For most of a century classical Pentecostals have presented and defended speaking in tongues in a way that emphasizes discontinuity with the bulk of Christian history. Wanting to elevate their own unique distinctives, Pentecostals have championed Spirit-baptism and tongues as the Spirit-breathed linchpins between themselves and the apostolic era.¹ Aimee Semple-McPherson’s famous This is That message well exemplifies the common Pentecostal “book end” approach to Christian history. “This”—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit signified especially by glossolalia—is the “that” which the apostles themselves experienced as the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy (2:28–32). The traditional inference was that everything between Pentecost and contemporary Pentecostalism could be jettisoned as less than fully Christian.

Historic Pentecostal apologies of tongues have also heightened this sense of discontinuity with historic Christendom. In response to their own twentieth-century Western cultural milieu, Pentecostals have consistently described and defended glossolalia using the constructs of modernism. The modern person, it is assumed, makes decisions based upon reasoned arguments and proof. For example, the argument has regularly been made that it makes sense for contemporary Christians to speak and pray in tongues because the apostles themselves did. Or, it has been argued that it is reasonable to practice glossolalia precisely because God expects us to use the gifts He has given. The question, “how can one know that one has been Spirit-baptized?” is similarly answered in a modern way by turning to biblical evidence: speaking in tongues is the “proof” of one’s Spirit-baptism.² The not-always intended result of these kinds of apologies is that there is a separation of the “haves” and


² I am indebted to Russell Spittler for suggesting that this kind of modernistic argumentation was occurring.
Apophatic theology impacted the West first when Thomas Aquinas read and quoted
“have-nots” concerning the gift of tongues. And so Pentecostals have been
charged with triumphalism.

My aim is not to challenge such traditional argumentation. The traditional apologies were necessary for their own historic contexts. However, my concern is that those very kinds of modernistic apologies have contributed to what I believe is the wane of glossolalia as a theological, spiritual, and practical impulse in North American Pentecostalism. In other words, because Pentecostals have for so long described tongues in modern categories, and because modernism is now itself on the wane, glossolalia is seemingly becoming passé. Especially among postmoderns tongue-speaking is a feature of old-time Pentecostalism, an odd if interesting relic that is rarely, if at all, taught in contemporary Pentecostal or charismatic churches.

To address that sorrowful historical development I am proposing that glossolalia be considered in light of two different philosophical-contextual constructs, one ancient and one contemporary. The ancient one—apophatic theology—is a theological category mostly unexplored by Pentecostals, Charismatics or Evangelicals. Apophticism is a category that is both latent within and implicitly familiar to Pentecostals, but it is a category that has been variously ignored and/or denigrated amid the quests for quantifiability, the reasoned pleas for acceptance, and the evidentiary language of the modern era. The contemporary category—postmodernism—is downright frightening to many Pentecostals because they believe it is undermining their historic apologetics; in part, such undermining is happening if only because Pentecostal theology and apologetics have uncritically become one with modernism. Nevertheless, elements within postmodernism offer Pentecostals fresh avenues within which to re-think glossolalia. I believe re-thinking glossolalia within the constructs of apophticism and postmodernism can both open up avenues of continuity with the whole Church and give Pentecostals fresh inroads through which to present their vibrant faith to the world. The apophtic context can serve to sustain the mystery of glossolalia. The postmodern context can enable a sense of the aesthetic dimensions of glossolalia.

**Glossolalia and Apophtic Theology**

Apophatic theology, also known as the way of unknowing, or the via negativa, began to develop as early as Clement of Alexandria (d. 215).

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3 Apophtic theology impacted the West first when Thomas Aquinas read and quoted