεκα [the twelve] and the ἀποστόλων [the Apostles]

The twelve (v. 1) and the Apostles (v. 6) refer to the same people. Although the term 'twelve' is used only here in Acts, they were referred to as the 'eleven' (Ac 1:6) after Judas Iscariot died, and his place had not yet been filled. These were the leaders of the Jerusalem church at this moment in time, and they were responsible for the growth and maintenance of peace. When they heard the complaint, they decided to act decisively and resolve it so that they could keep their focus on what is urgent and important to the entire church, i.e. preaching the word. Notably, as leaders, they were involved in the elections even though they themselves did not vote. They set the tone and trajectory of the election by initially suggesting a solution and setting the qualifications for those to be elected.

c. πλῆθος τῶν μαθητῶν [multitudes of the disciples] and μαθητῶν [disciples]

The disciples referred to the 'community as a whole' (Witherington 1998:122). In this pericope, the term refers to the believers who were present from the beginning, including the 120 in the upper room. It also refers to believers who have recently joined the community. This is very important because the qualification for being a disciple seems not to have changed as the church grew and its composition varied. Everyone who believed became a disciple of Jesus. True to the message of the Apostles that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Ac 2:21) and that this is made possible when you 'repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins' (v. 38). All these people were involved in the election of seven men to supervise the community's finances.

These seven were from among them; they were disciples too.[10] The community of believers knew them and knew their conduct, so electing them became easy. This notion has implications for Pentecostals today. Before elections are based on ability or any other trait, initially, the question of being a disciple of Jesus must be answered adequately.

d. ἱερέων [priests]

The last group of people mentioned, although they did not take part in the elections, was the priests. They form part of the summary that is presented here, as in other places.[11]

Among the people who came to join the community of believers were the priests. The priest's faith is crucial at this time because, up to now, the records have consistently suggested enmity between the priests and Jesus and the Apostles. Bruce (1988:123) deals extensively with this subject and contends that, although at this time, the coming of the priests would have meant that 'ties which attach many to the temple order would be strengthened. It is not suggested that these priests relinquished their priestly office'. He also contends that these were ordinary priests and that their entry into the community would have had no effect on the relationship between the community of believers and the High Priest and his close associates. 'The ordinary priests were socially, and in other ways, far removed from the wealthy chief-priestly families from which the main opposition to the gospel came' (Bruce 1988:123).

Conclusion

Implications for Pentecostals

Even though the Pentecostal church is truly led by the Holy Spirit, who directs its affairs, it is equally true that he uses people and allows people to use their faculties to navigate everyday challenges. The scope of the intervention in Acts 6:1–7 reveals the scope that the current Pentecostal church should also be actively involved with. The harmony was achieved, and the results serve as landmarks for the current Pentecostal movement.

The trio, the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and Faith, regarded as fundamental and preeminent in the early church, must also be in the current Pentecostal affairs. These must be used to resolve conflicts that bedevil Pentecostals and cause many schisms in the church. These divisions bring disrepute to the name of the Lord, backsliding of saints, mushrooming of churches, divided families, and the Word of God is regressing and thriving.

At the centre of this problem were the less privileged and the prevalent poverty, especially among the widows. The early church attended to their daily needs with the proceeds from the church. This is completely different from the current status. Today, church proceeds go into making leaders rich, building big halls, keeping huge accounts, but little to nothing trickles down to the less privileged. The Pentecostal church does not adequately contribute to society in building schools, hospitals, feeding programmes, feeding orphans, and the less privileged.

The Apostles delegated the feeding of the widows to the chosen seven; this is contrary to the pattern of Ministry in Pentecostalism, where the main pastor is the leader who does all the work, and attention and resources are focused solely on him. Pentecostals must reflect on Acts 6:1–7 and adjust accordingly if they want to see what the early church saw: 'Even priests became obedient to the faith' (Ac 6:7).

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10.Noteworthy is that all the chosen leaders were Hellenists. Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus who was clearly portrayed as a proselyte (Ac 6:5).

11.cf. Acts 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20 and 28:31. Add something on Acts summaries.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Samuel Letang: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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