PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTICS: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

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We are not fighting against people or churches, but we are seeking to replace dead forms of dogmas with living, practical Christianity.

_The Apostolic Faith_, William Seymour

The Pentecostal movement emerged out of the intense Weslyan-holiness and Reformed evangelical revivals of the late nineteenth century. What specifically distinguished this movement from the other revival movements was the binding together of the biblical concept of the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the charismatic phenomenon of speaking in other tongues. However, we must recognize that even though the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues is the distinctive doctrine of Pentecostalism, it is not the central essence of Pentecostalism.

What is at stake in the present hermeneutical debate is not whether Pentecostals have correctly exegeted the Lukan corpus according to the traditional historical-critical methodologies, but Pentecostal identity. Thus, the purpose of this article is to identify the essence of Pentecostalism in order better to appreciate the contemporary debate concerning Pentecostals and hermeneutics. By doing this I hope to show that a promising hermeneutic can be extrapolated from the spiritual ethos of classical Pentecostalism.

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The Essence of Pentecostalism

The essence of Pentecostalism is its persistent emphasis upon the supernatural within the community. G. Wacker, in his article 'The Functions of Faith in Primitive Pentecostalism', argues that the framework in which speaking in tongues should be analyzed is the thoroughly experiential supernaturalistic conceptual horizon. This supernaturalistic horizon of Pentecostalism is 'marked by living in and from the eschatological presence of God'.

Pentecostalism with its manifestation of the charismatic gifts (tongues, prophecy and healings) 'offered invincible certitude that the supernatural claims of the gospel were really true'. Pentecostalism perceived itself as a revival movement that called the church to relive the apostolic experiences that are related in the New Testament.

At the center of this supernaturalistic horizon stood Jesus the Savior, Sanctifier, Healer and soon coming King. The christological themes were rooted in the revivalistic movements of the late nineteenth century. To these christological themes Pentecostals added one more—Spirit baptizer, and they saw themselves as living in the latter rain (Joel and Acts). They viewed this Holy Spirit outpouring as the final act in the drama of salvation, for the second coming of Jesus was going to happen very soon. Pentecostal identity was shaped from the beginning by an 'eschatological intensity and an existential identification with “the full gospel” of the New Testament Apostolic Christianity'. Pentecostals, like other restoration groups, were certain that they had recaptured the essential features of the New Testament church and that these supernatural features were available to all Christians.

5. Land, Pentecostal Spirituality, p. 56.