

# Theological training in Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches: A necessity for discipleship



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## Dates:

Received: 10 Sept. 2025  
Accepted: 16 Jan. 2026  
Published: 20 Feb. 2026

## How to cite this article:

Prince, R.M. & Knoetze J.J.,  
2026, 'Theological training  
in Pentecostal-Charismatic  
Churches: A necessity for  
discipleship', *In die Skriflig*  
60(1), a3256. [https://doi.  
org/10.4102/ids.v60i1.3256](https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v60i1.3256)

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Theological education is downplayed by many Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCCs), resulting in church leaders who lack theological proficiency. The lack of sound theological training means that discipleship may be inadequate in many PCCs since discipleship entails being taught profound knowledge of the Word of God and being taught to long for obedience to all that Christ instructed. Therefore, for discipleship to occur systematic, biblical learning (knowledge) must take place in the context of a faith relationship with God within the faith community. Pastors play an important role in the spiritual lives of their congregants by teaching and nurturing them in the ways of God. Theologically untrained pastors may be ill-equipped to adequately shepherd the congregants in spiritual maturity, and therefore biblical training must be prioritised for the believer to grow into the full stature of Christ.

**Contribution:** This article is a critical literature study within the theological fields of Practical Theology and more specifically congregational ministry, as well as in Missiology and more specifically discipleship and theological education. The article contributes to the discussion of youth ministry in South Africa by looking at the context of theological training of pastors in PCCs and how this impacts discipleship. It suggests a positive correlation of theological proficiency among church leaders with discipleship of the youth within the South African context.

**Keywords:** theological training; Pentecostal; Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches; youth; discipleship.

## Introduction

The prolific rise of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCCs) has contributed to the sustained growth of Christianity in South Africa; however, in many parts of the world, the faith is in decline (Erasmus & Hendriks 2005:83; Forster 2024). Pentecostalism's popularity is owed to its rich spirituality, which allows deep personal experiences and supernatural encounters with the Holy Spirit (Nel 2019:36), allowing believers to live out and experience their faith in practical ways. Pentecostalism is also responsible for spiritual revitalisation amidst societal, economic, and political hardships in South Africa (Kgatlé 2022:1). There are, however, challenges in the movement which relate to doctrinal integrity, theological compromise and the potential for exploitation and abuses through some practices (cf. Frahm-Arp 2018, 2019; Kgatlé 2021; Ramantswana 2019; Resane 2024). The aforementioned issues closely relate to some of the matters Paul addresses in his letters to the Corinthians, particularly in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and elsewhere, such as in Romans 8:1–17. We argue that some challenges in the PCCs are a direct consequence of poor theological substance. Consequently, this article suggests that some form of theological training should be prioritised by the PCCs, particularly as it has a direct bearing on discipleship among the youth in South Africa. While various spiritual disciplines exist, each contributing to the overall discipleship of the youth, the focus of this article is on the role of acknowledged theological education (not necessarily accredited)<sup>1</sup> in the life of the pastor as a leader and disciple of youth congregants. Key tenets of Pentecostalism include individual holiness and intimacy with the Holy Spirit that produce transformation. This transformation is characterised by maturing in Christlikeness, and it requires a holistic view, as well as scriptural proficiency, to mature in the stature of Christ and to fully appreciate the God of the Bible who calls believers into a personal and knowable relationship with himself.

1. Acknowledged theological education may include any form of formal theological education, for example Bible school, denominational training or accredited academic training. The importance is that it must also be theological, ethical, and societally acceptable. In the rest of the article, we merely refer to theological education.

## The context of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in South Africa

There are thousands of PCCs across the nation which are not affiliated with a formal denomination. These churches follow the early Pentecostal tradition which sought freedom from Mainline Mission Churches (MMC), which they perceived as having a cold and lifeless Christianity that was steeped in doctrinal error (Kgatle 2022:1). Many Pentecostals still view Protestant spirituality as listless and accuse it of removing the power of the Holy Spirit by subjugating the Spirit to the Word, in as much as the only significant contribution of the Spirit is to be a witness to the Bible. This is primarily interpreted through human reason (Nel 2015:2). While many follow Pentecostalism because of its vibrant spirituality and experiential faith, Masenya and Masenya (2018:634) suggest that the rapid increase of newer independent churches is on the back of a combination of factors: people leave and start their own churches because they are disillusioned with existing religious structures; other churches are formed for financial and material gain; and some originate because their leaders desire autonomy without strict oversight from an overseeing body. Some of these leaders also use *fake* academic titles to give them 'more authority' than other leaders. However, many PCCs are also established from a genuine desire and vocational calling in ministry, while others suggest (cf. Forster 2024) that some of these churches have arisen from the urge to decolonise and indigenise Western Christianity.

However, certain expressions in contemporary Pentecostalism<sup>2</sup> are criticised for rejecting fundamental Christian traditions and doctrines in word or deed (Kgatle 2022:1). They rebuttal some of the foundational principles that undergird the movement and have formulated a form of Pentecostalism, which Mokhoathi (2021:1) argues is a reactive rebellion of colonial Christianity, which often vilified as evil and portrayed African traditional religion as witchcraft. The result is an African Pentecostalism that has replaced, reformed and transformed certain Christian practices and beliefs, forming an African Christian belief system that fuses foreign with indigenous elements, working together in a way that makes sense within the local context (Meyer 2014:454). Therefore, certain expressions that are returning to and prioritising African identity and traditional religious and philosophical modes over Western Christian influences are increasingly popular in South Africa (Forster 2024). African Pentecostalism fosters traditional views grounded in the notion that the African religious tradition should be freed from Western Christianity and its influence to become more affirming and representative of African values, beliefs, and practices (Forster 2024; Larbi 2002:155; Mokhoathi 2021:1). However, this desire to return to African traditional religious

systems has not necessarily materialised an authentically traditional religious form but has produced a syncretistic mode of Christianity, practiced by many Africans who combine Western Christian practice and belief alongside traditional systems (Mndende 2009:79). These syncretic elements are occurring increasingly in many PCCs across South Africa, who are not historically steeped in local culture or influence.

The notion of *independence* remains important for many PCCs in South Africa, representing freedom from the prescriptions of stale and lifeless Christianity, or freedom from colonial Christianity with its influence and standards. Thus, the concept of freedom that many independent churches represent may be an important attraction for youths in South Africa, the 'born-frees' of post-apartheid South Africa, but who still face very real challenges that exist today. Freedom should have been about empowerment and opportunity; however, South African youth still grapple with root issues of poverty, crime, violence, and unemployment as well as barriers to self-sufficiency, safety, and self-actualisation (Komako 2025). Therefore, churches that can provide solutions to their challenges are appealing. This is because South Africans distrust politicians and the state in light of economic, moral, and transformation failings, making religious organisations that promise supernatural pathways to health and wealth attractive (Forster 2019; also cf. Frahm-Arp 2018; Kgatle 2021). In addition, churches that offer freedom from the white Western religion are attractive for youth looking to reestablish their African religious identity and throw off the vestiges of oppression, as they perceive it. It is in this context that many PCCs have found their niche. The growth of Pentecostalism in South Africa may therefore be explained as *reactance*, a 'motivational state characterised by distress, anxiety, resistance, and the desire to restore a freedom' (American Psychological Association [APA] 2018). Reactance suggests that when people are forced into certain actions, they will react against it, often by demonstrating an increased preference for the action that was restrained (APA 2018). Therefore, the South African context sees many locals actively resisting and rejecting the influence of colonial Christianity by returning to and re-emphasising traditional religious expressions that are tolerated by, or even promoted, in certain Pentecostal churches.

Unfortunately, the recoil reactance has resulted in the proverbial 'throwing out of the baby with the bath water' as some notable aspects of the Christian faith is rejected. A core feature has been the neglect of theological training, and there are increasing numbers of new PCCs established by leaders who lack sound theological training. Many leaders without formal biblical education establish churches (Masenya & Masenya 2018:639, 643). The increase in heretical teachings and doctrinal errors does not surprise and are directly linked to this lack of sound theological training (Kgatle 2022:3). From the beginning of the Pentecostal movement, Christian education and parish work was not prioritised (Oosthuizen 1975:68) because the early Pentecostals were preoccupied with the imminent second coming of Christ and the necessity

<sup>2</sup>Contemporary expressions of Pentecostalism include new Charismatic and prophetic types, that tend to be independent from and not affiliated with known denominations (cf. Anderson 2002; Kgatle 2021; Williamson & Handley 2025). While Pentecostalism (denominational and independent) in South Africa draws from a rich history in American Pentecostalism, there is an increasing indigenous influence, unique to certain expressions.

to evangelise the world (Nel 2017:303). But theological training continues to be neglected in many Pentecostal churches today (Muller 2018:327), resulting in the crises that some of these churches are experiencing.

Ministers who lack theological education often lack a sound biblical knowledge, with the consequence that they are unable to exegete Scripture properly and in context. This results in erroneous and heretical interpretations of the Bible. Consequently, weak theology results in poor teaching, which produces immature Christians who fall for flawed teachings and abuses (Kgatlle 2022:4). However, not all PCCs are doctrinally unsound. Nel (2019:18) argues that although many preachers do not have a formal theology, the rituals and manifestations of their worship are an enactment of theology. Pentecostals have a pneumatic theology, which emphasises the Holy Spirit in all aspects of their worship and practice. As such, scriptural interpretation is dependent on the Spirit who repeats and brings to remembrance what is found in Scripture (Nel 2015:2), who illuminates the Word for the contemporary reader (Land 1993:28) and who directs the church in those areas not covered by Jesus's teachings (Nel 2015:2). Unfortunately, the belief that the Holy Spirit can lead believers in areas not covered by the Bible, has the danger of introducing heresy (Nel 2015:2, referencing Robeck 2006:40). For instance, how should the ordinary believer test the claim of receiving a direct revelation from God? How can the believer be sure whether the revelation is of divine or earthly origin, and what motives are behind such claims? It is not difficult to see how such practices can become manipulative and abusive. That is why church leaders could instruct their congregants to eat grass (News24 2014) and snakes (Raborife 2015), or to drink petrol (Meyer 2014), and allow themselves to be sprayed with insecticide (Makana 2017), have motor vehicles driven over them (Smith 2016), and fall victim to sexual and financial abuse (Knoetze 2022:1). Some young people in South Africa are desperate and willing to prove their faith by participating in these harmful and abusive practices. On the other hand, believers can protect themselves from exploitation and harm by practising discernment, recognising the truth from deception – it comes by knowing the truth of God's Word. Discipleship, the ongoing process of growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pt 2:18), has a direct bearing on spiritual discernment and is a safeguard against deception. Katle (2021) explains:

Poor teaching results in immature Christians who lack discernment and gullibly fall for flawed teachings. When discipleship is properly instituted and conducted, believers are matured in their faith and able to discern and understand the Bible and reject false teachings. (p. 50)

## Theological training

Theological training is not prioritised in Africa; Knoetze (2022:1) reports that as many as 85% of church leaders in Africa have no formal theological education. In addition, many Pentecostal churches discourage formal theological training because they fear that it will affect the spirituality of a person, despite the positive correlation that theological

proficiency has with spiritual formation (Knoetze 2022:2). Mogoane, Nel and Dryer (2023:6) note that theological training is sidelined by Pentecostals because of their (*over*)-dependence on the Holy Spirit [*author's emphasis*]. They view formal training as an academic endeavour that limits the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the preacher, called by God who can equip and empower them for ministry. Their particular view of the Holy Spirit is foundational to their reliance on a personal spiritual experience and extra-biblical revelation, since they view the continual working and presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives as justification for their belief in the ongoing revelation of Scripture through the Holy Spirit (Nel 2017:290). What this means, is that they affirm that the Holy Spirit speaks to the church through Scripture and in numerous other ways (Moore 2000:12). They tend to emphasise the Spirit's role in facilitating supernatural encounters with God through the Spirit, which results in transformative personal experiences (Anderson 2002:168). In the same light, their pneumatic spirituality forms the basis of their theology (Archer 2009:140–156) and biblical interpretation (Dela Cruz 2010:105). Unfortunately, personal spiritual experiences, viewed as a sign of a supernatural encounter with God and extra-biblical revelation, are often elevated above the Bible (Enyinnaya 2008:146) and used to validate their beliefs (Nel 2019:6). Relying on experience and extra-biblical revelation poses a danger in that it can expose people to heretical teachings and abuse, especially when it occurs outside the norms of Scripture (Nel 2015:2; 2017:290, 300).

Central to Pentecostalism's pneumatic spirituality are the personal spiritual experiences that form part of their daily lives and worship experience. Their theology emphasises the power of the Holy Spirit working in the life of the believer, which results in transformation whenever the Word is preached. Therefore, preaching is about communicating God's mind to his people to bring about transformation and a lifestyle change (Mogoane et al. 2023:1). As such, they rely on the Spirit to effect change in the life of the believer when the Word is preached, dismissing the proper exegesis of Scripture in favour of supernatural empowerment and manifestations (cf. Mogoane et al. 2023). Systematic biblical exegesis is not prioritised, as they believe that the Holy Spirit can draw the preachers' attention to relevant scriptural passages that will help them deal with contextual challenges in their lives and ministry (Kgatlle & Mofokeng 2019:2). Consequently, Pentecostals expect to experience the immediacy, power, and truth of the written word being proclaimed through the active involvement of the Spirit in the preacher and in the midst of the congregation (Nel 2017:288–289). As a result, they may manufacture experiences to validate the activity of the Spirit (Jaichandran & Madhav 2003:55) and elevate spiritual experiences above the written word. Unsound biblical interpretation often implies the introduction of heresies, as untrained pastors are ill-equipped to handle exegetical and hermeneutical issues in preaching (Mogoane et al. 2023:6). The danger of manipulation, exploitation and abuse also exists in churches when poorly

taught congregants lack spiritual discernment and fall into erroneous teachings. Therefore, biblical knowledge is necessary for spiritual discernment and Christian growth. Consequently, discipleship should be a priority for developing and deepening one's spiritual beliefs, values, and biblical understanding. Discipleship is multidimensional and involves spiritual disciplines, education, and experiences in nurturing a person's relationship with their faith, community, and God.

## Discipleship

Broadly speaking, discipleship is about the formation of a student or follower of a particular school of thought. Youths are undergoing formation daily through the influences, interactions, and relationships they have with the world and with the church. In this regard, Hoffman (2015:87) mentions formation as it occurs in the intellectual, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of life. This suggests that while information is necessary for formation, it is not the only requisite for the development of youths. Within the Christian faith, biblical instruction, while not the only factor, is a key aspect of discipleship as Wright (2010:285) puts it: 'discipleship occurs when believers are taught the Word of God and are taught to obey all that Christ instructed'. It involves teaching and doing, which occurs in the context of systematic biblical instruction (knowledge), together with a faith relationship with God and within the faith community (Christian & Kilgour 2014:21).

Christian discipleship is about growing into the stature of Christ (Nel 2015:2), and this process unfolds in the course of the relationships that believers have with God, one another, and the world (Knoetze 2017:1-2). A disciple embodies Christ – a process which begins at conversion, and which continues throughout life by obeying all that is commanded in Scripture (Jn 8:31; Whitmore 2018:473; Zhodiates 1999:3). It is a lifelong learnership which requires a discipler-disciple, or student-teacher relationship (Nel 2017:2; Ruthven 2000:69). The context of the church promotes youth discipleship since youths can have access to spiritually mature leaders and believers who teach, guide, and influence Christian values in their faith journey (Maiko 2007:166). In this context, youths learn how to live a life of Christlikeness that reflects the nature and instruction of Christ. Discipleship is therefore characterised by the *Imitatio Dei* – the imitation of Christ (Frederick 2008:556) in a lifestyle of worship (Bosch 2014:76, 82; Horton 2011:671). In other words, the calling of a Christ-disciple has to do a lot more than merely following Jesus; it involves a life that is inculcated to the extent that the true disciple's life reflects Christ (Ruthven 2000:67).

In Matthew 11:29, Jesus invites believers to learn from him. Learning in this context is the process of understanding his teachings and character and actively applying these teachings in daily life (Biblehub.com). In other words, discipleship occurs through theoretical knowledge and practical insight that is gained through instruction and experience (Nel 2015:6). Therefore, biblical instruction is an essential

component of discipleship and is principled in teaching [*didasko*], demonstrated in Matthew 28's Great Commission (Bosch 2014:67). According to the text, the making of disciples occurs through proclaiming the gospel, baptising, and teaching followers to obey all that Jesus commanded. However, mere knowledge may do little to transform the life of a believer (Folmsbee 2007:39), as transformation occurs through the working of the Holy Spirit (Knoetze 2015:7). In this regard, discipleship into Christlikeness occurs through the Word and the continuous transformative work of the Holy Spirit (Willard 2000:256). It requires a holistic and balanced view of Scripture directed by the Holy Spirit (Jn 6:63), which means that the written Word should be revered and studied with the Spirit's illumination and application. Thus, discipleship is a lifelong process of learning how to live a life that glorifies God through observation and sound theological instruction (Folmsbee 2007:39). It requires scriptural knowledge and applying these biblical truths to mature in the faith. It also requires the Holy Spirit to enliven the written Word and to vitalise spiritual acts of prayer, meditation, fasting, study, service, and worship (Vanhoozer 2015:169–170).

The observations of my PhD study (Prince 2026) show that PCCs do not explicitly refer to terminology such as faith formation, or discipleship (although the term discipleship is being used evermore frequently) but rather speak of maturing in faith, or spiritual maturity. Nonetheless, they are concerned, as with any other Christian tradition, with the spiritual growth and development of their faith. Discipleship within Pentecostalism is deeply relational and Spirit-driven, giving space for experiences to contribute to the individual's faith experience (Williamson & Handley 2024:117/118). Nevertheless, a balanced view of discipleship should be considered – one that incorporates biblical instruction alongside experiences rooted in the Holy Spirit. In addition, formative experiences, embodied in practices such as worship, fasting, meditation, and study should be combined with sound theology to promote discipleship among the youth. In this respect, the faith community is important for the youth to learn from and to observe mature believers living out their faith – it is therefore crucial for discipleship.

However, because many pastors from PCCs in South Africa lack sound theological training, they may also lack biblical proficiency (Kgatlé 2021), which negatively impacts the instruction and discipleship of youth congregants. Wholistic biblical instruction that teaches the Word of God in its fullness will cause people to mature into the stature of Christ (Groome 1980:49–51; Root & Dean 2011:71). Sound scriptural education can mitigate against heresies and erroneous biblical interpretations, which give rise to exploitation and abuse. Sound biblical teaching can guard against the over-reliance on experiences that are sometimes manipulated to justify people's religious beliefs. In addition, Scripture, when appropriated correctly, should be the standard by which spiritual experiences are measured. Therefore, discipleship should be about knowing the Word and adhering to all its

instructions in synergy with the Holy Spirit, who works in the lives of believers to bring them into the image of Christ. Consequently, faithful devotion to Scripture that enables youths to adequately handle the truth and refute all false claims, alongside intimacy with the Spirit who illumines the Word and causes believers to walk in the truth and revelation, is key to the discipleship of youth in today's independent Pentecostal churches.

The failure of PCCs to promote theological training has resulted in, among others, scriptural misinterpretation and distortion, which has led to doctrinal breakdown and theological compromise. Much has been written about such matters, but I offer a brief example to explain what I mean. For instance, Pentecostal deliverances (ridding a person of satanic possession and influence through prayer, or through the application of anointed items to cast a demon out), stem from a lack of sound biblical knowledge; and also the application of biblical truths resulting in (new) believers who revert to old unprofitable habits that are often viewed as the operation of demonic strongholds and oppression in their lives, and which require supernatural intervention to free them completely. I contend that their minds are not (constantly being) renewed through the Word, and therefore their external behaviour shows no evidence of the internal transformation that occurred at conversion. Vanhoozer (2015:149–150) explains that they do not conform to the image of Christ, as they have yet to develop the mind of Christ, and therefore operate as dysfunctional Christians. Minds are renewed through Scripture (cf. Ps 119:11; Eph 4:23; Philp 2:5; Col 3:16). Discipleship that emphasises biblical knowledge illuminated by the Spirit therefore is the remedy for this dysfunction.

## Conclusion

The importance of theological training for pastors in PCCs cannot be understated. Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches are the fastest-growing means of Christianity in South Africa, drawing young people from all spheres of life. Yet, certain PPCs have experienced challenges related to doctrinal integrity, theological compromise, and abuses as a direct consequence of poor theological substance. Theological training is important for developing critical skills in biblical interpretation. These skills are necessary in the spiritual growth and discernment of young people. Discipleship is about learning about God and learning how to live a life that glorifies him. Learning about God is chiefly an academic endeavour, requiring verbal instruction of the interpreted Word. If pastors are ill-equipped to provide sound biblical instructions, their congregants will also lack sound biblical knowledge. Learning how to live a life that glorifies God is chiefly an experiential endeavour. Youths learn from observing others how to live lives that honour and glorify God. This is learned within the community of faith. Both are necessary; one aspect cannot be emphasised at the expense of the other. In this regard, theological training contributes positively to discipleship and transformation when it is rooted in sound biblical principles through the influence and

direction of the Holy Spirit to produce the appropriate understanding, interpretation, defence, and right application of Scripture.

## Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on Ronele Prince's thesis entitled 'Faith formation of Emerging Adults in Independent Pentecostal Churches in South Africa' towards the degree of PhD at University Pretoria on 2026, with supervisor Prof. Knoetze. It is currently in progress and not publicly available.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## CRediT authorship contribution

Ronele M. Prince: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Resources. Johannes J. Knoetze: Conceptualisation, Visualisation, Writing – review and editing, Supervision. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

## Ethical considerations

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

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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