Tongues as “The Initial Physical Sign” of Spirit Baptism in the Thought of D. W. Kerr

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As a Pentecostal people, we hold that the Bible evidence of the Baptism with the Holy Ghost, which is promised by the Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples, and to all them that are afar off, and as many as the Lord our God shall call, is speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance. We have found that whenever we, as a people, begin to let down on this particular point, the fire dies out, the ardor and fervor begin to wane, the glory departs. We have found where this position is held and wherever it is proclaimed, the Lord is working.

—D. W. Kerr

The chief distinctive and *sine qua non* of the Pentecostal movement is its doctrine that “an enduement with power” called “the baptism in the Holy Spirit” is described in Scripture and is available to all believers who seek it. Moreover, Pentecostals maintain that speaking in tongues constitutes a visible sign, warranted by the descriptions and inferences recorded in the book of Acts, that one has been baptized in the Holy Spirit. This Spirit baptism with the evidence of speaking in tongues is often referred to, by participants in the movement, as “the Pentecostal experience.”

Pentecostals have always understood speaking in tongues to provide evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit. That is a hallmark of Pentecostal theology. On the other hand, this theology of “evidence” has not always been articulated in exactly the same way. While a discussion of the full panorama of Pentecostal explanations of tongues


2Before the eruption of the charismatic movement in the 1960s, Pentecostals would also have differed from most other Christians in maintaining that the gifts of the Spirit described in such passages as Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12—including the “oral gifts” of tongues, the interpretation of tongues, prophecy, the word of wisdom, and the word of knowledge—are available to the church today, just as they were in the apostolic age. In contrast, most Christians regarded glossolalia in particular as a token of fanaticism and emotional excess. But due to the eruption of the charismatic movement in the 1960s and its widespread success in popularizing this Pentecostal understanding of spiritual gifts outside of Pentecostal circles, the notion that all of the gifts of the Spirit are available to the contemporary church no longer constitutes a “distinctive” of Pentecostalism. And while Pentecostals rejoice that in this regard the rest of the church has moved in their direction, this “success” has only intensified the need for Spirit baptism and evidential tongues to provide distinctive identity and internal cohesion to Pentecostalism.
as evidence would be both interesting and useful, this article will attempt something much less ambitious.

In this study the views of Daniel W. Kerr, an early Assemblies of God leader, will be explored with a single key question in mind: Did Kerr believe that tongues as “the initial physical sign” of baptism in the Holy Spirit always occurred simultaneously with that Spirit baptism? Or was it possible that the sign sometimes followed the Spirit’s work? There is another way to state this question: Would Kerr have disagreed with the following sentences from the 1981 Assemblies of God position paper entitled “The Initial Physical Evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit”?

The expression initial physical evidence of the Baptism refers to the first outward sign that the Holy Spirit has come in filling power. A study of Scripture indicates there was a physical sign by which observers knew that believers had been baptized in the Holy Spirit. The evidence always occurred at the very time the believers were baptized in the Spirit and not on some future occasion.3

Where We Stand: The Official Position Papers of the Assemblies of God (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1994; originally published in 1989), 147. While the emphasis of this paragraph is clearly upon the simultaneity of the sign of tongues with baptism in the Spirit, a measure of logical tension between the three sentences in the paragraph is also evident. According to the first sentence, the "first outward sign" indicates that the Holy Spirit has come upon the believer, filling him or her. Similarly, the second sentence notes that the believers had been baptized. The perfect tense of the first sentence and the pluperfect of the second indicate that the sign follows the baptism. These assertions in the first two sentences seem to contradict the assertion of the third sentence: “The evidence always occurred at the very time the believers were baptized in the Spirit and not on some future occasion.”

There has been some question about the status of position papers in the Assemblies of God. Where We Stand: The Official Position Papers of the Assemblies of God begins with this sentence: “The statements on the issues in this book were approved as the official statements of The General Council of the Assemblies of God by the General Presbytery, the ruling body of the Assemblies of God, over the past twenty years.” This affirmation seems to conflict with a report which was given by the “Committee to Study Status of Position Papers and Their Use in Dealing With Deviant Doctrines” at the 1991 General Council held in Portland, Oregon and an accompanying resolution (24) approved by the General Council. The committee was chaired by Richard Dresselhaus, D.Min.

Both the committee report and the resolution make a distinction between (1) position papers which have both been approved by the General Presbytery and also ratified by the General Council, and (2) position papers which have only been approved by the General Presbytery. In the report, this statement appears: “The committee is of the opinion that a paper which may be the basis for credentialing, discipline, or membership decisions should result from some involvement of the General Council in session.” Moreover, the resolution describes papers approved only by the General Presbytery as “primarily information” and not “the official position of the Assemblies of God.” As of 1991 only one position paper had been ratified by a General Council, the one entitled “Divorce and Remarriage,” and this status of one approved paper by the General Council still seems to be the case.