

Spiritual Experience and Character Formation: Finding Balance in Pentecostal Spiritual Formation Tradition

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Abstract

The article explores the imbalance in Pentecostal spiritual formation, where the focus on personal experiences with the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues and healing, often overshadows the importance of deep theological education, spiritual disciplines, and character formation. The aim is to highlight the gaps in spiritual formation within Pentecostalism and propose ways to integrate emotional experiences with doctrinal understanding for a more holistic spiritual growth. The article uses a theoretical approach, reviewing existing theological perspectives and spiritual practices, referencing scholars like Anderson, McGrath, and Banda. The results reveal several key issues: a lack of theological depth, neglect of regular spiritual practices, and insufficient emphasis on Christian character and ethics. It also points to the underdeveloped role of community and intergenerational learning in spiritual formation. The contribution of the article is in proposing a balanced approach to spiritual growth that combines emotional experiences with solid theology, regular spiritual practices, ethical living, and strong community involvement, ultimately offering a framework for more sustainable spiritual maturity within Pentecostalism.

Keywords:

spiritual formation; Holy Spirit; disciplines; character; church community

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual formation in the Pentecostal tradition is a key element in the spiritual journey of individuals and communities. The Pentecostal movement strongly emphasizes deep personal experiences with the Holy Spirit, represented through the manifestation of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy. However, while such experiences play an important role in shaping one's faith, spiritual formation in this tradition often neglects other equally important dimensions, such as deep theological understanding, regular spiritual disciplines, and true character formation.

Pentecostalism, as part of the Christian movement, strongly emphasizes personal experiences with the Holy Spirit as the foundation of spiritual formation. These spiritual

gifts and mystical experiences are believed to be tangible signs of God's presence in the lives of individuals. This creates a strong connection between Pentecostal churches and direct experiences with God. However, these profound spiritual experiences, while important, often take precedence over other equally essential aspects of the spiritual journey, such as the development of a deep theology and balanced spiritual disciplines (Hollenweger, 2017; Kay, 2020; Wariboko, 2022, p. 1-4).

According to the theory proposed by Anderson (2014), Pentecostalism focuses on direct experience with the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. Anderson argues that such experiences can enrich the life of faith, but must be accompanied by a strong theological understanding. Without deep theological understanding, such experiences can be misinterpreted or misused for purposes that are incompatible with the teachings of Christ. The search for deep spiritual experiences should not only depend on the manifestations of the Holy Spirit, but also on a broader knowledge and teaching of the Christian faith (Fee, 2024; Wariboko, 2022, p. 1-4).

Although faith is the foundation of every spiritual life in the Christian tradition, in the context of Pentecost, faith based solely on personal experience is often considered insufficient to form full spiritual maturity. Faith must be rooted in a deep understanding of the teachings of the Bible and its application in daily life (Chaves, 2013). McGrath (2023) argues that without a deep understanding of doctrine, one's faith can waver and become shallow, which in turn affects the quality of one's spiritual life.

On the other hand, according to research by Banda (2021, p. a6579), experiences gained through the manifestation of spiritual gifts can indeed deepen the relationship with God, but often such experiences unaccompanied by correct doctrinal understanding can lead to imbalances in spiritual growth. Banda states that experiences that are uncontrolled or based on erroneous understanding can be a source of spiritual confusion and undermine the foundation of faith. This suggests that Pentecostalism must maintain a balance between emotional experiences and deep teaching in order to achieve healthier spiritual growth.

A concrete problem that often arises in Pentecostal spiritual formation is the imbalance between direct experience with the Holy Spirit and deep theological understanding. An overemphasis on emotional experiences often results in the neglect of deeper theological education and regular spiritual disciplines (Cameron, 2019; Snyder, 2021). This phenomenon can cause individuals to become overly dependent on

emotional experiences, which tend to be transient and unstable, and neglect deeper teachings about faith and the Christian life (McGrath, 2023).

In addition, within the Pentecostal movement, there is often less attention paid to the importance of more structured spiritual disciplines, such as meditation, Bible reading, or time in silence. According to Nel (2023, p. a222), although the focus on the experience of spiritual gifts is very good, if it is not accompanied by regular spiritual practice, individuals in the Pentecostal tradition tend to lose their way when the spiritual experience fades. This leads to a spiritual vacuum, where individuals do not have the tools or knowledge to remain steadfast in their faith when intensive spiritual experiences are no longer present.

Some research suggests alternative approaches to address this imbalance in Pentecostal spiritual formation. For example, Kim (2017, p. 22-32) suggests that the integration of the experience of the Holy Spirit with a more structured disciplined life can help create balance in spiritual formation. In his view, spiritual practices such as retreats, in-depth Bible reading, and healthy community life could enrich the charismatic experience by providing spiritual depth and stability (Coleman, 2021; Robeck, 2018, p. 75-92).

In addition, Wright (2020) in his book *Simply Christian* proposes that strong theological education is necessary to create a community that not only experiences manifestations of the Holy Spirit, but is also able to understand and live out the teachings of Christ well. Wright suggests that Pentecostal churches can strike a balance by providing strong theological education, while still maintaining the tradition of spiritual experience that characterizes them.

This article aims to identify and explore aspects that are lacking in spiritual formation within the Pentecostal tradition. The main focus of this article is to explore the potential imbalance between spiritual experience and deeper theological understanding within the Pentecostal movement. The aim is to seek ways that Pentecostal churches can integrate these elements to achieve a fuller and more balanced spiritual formation. By reviewing various existing theological theories and spiritual practices, this article aims to provide new perspectives in the development of a more holistic spirituality.

RESEARCH METHODS

The article uses a theoretical approach to examine the imbalance in Pentecostal spiritual formation, drawing from existing literature and theological perspectives to analyze the issues and propose solutions. The primary method employed is a review of scholarly works by influential theologians and scholars within the Pentecostal tradition. Notably, the article references Anderson (2014), McGrath (2023), and Banda (2021, p. a6579), whose theories provide a framework for understanding the significance of emotional experiences and the need for balanced theological education. The review process involves critically assessing how these scholars address the tension between personal spiritual experiences with the Holy Spirit and the necessary integration of doctrinal understanding. Through this method, the article identifies key shortcomings in the current Pentecostal spiritual formation, such as an overemphasis on emotional manifestations at the expense of theological depth and spiritual discipline (Anderson, 2014, p. 58; McGrath, 2023, p. 92; Banda, 2021, p. a6579).

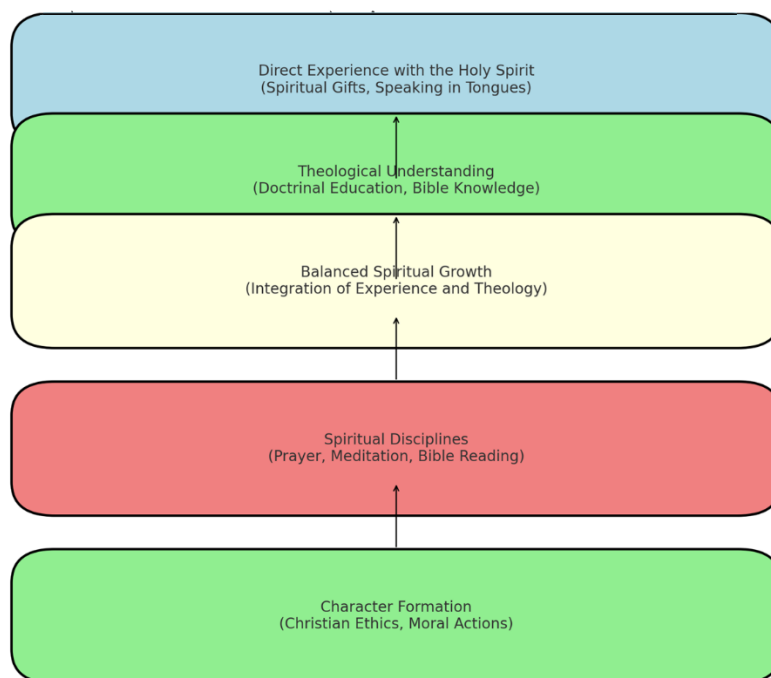


Figure 1. Relationships between variables in Pentecostal Spiritual Formation

Additionally, the article explores various practical solutions proposed in the literature to address these gaps. For example, Kim (2017, p. 22-32) and Wright (2020) suggest integrating the experience of the Holy Spirit with structured spiritual practices, such as Bible study and communal worship, to create a more balanced approach to spiritual growth. These perspectives are examined in relation to the broader Pentecostal

movement, highlighting both strengths and areas needing improvement. By drawing on these diverse sources, the article offers a comprehensive analysis of the current state of Pentecostal spiritual formation and presents new strategies for enhancing spiritual maturity through the combination of experience, theology, and disciplined practice (Kim, 2017, p. 22-32; Wright, 2020, p. 120).

RESULTS

A General Understanding of Spiritual Formation in Pentecostalism

Spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition is a process of spiritual life formation that focuses on direct experience with the Holy Spirit as well as the development of a balanced faith through theological education and spiritual disciplines. The movement is known for its strong emphasis on personal experience with the Holy Spirit, manifestation of spiritual gifts, and worship as a way to achieve spiritual growth (Feller & Lombaard, 2018; Cameron, 2019; Wariboko, 2022, p. 1-4). While such experiences have a profound impact on the journey of faith, spiritual formation in Pentecostalism needs to be balanced with other aspects such as deep doctrinal understanding, character building, and the application of spiritual disciplines.

In general, spiritual formation in the Christian tradition refers to the process by which a person is shaped in their relationship with God through theological learning, character growth, and deeper spiritual life experiences. This spiritual formation does not only involve emotional or phenomenal experiences, but also involves deep theological understanding and living in accordance with the teachings of the Bible (Chaves, 2013; Kay, 2020). McGrath (2023) defines spiritual formation as "a character-building process that occurs along with the application of Christ's teachings in daily life, leading to the transformation of the individual in both actions and attitudes." In this context, spiritual formation is not only about intellectual knowledge, but also the development of Christian morals and ethics that enable individuals to live according to God's will.

According to Wright (2020), spiritual formation involves "personal sanctification through a deepening relationship with God, reflected in acts of love, justice, and peace." In this sense, spiritual formation also relates to growth in character, including acceptance of change, repentance, and commitment to live according to the teachings of Christ. In this view, spiritual formation is not a momentary outcome, but an ongoing journey throughout life.

Some other relevant definitions come from a study by Hollenweger (2017), who describes spiritual formation as a process of "faith growth that involves not only personal experience with God, but also collective teaching and learning in community." Spiritual formation in the Pentecostal tradition often relies on personal experiences with the Holy Spirit, but also includes the role of community as a place to deepen faith.

Spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition has very different characteristics compared to other Christian traditions, especially in terms of the emphasis on direct experience with the Holy Spirit. This is evident in the teachings of Pentecostalism, which places great emphasis on the experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, and other spiritual manifestations (Nel, 2023, p. a222; Kärkkäinen, 2019; Robeck, 2018, p. 75-92). According to Wacker (2023) dan Stephenson (2019), the Pentecostal movement regards these gifts not only as a sign of God's power, but also as a means to build faith and unite congregants in a deeper spiritual experience.

Experiences such as speaking in tongues are often taken as evidence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and are a sign of truth and spiritual depth. This characteristic makes the Pentecostal tradition focus more on emotional and phenomenal experiences rather than theological learning or deep biblical knowledge. As expressed by Banda (2021, p. a6579), while such experiences are very important, there is a concern that they may reduce attention to the depth of doctrine and theological learning that should be the foundation of a solid faith.

Focus on the Experience of the Holy Spirit, Gifts, and Worship

A major focus in Pentecostalism's spiritual formation is direct experience with the Holy Spirit. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy, are considered tangible evidence of God's presence in the lives of individuals and congregations (Fee, 2024; Kärkkäinen, 2019). In Pentecostal churches, such experiences are often seen as a means to deepen relationships with God and strengthen individual faith. For example, Wacker (2023) writes that speaking in tongues is considered a sign of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that brings about a more authentic spiritual experience.

Worship in the Pentecostal tradition is also an integral part of spiritual formation. Worship is not just regarded as a ritual or tradition, but as an experience that allows

believers to feel God's presence directly (Nel, 2023, p. a222; Snyder, 2021; Kwiyani, 2022, p. 282–299). In Pentecostal churches, worship often involves vibrant music, passionate prayers, and other emotional expressions that are perceived as a way of connecting directly with God. Fee (2024) notes that this kind of worship is instrumental in building a strong faith community, where individuals feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in every aspect of their lives.

The Role of the Bible in the Spiritual Formation of Pentecostalism

Although experiences with the Holy Spirit dominate the Pentecostal tradition, the Bible still has an important role in shaping spiritual life. In McClymond's (2018) view, the Bible serves not only as a source of knowledge, but also as a practical guide for a spiritual life in accordance with God's will. In-depth reading and understanding of the Bible is considered essential to balance personal experience with correct doctrinal understanding. Fee (2024) asserts that although direct experience with the Holy Spirit is essential, biblical knowledge remains the basis for guiding individuals in their spiritual lives.

However, McGrath (2023) notes that in some Pentecostal communities, the lack of attention to theological teaching can lead to an unbalanced spiritual formation. Intense spiritual experiences are often dominant, while Bible study and theological reflection can be neglected. Therefore, it is important to find a balance between spiritual experiences and a deep understanding of biblical teachings in order for individuals to achieve more thorough spiritual maturity.

Challenges in Spiritual Formation of Pentecostalism

Although Pentecostalism offers deep and authentic spiritual experiences, there are challenges to be faced in spiritual formation. One of the main challenges is the tendency to emphasize experience over teaching. Banda (2021, p. a6579) suggests that in some Pentecostal communities, there is a tendency to regard the gifts of the Holy Spirit as the primary sign of depth of faith, while doctrinal understanding and spiritual disciplines often lack the attention they deserve.

In addition, while experiences with the Holy Spirit are essential, spiritual disciplines such as meditation, Bible reading, and theological reflection should also be considered. McGrath (2023) suggests that Pentecostal churches need to integrate these spiritual

disciplines in congregational life to create a more balanced spiritual formation. This will help parishioners overcome the challenge of maintaining the depth of their faith after a profound spiritual experience.

Spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition focuses on direct experience with the Holy Spirit and the manifestation of spiritual gifts. While these experiences are important in deepening faith, balanced spiritual formation requires the integration of spiritual experiences and deep theological understanding (McClymond, 2018; Kwiyani, 2022, p. 282–299). Pentecostal churches must balance these experiences with deeper Bible study and broader spiritual disciplines to achieve a full and balanced maturity of faith.

What Might Be Missing?

Spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition has been an important element in the spiritual development of many individuals, yet there are some aspects that still lack attention and require further development. In particular, some important elements such as theological deepening, balanced spiritual disciplines, Christian character and ethics formation, and intergenerational learning tend to receive less attention in this movement. Although the main focus of Pentecostalism is on personal experience with the Holy Spirit, to achieve fuller spiritual growth, there is a need for integration with various other aspects that are no less important.

Theological Deepening

One aspect that is often missing in the spiritual formation of Pentecostalism is theological deepening. The experience of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts take center stage in many Pentecostal churches, yet this often overrides the importance of deep theological learning. For example, Fee (2024) argues that while experiences with the Holy Spirit are very important, a deep theological understanding provides a solid basis for assessing whether such experiences are truly from God. Without a solid doctrinal foundation, individuals can easily be misled by experiences that are not in line with biblical teachings. McGrath (2023) also revealed that theology is an irreplaceable foundation in a mature spiritual journey.

The opposing theory to this view comes from the opinion of Hollenweger (2017), who argues that spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition focuses more on

direct and lived experiences connected to the Holy Spirit, and that these experiences are of higher value than rigid theological understanding. Hollenweger emphasizes that personal experiences can lead individuals to a more intimate relationship with God, even if their theological understanding is not as comprehensive as in other Christian traditions. Nonetheless, a criticism of this approach is that without a correct theological understanding, such experiences can easily be distorted, as described by Banda (2021, p. a6579), who warns that experiences can be more influenced by emotions or other external factors.

Balanced Spiritual Discipline

Besides theological deepening, another aspect that is often neglected is regular spiritual discipline. In many Pentecostal churches, great emphasis is placed on the experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and other emotional manifestations, while spiritual disciplines such as meditation, regular Bible reading, and time in silence do not get enough attention (McGrath, 2023; Putrawan, 2019). Packer (2023) emphasizes the importance of spiritual disciplines such as consistent prayer, Scripture reading, and contemplation in daily life as an integral part of ongoing spiritual growth.

On the other hand, theories that focus more on individualized experiences, as expressed by Wright (2020), suggest that emotional experiences and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in worship are sufficient as a means to deepen spiritual life without relying too much on structured spiritual disciplines. However, many studies show that while experiences can enrich faith, without balanced spiritual disciplines, spiritual growth tends to be unstable and easily eroded as life challenges arise (Nel, 2023, p. a222; Ngguna & Lumingkewas; 2025, p. 149–161).

Character and Ethics Building

The formation of Christian character and ethics is another element that is often neglected in the spiritual formation of Pentecostalism. The primary focus on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and personal experience with God sometimes leads to the neglect of moral and ethical values that should be reflected in daily life (Packer, 2023; Newberg, 2021, p. 65-79). As stated by Banda (2021, p. a6579), there is a tendency to measure the depth of faith based on experiences with the Holy Spirit, while character development, which includes values such as love, forgiveness, and patience, receives less attention.

The opposing theory to this view comes from a broader theory of Christian ethics, as expressed by Wright (2020), which emphasizes that true faith should be reflected in moral actions that reflect the character of Christ. In this case, character formation is not just about experiencing the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, but about how individuals live according to the teachings of Christ in their daily actions. Menzies (2024) also argues that spiritual character is formed through correct theological discipline and teaching, which involves learning biblical morality, as well as a deeper relationship with the church community.

Community and Intergenerational Learning

Another aspect that is often missing in Pentecostalism's spiritual formation is the strengthening of community and intergenerational learning. The movement often places more emphasis on personal experience than the role of community in guiding individuals on their spiritual journey (Hollenweger, 2017; Newberg, 2021, p. 65-79). The church community plays an important role in shaping one's faith, not only through shared experiences, but also through shared learning that enables cross-generational teaching and mentorship. Intergenerational learning can enrich spiritual experiences and strengthen relationships between generations, which will ultimately strengthen the church community as a whole.

According to Kim (2017, p. 22-32), Pentecostal churches can benefit greatly from delving into the teaching and spiritual experiences shared by church members of different ages. This enriches the community with a broader understanding of the faith and provides opportunities for younger generations to learn from the experiences and wisdom of older generations. Enhancing this intergenerational learning can be key to addressing imbalances in spiritual formation.

Spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition relies heavily on personal experience with the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. However, in order to achieve more holistic spiritual growth, it is important to integrate other elements that have received less attention, such as theological deepening, balanced spiritual disciplines, the formation of a more mature character, and the strengthening of church community and intergenerational learning (Feller & Lombaard, 2018; Nggunu & Lumingkewas; 2025, p. 149-161). It is important to find a balance between strong emotional experiences and

deep learning about the Christian faith for individuals to experience sustainable and more balanced spiritual growth.

DISCUSSION

Seeking Balance: Integrating the Lost

Spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition offers very powerful experiences through manifestations of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. While these experiences are important, there is a need to create a balance between spiritual experiences and other elements of spiritual formation. A balanced spiritual formation not only relies on personal experience with the Holy Spirit, but also integrates deep theological understanding, regular spiritual disciplines, mature character formation, as well as learning in a healthy community. Finding this balance is key to enriching the spiritual life of individuals and communities within the Pentecostal church.

Achieving a Balance between Theological Experience and Understanding

Direct experiences with the Holy Spirit are often central in the Pentecostalism movement. However, according to McGrath (2023), such experiences not enough without a deep dive into theology. Theology provides a framework for understanding the spiritual experience, so that it is not misinterpreted or utilized for purposes that are not in accordance with God's will. Fee (2024) also argues that experiences with the Holy Spirit should be balanced with strong biblical knowledge, which enables individuals to better assess and understand their experiences.

On the other hand, there is an opposing theory that states that direct experience is more important than structured theological understanding. As stated by Hollenweger (2017), the main focus of the Pentecostal movement is on personal experience with the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. According to this view, these experiences can be a direct path to closeness with God without the need to follow strict theological knowledge. However, while this view has its appeal, criticism of it comes from theologians such as Packer (2023) who emphasizes that without deep theology, spiritual experiences can be distorted or not rooted in the principles of true faith.

Developing a Balanced Spiritual Discipline

One element that is often overlooked in the spiritual formation of Pentecostalism is regular and balanced spiritual disciplines. In many Pentecostal churches, great emphasis is placed on emotional and phenomenal experiences related to the Holy Spirit, while spiritual disciplines such as meditation, deep Bible reading, and time in silence receive less adequate attention (Nel, 2023, p. a222; Stephenson, 2019). McGrath (2023) and Packer (2023) argue that intense spiritual experiences, although important, cannot be the only factor in healthy spiritual growth. Regular spiritual disciplines, such as daily prayer, Bible reading, and contemplation, are essential for building sustainable faith maturity.

In contrast, some theologians in the Pentecostalism tradition argue that a personal experience with the Holy Spirit itself is sufficient for one's spiritual growth, without the need for much formal discipline (Wright, 2020). In this view, Pentecostal churches should emphasize direct experience over structured spiritual routines. However, criticism of this view comes from Anderson (2014), who emphasizes the importance of spiritual disciplines to stabilize the experience and direct it towards the right spiritual goal. Without discipline, spiritual experiences can be temporary and cannot support long-term growth in spiritual life.

More Mature Character and Ethics Building

In addition to spiritual experiences and disciplines, mature character formation is an important element in a more holistic spiritual journey. Christian character formation includes values such as love, patience, forgiveness, and justice that are reflected in daily actions (Packer, 2023). In the Pentecostalism tradition, too often experiences with the Holy Spirit are valued more than character formation and the development of Christian ethics. This can lead to deficiencies in the moral life of the congregation, where the depth of faith is only measured by their spiritual experience and not by how they live according to the teachings of Christ in their daily actions (Banda, 2021, p. a6579).

Wright (2020) suggests that in order to achieve true spiritual maturity, moral character that reflects the values of Christ should be the primary focus. Without solid character formation, spiritual experiences can become meaningless or even confusing. To address this, Pentecostal churches need to introduce more structured Christian moral teachings, which teach congregants to apply biblical values in every aspect of their lives.

This can be done through a teaching program on Christian ethics and living that reflects the teachings of Christ (Nel, 2023, p. a222; Winanto & Bulan, 2024, p. 161-170).

Community and Intergenerational Learning

The church community plays a very important role in a more balanced spiritual formation. The church is not only a place to have personal spiritual experiences, but also to encourage and guide each other in the journey of faith. Hollenweger (2017) argues that a healthy and supportive community can enrich an individual's spiritual experience. In addition, inter-generational learning in Pentecostal churches is also very important. The older generation can mentor the younger generation in their faith journey, providing valuable guidance based on their deeper spiritual experiences (Kim, 2017, p. 22-32; Tubagus & Sarono, 2021; Putrawan, 2019, p. 1-7).

However, there is an opposing theory that sees community as more secondary in spiritual formation, with an emphasis on personal experience as the main priority (Richie, 2020, p. 174–200; Winanto & Bulan, 2024, p. 161-170). Criticism of this view comes from Menzies (2024), who states that without a supportive community, individuals can lose their way in their spiritual journey, as there is nowhere to share experiences or get guidance.

Spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition focuses on personal experience with the Holy Spirit, yet this experience needs to be balanced with deep theological understanding, regular spiritual disciplines, mature character formation, as well as community strengthening and intergenerational learning. Pentecostal churches need to integrate these elements wisely to create an environment that supports balanced and sustainable spiritual growth. Only with the right balance of emotional experience, theological teaching, spiritual discipline, and character formation can a Pentecostal church achieve fuller spiritual maturity for its members.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this article is that spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition, despite its strong focus on personal experience with the Holy Spirit, still requires integration with several other important aspects. Deep spiritual experience is important, but for the faith journey to be more complete and sustainable, it needs to be supported by deep theological understanding. Pentecostal churches need to introduce

more structured theological education, through seminars, Bible study groups, and doctrinal training, to provide a solid foundation for the congregation. In addition, regular spiritual disciplines, such as consistent Bible reading and prayer, also need to be emphasized so that individuals can achieve stable spiritual growth and not rely solely on emotional experiences. The formation of Christian character and ethics should be part of this formation so that the spiritual life can be reflected in moral actions that are in accordance with the teachings of Christ.

In addition to theological understanding and spiritual disciplines, it is also important to strengthen church community and intergenerational learning. Pentecostal churches need to provide space for congregants to encourage and mentor one another, especially between older and younger generations. Through intergenerational learning, churches can enrich the spiritual journey of individuals with the wisdom and experiences possessed by previous generations. With the integration of spiritual experiences, theology, spiritual disciplines, and a supportive community, spiritual formation in the Pentecostalism tradition will become more balanced and sustainable. This will enable individuals and churches to develop spiritually and live a life worthy of Christ's calling.

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