CHAPTER TWO

THE ORIGINAL CLASSICAL PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTIC

All along the ages men have been preaching a partial Gospel. A part of the Gospel remained when the world went into the dark ages. God has from time to time raised up men to bring back the truth to the church. He raised up Luther to bring back to the world the doctrine of justification by faith. He raised up another reformer in John Wesley to establish Bible holiness in the church. Then he raised up Dr. Cullis who brought back to the world the wonderful doctrine of divine healing. Now He is bringing back the Pentecostal Baptism to the church.

– *The Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles), October 1906

The purpose of this chapter is to identify, illustrate and interpret the original Classical Pentecostal hermeneutic which was the originating hermeneutic of Classical Pentecostalism and has come to serve as the starting point for Pentecostal hermeneutics. My claim is that it was a theological hermeneutic which was based on at least four core interpretive assumptions which gave orientation to the ethos of early Pentecostalism. This is based upon my own evaluation of four major early Pentecostal theologians, but first it builds upon several important interpretations of early Pentecostal hermeneutics.

The first, and foremost, interpretive assumption is that the Protestant Christian Scriptures were the sole ultimate authority for Christian belief and living which functioned dialogically with the religious and general experiences of early Pentecostals to form a theological understanding of their world. For early Pentecostals, this authority functioned as the Scriptures served as normative exemplars for Christian experience which, in turn, informed their reading of Scripture. I assess their actual practice of relating to Scripture as dialogical. The human experience of hearing Scripture, in relation to all other human experiences, provided moments of experiencing it as God’s word, and these stood out as authoritative and normative for the rest of a Pentecostal Christian’s lived experience. Then, from this lived experience, a theological interpretation of the world

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followed, informed by both Scripture and life’s experiences as related to Scripture.2

Second, the restorationist beliefs of the early Pentecostal movement, centering on the narrative of God’s plan for humankind coming to pass with the outpouring of the Spirit in the Latter Rain, came to form the primary Pentecostal story of history. Third, the four-/five-fold “full-gospel” came to serve as the doctrinal grid that oriented Pentecostal beliefs and living and came to operate as new doctrinal hypotheses which explained Scripture and spiritual experiences. And fourth, a pragmatic naïve realism, integrated with an understanding of the primacy of the supernatural, formed early Pentecostal rationality. The words of Scripture (almost always in the King James Version of the Bible) were identified in relation to the common sense, supernatural experiences of early Pentecostal readers. Because of this tacit naïve realism, the understanding of direct correspondence between early Pentecostals’ theological views and the realities to which these articulations pointed, in many cases, led to an absolutism which engendered the significant splintering of Pentecostalism in the decades following the Azusa Street Revival.3

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2 In Martin Jay’s investigation of experience in modern Western thought, he accounts for “the American culture of experience” as drawing on the rhetoric of experience as a source of legitimation against rational abstraction or unexamined authority. In the American context, experience is a “knowing how” in forming habits in the interaction between one’s self and one’s world. There is continuity, then, between belief and action in this understanding of the American account of experience. Experience serves as a corrective on many levels in American culture and has led to a general rejection of all-embracing systematic truth – whether theological, philosophical or political – in favor of the adjudication of truth claims by “the canons of a constantly shifting collective experience.” This was especially true of the American pragmatist tradition, represented by the likes of Charles Sanders Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., William James and John Dewey. See his Songs of Experience (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 265–271.

To a degree, this is true of the early Pentecostals’ understanding of experience. As American theologians, they held the authority of the Bible in tension with the primacy of religious experience in the devotion and practice of Christian faith. Experience taught them that belief in the baptism in the Holy Spirit caused vibrant spiritual life. It was in the experiential context of America which this quest for a deeper experience of empowerment and holiness took place. For early Pentecostals, these religious experiences “worked,” therefore the truth of their doctrines was demonstrated.