BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT:  
THE ISSUE OF SEPARABILITY AND SUBSEQUENCE

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Article 7 of the "Statement of Fundamental Truths" in the constitution and by-laws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God reveals:

All believers are entitled to and should ardently expect and earnestly seek the promise of the Father, the baptism in the Holy Ghost and fire, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was the normal experience of all in the early Christian church. With it comes the enduement of power for life and service, the bestowment of the gifts and their uses in the work of the ministry (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4,8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-31). This experience is distinct from and subsequent to the experience of the new birth (Acts 8:12-17; 10:44-46; 11:14-16; 15:7-9).

The theological sentiment expressed in this statement, it should be noted, is not unique to Pentecostalism. Rather, it reflects a classical view of many pietistic groups, reaching at least as far back as early Methodism, and found subsequently in various holiness and deeper life movements, namely that there is for all believers a "baptism in the Holy Spirit," which is separate from and sequential to the initial experience of conversion. Indeed two of the best known defenses of this position were written by none other than the first president of Moody Bible Institute, R.A. Torrey, and one of the founders of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, A.J. Gordon. The uniquely Pentecostal contribution to this theological construct was to insist on the gift of tongues as the evidential sign that such a baptism had indeed taken place, and to insist on the empowering-for-service dimension of the experience.

Since Pentecostals experienced their "baptism" after their conversion they have also regularly argued for the biblical nature of both their experience of baptism and its timing (as separate and subsequent). And since they tend to make the timing of the experience of equal significance to the experience itself, those who have opposed the Pentecostal position have also generally believed themselves to have dealt a crippling blow to the Pentecostalism when they have argued exegetically against its timing (as the Pentecostals express it).
The purpose of this present paper is to open the question of separability and subsequence once again, and (1) to suggest that there is in fact very little biblical support for the traditional Pentecostal position on this matter, but (2) to argue further that this is of little real consequence to the doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, either as to the validity of the experience itself or to its articulation.

I. The Pentecostal and the Baptism in the Spirit

In order to understand the doctrine of "subsequence" one must first try to understand the Pentecostals themselves — and how this doctrinal stance came to be so cherished.

Pentecostals have often been accused of exegeting their own experience and then looking to the Bible to support it. In part this may be true; but it is important to know why they have done so. On the one hand, their experience itself has been so empowering, so thoroughly life-changing, both in terms of personal obedience to God and readiness and empowerment for witness, that they instinctively know that it must be of God — and therefore must be biblical.

But since, on the other hand, for them that experience was subsequent to their conversion, they turned to the New Testament for the basis both of the experience itself and its timing. Their reasons for this are clear. All the early Pentecostals carried with them to their experience the traditional Protestant view of Scripture, as inspired of the Spirit and made effective by the Spirit through Spirit-anointed preaching. Thus the Pentecostals felt a great urgency to verify their experience by the interpretation of Scripture. For them the Bible was still central; and since their own experience of the Spirit was so vital, they knew that the God of the Bible and the God of their experience had to be one God. Hence they automatically expected to find the evidence for their experience in Scripture. Their understanding of Scripture, therefore, seemed both reasonable — and perfectly plain.

In the course of articulating this experience biblically, however, they felt a special urgency to press for all the aspects of the experience — not only the experience itself, but also especially its necessity as a work of grace subsequent to salvation. But in so doing, they exposed their flanks to some exegetical and hermeneutical weaknesses; and they ended up trying to persuade others of the rightness of their experience on grounds different from their own experience of the Spirit.