

The Hermeneutics of God’s Call: A Theological Inquiry into Pentecostal Pastoral Training

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Abstract

While the “call to ministry” notion is central to Pentecostal ecclesiology, it often remains under-theorised in academic discourse, particularly in relation to structured theological education. While Pentecostalism has garnered significant scholarly attention about pneumatology and charismatic expressions, a dearth of critical engagement remains about how the call to ministry is theologically understood and operationalised in the formation of pastors. Existing literature tends to treat vocational calling as either a mystical experience or a subjective conviction, often without sufficient theological or pedagogical scrutiny.

The problem lies in the tension between institutionalised theological education and the lived, charismatic experiences that characterise Pentecostal spirituality. A Pentecostal pastoral vocation is recognised and affirmed through a blend of theological, experiential, and scriptural interpretive frameworks, which prioritise spiritual encounters and divine calling over academic training.

This study aims to examine how Pentecostal communities construct and interpret divine calling through a distinctive hermeneutic that integrates scriptural interpretation with lived spiritual experience. This includes how Pentecostal clergy negotiate God’s call to ministry in the context of theological training. The study explores selected contributions in Pentecostal theology, including Reichard’s exploration of miracle discourse and relational metaphysics, to articulate the evolving interaction between spiritual experience and ministerial legitimacy. It also looks at the metaphysical assumptions and dialogical processes underpinning vocational discernment in Pentecostal contexts. The methodology is a qualitative theological approach, integrating textual analysis with reflective engagement on Pentecostal practice. The findings

strive to contribute to Practical Theology discourse, particularly regarding ministerial vocation, charismatic authority, and the formation of ecclesial identity.

Keywords: Biblical; Calling; Gospel; Legitimacy; Ministry; Training; Pentecostal

Introduction

The Pentecostal hermeneutical approach entails a mutually dependent interaction between Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the faith community. This interaction leads to a collaborative interpretation where the narrative world of the text and the Holy Spirit play a crucial part (Nel, 2015:5). Considering the interpretation methods used in the Pentecostal movement and the difficulties and obstacles encountered in approaching and adopting Christian leadership, Pentecostal clergy face numerous hurdles, making good leadership of utmost importance. In a ministry context, a priest must comprehensively understand the Bible and theology (Masenya, 2021:122). They are expected to be proficient in accurately interpreting Scripture, articulating intricate theological ideas, and offering help to individuals grappling with faith-related inquiries or uncertainties. A good comprehension of counselling skills is also essential since they will undoubtedly need to work with individuals and families grappling with a multitude of concerns.

Throughout its history, Pentecostalism has wrestled with the tension between experiential faith and structured theological education (Topf, 2020:100). Although the Pentecostal movement was widely popular in the past, it did not mandate rigorous theological study for its clergy. Consequently, it might not have acquired a comprehensive and intellectual understanding of the Bible and Christian doctrines. Pentecostal clergy did not necessarily lack theological training; however, a significant proportion had less formal training than clergy in other Christian traditions (Resane, 2017:3).

Following this insight, some scholars of Pentecostalism have posited that Pentecostal pastors' theological positions may be less coherent or consistent than those of clergy in other Christian traditions. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that this does not inherently imply that Pentecostal ideas are less legitimate or significant. Asumang (2018:130) indicates that numerous Pentecostal Christians contend that their belief system is rooted in a firsthand, individual encounter with God, rather than relying on cerebral comprehension or academic education.

This article aims to elucidate the correlation between God's divine summons and the training received in the Pentecostal tradition in South Africa. It contends that an integrated hermeneutic that fuses charismatic experience and formal education is imperative. It also seeks to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse about Pentecostalism in South Africa, particularly regarding clergy members and their vocational calling. The study evaluates Pentecostal clergy based on the principles of divine calling and Pentecostal education. Finally, it examines the characteristics of a pastor commonly referred to as Pentecostal.

Pentecostal clergy's and God's call

Pentecostalism first evolved in the early 20th century, emphasising the experiential components of faith, particularly the baptism of the Holy Spirit and subsequent

manifestations. A significant focus on direct spiritual experiences, the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, and, on occasion, a lack of formal theological education first distinguished the movement. As Pentecostal groups evolved, many saw the need for broader doctrinal roots. This evolution still leads to continuous tension in Pentecostal ministry.

In South Africa, Pentecostalism has grown dramatically, with many independent churches adopting Pentecostal methods while incorporating local cultural components. This complicates the task of harmonising theological orthodoxy and contextual expressions of spirituality. Although theological knowledge provides a solid basis for understanding the principles and teachings of a particular faith, a focus on spiritual gifts and manifestations enables individuals to have a more profound connection with their spirituality (DeVries, 2016:9). Believers can actively enhance their personal and communal spiritual advancement by comprehending and employing their distinct spiritual capabilities, leading to a vibrant and varied atmosphere that fosters spiritual growth and unity.

By examining the complex intersection of three core concepts – the Bible, the Holy Spirit's dynamic presence, and the Pentecostal community's corporeal practices – this study proffers a hermeneutic that perceives *calling* as a relational and dynamic process rather than a unique or monolithic experience. Together, these components provide a correlated framework that reveals vocation discernment through communal affirmation, scriptural devotion, and intuitive spirituality.

This understanding is encompassed in the lived experiences of Pentecostal clergy, who are officially appointed pastors in Pentecostal denominations and serve as spiritual guides in their congregations (Matshobane, 2016:4). These religious leaders often emphasise their belief in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the act of speaking in tongues, and the importance of individual spiritual encounters. Furthermore, they oversee worship services, deliver sermons, offer pastoral support, and guide their congregations' spiritual development. Pentecostal clergy often significantly impact the development of the vibrant and energetic worship style closely linked to Pentecostalism (Hobe, 2019:35; Willaford, 2023:6). These clergy members are crucial in providing leadership and guidance to the religious community.

Within Pentecostal tradition, a genuine call from God is recognised through distinct forms of spiritual empowerment (Ma, 2017:232). This may include receiving spiritual gifts or a personal anointing. Such experiences are regarded as clear indicators of divine calling. Clergy are considered to be fulfilling their purpose when they demonstrate this empowerment in their ministry. The effectiveness of their service and leadership, and their spiritual influence in their community over time serve as tangible evidence of their calling. The pastor is believed to be anointed when the adherents attest to being cured, delivered, blessed, or spiritually promoted by the cleric's laying on of hands or declaration (Bewley, 2020:27).

Generally Pentecostal clergy are committed to fostering an individual and profound encounter with the power and existence of God in their congregations. An exemplar of a Pentecostal clergy member in action is a pastor who leads a vibrant and dynamic congregation, characterised by spirited singing, glossolalia (speaking in tongues as an expression of the Holy Spirit), and tangible expressions of the Holy Spirit. This clergy member would deliver powerful sermons, intercede for healing and liberation, and actively engage the audience in spiritual combat against malevolent entities.

Difficulties encountered by Pentecostal clergy in training according to God's principles

Pentecostalism has been differentiated by the distinction between academic theology and experiential faith from the start (Eriksen, 2015:51). Academic theology seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of religious beliefs and practices through rigorous investigation and scholarly work. Conversely, experiential faith places greater significance on direct interaction with the divine, emphasising spiritual encounters and manifestations. Both philosophies have merits and drawbacks, and Pentecostal adherents often struggle to achieve a harmonious equilibrium.

This article emphasises the importance of both academic training and spiritual calling as essential factors for addressing this issue. Those who practise experiential faith see it as a direct demonstration of the Holy Spirit's presence and power. For example, glossolalia illustrates how Pentecostal clergy use lived experience to determine divine calling. However, in the absence of theological education, spiritual activities can be inaccurately discerned or prove inconsistent with theological instruction. For example, an academic theologian may investigate the phonetics and syntax of glossolalia utterances to discover commonalities between individuals and cultures, while a Pentecostal believer may consider speaking in tongues as possible evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostal clergy have difficulties in understanding and applying biblical themes in the modern setting, owing to significant cultural and historical differences between the biblical era and the present (Archer, 2004:26). It can be challenging to harmonise understanding the language, customs, and societal norms of biblical periods with the complexities of modern life, particularly for those without scholarly expertise.

Moreover, the comprehension and application of biblical texts differ significantly among religious traditions and individual perspectives, leading to conflicting interpretations of fundamental principles acquired through theological institutions. In Pentecostal settings, the complexity of ethical decision-making is exacerbated by the presence of ethical supernaturalism. This approach involves pastors relying on subjective divine revelations, such as visions, prophecies, or glossolalic experiences, to inform their moral and pastoral choices. Although these revelations are regarded as spiritually authoritative within the community, the personal interpretation of such experiences may lead to ethical or moral lapses if they are not accompanied by appropriate accountability or critical evaluation. Hence, Pentecostal clergy face the challenge of discerning how to apply biblical teachings faithfully and ethically to present-day difficulties and challenges.

Navigating the complexities of spiritual warfare and addressing demonic influences remains a significant challenge for Pentecostal clergy (Twibell, 2020:85). In this context, spiritual warfare refers to the belief that supernatural forces can affect individuals' lives, requiring pastors to respond both through prayer and practical action to safeguard and guide their congregations. Effectively managing these challenges calls for a comprehensive understanding of faith, a strong personal relationship with God, and a well-established theological and practical foundation. Clergy are also expected to exercise discernment, distinguishing between typical life difficulties and what they interpret as genuine malevolent spiritual influences.

Building theological knowledge and acquiring practical ministry experience equips pastors with the necessary strategies and perspectives to address these issues responsibly. With scholarly insight, unwavering faith, and suitable support, Pentecostal leaders are better prepared to confront spiritual conflicts with confidence and integrity. This approach not only strengthens their own convictions but also reinforces the faith of their congregations.

Pentecostal pastors' qualifications: Does God's calling trump training?

Pentecostalism provides a unique perspective in the realm of theology. The movement's hermeneutics and its approach to theological training are closely linked with its historical development. Pentecostal hermeneutics encompasses a dynamic interface between the interpreter and Scripture, facilitated by the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Kgathe & Mofokeng, 2019:2). It is a process of creatively discussing and reaching a shared understanding that ultimately leads to gaining knowledge via personal experience. This is where the fictional world of the text and the group of readers come together, and where the Spirit plays a crucial role in understanding and interpreting the text.

Pentecostalism has typically emphasised that Christians are not obligated to possess formal theological education to interpret and communicate the teachings of the Bible (Jentile, 2016:65). Pentecostals frequently prioritise being guided by the Holy Spirit when comprehending and proclaiming biblical truths. They often believe that engaging in a personal examination of the Bible and cultivating spiritual abilities such as prophecy, words of wisdom and knowledge, and interpretation of languages is sufficient for impactful ministry.

Adopting a more experiential and Spirit-guided methodology in religious observance may effectively address the requirements of both the individual and the community. Pentecostals often resist formal theological education, maybe as a rejection of the perceived inflexibility and lack of vitality in worship in more conventional, educated congregations (Darby, 2022:15).

The concept of divine calling holds a prominent position in Pentecostalism and is frequently regarded as necessary for anyone aspiring to join Pentecostal clergy (Naidu & Nzuzza, 2013:157). Although some Pentecostal congregations expect rigorous theological preparation by church leaders, many prioritise the divine calling and may allow individuals to pursue ministry without traditional education. Under such conditions, the divine summons is interpreted as confirmation of the individual's aptitude and preparation for their role in serving. Pentecostal clergy must demonstrate obedience and receptiveness to God's calling, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their ministry.

Pentecostal clergy often describe their calling as a powerful and transformative experience, marked by a strong sense of conviction, purpose, and divine direction. Despite having different beliefs, Pentecostal clergy are strongly inclined to allow personal experience to influence their theology and interpretation of ministry (Nel, 2017:197). The correlation between the hermeneutics of the Pentecostal movement and its approach to theological training is crucial for comprehending the clergy (Nel, 2016:8).

Pentecostal clergy firmly believe their entry into ministry is a divine calling from God. They perceive this calling to be rooted in faith, rather than limited to formal education or academic credentials. It is perceived as a divine endowment and not attained

solely via academic pursuit. The early Pentecostal movement exhibited a limited inclination towards theological education due to its scepticism in this regard, and strong emphasis on the concept that the Holy Spirit is crucial in enabling all Christians (Kahsay, 2021:101). Put simply, the Holy Spirit was regarded as the supreme authority and primary source of direction.

It is important to acknowledge that since then Pentecostalism has evolved from relying solely on divine calling to embracing the role of academic theological training. The issue is whether God's calling alone is sufficient for ministry, and if theological training is also necessary. The response to this inquiry is complex and depends on various underlying factors.

Pentecostals have undergone a significant transformation in their approach to liturgy. Adopting a more organised and systematic approach, worship practices now combine aspects of classic liturgy with contemporary and spontaneous emotional displays. Williams (2016:46) states that this has created new opportunities for Pentecostal worship and offers a more equitable method of integrating subjective and objective components into liturgies. This transition also emphasises the necessity of robust biblical instruction, enabling worshippers to acquire the ability to respond in a meaningful and genuine manner. Pentecostals have successfully formulated a liturgical concept based on the Bible and aligned with their cultural values. This principle allows for the free expression of emotions and spiritual talents.

The Pentecostal churches and their leadership should prioritise the significance of formal education by seminaries and recognised institutions of higher learning. This will expose them to diverse perspectives that foster critical thinking in the church's execution of its daily responsibilities.

The significance of training biblical personnel to prepare them for God's work

Ministry is necessary and commendable as it encompasses the exaltation of God and offers the congregation answers and practical guidance in all facets of life. The point of this article is that for the ministry to function well and be beneficial to the congregation, the clergy must be well equipped to carry out God's mission. Reichard (2013), in his article titled 'Of miracles and metaphysics: A Pentecostal-charismatic and process-relational dialogue', emphasises the significance of theological training when he focuses on the Pentecostal and charismatic understanding of miracles through church experiences and personal experiences. Pentecostal-charismatic movements require robust metaphysics and scientific methodology to substantiate their assertions and regulate potential exaggerations. Pentecostals and Charismatics claims about healing, prophecy and other supernatural encounters should be continually examined and supported with coherent metaphysical, intellectual, and, where possible scientific reasoning. These statements are understandable when presented in both practical and intellectual terms. Therefore, it is critical to provide training for those who will be involved in Bible ministry.

Divine miracles continue to occur and will continue to do so as long as the church exists and people have faith. The correct interpretation and understanding of these miracles should focus on glorifying God rather than attributing credit to the people in charge of the ministry. Individuals often misinterpret these wonders for their own advantage and to acquire recognition. I contend that merely being anointed by the Holy

Spirit is inadequate for comprehending these extraordinary deeds; training and anointing are necessary.

Brodie (2011:1) examines whether Pentecostals, particularly those called to pastoral or evangelistic ministry, need formal theology education or if relying on the “anointing” of the Spirit is enough. Careful analysis indicates that being chosen by the divine and possessing prior experience in ministry are inadequate. It is imperative for anyone called to the ministry to undergo thorough instruction in Biblical Studies in order to be well prepared. Hendriks (2012:2) points out that in the present context, when most congregants are highly educated, it is imperative to have skilled and knowledgeable preachers who possess both intellectual and practical abilities to address the church’s contemporary challenges effectively. In today’s globalised society, there is a need for a fresh approach to leadership and training.

At the same time, academic training is not a precondition for entering the ministry. Under certain conditions, untrained individuals may be summoned to specific ministries, and these ministries can thrive and succeed even without theological training. However, it is imprudent to assert that education, as a fundamental value, is dispensable, thereby treating an exception as the norm (Brodie, 2011:15).

While this article acknowledges the significance of academia, it does not consider it mandatory. Nonetheless, pastors are entrusted with specific responsibilities that necessitate a combination of academic knowledge and practical experience. The primary duties of pastors are portraying an accurate depiction of God, articulating a vision, delivering sermons, safeguarding against erroneous doctrines and biblical interpretations, and tending to the needs of God’s followers (Moskala, 2018:17). In order to maintain relevance, tasks must be executed diligently with consideration for the church’s specific context, timeframe, and prevailing circumstances. Pastors should undergo theological instruction to carry out these roles faithfully within their respective contexts. There is a scarcity of qualified preachers globally, including in Africa and more specifically in South Africa, across various religious faiths, particularly in the Pentecostal churches.

Handley (2021:137) confirms that one of the major problems in the evangelical world is the lack of adequate theological education for pastors, missionaries, and lay leaders. A significant proportion of pastors have informal or non-formal theological education. Providing good training for those engaged in biblical work is essential. Such training offers a range of benefits worldwide, with particular significance for regions such as Africa and South Africa. By utilising sound theology, pastors can avoid the occurrence of poor-quality academic research, attention-grabbing and emotionally charged misinformation, and speculative misinformation, including conspiracy theories. The study of theology equips pastors to provide logical and reasoned answers to inquiries. It empowers them to communicate the gospel to many cultures and belief systems. According to Moskala (2018:19), theological study enables pastors to engage in meaningful debates and deliver contemporary and pertinent presentations. In addition, it enhances pastoral care by imbuing it with professionalism, competence, and confidence.

Providing people with a biblical background can be difficult in Pentecostal situations, because some members believe it could lead to attaching greater importance to formal theological education, diminishing dependence on the Spirit of God and reducing reliance on divine guidance. According to Sun (2000:227), some early Pentecostals

believed that formal theological study should be avoided entirely as it would stifle the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit. This article concludes that there is no inherent issue with performing miracles and healing individuals.

However, education has played a significant, albeit challenging, role in the Pentecostal movement. The training of biblical people has become important due to the role of numerous seminaries and theological colleges worldwide, particularly in Africa and South Africa, which aim to equip pastors for their mission. Amanze (2008:122) highlights the significance of theological education in Southern and Central Africa, as evidenced by the widespread presence of Bible schools, theological colleges, and other institutes of theological education. These educational institutions emerged in the 1980s and are found throughout the region. Several Christian groups, such as Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Dutch Reformed, have established theological colleges throughout Southern and Central Africa to meet the need for highly skilled clergy. Numerous other institutions have specifically created departments dedicated to studying theology and religious education.

According to Anderson (2004:1), Pentecostal churches are required to send their pastors to seminaries and colleges to gain qualifications that are acknowledged by higher education institutions. Pentecostal congregations previously sent their pastors to unaccredited theological institutions for training periods of three, six, and twelve months. These seminaries are crucial for providing pastors with religious education, but this does not preclude them from pursuing accredited university academic training.

Training those involved in Bible studies is crucial, as it is substantiated by Scripture in terms of academic knowledge and practical application. The three years Jesus spent with his disciples might be seen as a period of practical instruction for their future ministry. While in Acts (22:3), Paul states, "I am a Jew, hailing from Tarsus in Cilicia, but raised in this particular city. I received education from Gamaliel and underwent comprehensive instruction in the legal principles of our forefathers. I possessed an equal amount of fervour for God as any of you currently exhibit." During this defence before the Jews Paul explicitly says that he underwent theological instruction under the tutelage of the esteemed instructor Gamaliel.

The ministry's smooth operation relies on both academic and ecclesiastical preparation. Individuals who contend that academic education lacks significance and that vocation is the sole crucial aspect for competency for ministry, fail to comprehend our contemporary world. Our society is confronted with many challenges and predicaments that necessitate the involvement of pastors with erudite training. The present theological challenges that we encounter globally, with a particular focus on Africa and specifically our nation, South Africa, involve instances where individuals, influenced by pastors and followers, engage in deplorable behaviour such as consuming petrol, grass, snakes, leaves, and other detrimental ritual acts (Pondani, 2019:31). This suggests that pastors and church members require training to possess fundamental knowledge when evaluating the content of pastors' sermons and believers' teachings.

The frequent reliance on personal experiences of divine revelation, while central to the tradition, raises important ethical concerns. Specifically ethical supernaturalism highlights the potential danger that individual interpretations of spiritual guidance may result in decisions that conflict with established moral standards. The ecumenical and contextualised approach of theological education prioritises making theological

education accessible to all believers (Wah, 2013:282). The purpose of theological education is to prepare individuals to actively engage in humanisation, enabling them to fully embody the divine image in which they were created by God (Abolade, 2024:297). This affirms the indispensability of and pressing need for providing preachers with biblical training. Given the urgent nature of the matter, it is imperative to construct a set of guiding principles for persons aspiring to become pastors. Ministry is similar to other professions in that individuals must be adequately prepared to operate in their specific sectors.

Key findings

This study into Pentecostal pastoral training reveals several noteworthy findings:

Dialectical tension in Pentecostal formation: There is continual tension between experiential faith and scholarly theology in Pentecostal traditions. This tension is not incidental, but integral to Pentecostal identity, demonstrating the need for a nuanced hermeneutical approach that combines charismatic experience with formal theological understanding.

Pentecostal attitudes towards education: While early Pentecostalism was often sceptical of formal theological education, contemporary Pentecostal communities are increasingly recognising the value of structured theological training, especially in the light of the complexities of current ministry settings. This marks a dramatic shift in the movement's epistemological principles. The most effective method for Pentecostal pastoral formation appears to be an approach that acknowledges the divine calling and anointing of the Holy Spirit while embracing rigorous theological study that prepares ministers to address current concerns effectively.

Legitimation via dual authority: Pentecostal pastoral legitimacy is based on divine calling (pneumatological authority) and theological training (institutional authority). This dual legitimisation process enables Pentecostal clergy to distinguish between charismatic and institutional representations of ministerial power.

Contextual challenges in South African Pentecostalism: The South African Pentecostal context presents unique challenges, such as problematic practices (e.g., congregants consuming harmful substances at the pastor's direction), highlighting the dangers of ministerial leadership lacking adequate theological grounding and ethical formation.

Towards an integrated hermeneutical approach: Effective Pentecostal hermeneutics involves a three-way interaction between Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the faith community. This method rejects solely intellectual or purely experiential interpretations, instead proposing a more integrated path for theological knowledge and ministry preparation.

Transformation of Pentecostal liturgical practices: Pentecostal worship has evolved into a more structured approach that combines spontaneous charismatic expression with

liturgical elements, necessitating training and deeper theological reflection to remain consistent with Pentecostal spiritual identity.

Conclusion

This article examined Pentecostal pastors and the responsibilities and requirements associated with their calling to serve as pastors or ministers. Pentecostals consider a call to ministry as a personal, intense desire inside oneself, accompanied by an anointing and exceptional abilities, to proclaim the gospel with miraculous manifestations. This article explored the notion that Pentecostals believe pursuing a vocation in ministry, church leadership, or evangelistic work necessitates a combination of formal education and the divine empowerment bestowed by the Holy Spirit. If the emphasis on anointing by the Holy Spirit is no longer prioritised in the Pentecostal community, Pentecostal ministry will cease. However, this article contends that, besides being anointed and possessing the Spirit, preparation for ministry must encompass theological training. Ministerial training empowers pastors to effectively articulate the gospel with relevance and comprehension and equips them to steer clear of erroneous teachings that may result in the secularisation and commercialisation of the church. This will also work against church members being deceived (under the guise of the anointing) to engage in disgraceful activities such as consuming grass and ingesting petrol. Training pastors also enhances their ability to provide pastoral care with professionalism and expertise.

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