A Pentecostal Perspective on “Signs and Wonders”

Robert P. Menzies

One striking characteristic of modern Evangelicalism is a growing appreciation for the miraculous. This trend has generated a sub-group within Evangelicalism frequently identified as “The Signs and Wonder Movement” or “The Third Wave.” The latter title indicates the close relationship between this movement and Pentecostalism. The third wave refers to an energizing work of the Spirit among Evangelical Christians, subsequent to the first wave of renewal which birthed the classical Pentecostal denominations and the second wave which impacted mainline denominations and ignited the Charismatic Renewal movement. Third wavers and Pentecostals clearly hold much in common. Both groups stress the continuing validity and importance of the gifts of the Spirits described by the Apostle Paul (e.g., 1 Cor. 12), including the more demonstrative gifts, such as healing and prophecy, which many Evangelicals had consigned solely to the apostolic age.

Nevertheless, third wavers clearly distinguish themselves from their Pentecostal precursors. The key point of difference is the way in which these two groups view Spirit baptism. Pentecostals have long affirmed a baptism of the Holy Spirit “distinct from and subsequent to the experience of new birth.” By way of contrast, third wavers “generally understand the baptism of the Spirit not as a second blessing but as a part of conversion.” Thus, while Pentecostals and third wavers both highlight the contemporary relevance of the miraculous gifts of God, the Pentecostal emphasis on the distinction between conversion and Spirit baptism separates this group from their third wave counterparts.

This difference in theological perspective reflects differing interpretations of Luke’s theology of the Spirit in general, and the Pentecostal gift of Acts 2 in particular. The Pentecostal doctrine of “subsequence” flows naturally from the conviction that the Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2), not as the source of new covenant existence, but rather as the source of power for effective witness. More recent Pentecostal studies have grounded this judgment

---

in the distinctive character of Luke's pneumatology: Luke consistently portrays the Spirit as the source of power for service. Third wavers, on the other hand, consistent with their non-Pentecostal Evangelical origins, view reception of the Pentecostal gift as the *sine qua non* of Christian existence, the essential element in conversion. These differing views have led Pentecostals and third wavers to develop their respective emphases on "power evangelism" along different lines. Pentecostals, in contrast to third wavers, have given special prominence to Luke-Acts, and especially Pentecost, as containing an important promise and paradigm of empowering. Indeed, for Pentecostals, any discussion of "power evangelism" or "signs and wonders" must take as its point of departure Luke's record of that first Pentecost (Acts 1-2).


In the following essay I would like to explore some of the implications Luke's theology of the Spirit may hold for a biblical perspective on "signs and wonders." And then, in view of the unique role which Luke-Acts plays in the formation of Pentecostal theology, I would also like to suggest how Luke's perspective has contributed to a uniquely Pentecostal approach to "power evangelism." I offer this Pentecostal perspective with the hope that it might contribute in some small way to the stimulating discussion concerning "signs and wonder" currently taking place within the larger Christian community.

---


2 James D. G. Dunn's *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1970) has been very influential in non-Pentecostal Evangelical circles.

3 See, for example, the articles and appendixes in Greig and Springer, *The Kingdom and the Power*; C. Peter Wagner, ed., *Signs and Wonders Today* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Creation House, 1987); and Wimber and Springer, *Power Evangelism*. 