Tongues as a Sign: Towards a Sacramental Understanding of Pentecostal Experience

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Simon Tugwell observed that most classical Pentecostals do not regard baptism and the eucharist as "sacramental" in significance. Instead of functioning as visible signs of God's presence to save, the principle sacraments of baptism and the eucharist among Pentecostals appeared to Tugwell to be tied more closely with human acts of repentance and testimonies of faith. Of significant interest, however, is Tugwell's recognition of the "sacramental" character of Pentecostal speaking in tongues. He noted that, for Pentecostals, glossolalia signified God's presence here and now. Rather than representing mere emotionalism, tongues made God present for Pentecostals in a special, audibly identifiable way. As a Catholic, Tugwell felt most at home in this aspect of Pentecostal worship and speculated that tongues might provide a fruitful point of departure for future Pentecostal/Catholic dialogue.

Scholars of Pentecostalism, such as William Samarin and Walter Hollenweger, have also noted a sacramental element in the Pentecostal use of glossolalia. Samarin argued that tongues for Pentecostals represented a "heightened awareness of God's presence," such as one normally finds in response to the eucharist in sacramental communions. As a "linguistic symbol of the sacred," tongues says, "God is here." In this context, Hollenweger offers the provocative statement that tongues is the "cathedral of the poor," signifying God's majesty present for people who cannot afford to worship in gothic church settings.

Most Pentecostals are uncomfortable with the term "sacrament" because of the association of the term with an "institutionalization" of the Spirit or with "formalistic" liturgical traditions. Under the influence of a Reformed (especially Zwinglian) critique of sacramentalism, many Pentecostals fear that any use of the term "sacrament" would imply an understanding of sacramental efficacy as necessitated by a causative dynamic intrinsic to the elements, thereby institutionalizing or

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1The term "Pentecostal" throughout this article is used in reference to the classical Pentecostal movement.
formalizing the free Spirit or grace of God. Such a belief would imply for Pentecostals a denial of their cherished belief in the unmediated gracious presence of God conveyed directly to the believer by the Holy Spirit.

Do Pentecostals consistently hold to such a view of experiencing God? Morton Kelsey would answer in the affirmative. He is convinced that Pentecostalism advocates an experience of God that is unmediated and direct. For Kelsey, glossolalia serves to grant the believer direct access to God that bypasses rational and liturgical forms of mediation. In a similar vein, Karl Rahner viewed “enthusiastic” worship as a means of achieving an immediate experience of God that calls into question institutional, rational and sacramental forms of mediation between God and humanity, thereby providing a context for possible institutional renewal. Such views rightly draw our attention to the role that tongues play in bypassing, even calling into question, liturgical forms of sacramental mediation. Yet, such views do not adequately take into consideration the role of tongues as an audible means of making God present that may also be viewed as “sacramental” in significance.

Pentecostal misgivings described above concerning the term “sacrament” are not wholly without historical or theological justification. Pentecostalism has inherited from reformation--both classical and radical--and pietistic movements a keen awareness of the dangers of institutionalizing or formalizing the Spirit of God. But such misgivings are one-sided and mainly justified in relation to a neo-scholastic Catholic understanding of “sacrament” that has been radically questioned by contemporary Catholic theologians, such as Karl Rahner and E. Schillebeeckx. As we will have occasion to note, this more recent Catholic sacramental theology views the sacraments primarily as occasions for a personal encounter between God and the believer. Rahner does not locate sacramental efficacy in some kind of material causation necessitated by the elements as elements. Rather, he deals with the question of sacramental efficacy only in the context of the sign value of the sacrament. This redefinition does not mean that Rahner holds to a simplistic understanding of “sign” as an intellectual reference to some other reality yet to be experienced. For Rahner, the reality signified becomes present and is experienced through the visible sign in the process of signification. The reality signified is actually made

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