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The Church in Public Life: A Barthian Vision for Indian Pentecostal Ecclesial Worldview

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ABSTRACT

Indian Pentecostalism, being a restorationist movement within Christianity, primarily focuses on recovering the original ethos and faith of the church. As such, it traditionally emphasised personal salvation and spiritual experiences; the downside of such an approach was that it largely remained disengaged from public life and social issues. However, this detachment has not helped the development of a holistic vision of the church. Based on Karl Barth's idea of the church as a sanctified and prophetic community committed to live out its faith both within and outside the church, this article proposes a more integrative approach within Pentecostal ecclesiology, where communal and personal spirituality is linked to social and political intervention in the pursuit of justice, compassion and redemptive discipleship.

Key Words Indian Pentecostalism, theology, ecclesiology, Barthian vision, socio-political praxis, church, civil community.

1. Introduction

Pentecostalism, in the last hundred years, has become one of the most influential Christian movements all over the world, including in India. It is a restorationist movement seeking to go back to the faith and practices of first-century Christianity. As a religion among the poor, it has exercised significant influence among the marginalised sections of society. While it has focused on charismatic gifts, personal holiness, and eschatological hope, there has been less focus on socio-political involvement as a community. This raises an important question: how can Indian Pentecostal ecclesiology meaningfully address the living realities such as suffering, injustice, and social divisions? This article focuses on developing a holistic ecclesiology that addresses issues of social justice and compassion, along with spiritual concerns. Karl Barth's theology, while developed within the Western Reformed tradition, has a significant focus on socio-political dimensions. A Barthian approach can empower Indian Pentecostal ecclesiology to reimagine its ecclesial message and vocation in light of the socio-political challenges that Indian society faces today.

2. Indian Pentecostalism and Contextual Particularities

Indian Pentecostalism broadly falls within the evangelical Protestant form of Christianity. Globally, Pentecostalism emerged in the early twentieth century as a collection of numerous restorationist movements (Anderson, 2004, pp. 30–37; Vondey, 2012, p. 11) that arose independently in different parts of the world, yet gradually grew into denominations. Over more than a century of its existence, Pentecostalism has significantly influenced the way Christian faith is understood and practised. Today, it is a dynamic force within world Christianity. Unlike many historic Christian denominations, Pentecostalism emerged primarily as a people's movement from the grassroots. Its early followers largely consisted of socially and economically marginalised people groups, with limited political or ecclesiastical influence. They emphasised spiritual renewal, charismatic manifestations, and direct encounters with God, in place of structured ecclesiastical ministry and worship.

Naturally, Pentecostal ecclesiology displays a greater focus on the spiritual formation of its members in preparing them as a sanctified community for the church's eschatological hope. The church is often portrayed as a fellowship set apart from the corruptions of the world around, and focused on the return of Christ. The downside of this approach is a lack of sustained theological engagement with socio-political realities in which the church exists and lives out its vocation. At the same time, some of the Pentecostal ecclesiological assumptions are theologically important, however implicit they may appear. Pentecostalism views the church as a visible sign and instrument of God's Kingdom, bearing witness to it through ministries of healing, deliverance, compassion, and restoration. The church is thus recognised as a space for transformation through the power of God's Spirit (Land, 1993, pp. 58–121). This pneumatological dimension opens up space for a holistic ecclesiology when extended to the socio-political spheres.

The Indian context presents both a challenge and an opportunity for reimagining Pentecostal ecclesiology. As a religiously pluralistic society, India is home to diverse faith groups and religions. However, Christians, including Pentecostals, remain a minority faith, facing increasing scrutiny and violence.

In recent years, political tensions have intensified the pressure on Pentecostal communities (Mahendra, 2016). Rather than retreating into a fear psychosis, the church must prepare itself to be a sacrificial and prophetic presence in the face of abounding challenges.

Another issue that needs attention is caste-based discrimination. Caste continues to be an oppressive social system that marginalises a sizable population in India (Chatterjee, 2021). Although Christianity affirms the equality of all persons in Christ, caste discrimination often persists within the church in India, including Pentecostal communities (Massey, 1997, p. 194). A sanctified ecclesiology must courageously proclaim how God calls the church to pull apart systems of injustice within its walls as well as in the society around it.

Poverty among the masses, across rural and urban spaces, is another stark reality. Government attempts to reduce poverty have not fully addressed the ground realities, although the country has made progress in poverty eradication since independence (Singh & Jayaram, 2022). While Pentecostals emphasise God's favour on all, especially the poor, there is still scope for a more informed theological response that empowers the church for decisive action to break the cycle of poverty and systemic exploitation. There is a genuine need for a new social vision from Indian Pentecostals, although Ivan Satyavrata claims that Pentecostalism indeed has a tradition of social engagement (Satyavrata, 2017, pp. 1–18).

3. The Barthian Vision of the Church in the World

Karl Barth was a well-known Reformed theologian from Switzerland who envisioned the Christian faith's broader mandate beyond private spirituality. He considered theology to be the theory of praxis (Jüngel, 1986, p. 82). He developed a dogmatic theology that was contextually relevant to the realities around him. The following is a brief discussion of two of his relevant themes: the church's relation to civil society and the socio-political praxis of the doctrine of sanctification.

3.1 The Role of Christian Community in Relation to Civil Community

Karl Barth developed a constructive relationship between the church and civil society (Barth, 1991, p. 266). They are not merely institutional bodies, but gatherings of people in the service of spiritual and civic tasks respectively. The church is a community led by God's Spirit, in obedience to the Word of God in Jesus Christ, who shares one faith, love and hope (Barth, 1991, p. 266). The civil community, likewise, is a collective of people under a constitutional system for maintaining order, peace, and freedom through legislation, governance, and justice (Barth, 1991, pp. 266–267).

Barth maintains that while church and state are distinct, they are also interconnected. The church exists within a legal and social sphere, by serving all people in light of its universal message (Barth, 1991, pp. 268–269). Civil government, though secular and provisional, contributes to a broader moral order, participating in divine service (Barth, 1991, pp. 271–272). Christians are called to engage responsibly in civic life, recognising the authority of the state. There is not a blind submission, but an engagement with a sense of co-responsibility. Barth thus rejects both religious withdrawal and political absolutism, but encourages the church to engage the public arena critically and constructively, recognising their accountability to a higher ethical standard (Barth, 1991, p. 275). According to R. Lindsay, "...from the earliest days of Barth's career, theological thought went hand in hand with social and political praxis." (Lindsay, 2001, p. 114).

3.2 Socio-Political Action in Sanctification

In Christian theology, sanctification is understood as God's action of making His people holy, through "the restoration of God's image" in their life and vocation (Kapic, 2014, p. 26). According to Barth, it is God fashioning a people to represent Him in the world, despite their sin (Barth, 1958, p. 511). Sanctification does not lead to an isolated life but is proven in everyday relationships, ethical conduct, and suffering. Sanctified people live within society, making a "provisional offering of thankfulness for which the whole world is ordained by the act of the love of God" (Barth, 1958, p. 511). In Barthian theology, this includes socio-political engagement, viewing theology as a theory of praxis (Jüngel, 1986, p. 82).

Barth thinks that both spiritual and social forces divide human life by separating people from God and one another. This starts with a broken relationship with God and reveals itself in acts of injustice and disorder within social structures (Barth, 1981, p. 233). In response, he wants the church to join God's reconciling work of the world from its brokenness (Suck Rhee, 1995, Chapter 3). The church bears the responsibility of witnessing to Christ's sanctification of the world, not as passive recipients of salvation, but as active agents engaged in the world's renewal. He encourages the church to develop solidarity with the world, and participate in its broader concerns rather than retreating into spiritual isolation (Suck Rhee, 1995, Chapter 3).

Barth identifies four forms of sanctification, namely discipleship, metanoia, worship, and bearing the cross, as tangible practices of spiritual identity and ethical life that sustain the faith communities while engaging the world (Barth, 1958, pp. 511–613).

Discipleship: Christian discipleship is a response to the call of the Lord Jesus to follow Him. In following, Jesus reveals Himself to His disciples and sanctifies them, setting them apart as His own and as His witnesses in the world (Barth, 1958, pp. 536–537). A disciple is called to self-denial and to act for the sake of the world's reconciliation with God (Barth, 1958, p. 543). It calls for a socially transformative response that moves beyond personal salvation. It involves a public responsibility to bring about the world's reconciliation and peace from its state of disintegration (Barth, 1958, pp. 543–544). It involves a life with values of love, compassion, justice, humility and service to others. Discipleship, therefore, represents a deliberate and socially engaged life that seeks meaningful personal growth while actively participating in the renewal of society.

Discipleship combines theological principles with social engagement, positioning individuals as ethical agents within the public sphere (Gunton, 2006, p. 154). Barth acknowledged the political dimension of his theology, linking discipleship to ethics, solidarity, the servant character of the church, socialism, peace, and politics (Werpehowski, 2006, p. 228). For him, discipleship is not merely a private spiritual path but a socio-political action rooted in social and historical realities. It arises from a faithful response to a superior reality that informs the Christian ethical and public responsibilities (Werpehowski, 2006, p. 240).

Christian political witness involves rejecting conformity to legalistic systems of dominant worldly powers. It resists reliance on the authority and security of possessions, as well as the belief in the benefits of using force (Barth, 1958, pp. 548–550). The service to others is also an act of freedom from material attachments and the friend-enemy divisions. Social justice and peace are not merely a reformist aim but are born out of a revolutionary freedom that envisions a transformed social order. A credible Christian witness, therefore, resists resignation to systemic injustice and fosters hope amid persistent social brokenness (Werpehowski, 2006, p. 241). This political dimension is grounded in the belief that, through Jesus Christ, God freely chooses to be for humanity. This divine freedom sets believers free from following ideologies and empowers them to stand in solidarity with the marginalised and suffering (Werpehowski, 2006, pp. 240–241).

George Hunsinger states that God's non-violent love for opponents is central to Barth's model of discipleship (Lauber, 2004, p. 153). The church's mission is to be a public, counter-cultural community that proclaims the lordship of Jesus Christ in the face of injustice and suffering (Lauber, 2004, p. 153). Discipleship is not only a spiritual enterprise, it is also a socially oriented vocation formed by theological conviction (Mangina 2-4, 187).

Metanoia (Conversion/Repentance): Barth maintains that *metanoia* or repentance is an ongoing process of reorientation, a daily "reawakening" (McBride, 2011, p. 61); it links personal change with social and political action. It is not a private event, but something that challenges religio-cultural traditions, urging individuals to continually reevaluate their commitments in the light of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that genuine transformation arises from "living unreservedly" amid life's complexities, particularly in solidarity with "the sufferings of God in the world," similar to Barth's perspective (McBride, 2011, p. 61). In this context, *metanoia* is fundamentally socio-political, shaping Christians' ideas of power, justice, suffering, and engagement in civic affairs. It advocates for an ongoing, socially engaged transformation (Cochrane, 1956, pp. 376–388).

Good Works: Karl Barth understands "good works" of Christians as not an end in themselves, but as acts of worship that seek divine recognition. He believes that such works serve a two-fold purpose: first, God affirms the individual through them, and second, the individual, in return, praises God (Barth, 2004, p. 584). This mutual dimension places ethical action within a theological framework, where political and social engagement find their fulfilment in God. For Barth, Christian socio-political involvement is not about achieving material gain or public approval, but about faithfulness to God's will, thus preventing them from deteriorating into selfish actions.

Carrying the Cross: Within the Christian tradition, carrying the cross is more than a symbolic act; it is a fundamental demand of faith. In practice, it means that Christians, like Christ, are called upon to suffer in participation of the cross (Barth, 1958, p. 604). Barth points out that at the cross, God does not meet His opponents with revenge, aggression, or power, but he embraces suffering love. He offers Himself, freely bearing the penalties that belong to others, in order to achieve their salvation. In this act, evil is not returned with evil, but achieves what is good and righteous, even at the cost of His own life. The account of the cross reveals a divine way of governance grounded in a love that clearly rejects violence (Hunsinger, 2001, p. 35). Thus, the Christian faith proposes a non-retaliatory, self-sacrificial response to hostility and injustice, disrupting the cycle of violence and retribution.

The New Testament present the cross as "the measure and norm" for Christian living. While believers are called to stand against evil and those who commit it, they are not permitted to respond with evil in return (Hunsinger, 2001, p. 38). Thus, the cross becomes the standard by which Christian conduct, especially in the face of social evil, is measured. While Christians are called to resist injustice, they are at the same time instructed to exercise non-violent resistance and redemptive love in its pursuit. This perspective resembles the Gandhian attitude of *Ahimsa* (non-violence), which resists injustice without replicating its violent means. Both approaches call for moral firmness and restraint, while seeking transformation of the other. Such practices contribute to the formation of socio-political paradigms that are relational and restorative.

4. Reimagining Indian Pentecostal Ecclesiology through a Barthian Social Vision

For Indian Pentecostalism to develop a socially and politically oriented ecclesiology, it must engage with the contemporary realities. It must interpret the church's faith in the light of current challenges and problems that exist in its socio-political milieu. This is where a Barthian approach becomes relevant, which envisions the church not merely as an inwardly focused pious community but as a public community committed to confronting the brokenness of the world in the power of God. Barth's conviction that the ecclesial community bears responsibility toward the civil community, and that sanctification is both holistic and socially transformative, is undeniably appropriate in this context.

4.1 Hospitality and Engagement

India's religious diversity is not just a sociological reality, it is a theological challenge that Indian Pentecostal churches must engage. Traditionally, Pentecostals, while harmoniously co-existing with people of all faiths at the grassroots, also tended to be slightly cautious about broader engagements. Barth provides an important corrective here. His stress on the universality of the church's message and its call to engage with all people in Christ's love, without coercion, invites a posture of humility and openness.

For Indian Pentecostals, this means adopting a stance of hospitality, welcoming the religious other as someone who shares the same dignity as an image-bearer of God. While Pentecostals must still affirm the uniqueness of Christ, they must also acknowledge that the church becomes a place of encounter, where openness, testimony, and dialogue go hand-in-hand. Barth's view helps us resist both religious relativism and sectarian exclusivism, calling Pentecostals to bear witness to Christ through presence, humility, and self-giving love. Moreover, such openness nurtures collaboration in addressing social challenges as co-citizens who share a common heritage and civilizational legacy.

The solution for divisive tendencies in pluralistic societies is not to be found in retributive sentiments, but in a constructive approach based on love, mutual regard, and cooperative action. This vision, based on a Christocentric ethic of self-emptying (*kenosis*) and reconciliation, calls Pentecostals to enact a public theology that is beyond sectarian borders and contributes to the public good. Such a posture neither compromises theological beliefs nor withdraws into isolation but strives to mirror the redemptive love of Christ in a shared social and cultural life.

4.2 Public Discipleship and Nonviolent Struggle

As already noted, India still struggles with caste-based segregation in many areas of life, despite the progress the nation has made in socio-economic areas. The church has to raise its voice for the struggling victims of caste-based marginalisation, both inside and outside the church. Indian Pentecostalism should avoid the tendency towards a withdrawal into private spirituality, evading the hard questions of social injustice. Karl Barth's discipleship theology challenges the church to practice the lordship of Christ in public and social life. This means that the Indian Pentecostal church should be willing to challenge those caste-based structures of discrimination and marginalisation, including within its structures, through the power of non-violent resistance and the authenticity of lived example. Barth reminds us that Christian witness does not fit the world's ideologies but is a faithful and peaceful witness to the freedom of God. In the Indian context, this signifies that the church will be on the side of the oppressed, speak truth to power, and demonstrate the suffering love of Christ in public life. Christian faith thus becomes a source of power for inspired critique and allows them to be agents of peace, reconciliation, and hope in the midst of misery and suffering.

4.3 Ecclesial Metanoia

The church, most of all, should model the values it teaches, being a living witness to God's kingdom through practice and communal life. In the Indian Pentecostal experience, however, subtle currents of discrimination, most notably in terms of caste, gender, and class, are a strongly worrying contradiction to the gospel's liberative values. These trends indicate the stern grip of cultural hierarchies that still await dismantling by the church. Significantly, this tension is in place despite the historical grassroots environment of Pentecostalism in marginalised and socially underprivileged communities. This is a contradiction between theological and socio-cultural realities. The presence of discriminatory hierarchies in some Pentecostal church communities is not a failure of personal piety but a reflection of institutional inertia conditioned by wider social norms.

Karl Barth's understanding of metanoia, a persistent turning towards God that entailed both transformation and repentance, provides a powerful framework to rethink the church's role in this situation. His focus is that repentance is not a fleeting moment of personal sorrow but a persistent, collective turning towards justice and the truth in Christ. In the light of this vision, Indian Pentecostal churches are invited to experience an ecclesial metanoia: a spiritual and structural turning that presses against established divisions. This turning will demand more than a verbal denunciation of social sins, but a deliberate reordering of church life to mirror the fundamental equality the gospel is supposed to bring. Holiness, in this context, is not separation from the world but solidarity with the victims of wickedness and the fearless adoption of justice even in the form of nonconformity. A church formed in such a vision will not only proclaim the gospel of freedom but will practice it.

4.4 Solidarity and Economic Witness

In a nation such as India, where economic inequality is so stark and pervasive, even among Pentecostal Christians, the church cannot just be passive. Commitment to the gospel requires a response beyond personal prosperity and engaging the deeper, structural causes of economic injustice. Karl Barth's teaching on good works critiques the pervasive but often well-intentioned charity-based approaches to poverty. Instead, he encourages the church to go further, to recognise acts of justice and solidarity as acknowledging God's presence in the poor. Such a vision redefines the church's calling: not merely to give to the poor but to accompany them and to confront the powers that trap people in cycles of poverty. Pentecostal theology that is informed by this vision identifies that economic justice is not an afterthought to the spiritual life but a part of it. It is an expression of sanctification, by and through the Spirit, in creating possibilities of a new life together. Herein, the church is a place where different kinds of economic relationships are possible: where care replaces competition, where advocacy is an act of worship, and where the poor are not merely recipients of assistance but agents in creating a just world. A gospel-formed spirituality is characterised not by amassing, but by *kenosis*, self-giving love. It resists the commodifying of human existence and expresses itself in healing, sharing, and liberating acts.

5. Conclusion

Karl Barth's understanding of the church provides a new perspective for Indian Pentecostals to go beyond their inward spirituality and to rediscover the church's public mission based on holiness and justice. It calls upon them to recognise that in a world infested with deep divisions and inequalities, the church should aspire to be more than a community of worship. It should grow to become a sign of hope, healing, and peace in a broken and hurting world. Pentecostals can bring their vibrant spiritual heritage into meaningful engagement with the world by reimagining the church as a visible, prophetic, and

holy community. The church needs to show its practical faith in the communities around, just as it does within its sanctuary. The Pentecostal ecclesiology must recognise that the Lord who calls people to holiness also wants them to engage with the world to become partners in its renewal.

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