Toward a Cultural-Linguistic Account of the Pentecostal Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit

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All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

—Acts 2:4, NIV.

Since its beginnings in the early twentieth century, North American Pentecostalism has presented a dilemma of sorts to the wider Christian community. Non-Pentecostals have never known just how to deal with these ever-growing communities with decidedly unique, albeit generally orthodox, practices and doctrines. Given its roots in the ant-denominationalist restorationism of the late nineteenth century, along with the emotional intensity and exuberance of worship that it often embodied, early Pentecostalism not altogether surprisingly found itself set apart from the Christian mainstream as a frequent object of derision, accusations of demon possession, and even physical persecution.

The increasing growth and establishment of North American Pentecostalism and its gradual acceptance into the Christian mainstream has been accompanied by a change in the nature of critiques of the movement. Recent criticisms of Pentecostalism have been more fraternal, more congenial and more explicitly theological, most often taking the form of debates concerning what is regarded by Pentecostalism as its distinctive doctrine—the initial physical evidence of Spirit Baptism. This doctrine is the eighth of the “Sixteen Fundamental Truths” of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, and states:

The baptism of believers in the Holy Ghost is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them

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1 When I say that Pentecostals are "orthodox" I mean, rather arbitrarily, that they affirm the trinitarian faith of historical Christianity as represented, for example, in the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds.


utterance (Acts 2:4). The speaking in tongues in this instance is the same in essence as the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:4-10, 28).4

The debates surrounding the doctrine of initial evidence have typically been of two sorts. The first has generally been conducted between traditional Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals or charismatics, and has centered around the necessity of the presence of tongues as the evidence of Spirit baptism. The second debate is a more general one between Pentecostals and some mainstream evangelicals over the contemporary possibility of tongues and the other charismata.5 These debates as currently construed are destined to remain largely intractable insofar as they are rooted in suspect understandings of doctrine per se. In this essay I propose to relocate these debates concerning the theological validity of the Pentecostal distinctive by showing how this doctrine may be seen as comprising one of the many practices of a particular cultural-linguistic community. As such, I shall argue that this doctrine can be fully understood and therefore critiqued as valid or not only from within the bounds of the Pentecostal community itself.

I will seek to accomplish this relocation first by displaying the popular understanding of Pentecostal Christianity as a radically experiential and individualistic religion. In contrast, I will show the role doctrine plays in particular communities both in giving intelligible expression to liturgical impulses and in shaping the liturgical practices of these communities. The correctness of particular doctrines, I will argue, is primarily validated by a doctrine's conformity to the practices of particular communities. Finally, I will represent contemporary North American Pentecostalism and its distinctive doctrines as being a liturgical community of this sort.6

4From the Minutes and Revised Constitution and Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, Portland, Oregon, 1991, 130. In using the Assemblies of God as an illustration in this essay, I am not suggesting that the Assemblies of God is the most representative Pentecostal movement; it is simply the one with which I am most familiar.

5Both of these debates are represented in the summer 1993 issue of the journal Paraclete.

6I should qualify this assertion by saying that to the extent that all Christian communities are part of the same tradition, there are many points at which the doctrines and practices of any particular Christian community may be interrogated by the wider Christian community.

Additionally, I need to clarify what I do not mean to suggest by the arguments presented in this essay. First, and most importantly, I do not in any way mean to reduce any aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit to any sort of purely sociological explanation. My arguments are not intended to display the Pentecostal doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit as anything less than what Pentecostals, among whom I number myself, believe that it is: the sovereign, supernatural activity of the Third Person of the triune God establishing a presence within the Christian in such a way as to...