It has been over thirty years since James Dunn wrote his classic, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, and nearly as long since I first read it as a young graduate student in the mid-1970’s. I have since read a few of Dunn’s books with great interest, convinced that especially his earlier work is very significant for Pentecostal theologians. I have followed the debate that has developed between Dunn and valued Pentecostal colleagues over the issue of Lukan pneumatology and the theological “separability” of Spirit baptism from conversion/initiation. I value that debate, but I have always felt that the Pentecostal discussion of Dunn’s work on Spirit baptism needed to take place more directly at the core of the book’s central thesis. So, in preparation for this editorial, I took Dunn’s classic up and read it again. Below are a few brief responses.

First, I was reminded of how forcefully Dunn had argued for a universal witness among the diverse voices of the New Testament to the centrality of the gift of the Holy Spirit as the essential core or “nerve center” (102) of Christian life and identity. For Dunn, all soteriological categories emerge from this divine act of bestowing the Spirit and the experience of receiving the Spirit. There is no such thing as a “legal” justification or divine word of forgiveness or acceptance that does not involve this divine bestowal and experience of the Spirit: “Justification is impossible without receiving the Spirit, for the gift of the Spirit effects the righteousness which constitutes a right relationship with God” (136). Similarly, neither is the possession of the Spirit merely assumed to have occurred as a result of receiving the sacrament of water baptism: “In earliest days of Christianity, possession of the Spirit was a fact of immediate perception, not a logical conclusion to be drawn from the performance of an ecclesiastical rite” (149). The event of receiving the Spirit that makes one a Christian in favor with God is an immediate experience of God that is vibrant and involves felt changes in a person’s life. Not only is the centrality of our experience of the Spirit implied in Luke’s account of the early Christian communities, it is Paul’s assumption for Dunn as well: “the gift of the Spirit for Paul is the same as justification by faith . . . It is clear that this
reception of the Spirit was a conscious experience (Gal. 3:2-4)” (p.113). Commenting on 1 Thessalonians 1:5-9 and 2:13, Dunn states further that for Paul the experience of the Spirit “was certainly a very vivid, perhaps even emotional experience” (105).

Dunn does credit the Pentecostals with focusing on this experience of the Spirit as the heartthrob of the Christian life, an insight from the New Testament that, as Morton Kelsey or Emil Brunner have reminded us time and again, has been nearly lost to modern theology. Dunn remarked concerning the Pentecostal charge that historic Protestant and Catholic churches have to a degree neglected this immediate experience of the Spirit:

Our examination of the NT evidence has shown that they were wholly justified in this . . . It is a sad commentary on the poverty of our own immediate experience of the Spirit that when we come across language in which the NT writers refer directly to the gift of the Spirit and to their experience of it, either we automatically refer it to the sacraments and can only give it meaning when we do so . . . or else we discount the experience described as too subjective and mystical in favor of a faith which is essentially an affirmation of biblical propositions, or else we in effect psychologize the Spirit out of existence (225-226).

Secondly, Dunn even accepted the Lukan and Pauline tendencies to view the gifts and signs of the Spirit as involved in and signaling the reception of the Spirit. Dunn remarked concerning how we know the Spirit has been received: “And in case it should be thought that I have been less than just to the Pentecostals let me simply add in reference to these questions that Pentecostal teaching on spiritual gifts, including glossolalia, while still unbalanced, is much more soundly based on the NT than is generally recognized” (229). Dunn also roots this Christian charismatic experience of the Spirit in Christ’s own experience of the Spirit (a point that he takes up again and expands in his Jesus and the Spirit). In my view, Dunn helps the Pentecostals by revising the Reformation principle of Christ alone to Christ and the Spirit alone. There is much potential here for the development of a pneumatological soteriology among Pentecostals that would fulfill the basic thrust of their preaching and narrative theology.

Without wanting to patronize Dunn, my temptation is to say that Dunn’s classic is more thoroughly “Pentecostal” than he himself may have realized. After all, if, as Dunn admits, the Pentecostals have focused on the immediate and life-transforming experience of the Spirit as the nerve center of the Christian life, this fact is of no minor consequence for the cen-