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The Book of James as a Pentecostal Manifesto: Faith Made Flesh in Word, Power, and Praxis

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ABSTRACT

The Epistle of James, historically marginalized within Protestantism due to its emphasis on works, finds a natural and resonant home within the Pentecostal tradition. This paper argues that James functions as a foundational manifesto for Pentecostalism, providing a theological and practical framework that aligns with its core distinctives. Moving beyond a superficial resonance, the analysis demonstrates how James's emphasis on a faith manifested in action provides a pneumatological theology of works, where ethical imperatives are energized by the Holy Spirit. The paper examines the historical context of James's diaspora community as a prototype for Pentecostal identity, engages in a deep exegesis of "faith and works" through a charismatic lens, explores the theology of the tongue in relation to charismatic speech, and analyzes James 5:13-18 as a liturgical blueprint for divine healing. Furthermore, it explores the epistle's radical economic ethics as a challenge and corrective to modern Pentecostalism, particularly the Prosperity Gospel. The paper also engages with African, Asian, and Latin American Pentecostal perspectives to demonstrate the global resonance of James's message. Through scholarly engagement and historical case studies, the paper contends that James offers a holistic, integrated vision for a Pentecostality that is spiritually powerful, ethically rigorous, and socially compassionate, solidifying its role as an essential and enduring manifesto for the global movement.

Keywords: James; Pentecostalism; manifesto; faith and works; healing; prosperity gospel; diaspora; pneumatology; social ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The Protestant theological tradition, heavily influenced by Martin Luther's seminal emphasis on justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), has often struggled with the Epistle of James (Johnson, 1995). Luther's famous dismissal of it as an "epistle of straw" because it did not "preach Christ" in the way he believed Paul did has cast a long shadow over its reception within Western Christianity (Luther, 1522/1960). This perspective positioned James's emphasis on works as a potential threat to the doctrine of grace, creating a theological tension that has persisted for centuries. However, Pentecostalism, born on the margins of established Protestantism, instinctively bypassed this polemic. Its theology was not forged in the halls of Wittenberg but in the sawdust-covered tents and rented halls of the Holiness and revival movements, where the proof of faith was found not in doctrinal precision alone but in tangible experience and demonstrable power (Hasugian, 2022). From this vantage point, James was not a problem to be solved but a promise to be claimed, a scriptural warrant for a faith that does something.

To classify James as a "manifesto" is to make a specific claim about its genre and function. A manifesto is more than a letter or a treatise; it is a declarative, often provocative, document that seeks to define an identity, articulate core principles, and issue a call to action (Shepherd, 2025). It is written for a community under formation or in need of reformation. James fits this description perfectly. It opens with a declaration of identity, "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," and proceeds to outline, in stark, imperative terms, the marks of authentic faith: endurance in trial, resistance to temptation, hearing and doing the word, caring for the marginalized, taming the tongue, and praying for the sick. It is a document of action and identity, making it profoundly manifesto-like in its tone and intent. Unlike the more abstract theological treatises of Paul, James reads like a collection of prophetic exhortations designed to shape a community's character and practice.

Pentecostalism is a multifaceted global movement, but its core distinctives provide a hermeneutical key for reading James. These include a pervasive pneumatology that expects the present-day, powerful work of the Holy Spirit, including charismata such as healing, prophecy, and glossolalia; an experientialism that values personal encounter with God as a validation of truth; an oral-narrative culture that prioritizes testimony, story, and proverbial wisdom; an eschatological urgency that shapes ethical living; and a communalism that often emerges among marginalized groups (Anderson, 2014). It is a worldview that seamlessly integrates the spiritual and the practical, seeking evidence of the invisible Spirit in visible, tangible outcomes. This integration is precisely what James offers: a vision of faith that is both spiritually dynamic and ethically demanding.

The significance of this investigation extends beyond academic curiosity. Pentecostalism is now one of the fastest-growing religious movements in the world, with significant presence in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Global South. The movement's emphasis on experiential faith, spiritual gifts, and practical holiness makes James a uniquely relevant text for its theological formation. Yet, Pentecostal engagement with James has often been implicit rather than explicit. This paper seeks to make that engagement explicit and systematic, demonstrating how James provides a theological foundation for Pentecostal identity and practice.

Furthermore, the global spread of Pentecostalism demands a theology of James that is attentive to diverse cultural contexts. African Pentecostal scholars such as Kalu (2008) and Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) have emphasized that James's practical ethics resonate deeply with African worldviews that integrate the spiritual and material. Similarly, Latin American Pentecostal scholars like Martin (1990) have highlighted how James's social ethics speak to communities experiencing poverty and marginalization. Asian Pentecostal voices, including those emerging from Indonesia and the Philippines, emphasize

the communal dimensions of James's ethics, where faith is lived out in extended family networks and tight-knit church communities (Hasugian, 2022). This paper engages with these global perspectives to develop a more representative and robust reading of James as a Pentecostal manifesto.

This paper argues that the Book of James serves as a potent and comprehensive manifesto for Pentecostalism because its theological and ethical imperatives are inherently pneumatological, providing a blueprint for a faith that is dynamically enacted through the Spirit's power in matters of speech, prayer, economics, and community life. The analysis proceeds by first establishing the historical context of James's community as a parallel to the Pentecostal diaspora. It then engages in a thorough exegesis of "faith and works," arguing for a charismatic interpretation. Subsequent sections explore the Pentecostal linguistics of the tongue, the liturgy of healing in James 5, and the radical socio-economic message that both aligns with and challenges modern Pentecostalism. The paper also incorporates African, Asian, and Latin American Pentecostal perspectives to demonstrate the global resonance of James's message. It concludes by synthesizing these elements into a cohesive vision of James's enduring relevance for contemporary Pentecostalism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: JAMES, THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL, AND PROTO-PENTECOSTAL PRIMITIVITY

James of Jerusalem: Leader of a Spirit-Expectant Community

The traditional attribution of the epistle to James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, situates it within a crucial juncture of early Christian history (Saxby, 2015). This James, as depicted in Acts, was a central figure who presided over the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), mediating between Jewish and Gentile factions. His decision was notably inclusive, grounded in the witness of God's activity: "Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name" (Acts 15:14, NRSV). This James was a leader deeply attentive to the workings of the Spirit in real-time, a practice that would define Pentecostalism. His authority derived not from apostolic appointment but from his relationship to Jesus and his recognized wisdom, making him a figurehead for a pragmatic, Spirit-led community navigating its identity. This description equally fits early Pentecostal pioneers like William J. Seymour, whose leadership at Azusa Street was marked by a profound attentiveness to the Spirit's leading.

The historical James was not a theologian in the Pauline sense but a pastoral leader concerned with the practical outworking of faith in everyday life. His epistle reflects this pastoral concern, addressing issues of poverty, oppression, favoritism, and speech that would have been pressing concerns for the early Christian community in Jerusalem and beyond. This pastoral orientation resonates deeply with Pentecostal leadership, which has historically prioritized practical ministry over abstract theological formulation. Pentecostal pastors and evangelists, like James, are often more concerned with how faith operates in the lives of ordinary believers than with systematic theological construction.

The "Diaspora" as a Pneumatological Community

The address to the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (James 1:1) is richly layered. While it literally refers to Jewish Christians scattered outside Palestine, it theologically signifies the new people of God living as exiles in a world not their own. This sense of diasporic identity is central to understanding both James and Pentecostalism. These dispersed communities were cut off from the central temple cult and had to cultivate a faith that was portable, personal, and empowered by the Spirit wherever they found themselves.

Similarly, classical Pentecostalism exploded among modern diasporas: African Americans migrating north, poor whites from the American South, and eventually among the global poor in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. These groups, often socially and economically marginalized, found in the Pentecostal experience a new identity and a powerful presence of God that transcended their earthly location.

James's manifesto is written precisely for such a community, a people in need of an internal, spiritual compass to navigate a hostile or indifferent world. The diaspora community lacked the external markers of religious identity, the temple, the priesthood, the sacrificial system, and had to rely instead on internal, Spirit-enabled resources. This resonates powerfully with Pentecostalism, which has often flourished in contexts where institutional religion was weak or where believers were marginalized from mainstream society. The Pentecostal emphasis on the indwelling Spirit as the primary source of guidance and empowerment reflects the same diasporic dynamic that James addresses.

Furthermore, the concept of diaspora in James carries eschatological significance. The scattered people of God are not merely wanderers but pilgrims on a journey toward a promised inheritance. This eschatological orientation shapes James's ethics: because the community is waiting for the coming of the Lord (James 5:7-8), it must live in a way that anticipates that coming. This eschatological urgency is also central to Pentecostalism, which has traditionally maintained a strong emphasis on the return of Christ and the final consummation of God's kingdom.

The Genre of Paraenesis and Pentecostal Orality

Literarily, James is not a systematic letter but a collection of paraenesis, moral exhortation and wisdom instruction (Niebuhr, 2024). It lacks a linear argument and is instead composed of pithy, often provocative, sayings and imperatives. This style is deeply congruent with Pentecostal culture, which has historically prioritized oral communication: dynamic preaching, shared testimonies, proverbial wisdom, and songs. The written word often serves to capture and catalyze oral practice. James's style feels less like a theological dissertation and more like a series of sermon notes or a collection of wisdom for communal living. Its form matches its function as a practical guide, making it immediately accessible and applicable to the oral-aesthetic of Pentecostalism (Witherington, 2007).

The paraenetic character of James also reflects its function as a community-forming document. Paraenesis is designed not merely to inform but to shape character and practice. It is the kind of instruction that a community receives in the context of worship, fellowship, and shared life. This aligns with Pentecostal practice, where teaching and exhortation often occur in the context of dynamic worship gatherings, testimonies, and small group fellowship. James's wisdom sayings are meant to be memorized, repeated, and internalized, becoming part of the community's collective consciousness.

Case Study: The Azusa Street Mission as a "New Diaspora"

The Azusa Street Revival (1906-1909) serves as a prime historical example of a community that embodied the Jamesian diaspora. Led by William J. Seymour, the son of former slaves, the revival was famously multi-racial and multi-ethnic, a radical fact in the Jim Crow era. Participants described it as a modern "Pentecost," a gathering of a new people from every nation. The publication that emerged from the revival, *The Apostolic Faith*, regularly used language of gathering the "scattered" people of God. An early edition stated, "The power of God now has this thing [racial prejudice] under the feet of the saints... They are made to love one another with a pure heart fervently" (*The Apostolic Faith*, 1906, p. 1). This direct connection between Spirit-baptism and the breaking down of social barriers for a dispersed community mirrors the ethical and social imperatives

found throughout James's letter, demonstrating a lived reception of its manifesto-like call.

The Azusa Street community, like James's diaspora community, was composed of people who had been displaced from their homes, marginalized by society, and in search of a new identity. The experience of the Spirit created a new kinship that transcended the divisions of race, class, and nationality. This echoes James's insistence that genuine faith does not show favoritism (James 2:1-7) and that the community must care for the vulnerable among them. The Azusa Street revival thus represents a historical embodiment of James's vision of a Spirit-formed, inclusive, and compassionate community.

Broader Historical Reception of James in Pentecostalism

Beyond Azusa Street, the reception of James within Pentecostalism has been characterized by a practical, experiential reading. Pentecostal preachers and teachers have drawn on James for sermons on perseverance, controlling the tongue, prayer for healing, and caring for the poor. The epistle's emphasis on wisdom, especially the distinction between earthly and heavenly wisdom (James 3:13-18), has been influential in Pentecostal teaching on spiritual maturity. Pentecostal hermeneutics, with their emphasis on the Spirit's illumination and the practical application of Scripture, have found in James a text that speaks directly to the lived experience of believers.

However, Pentecostal engagement with James has not always been systematic or critical. There has been a tendency to read James in isolation from its historical and literary context or to harmonize it too quickly with Pauline theology. This paper contributes to a more rigorous Pentecostal reading of James by engaging with historical-critical scholarship, theological reflection, and global perspectives.

A PNEUMATOLOGICAL THEOLOGY OF FAITH AND WORKS: BEYOND LUTHERAN POLEMICS

Exegetical Deep Dive: James and Paul in Dialogue

The perceived tension between James and Paul, specifically Romans 3:28 and James 2:24, is a classic theological problem. A Pentecostal reading, however, can move beyond polemic to see a complementary relationship. Paul is attacking a legalistic "works of the law" mentality that seeks to earn salvation, while James is attacking a dead orthodoxy that claims faith but shows no evidence of the Spirit's transformative power. For Paul, works cannot cause justification; for James, the absence of works proves the absence of living faith. Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on the fruit and gifts of the Spirit as evidence of a Spirit-filled life, naturally aligns with James's concern for validation. James is asking, "How do you know faith is present?" His answer is by its visible, tangible products.

The complementary relationship between James and Paul can be further illuminated by considering their different contexts and purposes. Paul was writing primarily to Gentile Christians who were tempted to rely on Jewish legal observances for their standing before God. James was writing to Jewish Christians who were tempted to reduce faith to intellectual assent without corresponding action. Both apostles were concerned with authentic faith, but they addressed different threats to that authenticity. Paul emphasized that justification is God's gracious gift, received through faith; James emphasized that justification is demonstrated through a life of faithful action. A Pentecostal reading holds these emphases together, recognizing that the Spirit who justifies also sanctifies and empowers.

“Works” as Charismata: A Pentecostal Interpretation

A key Pentecostal contribution to this debate is the potential to interpret James’s “works” (ἔργα) not as generalized moral deeds but specifically as the outworking of the charismata, the gifts of the Spirit listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. When James asks, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” (2:14) and uses the example of failing to clothe and feed a brother or sister, he could easily be describing a failure to operate in the gifts of “helping” or “acts of mercy” (1 Cor. 12:28). The “work” of leading a sinner back to truth (James 5:19-20) aligns with the gift of prophecy or word of wisdom. In this reading, the “works” that justify faith’s existence are the very manifestations of the Holy Spirit that Pentecostalism holds dear. Faith is the channel; the Spirit’s works are the necessary, validating outflow.

This interpretation has significant implications for Pentecostal theology. It suggests that the gifts of the Spirit are not merely extraordinary manifestations but are also expressions of ordinary Christian service motivated by love. The gift of “helps” or “mercy” is just as Spirit-empowered as the gift of tongues or prophecy. This democratizes the charismatic life, making every believer a potential vessel for the Spirit’s works. It also connects the charismatic and ethical dimensions of Pentecostal spirituality, showing that the same Spirit who empowers supernatural manifestations also empowers acts of compassion and service.

Faith as Dynamic and Empowered

In Pentecostal experience, faith is rarely a static state of belief; it is a dynamic force. It is “saving faith,” “faith for healing,” “faith for a miracle.” This aligns with James’s conception of faith as something that must be perfected or brought to completion (τελειόω) by its accompanying action (2:22). A faith that does not act in the face of need is, in the Pentecostal vernacular, “dead,” meaning it has no life-giving power. James’s analogy of the body without the spirit being dead (2:26) is profoundly pneumatological. The Greek word *pneuma* can mean both “spirit” and “breath.” A body without breath is dead; faith without the breath (*pneuma*) of the Spirit animating it into action is equally lifeless. This creates a seamless link: genuine faith is invariably faith in the Holy Spirit, and thus will inevitably produce the works of the Holy Spirit.

This dynamic understanding of faith has deep roots in Pentecostal spirituality. Pentecostal worship is characterized by expressions of faith that are active and participatory: raising hands, praying aloud, testifying, and expecting divine intervention. This is not mere emotionalism but a theological conviction that faith is something one does, not just something one believes. James provides scriptural warrant for this active faith, showing that the patriarchs and prophets exemplified faith through their actions. Abraham’s faith was “active along with his works” (2:22), and Rahab’s faith was demonstrated by her actions. For Pentecostals, James validates the idea that faith is a lived reality, not just an intellectual assent.

The “Perfect Law of Liberty” as the Law of the Spirit

James’s reference to the “perfect law, the law of liberty” (1:25) further integrates his ethic with Pentecostal pneumatology. This is not a reference to the Old Testament Mosaic law as a burden, but to the new covenant law written on the heart by the Spirit (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 36:26-27). It is the law of love, enabled by the indwelling Spirit. Obedience to this law, caring for orphans, controlling the tongue, praying for the sick, is not a means of earning salvation but the liberated response of a heart transformed by grace and empowered by the Spirit. This frames James’s entire ethical project not as a new

legalism but as a description of the Spirit-empowered life, a concept central to Pentecostal identity.

The concept of the “law of liberty” also addresses a common misunderstanding of Pentecostal spirituality. Some critics have accused Pentecostalism of antinomianism, a disregard for moral law in favor of charismatic experience. James corrects this by insisting that the Spirit’s empowerment leads to greater obedience, not less. The freedom that the Spirit brings is not freedom from moral obligation but freedom to live in accordance with God’s will. This is a freedom that is exercised in community, in mutual accountability, and in loving service. James’s “law of liberty” is thus a law of love, a law that is fulfilled not by legalistic observance but by Spirit-empowered action.

Exegetical Insights from James 2:14-26

A closer exegesis of James 2:14-26 reveals several important features. First, James uses the example of a brother or sister in need (2:15-16) to illustrate the kind of works he has in mind. These are not spectacular or extraordinary works but ordinary acts of compassion. This suggests that for James, the most basic test of authentic faith is responsiveness to human need. Second, James’s use of Abraham and Rahab as examples (2:21-25) shows that faith and works are not opposed but complementary. Abraham’s faith was demonstrated by his willingness to offer Isaac, and Rahab’s faith was demonstrated by her protection of the spies. Third, James concludes that faith is “perfected” or “completed” by works (2:22), suggesting that works are the fulfillment or culmination of faith. This is not a works-righteousness but a faith-righteousness that manifests in action.

For Pentecostals, this exegesis reinforces the importance of practical ministry alongside charismatic expression. A church that speaks in tongues but fails to care for the poor is guilty of the same dead faith that James condemns. The Spirit who gives tongues also gives compassion and the motivation to serve. James thus calls Pentecostals to a holistic faith that integrates worship, witness, and social action.

THE PENTECOSTAL LINGUISTICS OF THE TONGUE: SANCTIFIED SPEECH AND CHARISMATIC EXPRESSION

James 3 and a Theology of Creative and Destructive Utterance

James’s discourse on the tongue (Chapter 3) is one of the most extensive in the New Testament and holds particular significance for a movement defined by charismatic speech. James articulates a theology of words that recognizes their inherent power, for both creation and destruction. His metaphors, the bit controlling the horse, the rudder steering the ship, the spark igniting a forest, all point to a fundamental principle: small things can direct great forces. For Pentecostals, who believe that Spirit-inspired words can heal, prophecy, praise, and cast out demons, this is a foundational text. It simultaneously validates the power they ascribe to speech and issues a severe warning about its potential for evil.

The power of speech is a recurring theme in Pentecostal spirituality. From the initial evidence of glossolalia to the prophetic declarations that shape community life, words are understood to carry spiritual weight. James’s warning about the destructive potential of the tongue is therefore a necessary corrective. It reminds Pentecostals that the same tongue that blesses God can also curse others (3:9-10). This inconsistency, James insists, should not be so. The tongue must be brought under the lordship of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit.

Furthermore, James’s discourse on the tongue is connected to his discussion of wisdom (3:13-18). The tongue reveals the character of the heart. A tongue that is full of bitter envy and selfish ambition (3:14) reflects a wisdom that is “earthly, unspiritual, devilish” (3:15). A tongue that is pure, peaceable, gentle, and full of mercy (3:17) reflects a

wisdom that is “from above.” This connection between speech and wisdom is crucial for Pentecostal spirituality, which emphasizes the importance of wisdom in the exercise of spiritual gifts. The gift of prophecy, for example, must be exercised with wisdom and discernment, not in a way that causes confusion or division.

Taming the Tongue as a Pentecostal Discipline

The Pentecostal practice of the charismatic gifts requires a rigorous discipline of discernment, and James 3 provides the ethical framework for this. The call to “tame the tongue” (3:8) is a call to bring all speech under the lordship of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit. This directly applies to the testing of prophecies (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21), the rejection of gossip and slander that can destroy community, and the avoidance of manipulative or coercive speech sometimes found in charismatic contexts. James’s description of wisdom from above as “pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (3:17) serves as the essential criterion for evaluating any and all charismatic utterance.

The discipline of the tongue is not merely a negative prohibition but a positive cultivation of speech that builds up, encourages, and heals. Pentecostal communities have traditionally valued testimony, encouragement, and prophetic ministry that strengthens the church. James’s teaching on the tongue provides a framework for evaluating these practices. Are testimonies marked by authenticity and humility? Are prophecies consistent with Scripture and characterized by love? Is encouragement genuine or manipulative? These are questions that James’s teaching raises for Pentecostal communities.

The Positive Manifesto: Praise, Testimony, and Prophecy

James’s treatise on the tongue is not solely negative. Implicit in his warning is the glorious potential of sanctified speech. The same tongue that can curse can also bless. In Pentecostal worship, this positive potential is realized through testimonies that declare God’s faithfulness, a practice echoing James’s command to confess sins to one another; songs of praise that offer thanksgiving; and prophecies that build up, encourage, and comfort the church (1 Corinthians 14:3). These are the “good fruits” that righteous speech can produce.

The role of testimony in Pentecostal spirituality is particularly significant. Testimonies are not merely personal stories but public declarations of God’s faithfulness that build faith and encourage the community. James’s teaching on the tongue validates this practice by affirming the power of speech to bless and build up. Similarly, the practice of prophecy, which is central to Pentecostal worship, is validated by James’s emphasis on the positive potential of speech. Prophecy, when exercised in love and wisdom, is a “good fruit” that edifies the church.

Glossolalia as the Ultimate “Taming” of the Tongue

A particularly Pentecostal interpretation might view glossolalia, speaking in tongues, as a unique solution to the problem James outlines. If the fallen human tongue is a “restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:8) incapable of being fully tamed by human effort, then glossolalia represents the submission of the speech faculty to the Holy Spirit. In this act, the believer yields their tongue directly to God, allowing the Spirit to pray through them “with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). It can be seen as the ultimate act of “taming,” not by human will, but by divine agency. Thus, James 3 does not condemn charismatic speech but rather calls for its purification and complete submission to the Spirit’s control, a goal embodied in the practice of tongues-speech.

This interpretation has been influential in Pentecostal theology. Glossolalia is understood not only as a sign of Spirit baptism but also as a means of sanctification, purifying the speech faculty and submitting it to God's control. While this is a distinctive Pentecostal reading, it is not without biblical warrant. Paul's discussion of praying in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:14-15) and Jude's exhortation to "pray in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 1:20) suggest a connection between Spirit-enabled prayer and the submission of speech to divine control. James's teaching on the tongue provides the ethical framework for this practice, ensuring that it is not merely an ecstatic experience but a discipline of holiness.

The Tongue and Community Life

James's teaching on the tongue also has implications for community life. Gossip, slander, and divisive speech are destructive to the body of Christ, and James warns against them. The tongue that "curses those who are made in the likeness of God" (3:9) is inconsistent with the Christian identity. Pentecostal communities, which emphasize the unity of the Spirit and the importance of love, must take this warning seriously. The practice of taming the tongue is not merely an individual discipline but a communal one, essential for maintaining the health and unity of the church.

Furthermore, James's teaching on the tongue is connected to his broader concern for justice. The tongue that oppresses the poor or slanders the marginalized is not only sinful but also unjust. James's manifesto calls for a community where speech is used to bless, encourage, and defend the vulnerable. This is a challenging call for Pentecostal communities, which must examine whether their speech, both in and out of worship, reflects the character of God.

DIVINE HEALING, ANOINTING, AND THE PRAYER OF FAITH: JAMES 5 AS LITURGICAL BLUEPRINT

A Liturgical-Historical Analysis of James 5:13-18

James 5:13-18 is perhaps the most explicitly Pentecostal passage in the New Testament, serving as a direct liturgical script for the community. The sequence is comprehensive: suffering calls for prayer; cheerfulness for praise; sickness for the elders. The instruction to "anoint with oil in the name of the Lord" is a tangible, sacramental act. In the first-century context, oil (*elaion*) had medicinal uses but was also a common symbol of consecration, setting something apart for God, as in the anointing of kings and priests. The early church saw this as a specific rite for healing. The *Didache*, an early Christian manual, prescribes anointing for the sick, indicating this was a widespread practice (Holmes, 2007). James is thus codifying a known ritual, investing it with the promise of God's power.

The liturgical structure of this passage is significant. It mirrors the pattern of early Christian worship: prayer, praise, confession, and healing. This suggests that healing was not an isolated event but an integral part of the community's worship life. For Pentecostals, this validates the practice of incorporating prayer for healing into regular worship services. It also suggests that healing is a communal act, involving the elders and the wider body of Christ.

The mention of "elders" (*presbyteroi*) is also significant. In the early church, elders were not merely administrators but spiritual leaders, often endowed with the gift of healing. This suggests that the pastoral ministry includes a healing dimension. Pentecostal pastors, following this model, are expected to be equipped to pray for the sick and to anoint with oil.

The "Prayer of Faith" and the Charism of Faith

The crucial phrase is "the prayer of faith will save the sick" (5:15). This is not merely a prayer offered with personal confidence. In a Pentecostal understanding, this aligns with

the specific charism or gift of faith mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:9, a supernatural impartation of certainty by the Holy Spirit that God will act in a specific situation. It is a prayer that arises not from human optimism but from divine revelation. This distinguishes it from all other prayers and explains the confidence behind the promise. The elders are not just religious officials; they are Spirit-filled vessels through whom a specific gift of faith may operate for the healing of the community.

The concept of the “gift of faith” is important for understanding James’s promise. Not all prayers for healing are “prayers of faith” in this sense. Some prayers may be offered with genuine hope but without the specific assurance that comes from the Spirit. James is not promising that every prayer will be answered but that when the Spirit grants the gift of faith, healing will follow. This nuanced understanding helps to address the pastoral challenge of unanswered prayer.

The Role of the Elders and Community Authority

The instruction to call for the “elders of the church” (5:14) places the healing ministry within a context of communal authority and order. This prevents it from becoming a purely individualistic or chaotic pursuit. The elders represent the faith and authority of the wider body of Christ. This model is evident in the structure of many classical Pentecostal denominations, where local pastors and elders are expected to be equipped to pray for the sick, anointing them with oil as a regular part of pastoral care. It formalizes the charismatic impulse within a framework of accountability.

The communal dimension of healing is also emphasized by James’s mention of confession: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (5:16). This links healing with reconciliation and mutual accountability. Sins that disrupt community relationships can be barriers to healing, and confession is a means of removing those barriers. This underscores the holistic nature of healing in James: it is not merely physical but spiritual and relational.

The Example of Elijah

James concludes this section with the example of Elijah: “Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth produced its fruit” (5:17-18). This example is crucial for Pentecostal interpretation. Elijah, despite being a human being subject to the same weaknesses as us, was effective in prayer because he prayed fervently and persistently. This is not a magical formula but a model of faithful, persistent prayer. It encourages believers to persevere in prayer, trusting that God hears and responds.

The example of Elijah also connects healing to the broader theme of restoration. Just as Elijah’s prayer restored rain to the land, so the prayer of faith restores health to the sick. This eschatological dimension of healing is important for Pentecostals, who view healing as a sign of the coming kingdom.

Historical Case Study: The Healing Revivals and the “Point of Contact”

The post-World War II Healing Revivals provide a clear case study of James 5 in action. Evangelists like Oral Roberts built their entire ministries on this text. Roberts famously taught the concept of a “point of contact,” a physical act of faith that releases God’s power, such as the laying on of hands or the anointing with oil (Roberts, 1950). For thousands of attendees, the moment of anointing became the tangible “point of contact” that allowed them to release their faith for healing. This practice, directly sourced from James 5, democratized healing, making it accessible to every believer who could come forward

to be anointed and prayed for by a minister acting as a modern “elder.” It turned the scriptural directive into a mass-scale liturgical practice.

The healing revivals also raised important questions about the nature of healing. Not everyone who was prayed for was healed, and this led to theological reflection on the relationship between faith, prayer, and divine sovereignty. Pentecostal theologians have grappled with these questions, emphasizing that healing is ultimately in God’s hands and that unanswered prayer does not indicate a lack of faith. James’s teaching on the prayer of faith, understood as a gift of the Spirit, provides a framework for addressing these questions.

Pastoral Implications of James 5

James 5 has profound pastoral implications. It provides a scriptural basis for a ministry of healing that is both practical and prayerful. It encourages believers to seek prayer and anointing when they are sick, and it calls church leaders to be equipped for this ministry. It also offers hope to those who suffer, affirming that God is compassionate and that prayer is powerful.

At the same time, James 5 raises pastoral challenges. When prayers for healing are not answered, it can lead to disappointment, doubt, and even crisis of faith. Pastors must address these challenges with sensitivity, acknowledging the mystery of God’s ways while maintaining confidence in God’s goodness. James does not offer a simplistic solution to the problem of unanswered prayer but calls the community to continue praying and trusting, even in the face of difficulty.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC RADICALISM: THE PENTECOSTAL PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Exegetical Deep Dive on Wealth and Oppression

James’s critique of wealth is among the most severe in the New Testament. He condemns the rich who exploit their workers, holding back wages (5:4), and who drag the poor into court (2:6). He warns the wealthy of miseries to come (5:1) and declares that God has “chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom” (2:5). This is not a mild preference for the less fortunate but a radical eschatological reversal rooted in the teachings of Jesus, such as the Magnificat in Luke 1:51-53, and the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. It presents a fundamental conflict between loyalty to God and complicity with oppressive economic systems.

The severity of James’s critique reflects the social reality of the early Christian community. Many believers were poor and marginalized, living at the mercy of wealthy landowners and merchants. James’s condemnation of the rich is therefore a pastoral response to the suffering of his community. It is not a blanket condemnation of wealth but a denunciation of wealth that is gained through oppression and hoarded at the expense of others.

“Pure Religion” as Holistic Pentecostalism

James’s famous definition of “pure religion” is undeniably practical and social: “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27). This integrates vertical piety, being unstained from the world, with horizontal social action, caring for the vulnerable. It proposes a holistic faith where Spirit-filled living inevitably includes economic justice. This aligns with the origins of Pentecostalism, which, as noted, found its first home among the poor and marginalized. The early movement often practiced a form of radical mutual aid, sharing resources and providing a community of support for those on the economic margins (Blumhofer, 1993).

The phrase “pure religion” (*thrēskeia kathara*) is significant. It suggests that worship that is acceptable to God is not confined to ritual or liturgy but includes social action. This resonates with Pentecostal spirituality, which has historically emphasized the practical outworking of faith. Pentecostal worship is not merely a Sunday morning event but a way of life that includes care for the needy.

The Sin of Partiality

James’s warning against partiality (2:1-13) is closely connected to his economic critique. He condemns those who show favoritism to the rich while dishonoring the poor (2:1-4). This partiality is not merely a social faux pas but a violation of the royal law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (2:8). It is a sin that demonstrates a lack of faith in God, who has chosen the poor to be heirs of the kingdom (2:5).

For Pentecostals, James’s warning against partiality is particularly relevant. Pentecostal churches have often been characterized by a cross-class, multi-ethnic composition. The experience of the Spirit has the power to break down social barriers and create a community of equals. James’s warning reminds Pentecostals that this is not merely a sociological phenomenon but a theological imperative. Any partiality based on wealth or status is a denial of the gospel.

Historical Case Study: Early Pentecostal Mutual Aid

The Azusa Street mission and many early Pentecostal congregations functioned as mutual aid societies. They provided food, shelter, and employment networks for new migrants and those down on their luck. This was not seen as a separate “social gospel” but as a natural outflow of the Spirit’s work. The experience of the Spirit created a new kinship, breaking down class and racial barriers and creating an obligation to care for one’s new brothers and sisters. This embodied James’s command to show no partiality (2:1) and to care for the basic needs of those within the community (2:15-16).

The practice of mutual aid continued in many Pentecostal communities throughout the twentieth century. In times of economic hardship, Pentecostal churches often provided a safety net for their members, sharing resources and offering practical support. This practice, rooted in James’s teaching, has been a distinctive feature of Pentecostal social ethics.

Modern Case Study: Latin American Pentecostalism and Community Building

The explosive growth of Pentecostalism among the poor of Latin America offers a powerful modern example. Scholars like Martin (1990) have observed that Pentecostal churches in the favelas of Brazil or the barrios of Chile often provide a “surrogate family” and a disciplined community that offers a way out of poverty, addiction, and violence. By teaching personal discipline, such as sobriety, marital fidelity, and financial responsibility, and creating strong social networks of support, these churches enact a form of James’s “pure religion.” They care for the “orphans and widows,” the modern dispossessed, while helping them remain “unstained by the world” of gang culture and despair. This is James’s socio-economic manifesto in action.

The Latin American experience also highlights the tension between Pentecostal social ethics and the prosperity gospel. While some Pentecostal churches have embraced prosperity theology, others have maintained a commitment to the poor that reflects James’s radical critique of wealth. This tension is a live issue in contemporary Pentecostalism and one that James’s teaching helps to address.

Asian Pentecostalism and Economic Ethics

In Asia, Pentecostalism has grown rapidly in contexts of poverty and economic inequality. Asian Pentecostal scholars have emphasized the communal dimensions of James's ethics, where faith is lived out in extended family networks and tight-knit church communities (Hasugian, 2022). In contexts where social safety nets are weak, the church often functions as the primary support system for the poor. James's call to care for orphans and widows is not an abstract ideal but a practical necessity.

The Asian Pentecostal experience also highlights the importance of economic justice in evangelism. When the church cares for the poor, it demonstrates the reality of the gospel. James's teaching on faith and works is therefore not only a matter of personal piety but also of missional effectiveness. A faith that does not act is not only dead but also ineffective in witness.

African Pentecostalism and the Prophetic Critique of Wealth

African Pentecostal scholars such as Kalu (2008) and Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) have emphasized the prophetic dimension of James's economic critique. In African contexts, where corruption and exploitation are often endemic, James's condemnation of the rich who oppress the poor resonates as a prophetic word. African Pentecostalism has often been characterized by a prophetic critique of injustice, and James provides a biblical foundation for this critique.

At the same time, African Pentecostalism has also struggled with the prosperity gospel, which has gained significant influence. James's radical critique of wealth calls African Pentecostals to examine their own teaching and practice. Is the prosperity gospel consistent with James's warning against the rich? Does it reflect the values of the kingdom or the values of the world? These are questions that James raises for African Pentecostals.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND TENSIONS: WHERE JAMES CHALLENGES MODERN PENTECOSTALISM

A Direct Challenge to the Prosperity Gospel

James's vehement condemnation of the rich stands in stark contrast to the "Prosperity Gospel" or "Word of Faith" movement that has become influential within some sectors of modern Pentecostalism. This theology, which often claims that faith and positive confession will inevitably lead to material wealth, is directly challenged by James 1:9-11, which calls the rich to "boast in being brought low," and James 5:1-6, which pronounces doom on the wealthy who have stored up treasure on earth. A serious engagement with James forces a Pentecostal critique of this theology, reorienting prosperity away from material accumulation and toward the "riches" of faith, community, and divine power promised in 2:5.

The prosperity gospel represents a departure from the radical economic ethics of James and the early church. It risks turning faith into a means of material gain, reducing prayer to a transaction, and justifying the accumulation of wealth at the expense of the poor. James's teaching serves as a corrective, reminding Pentecostals that the kingdom of God is not about material wealth but about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

Faith and Theodicy: Unanswered Prayer

James's bold promise that "the prayer of faith will save the sick" (5:15) inevitably raises difficult questions when prayers for healing go unanswered. This is a pastoral and theological challenge Pentecostalism must grapple with. A Jamesian approach might emphasize several things: the conditional nature of the "prayer of faith" as a specific charism,

not every prayer; the role of persistent prayer, noting that Elijah prayed seven times (5:18); and the ultimate trust in God's sovereignty. It does not offer a magic formula but a paradigm for faithful engagement, where the community continues to pray and anoint even in the face of mystery, trusting that God's ultimate healing is eschatological.

The challenge of unanswered prayer is not unique to Pentecostalism, but it is particularly acute in a tradition that emphasizes divine healing. Pentecostal pastoral care must address this challenge with honesty and compassion, acknowledging the mystery of suffering while maintaining hope in God's goodness. James provides a framework for this pastoral care, calling for prayer, confession, and community support even when healing does not come.

The Tension between Charismatic Freedom and Ethical Control

James's emphasis on controlling the tongue (Chapter 3) presents a critical tension with the Pentecostal value placed on spontaneous, emotional, Spirit-led expression. It serves as a necessary corrective against any form of charismatic practice that becomes manipulative, chaotic, or devoid of love and wisdom. James insists that all spiritual expression, no matter how powerful, must be evaluated by its fruit in peace, gentleness, and mercy (3:17). This challenges Pentecostals to hold together charismatic freedom and charismatic responsibility, ensuring that the pursuit of power is always tempered by the practice of love.

This tension is not unique to Pentecostalism but is present in any tradition that values spiritual experience. The challenge is to maintain a balance between openness to the Spirit and accountability to the community. James provides guidance for this balance, emphasizing that wisdom from above is "pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits" (3:17). This is the standard by which all charismatic expression must be evaluated.

The Challenge of Institutionalization

Another tension raised by James is the challenge of institutionalization. As Pentecostalism has grown and become more established, there is a risk of losing the radical, counter-cultural edge that James embodies. Institutional churches can become comfortable, complacent, and resistant to the prophetic critique that James represents. The book of James calls Pentecostalism back to its roots in the margins, reminding it that authentic faith is always a faith that challenges the status quo.

This challenge is particularly relevant in contexts where Pentecostalism has become the dominant religious force. In such contexts, there is a temptation to align with political and economic power rather than to critique it. James's manifesto calls Pentecostals to resist this temptation and to maintain a prophetic witness to the poor and marginalized.

The Importance of Perseverance

James's emphasis on perseverance in trials (1:2-4, 12) is a message that resonates deeply with Pentecostals who face persecution, poverty, and suffering. It calls believers to endure, trusting that God will sustain them and that their trials will produce maturity and wisdom. This message is essential for Pentecostals around the world who face oppression and hardship. It affirms that suffering is not a sign of God's absence but an opportunity for spiritual growth.

CONCLUSION: THE ENDURING CALL OF A PNEUMATOLOGICAL MANIFESTO

The Epistle of James concludes not with a final doctrinal summation but with a pastoral call to action: “My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (5:19-20). This final imperative encapsulates the entire letter: faith is active, interventionist, and aimed at salvation and healing in the most holistic sense.

This paper has argued that this active, holistic, and power-oriented faith is why James functions so effectively as a Pentecostal manifesto. It provides a theological framework where the Spirit’s power is the engine for ethical living, compassionate economics, sanctified speech, and miraculous healing. James answers the Pentecostal desire for a faith that is real, tangible, and demonstrable. It challenges the movement to never separate the gift of the Spirit from the fruit of the Spirit, the miraculous from the ethical, or the vertical encounter from the horizontal obligation.

In an era where Pentecostalism faces internal challenges from the Prosperity Gospel and external critiques of superficiality, James offers a profound depth. It calls the movement back to its roots among the poor, back to a faith that is validated by its love for the marginalized, and back to a reliance on a prayer that is both fervent and faithful. The Book of James remains an enduring manifesto, calling each generation of Pentecostals to a faith that is not merely professed but performed, a faith made flesh in word, power, and praxis, for the healing of the world.

The global Pentecostal movement, with its remarkable diversity and vitality, needs the message of James now more than ever. As the movement continues to grow and diversify, James provides a unifying theological center that holds together the charismatic and the ethical, the spiritual and the social, the individual and the communal. It is a manifesto for a Pentecostal faith that is intellectually credible, spiritually powerful, and socially engaged.

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