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STUDYING PENTECOSTAL EXPERIENCES OF THE SPIRIT: TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Pentecostal identity has long been shaped by experiences understood as encounters with the Holy Spirit, yet these experiences are often examined within separate fields such as spirituality, hermeneutics, practical theology, ritual studies and empirical research. This article brings these dispersed insights into conversation with philosophical and methodological phenomenology to propose an integrated Pentecostal phenomenological framework. The article takes a conceptual and interdisciplinary theological approach, drawing selected works in Pentecostal theology, phenomenology, practical theology, hermeneutics and qualitative research into conversation.

The framework examines Pentecostal experience through six interconnected dimensions: lived and embodied experience; relational and ecclesial mediation; interpretation and narration; time, space and transformation; ambiguity, suffering and discernment; and global and contextual Pentecostalisms. It considers how experiences attributed to the Spirit are bodily lived, communally mediated, interpreted, remembered and shaped by ecclesial and cultural contexts. Particular attention is given to suffering, spiritual authority and experiences that do not conform to dominant testimony patterns. Phenomenology can clarify how such experiences appear, acquire meaning and influence subsequent life, but it cannot independently establish divine causation. The framework keeps participant experience, communal interpretation and theological assessment distinct without separating them from one another. It is offered as an adaptable orientation for empirical enquiry rather than a fixed procedure. Its significance for Pentecostal scholarship lies in bringing dispersed fields into a coherent methodological conversation that remains attentive to context, ethical responsibility and pastoral reality across diverse settings.

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Introduction

The centrality of experience to Pentecostal identity has generated substantial theological reflection. Pentecostal experiences are not peripheral additions to theology, since they shape how Scripture is received, how communities understand divine action and how believers narrate their relationship with God. Lisa P. Stephenson describes religious experience as the "lifeblood" of Pentecostalism, indicating its formative role within the movement's history, theology and practice.[1] Pentecostal experience, however, is never simply an inward event; it arises within worshipping communities and is expressed through bodily response, testimony, prayer and patterns of Christian living.

Pentecostal scholarship has already produced substantial accounts of religious experience by examining it from several theological and methodological perspectives. Studies of spirituality have explored the relationship between belief, practice and affect, while scholarship in hermeneutics, practical theology and empirical research has considered how experience is interpreted within Scripture and the life of the believing community. Steven J. Land's account of Pentecostal spirituality is particularly significant in this regard because it places experience within an enduring pattern of Spirit-shaped affections rather than identifying it only with dramatic manifestations.[2] Phenomenological attention to Pentecostal experience has emerged through separate empirical and theological studies, including work on Spirit baptism.[3] Within the literature considered here, these contributions remain dispersed and have not yet been brought into an integrated framework that attends together to the bodily, relational, interpretive and temporal character of experience, including its contextual and ethically contested dimensions.

Phenomenology offers resources for this task because it directs attention towards experience as it appears to the person who lives it. Husserl's account of intentionality shows that consciousness is always directed towards something, allowing researchers to ask what

[1] Lisa P. Stephenson, "Pentecostalism and Experience: History, Theology, and Practice," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 28, no. 2 (2019): 187.
[2] Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 13.
[3] W. Paul Williamson and Ralph W. Hood Jr., "Spirit Baptism: A Phenomenological Study of Religious Experience," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14, no. 6 (2011): 543-59; David Perry, *Spirit Baptism: The Pentecostal Experience in Theological Focus* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 109-17.

participants believed they encountered and how that encounter acquired significance.[4] Later phenomenological and hermeneutical thinkers further demonstrate that experience is embodied, historically situated and interpreted within relationships and language. These insights are particularly relevant to Pentecostalism, where experiences attributed to the Spirit are often recognised through bodily responses and the interpretive language of the church.

This article proposes a Pentecostal phenomenological framework that begins with experience as bodily lived and relationally mediated, while attending to its interpretation and development over time. It further considers contextual difference, ethical consequences and experiences marked by suffering or unresolved ambiguity. Participants' claims of divine encounter are taken seriously and examined in terms of how they are lived, interpreted and carried into subsequent life. For Pentecostal scholarship, the significance of this methodology lies in bringing spirituality, hermeneutics, practical theology and empirical research into conversation. At the same time, it keeps participant experience, communal interpretation and theological assessment analytically distinct.

Research Problem and Questions

The research problem arising from this gap is methodological: how can Pentecostal experiences attributed to the Holy Spirit be studied in a way that attends to their lived, interpretive and contextual character without allowing theological affirmation or sceptical explanation to predetermine the enquiry? The article addresses this problem through the following questions:

1. How can phenomenological concepts contribute to the study of Pentecostal experiences of the Holy Spirit?
2. What dimensions of Pentecostal experience should an integrated phenomenological framework attend to?
3. How can such a framework maintain methodological openness while distinguishing participant experience, communal interpretation and theological assessment?

[4] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 63.

4. How can the framework accommodate ambiguity, suffering, spiritual authority and contextual diversity?

Methodological Approach

Methodologically, this is a conceptual and interdisciplinary theological study, not an empirical phenomenological investigation. It brings selected works in Pentecostal theology, philosophical and methodological phenomenology, practical theology, hermeneutics and qualitative research into dialogue in order to construct an integrated framework. The sources were chosen for their direct relevance to the dimensions of religious experience developed in the article, including embodiment, relationality, interpretation, temporality, contextuality and ethical discernment. It is not intended as a systematic or exhaustive review of phenomenological or Pentecostal scholarship. The purpose is to bring together sources that contribute directly to the construction of the proposed framework. The framework is therefore presented as an adaptable methodological orientation whose usefulness requires further examination through empirical research in diverse Pentecostal contexts.

The article first gathers phenomenologically relevant insights already present in Pentecostal scholarship before turning to philosophical and methodological resources. It then uses these resources to construct the framework, identify its methodological safeguards and indicate directions for further research.

1. Pentecostal Accounts of Experience

Pentecostal reflection on experience emerged from the movement's early expectation that the divine-human encounters narrated in Acts remain possible within contemporary Christian life. The New Testament itself preserves a close relationship between narrated events and theological teaching. The Gospels and Acts narrate God's action in Christ and through the Spirit while also interpreting these events, and the apostolic letters further articulate their significance for the faith and life of the church. Contemporary Pentecostal experiences may therefore contribute to theological reflection when they are narrated and communally discerned, without being equated with the foundational events of the New Testament.[5]

Stephenson relates this experiential emphasis to Pentecostalism's restorationist understanding of the church. Pentecostal worship therefore seeks encounter and interaction

[5] See, for example, Luke 24:44-49; Acts 2:14-36; 10:34-48; 11:1-18; 1 Cor. 15:3-8; Rom. 6:3-11.

with God rather than limiting itself to instruction about God.[6] Experience, however, is never received apart from prior theological expectation. In Pentecostal communities, experience acquires specifically Pentecostal meaning as it is interpreted through Scripture, the movement's history and the language of the believing community.

Steven J. Land gives this experiential orientation a broader theological structure. His account of Pentecostal spirituality brings beliefs and practices together within the affections, showing that Pentecostal experience cannot be reduced to isolated moments of emotional intensity.[7] The affections are formed through prayer, worship and participation in the life of the church, while they also shape conduct and the believer's orientation towards the kingdom of God. Land moves the discussion from unusual manifestations to an enduring form of Spirit-shaped life. Experience includes encounter, but it also involves the desires and habits through which believers continue to respond to what they believe God has done.

More direct phenomenological attention appears in the empirical study of W. Paul Williamson and Ralph W. Hood Jr. and in David Perry's theological analysis. Williamson and Hood used phenomenological interviews with eight men in a Pentecostal-oriented drug rehabilitation programme to examine initial Spirit baptism through participants' first-person descriptions. Their analysis identified six interrelated themes: connection with God, physical sensations, magnified feelings, prayer language, certain knowing and difficulty of description. Their findings present Spirit baptism as both an embodied and mystical experience. Although the narrow sample limits wider generalisation, the study demonstrates how Pentecostal experience may be investigated without making causal or ontological claims. Perry later drew upon this research and other testimony material to develop a brief phenomenology of Spirit baptism within a systematic theological enquiry. His purpose was not to conduct another empirical study, but to use phenomenological description as a basis for examining the theological plausibility of Spirit baptism as an experience of the Holy Spirit.[8]

Pentecostal hermeneutics adds an important interpretive dimension to this discussion. Amos Yong argues that theological enquiry is communally situated, since interpretation takes place within the local congregation, the wider Christian communion and the historical

[6] Stephenson, "Pentecostalism and Experience," 187, 196.
[7] Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 13, 135.
[8] W. Paul Williamson and Ralph W. Hood Jr., "Spirit Baptism," 543, 545-47, 553-54; David Perry, *Spirit Baptism*, 109-16.

tradition.[9] Experience cannot, then, be examined as private consciousness detached from ecclesial life. More recently, David Ray Johnson has brought affectivity into Pentecostal hermeneutics by presenting interpretation as a non-dualistic and embodied encounter. Feelings participate in the interpretive event and arise within particular relationships, times and spaces.[10] Together, these contributions draw attention to the communal, bodily and affective dimensions of Pentecostal experience, although they do not set out to construct a phenomenological research method.

Cartledge introduces a methodological development by bringing charismatic theology into conversation with empirical research.

Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives challenges a model in which conclusions reached through biblical or systematic theology are simply applied to contemporary church life. Cartledge instead treats practical theology as interpretive engagement with concrete religious reality and brings the tools of the social sciences into theological enquiry. His empirical studies of worship, glossolalia, prophecy and healing demonstrate that the beliefs and experiences of contemporary Christians can function as serious material for theological reflection.[11] In Cartledge's approach, Pentecostal and charismatic practices become material for direct investigation rather than illustrations of doctrine.

Cartledge develops the argument further in *The Mediation of the Spirit*. He identifies Scripture, experience and pneumatology as recurring elements within Pentecostal and charismatic practical theology, although their precise relationship differs among scholars. His concept of mediation explains how experiences attributed to the Holy Spirit occur through human agency, ecclesial practice and material conditions. This account introduces an important critical tension: mediation may be confused with the divine reality it communicates, allowing claims about divine action to be domesticated or manipulated through human

[9] Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 17.
[10] David Ray Johnson, "Calculating Affects: Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Affectivity," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 35, no. 1 (2026): 16, 20.
[11] Mark J. Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 1, 15, 69, 109.

interpretation.[12] Cartledge's account of mediation retains the need for empirical attention and critical discernment.

These developments show that Pentecostal scholarship already contains many of the elements required for a phenomenology of Pentecostal experience. Spirituality studies describe the relationship between experience and formation. Hermeneutics explores the role of Scripture, community and affect, while practical theology has opened Pentecostal practices to empirical investigation. Work on mediation further explains how claims concerning divine action are communicated through human and ecclesial processes. These contributions should not be presented as incomplete merely because they do not employ phenomenology. They address different theological and methodological questions and have produced substantial accounts of Pentecostal life.

What remains is the task of integration and methodological clarification. Existing insights are dispersed across spirituality, hermeneutics, ritual studies and empirical theology. They do not yet provide a unified phenomenological framework that directs researchers to examine how Pentecostal experience is bodily lived, relationally mediated, interpreted in language and remembered across time. Such a framework must also account for contextual difference and experiences that remain ambiguous. Phenomenology can assist this task by providing disciplined concepts and practices for attending to experience before theological conclusions are reached. The following section considers the resources that philosophical and methodological phenomenology can bring to Pentecostal enquiry.

2. Phenomenological Resources for Pentecostal Enquiry

Phenomenology offers Pentecostal studies a disciplined way of approaching experience without reducing it either to private emotion or to an illustration of doctrine already established. Its value lies in sustained attention to how an experience appears to the person who lives it, how consciousness is directed within that encounter and how meaning arises within the participant's world. This orientation is particularly relevant to Pentecostalism, where experiences described as conversion, healing, Spirit baptism, prophecy or divine

[12] Mark J. Cartledge, *The Mediation of the Spirit: Interventions in Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 23, 58, 65.

guidance are central to religious life and are often interpreted theologically before they are examined phenomenologically.

Husserl's concept of intentionality offers a useful starting point. He argues that conscious experience is characteristically "consciousness of something," so that an experience cannot be understood as an enclosed state existing only within the mind.[13] A Pentecostal account of divine presence, for example, is directed towards God as encountered, while an experience of healing may be directed towards bodily change, prayer and the expectation of divine action. Intentionality does not prove that the intended object exists in the manner claimed by the participant. It clarifies the structure of the experience by asking what was encountered, how it appeared and what significance it possessed for the person.

Husserl's account of the natural attitude further shows that experience takes place within a world already accepted as familiar and real. People live among other persons, practical concerns and inherited assumptions before they reflect upon them philosophically.[14] Pentecostal believers likewise inhabit a lifeworld shaped by Scripture, worship and congregational relationships. Terms such as anointing, conviction or the presence of God are not neutral labels added after an event; they belong to the world within which the event is recognised. Phenomenological enquiry attends to the participant's lifeworld without treating its categories as self-explanatory.

This restraint is expressed through epoché, although its use in qualitative research requires clarification. Husserl's epoché belongs to a transcendental phenomenological project in which convictions of the natural attitude are placed "out of action" rather than denied.[15] In this article, "bracketing" is used in a methodological rather than strictly transcendental sense: it refers to the researcher's disciplined effort to prevent prior theological conclusions from determining the description of the participant's experience. Applied to Pentecostal research, such bracketing does not require either the researcher or participant to abandon faith. It asks the researcher to suspend judgement about divine causation while attending to how the experience was lived and interpreted. For an insider researcher, this becomes a continuing practice of reflexivity rather than a claim to complete presuppositionlessness. Van Manen's account of the epoché-reduction is useful here because he treats bracketing as the suspension

[13] Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology*, 63, 161.
[14] Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology*, 48, 51.
[15] Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology*, 54.

of assumptions that obstruct access to the phenomenon and reduction as a return to its mode of appearing.[16]

The limits of a purely descriptive approach must also be acknowledged. Heidegger's account of being-in-the-world challenges the idea that human beings first receive neutral experiences and interpret them only afterwards. Understanding is already shaped by involvement in a meaningful world.[17] Gadamer develops this insight by showing that interpretation takes place within historically formed horizons and that prior understanding is always operative.[18] In Pentecostal enquiry, Scripture, testimony and ecclesial tradition therefore influence what participants notice and how they speak about it. The task is not to remove these horizons, but to make their role visible and remain open to meanings that may challenge them.

Merleau-Ponty adds that experience is embodied, with reflective consciousness representing only one dimension of the lived encounter. Phenomenology seeks direct description of the world as lived and begins from the fact that the world is already present before reflection.[19] Pentecostal research must therefore include the body and its spatial setting within the field of description. Max van Manen translates these philosophical resources into attention to lived body, time, space and relationality, providing practical paths for qualitative enquiry.[20]

Phenomenology contributes disciplined attentiveness rather than a theological verdict. Husserl himself places the transcendence of God within the phenomenological suspension, indicating that divine reality cannot be established through analysis of consciousness alone.[21] A Pentecostal phenomenology may investigate how an experience understood as the work of the Spirit is lived, remembered and interpreted, but it cannot by itself determine its divine origin. Theological enquiry can continue at a later stage, but it should not govern phenomenological description from the outset.

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[16] Max van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014), 216.
[17] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 170.
[18] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 270, 302.
[19] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), vii.
[20] Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, 303, 305.
[21] Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology*, 106.

The framework therefore adopts a hermeneutically informed phenomenology. It retains the descriptive discipline of attending closely to how an experience appears and treats methodological bracketing as a reflexive discipline against premature judgement. At the same time, it recognises that neither participants nor researchers approach experience without prior understanding. Heidegger and Gadamer clarify the interpretive horizons through which experience is understood. Giorgi's account of bracketing is retained as a discipline of methodological restraint and does not imply the complete removal of presuppositions. Van Manen's attention to lived body, time, space and relationality provides the practical orientation for interpreting experience within concrete human worlds. Within the present framework, description and interpretation are treated as related movements of enquiry rather than as competing procedures.[22]

3. A Pentecostal Phenomenological Framework

A Pentecostal phenomenological framework begins with experiences associated with the Holy Spirit as they are encountered in concrete human life. Experiences of this kind are received through the body, mediated through relationships, expressed in language and remembered across time. Their meaning may deepen or become contested as believers continue to live with them. The task is to attend to how an experience appears, how it is interpreted and what follows from it, without reducing it to private feeling or placing it immediately within a doctrinal category. The following dimensions overlap in practice and should not be treated as separate procedures.

In empirical use, the six dimensions function as guiding orientations rather than sequential stages. The framework may be applied to interviews, testimonies, observations or other qualitative materials according to the design of the study. During analysis, participant description, communal explanation and the researcher's theological assessment should first be identified separately and then examined in relation to one another. Methodological rigour requires the researcher to document the reflexive process, remain faithful to the participant's context, retain contrary or unresolved accounts and show clearly how the interpretation has developed from the description. Table 1 summarises the focus and indicative questions associated with each dimension. For example, a healing testimony may be examined by

[22] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 170; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270, 302; Amedeo Giorgi, *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A Modified Husserlian Approach* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 91-92; van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, 213, 216.

tracing bodily sensations, the role of prayer and congregational language, later changes in meaning, unresolved symptoms and the social setting in which the testimony is affirmed or questioned.

Table 1. Six Dimensions of the Pentecostal Phenomenological Framework

Dimension	Primary focus	Indicative question
Lived and Embodied Experience	Bodily sensation, affect, voice, movement and physical response	How was the experience bodily felt and expressed?
Relational and Ecclesial Mediation	Relationships, communal practices, authority and discernment	Who participated in naming or assessing the experience, and how did these relationships shape it?
Interpretation and Narration	Scripture, testimony, language, memory and communal interpretation	How was the experience narrated and interpreted within the participant's religious world?
Time, Space and Transformation	Temporal development, spatial setting and subsequent life	How did the meaning of the experience develop over time, and what followed from it?
Ambiguity, Suffering and Discernment	Non-healing, uncertainty, spiritual harm and unresolved meaning	What remained unresolved, and how were suffering and ambiguity interpreted?
Global and Contextual Pentecostalisms	Cultural, social, historical and religious contexts	How did the local context shape the recognition, meaning and narration of the experience?

3.1 Lived and Embodied Experience

Embodiment provides the first point of entry. Pentecostal encounters are commonly remembered through sensation, voice, movement and bodily response. The body is not a

container for an essentially inward event; it belongs to the experience itself. Merleau-Ponty supplies a philosophical basis for this claim by describing the body as "the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression."[23] In glossolalia, breath and vocalisation participate in the event's meaning, just as touch, pain and expectation may shape the experience of healing prayer. Posture, tears, stillness and fatigue may likewise disclose dimensions of an encounter that participants cannot state immediately in conceptual language.

Van Manen asks "how the body is experienced" within the phenomenon under investigation.[24] This question shifts attention from general claims about manifestations to the sequence through which an experience was sensed and remembered. What preceded the event, how the body was perceived during it and what changed afterwards become part of the description. Csordas's concern with "the immediacy of embodied experience" also shows that such descriptions are never culturally empty, since churches provide the language through which sensations are recognised as conviction, healing, empowerment or spiritual conflict.[25]

Pentecostal theology already contains resources for such an account. Land relates spirituality to beliefs, practices and affections, while David Ray Johnson's affective hermeneutics presents interpretation as an embodied encounter situated in time and space.[26] Together they prevent embodiment from being reduced to visible intensity. They also remind the researcher that affect is formed through repeated practices and may influence attention before a participant can explain what is happening. Physical and affective experience deserve close attention, though intensity itself cannot establish divine origin.

3.2 Relational and Ecclesial Mediation

The relational character of Pentecostal experience requires attention to the people who participate in its formation. Healing, prophecy, divine guidance and Spirit baptism are usually recognised within relationships where believers learn how an event may be named and assessed. Van Manen describes relationality as the lived experience of self and other, directing reflection towards connection, community and ethical responsibility.[27] In Pentecostal settings, pastors, prayer partners and congregations may therefore form part of the experience

[23] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 272.
[24] Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, 304.
[25] Thomas J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), vii, 7.
[26] Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 14, 135; David Ray Johnson, "Calculating Affects," 16, 20.
[27] Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, 303.

itself. Their gestures, prayers and responses may influence what the participant notices and how the event is remembered.

Amos Yong gives this relationality a theological form by arguing that enquiry is "communally situated."[28] The local congregation, the wider church and inherited tradition provide overlapping contexts of interpretation. Csordas's account of charismatic healing likewise shows how bodily proximity, authoritative speech and congregational participation can create an encompassing ritual environment.[29] This mediation can provide language and a communal setting for discernment. At the same time, communities gain considerable power over what may count as a legitimate experience. The same relationships that sustain a participant may also make disagreement costly.

Kirsty Rowan's study of a London Pentecostal deliverance service makes this power visible. The evangelists' questions linked a named spiritual agency with adverse events in the participant's life. When the expected sequence was disrupted, the participant struggled to remain within the ritual pattern.[30] Ecclesial language can thus organise distress and make it meaningful, yet it may also determine its interpretation in advance. Questions of authority become central at this point: who may name the experience, how is consent expressed and can alternative accounts be voiced? The enquiry must consider how communities nurture understanding while remaining alert to pressure, unequal authority and experiences that fall outside recognised patterns.

3.3 Interpretation and Narration

Testimony introduces a further interpretive dimension. Pentecostal experience does not reach the researcher as an untouched event, because it has already been understood through Scripture, preaching, memory and congregational language. This interplay between narration and interpretation is also evident in the New Testament, where experiences of divine action are narrated within the believing community and understood in relation to Israel's Scriptures and the emerging life of the church.[31] Hans-Georg Gadamer's description of understanding as the "coming-into-language of the thing itself" indicates that language participates in the

[28] Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 17.
[29] Csordas, *Sacred Self*, 59.
[30] Kirsty Rowan, "'Who Are You in This Body?': Identifying Demons and the Path to Deliverance in a London Pentecostal Church," *Language in Society* 45, no. 2 (2016): 263, 266.
[31] See Acts 2:14-36; 10:34-48; 11:1-18.

formation of meaning.[32] A bodily change may be recognised as healing, or an impression as prophecy, because such interpretations are available within a Pentecostal horizon. The vocabulary of the church may clarify experience, but it may also make some aspects easier to say than others.

Paul Ricoeur clarifies what happens when experience becomes testimony: language is the process through which "private experience is made public."[33] The original event remains personal, but its meaning becomes communicable through discourse. Testimony gives genuine access to experience, although it never reproduces the original event exactly. It is shaped by memory, later reflection and the circumstances of its telling. Land's account of early Pentecostal testimony shows that this narration also involved congregational theological reflection and the cultivation of shared narrative beliefs.[34] Testimony becomes both recollection and participation in a communal story.

Mookgo S. Kgatle extends the discussion within African Pentecostal worship. Public testimony contrasts an earlier condition with a present experience and can shape the expectations of the listening congregation. It may also be vetted by leaders or used to promote a ministry, revealing the influence of institutional setting upon its public form.[35] A phenomenological reading of testimony includes its formation, later development and the aspects of experience that remain difficult to express. Hesitation, omission and later revision are especially important where a participant's experience does not end in the expected victory. Testimony is a serious source of knowledge, but narration interprets the experience it seeks to disclose.

3.4 Time, Space and Transformation

Attention to lived time complicates accounts of sudden transformation. Conversion, healing or Spirit baptism may be narrated as a decisive moment, yet its meaning is connected with earlier struggles, later developments and future hope. Van Manen distinguishes measured time from lived time and observes that it is experienced through memory, involvement,

[32] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 370.
[33] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 19.
[34] Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 81, 94.
[35] Mookgo S. Kgatle, "Public Testimony in the Pentecostal Liturgy: A Transformative Experience Approach," *Theologia Viatorum* 48, no. 1 (2024): 2-4.

waiting and telos.[36] Lived space is equally significant. An altar call, a hospital room, a home prayer meeting or an online service may shape the experiential quality of an otherwise similarly named event. The atmosphere of the setting, together with its degree of privacy or public visibility, forms part of the experience under study.

These temporal layers appear clearly in Simon Coleman's study of the Word of Life ministry in Sweden. A participant's testimony connected bodily encounter and release from painful memory with an anticipated future, placing personal biography within a wider sacred history. Coleman describes this as "historiopraxy," an embodied performance of the relationship between past, present and future.[37] The account also shows that apparently immediate rupture is sustained through remembered practices, revival traditions and repeated narration.

Land places Pentecostal formation within an eschatological horizon of waiting, worship and witness,[38] while Frank D. Macchia presents Spirit baptism as participation in God's redemptive purpose and anticipated renewal.[39] Transformation includes the narrated moment of change, but its meaning also unfolds through the longer history in which the claim is embodied, tested or revised. Within this framework, claims of transformation are examined through the relationships, practices and moral choices that follow the original encounter, as well as through the participant's account of the event itself. Attention must also be given to what participants believed happened at the time and to what later endured, weakened or acquired a different meaning.

3.5 Ambiguity, Suffering and Discernment

The framework must leave room for experiences that remain unresolved. A study confined to healing, empowerment and visible transformation would reproduce preferred Pentecostal testimonies while overlooking illness, unanswered prayer and perceived divine silence. Csordas models useful restraint by allowing several interpretations of charismatic practices to remain possible.[40] The participant's account needs to be heard before the event is classified

[36] Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, 305.
[37] Simon Coleman, "'Right Now!': Historiopraxy and the Embodiment of Charismatic Temporalities," *Ethnos* 76, no. 4 (2011): 427, 434.
[38] Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 73, 120.
[39] Frank D. Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 117.
[40] Csordas, *Sacred Self*, 275.

as divine activity, psychological response, cultural performance or spiritual harm. Ambiguity is not necessarily a failure of research; it may belong to the phenomenon as it is lived.

The pastoral significance of such openness becomes visible in Christopher David Cat's study of unrealised healing expectations among Australian Pentecostals. Interviews with caregivers and people living with chronic illness revealed a gap between strong expectations of healing and continuing embodied limitation. Non-healing was sometimes connected with inadequate faith, hidden sin or insufficient persistence, producing guilt and self-doubt. Some participants concealed their acceptance of illness because it did not fit the expectations of their churches.[41] Although the sample is limited, it reveals experiences that a triumphal account can easily silence. It also shows why researchers must distinguish between a community's theological explanation and the participant's own experience of its consequences.

One participant contrasted repeated pressure for an immediate miracle with the invitation, "in the midst of the not-miracle, let's walk with you. Let's be present."[42] This response moves discernment from explaining non-healing towards accompanying the person who suffers. Macchia similarly warns that signs of healing cannot be approached naively or separated from unanswered prayer.[43] Discernment may remain open to divine action, yet it must also face bodily reality and the pastoral weight of experiences that remain unresolved. It should also allow lament, uncertainty and revised understanding to appear without treating them as evidence of spiritual failure.

3.6 Global and Contextual Pentecostalisms

Contextual diversity places important limits upon universal claims. Spirit baptism, healing, prophecy and spiritual conflict appear across Pentecostal traditions, but they do not carry identical meanings in every setting. Allan Heaton Anderson's "global, non-parochial and contextual perspective" recognises both family resemblance and substantial diversity within global Pentecostalism.[44] Context is not a background added after description; local history, social conditions and religious memory participate in the experience itself.

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[41] Christopher David Cat, "Unrealised Divine Healing Expectations in Australian Pentecostalism," *Religions* 17, no. 5 (2026): article 582, 8.
[42] Cat, "Unrealised Divine Healing Expectations," 10.
[43] Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*, 276.
[44] Allan Heaton Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), ix, 1.

The South Indian setting illustrates why this contextual attention is necessary. Bergunder shows that Pentecostalism in South India developed through an interaction of global Pentecostal influences, indigenous leadership and local religious worlds. Healing, deliverance, glossolalia and holiness therefore acquired meaning within a context already shaped by established Christian traditions and wider beliefs concerning spiritual power. Bauman further demonstrates that Indian Pentecostal identity is formed under conditions of caste location, minority status and public contestation surrounding conversion and evangelism. These conditions may influence how believers narrate healing, deliverance, conversion and public testimony, as well as the risks involved in identifying an experience openly as the work of the Spirit.[45]

Ogbu U. Kalu observes that traditions crossing boundaries "take local color" as they enter new settings.[46] African Pentecostalism must therefore be understood through indigenous agency and local accounts of spiritual power, illness and community. Ng'etich's account of polygenesis, understood as multiple locally rooted beginnings, extends this argument by locating African Pentecostal history within indigenous prophetic initiatives and responses to questions that mission Christianity had not adequately addressed.[47] This challenges the use of a single centre, including Azusa Street, as the interpretive norm and restores local actors to the history of the movement.

Contextual sensitivity does not require theological relativism. Amos Yong's communally situated hermeneutics allows local interpretations to be taken seriously while remaining open to dialogue, critical discernment and questions of truth.[48] A Pentecostal phenomenology moves from careful contextual description towards comparison and theological reflection. Responsible comparison begins only after local meanings have been established and differences have not been prematurely harmonised. Its global relevance depends upon careful attention to difference and resistance to imposing one model upon varied histories and communities.

[45] Michael Bergunder, *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 17-18, 108, 125, 181, 184, 248; Chad M. Bauman, *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 27, 40-41, 70-71.
[46] Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13, 188.
[47] Elias Kiptoo Ng'etich, "Global and Local Pentecostal Histories: Reframing Pentecostal Historiography in Africa," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 49, no. 1 (2023): 1, 10, 14.
[48] Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 17, 275.

4. Theological and Methodological Safeguards

A Pentecostal phenomenology must remain open to experiences interpreted as the work of the Spirit without allowing theological affirmation or sceptical explanation to predetermine the findings. Phenomenological description clarifies the appearance and meaning of an experience, while theological assessment considers claims about divine causation. Swinton and Mowat's approach to practical theology is useful because it places lived experience and Christian tradition in sustained critical conversation.[49] Theological reflection should therefore follow careful attention to participant accounts and remain willing to be questioned by experiences that do not fit familiar Pentecostal expectations. Cartledge's account of mediation reinforces this caution, since human practices that communicate claims about the Spirit may also distort them.[50]

For insider researchers especially, methodological openness depends upon sustained reflexivity. Familiarity can aid understanding, yet it can also make inherited explanations appear self-evident. Amedeo Giorgi clarifies that bracketing does not mean forgetting prior knowledge. It requires holding that knowledge in suspension while attending to what is presently given and remaining open when the data resist the researcher's preferred interpretation.[51] Reflexivity should therefore be documented throughout data collection and analysis, especially where personal experience or doctrinal commitment may have influenced interpretation.

Interpretive accountability depends upon distinguishing the participant's experience, the community's explanation and the researcher's analysis. These levels may overlap, but they should not be merged. A participant may describe bodily relief, name it as healing and later revise that judgement, while the church may interpret the same event differently. These meanings need to be represented faithfully before comparison or theological assessment is attempted. Contradictory accounts and later reinterpretation should remain visible, since phenomenological rigour is weakened when difficult material is removed to produce a

[49] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016), 76, 78.
[50] Cartledge, *The Mediation of the Spirit*, 58.
[51] Giorgi, *Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology*, 91-92.

coherent spiritual narrative. Swinton and Mowat's emphasis on the researcher's role and reflexive awareness supports this transparency.[52]

Safeguards are especially necessary where spiritual authority shapes what participants feel permitted to say. Ward's phenomenological study of six people from five Judeo-Christian groups identified experiences in which leaders were understood to represent God, disagreement became spiritually dangerous and acceptance depended upon compliance.[53] Ward's limited and religiously diverse sample does not justify a general claim about Pentecostal leadership. Its findings nevertheless demonstrate why researchers must ask whether consent was freely expressed and whether participants could question authoritative interpretations. Rowan's deliverance study and Cat's work on unrealised healing expectations similarly show that ecclesial expectations may organise experience while creating pressure, guilt or silence.[54]

These safeguards protect the openness on which phenomenological enquiry depends while allowing Pentecostal testimony to receive careful attention. By distinguishing description from verification, practising reflexivity, attending to power and preserving unresolved accounts, researchers can treat claims of divine encounter seriously without endorsing them uncritically or reducing them to non-theological explanations. This approach keeps phenomenological description accountable both to theological reflection and to the people whose experiences are being studied.

5. Limitations of the Framework

Since the present study is conceptual, the proposed framework has not been tested against participant data. The six dimensions are therefore provisional in their application and may need refinement when the framework is used in different Pentecostal traditions, forms of experience and cultural contexts. The article also offers a constructive interdisciplinary synthesis rather than a systematic or exhaustive review of phenomenological and Pentecostal scholarship. Its claims are therefore limited to the literature brought into conversation for the purposes of constructing the framework.

[52] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 56, 58.
[53] David J. Ward, "The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14, no. 9 (2011): 903, 909.
[54] Rowan, "'Who Are You in This Body?'" 263, 266; Cat, "Unrealised Divine Healing Expectations," 8, 10.

Phenomenological enquiry also places an important boundary on what the framework can claim. The framework can examine how experiences attributed to the Spirit are lived, interpreted, remembered and mediated through relationships and contexts, but it cannot establish divine causation. This limitation is methodological rather than theological: theological assessment remains possible, but it should be distinguished from phenomenological description and interpretation. Future empirical studies will be necessary to assess the framework's usefulness, limits and adaptability in different Pentecostal settings.

6. Future Research in Pentecostal Phenomenology

The value of a Pentecostal phenomenological framework will ultimately be tested through its capacity to guide empirical studies across different Pentecostal communities and forms of experience. Further studies may examine dramatic events such as Spirit baptism, healing, prophecy and glossolalia alongside quieter experiences of prayer and worship, including moral struggle and perceived divine absence. This wider field would prevent Pentecostal experience from being identified only with exceptional manifestations and would allow researchers to explore how the Spirit is understood within ordinary Christian life.

Comparative research is particularly important, provided that comparison follows careful contextual description. Studies across African, Asian, Latin American, European and North American Pentecostalisms should not assume that similarly named experiences carry identical meanings. In the Indian context, such comparison should include differences between Kerala's established Pentecostal traditions and settings in which caste marginality, minority status or public contestation surrounding conversion more directly shape religious experience. Anderson's contextual perspective, Kalu's emphasis on local appropriation and Ng'etich's account of polygenesis together support research that begins with local meanings before moving towards wider theological comparison.[55]

Future studies should also examine Pentecostal experience over time. Conversion or healing may be narrated as an immediate turning point, while its significance develops through memory, repeated testimony and later circumstances. Coleman's analysis of charismatic temporalities shows how personal experience may join past struggle, present embodiment and anticipated future within one narrative.[56] Longitudinal interviews could

[55] Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 1; Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 13; Ng'etich, "Global and Local Pentecostal Histories," 14.
[56] Coleman, "'Right Now!'" 427, 434.

therefore revisit participants to explore what endured, weakened or acquired a different interpretation. Longitudinal research of this kind would give greater substance to claims of transformation by attending to subsequent relationships, practices and ethical conduct.

The research agenda must also include accounts that remain marginal within public testimony. Participants who continue to experience illness, question prophetic words, leave congregations or reinterpret earlier experiences may disclose dimensions concealed by narratives of victory. The studies by Cat, Ward and Rowan show why disappointment and unequal spiritual authority must remain visible, particularly where participants' experiences resist authorised ritual patterns.[57] The framework must remain adaptable; turning it into a rigid checklist would weaken its phenomenological purpose. Giorgi's disciplined analysis of concrete descriptions and van Manen's openness to varied practices of lived-meaning research provide complementary resources for maintaining rigour without suppressing contextual difference.[58] Such studies should also indicate where the six dimensions require refinement or where locally significant features of experience fall outside the proposed framework.

Conclusion

Pentecostal scholarship has produced substantial accounts of religious experience through spirituality, hermeneutics, practical theology, ritual studies and empirical research. This article has brought these dispersed insights into a Pentecostal phenomenological framework organised around six interconnected dimensions: lived and embodied experience; relational and ecclesial mediation; interpretation and narration; time, space and transformation; ambiguity, suffering and discernment; and global and contextual Pentecostalisms. The main contribution of the article is methodological. It offers a disciplined way of attending to experiences attributed to the Spirit without reducing them to private feeling or assuming that their theological interpretation is self-evident.

The framework remains conceptual and has not yet been tested through participant data. Its dimensions should therefore be treated as adaptable and open to refinement across different

[57] Cat, "Unrealised Divine Healing Expectations," 8, 10; Ward, "Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse," 903, 909; Rowan, "'Who Are You in This Body?'" 263, 266.
[58] Giorgi, *Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology*, 128; van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, 213.

Pentecostal traditions and cultural settings. Empirical studies, including longitudinal and comparative research, are needed to examine how well the framework attends to testimony, spiritual authority, contextual difference, transformation and experiences that remain unresolved.

Phenomenological enquiry can clarify how an experience appears, acquires meaning and is carried into subsequent life, but it cannot by itself establish divine causation. The contribution of Pentecostal phenomenology, therefore, is not to decide in advance whether an experience is divine or non-divine, but to create a disciplined space in which the experience can be described, interpreted, critically discerned and ethically examined without silencing either faith or ambiguity.

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