Kenneth Richard Walters, Jr.


There is perhaps no question more universally asked about Pentecostalism than “Why Tongues?” In this monograph, Kenneth R. Walters, Jr. seeks to answer the question of why the doctrine of initial evidence was so important to early Pentecostals. Walters’ main thesis is that the doctrine of initial evidence is a direct result of the influence that Common Sense Realism (CSR) had on evangelical theology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Walters begins in chapter one by demonstrating how most studies about initial evidence have been primarily with concerned with the biblical or historical issues surround Pentecostalism’s most “distinctive doctrine.” Though scholars like Mark Noll and George Marsden have documented the effects of CSR on biblical interpretation and Fundamentalism, Walters is the first to show how CSR paved the way for the elevation of “evidence” in Pentecostal doctrine.

In chapter two, Walters begins with a history of CSR from its origins in the writings of Thomas Reid and his reaction to idealism in the writings of David Hume. Reid argued that Hume’s philosophy called into question the epistemological assumptions of human knowledge that were essential to the empirical sciences. Hume’s skepticism of human knowledge led Reid to argue that philosophy needed a new set of assumptions based on human reason and “common sense.” Common sense, for Walters, refers to the perceptions delivered to humanity based on the common ability to use their senses to receive knowledge. CSR affirmed that human beings could in fact trust their senses as sources for knowledge. In America, CSR found a home at Princeton in the writings of B.B. Warfield and shaped how evangelicals did theology. CSR became a rallying point for evangelicals in the struggle against modernism and their higher critical methodology, which eventually evolved into Fundamentalism. The emphasis on “reasonable” religion and rational faith based on evidences was spread by D.L. Moody and other revivalist evangelicals and eventually into the Pentecostal movement. It was this emphasis on evidence, Walters argues, that set the stage for the impulse within Pentecostalism that the baptism in the Spirit should be verified by evidence.

In the next four chapters, Walters seeks to show how CSR shaped four major influences that eventually culminated in the Pentecostal movement. In chapter three, he discusses how CSR contributed to the rise of “Christian Evidences” literature. Because modernism was creating skepticism about truth, conservatives turned to Christian evidences to argue for the the divine origin of the
Bible, the deity of Christ, the validity of prophecy, and the reliability of miracles. By appealing to reason and the senses, CSR ultimately shaped the way evangelicals understood spirituality by emphasizing that there should be “evidences” of God working in people’s lives.

In chapter four, Walters shares a history of the Cane Ridge revival and how the importance of religious experience became a powerful evidential orientation for revivalism. A particularly helpful section of this chapter is his discussion of the various “experiences” that characterized Cane Ridge and what that meant for how people understood the role of experience. The CSR impulse to seek verification morphed into encouragement to seek physical manifestations as evidence of God’s working in revivalist and holiness camp meetings. By connecting the importance of evidences and experiences, Walters argues persuasively that an emphasis on the evidence of tongues would naturally follow. This important connection, often overlooked by scholars, gets at the heart of the epistemological assumptions of Pentecostal theology.

In chapter five, Walters argues that premillennialism laid the groundwork for Pentecostalism by employing a literalist biblical interpretation of the Bible and by emphasizing the pneumatic and eschatological impulse in evangelism. Walters then turns to the writings of Azusa and several other early Pentecostal periodicals to show that premillennialism, pneumatology, and evidences all worked together to fuse these orientations into the one doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. In chapter six, he notes how restorationism, a topic covered quite thoroughly in other studies, also contributed to Pentecostal theology by turning expecting apostolic experiences and manifestations.

In chapter seven, Walters walks the well-worn path of the role of evidence in early Pentecostalism. He engages early Pentecostal literature in order to show how most of the early leaders, including Charles Parham, William Seymour, J.H. King, A.J. Tomlinson, and Aimee Semple McPherson, all affirmed that speaking in tongues was “the evidence” of the baptism in the Spirit. CSR provided the foundation, evidence literature encouraged the impulse toward verification, revivalism encouraged experience, premillennialism focused on Bible evidence, and restorationism became the basis for choosing the evidence.

Walter’s work is engaging, well researched, and brings out several points in this conversation about the evidence of Spirit-baptism that are helpful. First, he is persuasive in his argument that the CSR provided the philosophical orientation that birthed the Pentecostal impulse for evidence in their distinctive doctrine. The only chapter that fell short of that goal was the chapter on premillennialism, which had the potential to connect end times prophecy with the CSR emphasis on evidence and would have made more sense than his mission-eschatology-pneumatology emphasis. Second, he is able to demonstrate how