



Pentecostal Theology

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and the Christian

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Spiritual Tradition

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Simon Chan

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For my wife

Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3  
Eugene, OR 97401

Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition  
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Copyright©2000 by Chan, Simon  
ISBN 13: 978-1-61097-084-6  
Publication date 5/1/2011  
Previously published by Sheffield Academic Press, 2000

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## INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to interpret the Pentecostal reality in the light of the Christian spiritual tradition, and in so doing, address the problem of Pentecostal traditioning. By Pentecostal reality, I am referring to a cluster of experiences which, Pentecostals believe, distinguish them from other Christians. Pentecostals themselves are not in agreement over the precise nature of their distinctives. But what comes through over and over again in their discussions and writings is a certain kind of spiritual experience of an intense, direct and overwhelming nature centring in the person of Christ which they schematize as 'baptism in the Holy Spirit'.<sup>1</sup> For too long Pentecostals have been trying to defend their Pentecostal distinctiveness, but often at the expense of cutting themselves from the mainstream of Christian tradition. They are afraid that by identifying too closely with the mainstream they might lose their distinctiveness. I would like to argue, on the contrary, that it is when Pentecostals come to see their distinctives as a part of the larger tradition that they can preserve them and maintain their integrity. Pentecostals, as a matter of fact, could not avoid forging links with other Christian bodies; the problem is who they link up with.

Walter Hollenweger has maintained that the heart or core of the Pentecostal reality is found in the first five or ten years of the movement.<sup>2</sup> With this assessment Steven Land agrees and has attempted to capture this 'core' in his book *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*.<sup>3</sup> One does see something of the wholesomeness and beauty in Land's portrayal of Pentecostal spirituality, even if some of it seems to represent an 'ideal-type' construction rather than historical description. A character like William J. Seymour (1870–1922) comes close to em-

1. Mathew S. Clark *et al.*, *What is Distinctive About Pentecostal Theology?* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1989), pp. 163-69.

2. W. Hollenweger, 'Pentecostals and the Charismatic Movement', in C. Jones, G. Wainwright and S.J. Edward Yarnold (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1986), pp. 549-54 (551).

3. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.

bodying the Pentecostal ideal type.<sup>4</sup> But if Hollenweger's observation is right, it raises an alarming question: Why did Pentecostalism so quickly depart from its core and evolve into a segregationist, individualistic, culture-bound and inward-looking faith?

There is no question that classical Pentecostalism after almost a century is experiencing spiritual fatigue. Signs are everywhere of the waning of zeal and missionary vision. From published reports AG churches in USA are not growing. In one particular year the entire AG denomination in the USA experienced a net growth of one church.<sup>5</sup> Del Tarr stated that in 'hundreds of USA churches...there is no growth because there is no witness'—and he was being 'conservative' in his estimate of the numbers.<sup>6</sup> The social researches of Margaret Poloma indicate that the denomination is undergoing a phase of development which Max Weber called the 'routinization of charisma'. Even though glossolalia is a central doctrine, statistics show that a sizeable number of AG adherents do not speak in tongues or have stopped doing so.<sup>7</sup>

Signs of panic are also apparent. On the one hand, the 'establishment' Pentecostals appear more and more to align themselves with the fundamentalists. Attempts at reintroducing the King James Bible and censuring ministers involved in ecumenical dialogue are perhaps indicative of a leadership that feels that it is slowly losing its grip.<sup>8</sup> Hard-core dogmatism is always self-reassuring! On the other hand, those who are feeling the 'routinization of charisma' are searching desperately for new experiences. Where do they turn but to places where a lot of action seems to be going on: Toronto, Pensacola and a host of independent charismatic churches? But what the seekers are offered there are mostly exciting experiences whose novelty quickly wears off and which have

4. See Douglas J. Nelson, 'For Such a Time as This: The Story of Bishop William J. Seymour and the Azusa Street Mission' (PhD dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1981).

5. 'U.S. A/G Churches Opened and Closed: 1965–1998'. Office of General Secretary, General Council of the Assemblies of God. The information was supplied by Cecil M. Robeck, Jr, in conversation.

6. 'Transcendence and Immanence and the Emerging Pentecostal Academy', in Robert Menzies and Wonsuk Ma (eds.), *Pentecostalism in Context* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 195–222.

7. Margaret Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), p. 40.

8. These were some of the resolutions brought to the general council of the Assemblies of God of USA in recent years.

to be replaced by new experiences. We have here a religious version of the fashion world. The typical Pentecostal-charismatic church today is far from being a 'contrast community'; it is in fact the epitome of modern culture.

But Pentecostalism, as Hollenweger has also pointed out, has a tradition of self-criticism.<sup>9</sup> Throughout its history there have been prophetic voices castigating abuses of spiritual power and alerting the movement to the danger of compromise with the world. We think of Frank Bartleman, an early Pentecostal who was a witness of the Azusa Street revival, and more recently David Wilkerson and a growing number of veritable Pentecostals (and scholars) who are trying to set their own house in order. Bartleman has this to say of his age:

We live in a light jazzy age... They refuse the fires of purifying, holiness of heart. We have an atmosphere of confusion. There is too much 'professional' work, railroading seekers through, like a 'quack' doctor's office. This produces a 'fake' Pentecost, with spurious 'tongues'. The 'singing in the Spirit' is also imitated. Men have learned to do these things without the Spirit, and suggest them to others for their imitation. We have even heard leaders call for any demonstration they wanted from the people. What would Peter say to such a demonstration?... We advertise 'miracles', wonderful preachers, etc., and have crowds following bill-board 'signs' to the next big meeting.<sup>10</sup>

We are seeing something very similar today. Spiritual power is being manipulated by charismatic gnostics and magicians who seem to have access to privileged information about principalities and powers and how to outmanoeuvre them. Instead of serious discipleship we have virtual fan clubs revolving around the mega-church leader. Seldom is worship an encounter with the awesome God; it has become an occasion for cheap thrills and continuous festivity dubiously called 'praise and worship'. Pentecostal scholars today are seriously addressing these issues in line with their critical tradition, as can be seen in a sizeable number of articles in journals like *Pneuma*.<sup>11</sup> Sadly, it is the Pentecostal denominational headquarters that are reticent about the problem, being more concerned with the status quo.<sup>12</sup>

9. Walter Hollenweger, 'The Critical Tradition of Pentecostalism', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992), pp. 7-17.

10. Cited by Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, p. 51.

11. See, e.g., *Pneuma* 13.1 (1991).

12. Hollenweger, 'The Critical Tradition', p. 14.

The problem has a number of causes, but the main one is the failure in traditioning. The Pentecostal reality has not been communicated in all its fullness to a subsequent generation. When it was explained, it came through as rather impoverished theological constructs. To cite a case in point, the central doctrine called ‘baptism in the Spirit’ is far richer in Pentecostal *experience* than in Pentecostal *explanation*. As experience, it is nothing less than the ‘revelation’ of the triune God,<sup>13</sup> a ‘theophany’ of the God of history and the eschaton;<sup>14</sup> yet when it was explained, it was narrowly defined as ‘the enduement of power for life and service’. This disparity between experience and explanation has serious consequences for Pentecostal traditioning. We could better clarify the nature of the problem by looking at it in the light of George Lindbeck’s ‘cultural linguistic’ theory of doctrine.<sup>15</sup> According to Lindbeck, doctrines are like the regulative grammar that a community devises in order to make sense of their particular way of life. So, when Pentecostals explain glossolalia as the initial physical evidence of Spirit-baptism, *within* the Pentecostal community, as Joel Shuman has shown in a recent article,<sup>16</sup> this makes pretty good sense. But it makes good sense only as long as the majority of the people in the community continue to have a healthy experience of the Pentecostal reality—which was not a problem in the early days when most Pentecostals experienced Spirit-baptism and glossolalia first hand. But when the experience is inadequately conceptualized, what is communicated to the next generation is a constricted concept of the experience, and this concept will in turn evoke an equally narrow experience. This, I believe, is what is happening to Pentecostal believers in our churches today. Among second-generation Pentecostals Spirit-baptism is received first as a doctrine before it is actualized in personal experience. But when the doctrine is poorly explained, the intended experience does not necessarily follow. Or, one may have had an experience of glossolalia, but over time when questions begin to arise concerning the adequacy of the

13. Peter Hocken, ‘The Meaning and Purpose of “Baptism in the Spirit”’, *Pneuma* 7.2 (Fall 1985), pp. 125-34 (125).

14. Frank D. Macchia, ‘Sighs Too Deep For Words: Toward a Theology of Glossolalia’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992), pp. 47-73 (55-60).

15. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

16. Joel Shuman, ‘Toward A Cultural-Linguistic Account of the Pentecostal Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit’, *Pneuma* 19.2 (Fall 1997), pp. 207-23.

traditional Pentecostal explanation, one begins to cast doubt on one's own experience. If Pentecostals hope to communicate the original reality to subsequent generations, they must come up with an explanation that encapsulates it adequately.

But this failure in traditioning is symptomatic of a larger problem, namely, the lack of awareness of being a part of the larger Christian tradition. Lacking that awareness, Pentecostalism is not able to harness the conceptual tools the Christian tradition provides which would have enabled it to interpret its own experience more adequately. Here, Pentecostals are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to maintain their distinctive experience and this often means having to define it against the mainstream interpretation. Yet, on the other hand, they feel the need to establish their orthodox credentials by identifying themselves with some larger Christian body. Pentecostals, unfortunately, had not been very judicious in their choice of allies in the past. As Gerald Sheppard has noted, the questionable alliance that Pentecostalism made with dispensationalism only succeeded in undermining its own theological integrity.<sup>17</sup> Yet, as Pentecostals sought to clarify their own identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century, they have also found their affinities with other traditions besides the evangelicals, like the Pietistic stream that flows within the more liberal wing of Protestantism.<sup>18</sup> This is a good start, but what Pentecostals need is to discover the deeper roots of their faith and experience. There is much in the contemplative tradition which resonates with Pentecostalism which Pentecostals need to explore further. Catholic charismatics have been quick to root their newly discovered experience in their own spiritual tradition. This has resulted in a much more coherent understanding of the key Pentecostal experiences of Spirit-baptism and glossolalia compared with the classical Pentecostal's own understanding. Their explanation and approach to these realities are generally more congenial towards the Pentecostal self-understanding than those provided by most evangelicals, even by those evangelicals who claim to be practitioners of glossolalia.<sup>19</sup>

17. Gerald Sheppard, 'Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics and Dispensationalism: The Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship', *Pneuma* 6.2 (Fall 1984), pp. 5-34.

18. See D. William Faupel, 'Whither Pentecostalism?' *Pneuma* 15.1 (Spring 1993), pp. 9-27.

19. Max Turner is one such evangelical. While sympathetic to tongues per se, his approach to the place of tongues in relation to Spirit-baptism will in the end leave less room for Pentecostals to develop their own self-understanding with

The tension between continuity and discontinuity with the larger Christian tradition is something Pentecostals continue to struggle with. That there is something distinctive in Pentecostal experience is a point that recent Pentecostal scholars like Robert Menzies, Roger Stronstad and Steven Land have argued with a high level of sophistication. But how is this discontinuity to be maintained along with Pentecostal continuity with the larger Christian tradition? This question needs to be addressed if Pentecostals are to maintain their distinctiveness without marginalizing themselves.

If Pentecostals today are to recover the full-orbed Pentecostal reality of the first ten years, they will need to enlarge their understanding of key concepts like Spirit-baptism and glossolalia. They must not stop at chronicling their own history, writing commentaries and doing biblical theology, though these are very important in themselves. They must engage in integrative thinking, in systematic theology. Lukan pneumatology will have to be integrated with Pauline pneumatology and this integrated pneumatology will have to be interpreted within the larger framework of trinitarian theology. The failure in traditioning could also be seen as a failure in systematic theology. But Pentecostals need to go beyond having just the right theological concepts. Pentecostals are, quite understandably, afraid that the 'letter' might kill the 'spirit'. But they need not fear if they understand that this dualism between letter and spirit is itself a product of a certain kind of modern epistemology, namely, the Cartesian dualistic epistemology. What they need is to recover the ancient art of spiritual theology where reflecting on the nature of God and praying to him are indistinguishable acts. Only a spiritual theology will save Pentecostals from the trap of mere intellectualization of the faith.

In order to ground the Pentecostal reality in the larger Christian spiritual tradition, I would like to focus on two key concepts: glossolalia and baptism in the Spirit. But why glossolalia and baptism in the Spirit in particular? One could, ostensibly, consider a number of other Pentecostal practices in the light of the Christian tradition and derive much benefit from the comparison. The Pentecostal-charismatic penchant for dreams and visions, for instance, could be fruitfully explored in the light of similar phenomena in late medieval mysticism. In this endeavour, we would have the advantage of the monumental work of Bernard

respect to tongues compared with, say, the approach of Catholic Simon Tugwell. See Chapter 2.

McGinn.<sup>20</sup> But glossolalia and what it is believed to signify, baptism in the Spirit, are the most significant symbols of the Pentecostal movement. They are recognized in Pentecostal circles as the movement's most distinguishing marks. These terms, therefore, provide the means to explore meaningfully the distinctive features of Pentecostal experience. I would like to show that glossolalia which Pentecostals identify as 'the initial evidence' of baptism in the Spirit is a rich theological symbol precisely because it is linked to a reality (Spirit-baptism) which is far bigger than the classical Pentecostal conceptualization of it. Pentecostals also recognize that glossolalia has more than evidential value. It is also prayer, and as prayer it covers a very significant part of the Christian life of prayer when it is understood within the larger Christian spiritual tradition. Here, I would like to argue that glossolalia symbolizes the ascetical dimension of the Christian life just as evidential tongues symbolize the passive dimension. Together, we have a rich symbol that could integrate the passive and active dimensions of Christian spirituality.

But the analysis of Pentecostal experience per se is not enough. If traditioning is to be effective, it has to be carried out in the ecclesial community.<sup>21</sup> The Pentecostal church must become the traditioning community for Pentecostal faith and practice. But here, the Pentecostal church faces two formidable challenges. First, Pentecostalism thus far has been too individualistic in its conception of the spiritual life. The church is usually seen as a 'fellowship' to meet 'my needs'. It needs to move to a more communal understanding of the Christian life. In fact, Pentecostalism's central experience, as we have already said, makes much better sense when interpreted within its own communal-liturgical context. The Pentecostal Christian needs a Pentecostal community to make sense of his or her own spiritual experience. The second chal-

20. Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1991-), a monumental five-volume work, three of which are published: *The Foundation of Mysticism* (1991), *The Growth of Mysticism* (1994) and *The Flowering of Mysticism* (1998).

21. The need for Pentecostal scholars to do their theology within the worshipping Pentecostal community was underscored by John Christopher Thomas in his presidential address to the Society for Pentecostal Studies (pp. 7-8) in 'Pentecostal Theology in the Twenty-First Century', *Pneuma* 20.1 (Spring 1998), pp. 3-19. Thomas goes on to propose an outline of a Pentecostal ecclesiology based on the five-fold gospel and, on the same basis, makes an interesting suggestion on 'reappropriating the sacraments' (pp. 17-19).

lenge we face is that we are living in times when the general drift of many ecclesiastical traditions is towards the 'free church', non-hierarchical type, as Miroslav Volf has pointed out recently in his important study on ecclesiology.<sup>22</sup> Even Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are not spared. One can understand why a movement that cherishes the freedom of the Spirit would find the free church type more congenial. But if the Pentecostal movement is to bequeath its heritage to the next generation without diluting the core, it needs to have an adequate traditioning structure. I'm not referring here to ecclesiastical structures, hierarchy and such like; rather, I am referring to the need to develop an ecclesiology which makes effective traditioning possible.

Historically, there are both hierarchical as well as 'democratic' Pentecostal churches. The former is perhaps best (or should we say, worst?) represented by the modern charismatic mega-church which is the almost perfect embodiment of the effective, smooth-running hierarchy. But we are not so much concerned with ecclesiastical structures as with the theological nature of the church. The issue is not whether the church should be structured democratically or hierarchically, but whether it is a faithful and effective bearer of the Christian tradition. For the Pentecostal church to become an effective bearer of its own tradition, there needs to be a radical re-visioning of the church. The church needs to be seen not primarily as a functional entity for the sake of organizing our work more efficiently but as supremely a spiritual reality which, though existing in space and time, transcends space and time. The church is not the sum-total of individual Christians but exists prior to the individuals. To understand the church in this way, we need to reconsider the place of the sacraments and pneumatology. Only a proper theology of the sacraments and pneumatology can overcome the tendency to turn church services into what Gordon Fee calls 'a thousand individual experiences of worship'.<sup>23</sup> Pentecostals need to see beyond a doctrine of the Spirit as 'my personal Comforter' to one that sees the Spirit as first and foremost the Spirit for the *church* coming from *beyond* history. The implications of this for the life of worship are indeed far-reaching. Here, Pentecostals can learn much from Eastern Orthodoxy.

22. Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 12-13.

23. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 667.

In this connection, it is heartening to note the formation of the Charismatic Episcopal Church in 1992 by some 'independent pentecostal-charismatic congregations'. What is most interesting about it is that it is seeking to 'combine the elements of charismatic ministry with sacramental worship and celebrate biblical values and orthodox, evangelical teaching'. It wants to recover the catholicity of the church by 'restoring the liturgy, sacraments, creeds and councils of the early church to their proper place in our doctrine and worship'. At the same time it wants to integrate it with the evangelical conviction of personal conversion and charismatic gifts.<sup>24</sup> What we see in the Charismatic Episcopal Church is that the Pentecostal reality need not be confined to one particular type of church structure. In fact, I would like to show that it is better traditioned in a church that recognizes the constitutive role of the sacraments and the Spirit.

A radical re-visioning of the church will also help Pentecostals to recover a sense of genuine solidarity with all Christians that goes beyond the warm affinities with fellow-charismatics and fellow-Evangelicals. This was the original impulse of early Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal ecclesial *experience* has been more broadly ecumenical than its ecclesiology. Pioneers like William Seymour achieved a remarkable integration between blacks and whites. Later, David du Plessis initiated dialogue with the WCC at a time when conservative Christians were still highly suspicious of mainline Protestantism. In its more recent history Pentecostals like Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. continue to engage actively in dialogue with other Christians including Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians—much to the consternation of the Pentecostal 'establishment'.

Pentecostals need to re-vision the church as an eschatological community which includes an apocalyptic dimension but is not confined to it. William Faupel has shown the importance of eschatology for Pentecostal faith and practice.<sup>25</sup> But their historical association with dispensationalism has led most of them to develop a crisis eschatology. While this has positive results in terms of mission, it has also tended to create a loose ecclesial structure which prevents effective traditioning. If Jesus is coming 'at any moment', the only thing worth doing is to preach the

24. Information taken from the web page of the Charismatic Episcopal Church (<http://www.iccec.org>).

25. D. William Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).