

A Timely Look at Pentecostalism through a Law-and-Gospel Lens (Part One)

Colleagues,

It bears recalling in times like these that the world seethes with spirits of every kind and hue. Americans who paid attention to the politics of these past two weeks saw this on display in the arenas of Cleveland and Philadelphia. Assorted gusts of this or that either tore or wafted through those cavernous spaces, some dividing the crowds, others uniting them. A few were gentle; many more were strong and fierce. They moved people to chant slogans and wave flags and hoist banners and behave in assorted other ways that we ordinarily eschew. We who watched from afar responded to them in a host of ways. For better or worse, they affected our spirits too, and they shaped our own behavior. We cheered or raged or ground our teeth in disbelief, perhaps. We called our friends to share impressions. We made donations.

I would argue that all human behavior is always spirit-driven. The question is, what spirit or spirits is doing the driving in any particular event? To say that the possibilities are legion is to understate the case. Legion upon legion is more like it. This is true also in the operations of those very human institutions that, in one fashion or another, wear the label “church.” Every congregation, like every house, has its distinct smell. The odor reflects the peculiar mix of spirits at work in the place. So too with districts, synods, and dioceses; with schools and agencies; with denominations or “wider church bodies,” as some would rather call them.

Christians assert that of all the spirits on the scene, all itching to animate and propel us, One and only One is Holy. Again a question presses: how does one detect *that* Spirit's presence, or lack thereof, amid the fumes we breathe? Or to drag in some older language, what is "of the Spirit," and what is not? Did baptized voters ask that question when they tuned into the tumults of the fortnight past? If not, they were being lazy, or timid. Where my own Christian tribe is concerned, the latter is more likely. Little Lutherans are rarely trained to think about the Holy Spirit. Grownup Lutherans, if somehow trapped in discussions of where or how the Spirit might be at work in everyday affairs, will start to shift uneasily in their seats. A clear-eyed grasp of the sinner's capacity for self-delusion has something to do with this, I'm sure. That kind of clarity is a Lutheran strength. It also feeds a Lutheran weakness. We are far too modest about our calling and capacity in Christ to function as the Holy Spirit's operatives, too hesitant by far to inquire usefully into how that calling plays out as we go the mundane tasks of running a congregation, or the tawdry task (as some will see it) of casting a vote. Again, our lack of training in such inquiry feeds into this. So does our reluctance to put much stock in the promises of Christ, however plain and unmistakable they be (cf. [John 20:21-22](#)). But that too is an aspect of our sinners' delusion, as we of all people ought to know.

Last January the Crossings crowd hosted a conference on this matter of "discerning the Spirit." The papers were outstanding. You've gotten three of them via Thursday Theology in the months since. Today I start passing along a fourth, part two of which will bless your inbox a week from now. Steven Kuhl is the author. His topic is the Pentecostal response of the past century to the underwhelming attention that the Holy Spirit has gotten (and continues to get) in the conversation of older Christian groups.

You'll find Steve's paper of present interest for two reasons, I think. The first is the simple fact that too few of us know enough about the Pentecostal-minded churches that burgeon everywhere these days. Count me among the culprits who have gnashed their teeth about them for decades, not knowing whereof one gnashes, or at least not knowing well. Here Steve will illuminate, and that right brightly. In doing so he'll also press the question of how a person who distinguishes law and gospel might respond to the Pentecostal conception of how the Holy Spirit is active in the world. Out of that may come some useful thoughts for you and me on the key matter touched on above. How do we discern the Spirit amid the seething melee of powers and forces that occupy our present moment and scream for our allegiance?

Peace and joy, the ruckus notwithstanding.

Jerry Burce

The Holy Spirit in the Age of Pentecostalism

Steven C. Kuhl

1. Introduction

2. The title of my talk, "The Holy Spirit in the Age of Pentecostalism," is meant to say that the topic of the Holy Spirit is a big topic today for many Christians and academic theologians chiefly because of the global strength of the Pentecostal Movement. It is not to say that Pentecostalism has the last word on the topic of the Holy Spirit—indeed, Pentecostals differ greatly, even on this topic—but that the Pentecostal experience has marked the point of departure for the discussion of the topic today.
3. We can think of the term "Pentecostal" much like we think

about the term “Protestant.” Protestants are often lumped together as a group, not because they are all in agreement on doctrine and practice, but because they shared a common aversion to aspects of the religious status quo when they emerged, namely, Roman Catholicism. In light of that common “opponent,” they did come to share some general common accents. For example, Protestants tended to affirm notions like the priority of Scripture over tradition, justification by grace apart from works, and the priesthood of all believers. In addition, they also tended to reject ideas like the Sacrifice of Mass, the cult of the saints, the requirement of priestly celibacy, and the sacerdotal view of the Sacraments. But when you scratch beneath the surface of what different Protestant groups mean by these common affirmations and rejections you will soon notice substantial differences in interpretation and practice.

4. Pentecostalism is like this, too. Pentecostals tend to share a common critique of today’s mainline denominational churches. They see them as focused on institutional survival and doctrinal pettiness, and lacking in life and vitality—all because they lack an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit, what Pentecostals call “the baptism in the Holy Spirit” or “Spirit Baptism.” Pentecostals would say that mainline churches are open to the *idea* of being Christian but not to the *experience* of being Christian. To be sure, Pentecostals disagree on many things concerning the interpretation of their experience of the Holy Spirit and the biblical narrative that they claim confirms their experience. In their 100-year history, three very different classifications of Pentecostalism have emerged. Classical Pentecostalism, which has its own set of distinct denominational groupings, began around 1900; the Charismatic Movement, which nested in various mainline

denominations, began around 1960; and the Third Wave Movement, which emerged out of Fuller Seminary, began around 1980. But what makes them all “Pentecostal” is a shared, tangible experience of the Holy Spirit in spite of other differences they might have.

5. Pentecostalism has captured the attention of Christianity today because of its explosive, global growth. Some estimates put the number of Pentecostals globally at 600 million. That is incredible when you consider its short history in comparison to other expressions of Christianity. While getting an accurate count is difficult, the Pew Research Institute estimated that in 2010, of the 2.2 billion Christians in a world of 6.9 billion people,

50.1% are Roman Catholic (1.1 billion),

11.9% (262 million) are Orthodox, and

36.7% (807 million) are Protestant.

But in that “Protestant” count, Pew estimates that a staggering 72.7% (587 Million) identify as Pentecostal and Charismatic.[ref]See Pew Research Center, “<http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>,” accessed January 18, 2016. For World Religious Demographics go to Pew Research Center, “Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project,” <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/questions>, accessed January 18, 2016. There you will see that of the 6.9 Billion people in the world 31.4% are Christian and 23.2% are Muslim.[/ref] Compare that with some of the other denominations who are in the Protestant piece of the pie and you get a good picture of the size of the Pentecostal movement:

Anglicans = 85.5 million (10.6%)

Lutherans = 78.3 million (9.7%)

Baptists = 72.6 million (9.0%)

Reformed = 56.5 million (7.0%)

Methodists= 27.4 million (3.4%)

5. Pentecostalism has also shaken up the assumptions that reigned among Sociologists of Religion throughout much of 20th Century. According to Peter Berger (a renowned sociologist of knowledge and religion and publicly committed Lutheran Christian) everyone, including himself, held to what is called the secularization theory of modernity, the assumption that “modernity would lead to the decline of religion.” Now that the 21st Century is upon us the facts simply do not bear out that assumption. As Berger says,

With some exceptions, notably Europeans and an international class of intellectuals, most of our contemporaries are decidedly ‘religious’ and not only in the less-modernized parts of the world. There are many large religious movements, only a few of them violent, most of them resulting in significant social, economic, and political developments. Arguably the largest and most influential (and almost entirely nonviolent) of these movements is Pentecostalism.[ref]Peter Berger, “A Friendly Dissent from Pentecostalism,” *First Things* 20, November 2012, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/11/a-friendly-dissent-from-pentecostalism>. [/ref]

6. In what follows I will discuss 1) the historical developments that gave rise to Pentecostalism, 2) the theological hermeneutic that informs Pentecostalism, 3) the worship style that characterizes Pentecostalism, and 4) a few friendly questions and concerns that I as a

mainline, law-gospel distinguishing Christian have for Pentecostalism.

7. The Historical Origin of Pentecostalism: Azusa and the Dialect of Experience and Scripture

8. The traditional marker for identifying the beginning of the Pentecostal Movement is a remarkable rival event “led” by William Seymour, an African American Holiness preacher, in an old broken down church-turned-warehouse on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906. Although the lore surely supersedes the reality, the Azusa Street revival[ref]Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. While there are many books that rehearse this early history, I draw extensively on Robert Anderson’s thoroughly researched and critically informed study of early Pentecostalism. While the sociological criteria he uses to judge Pentecostalism is subject to the charge of reductionism, the questions he asks and the sensitivity with which he approaches his topic is commendable.[/ref] is said to have gone on non-stop 24-7 for three years. It featured preaching, prayer and an amazing array of spectacular, miraculous, supernatural wonders that were not only mindboggling but exhilarating for the participants. People of all races and from numerous national backgrounds are said to have experienced healings, prophesying, ecstatic outbursts, and above all, the speaking in tongues.

9. Significantly, this exhibition of spirituality did not go unnoticed by the secular media, specifically, *The Los Angeles Times*, even though it typically ridiculed the event as “fanaticism” and described its prized gift as a “weird babble of tongues.” [ref]Wikipedia, “Azusa Street Revival,” accessed January 18, 2016 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/->

[Azusa_Street_Revival.](#)^[/ref]In response, the movement started its own journal, *The Apostolic Faith*, which regularly recorded and published what was happening from its own distinctive point of view. It also commissioned missionaries, many of whom were long-distance visitors from all over the world who had somehow caught wind of the happening, got caught up in the spirit, and returned home to spread the news that Pentecost had come again upon the earth. As a result, Pentecostalism soon began to get a toe hold in many places.

10. The Azusa Street Revival serves Pentecostal history much the way Luther's nailing of the 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg serves Reformation or Protestant history. It is a symbolic moment, not an absolute one. It cannot be fully understood apart from its pre- and post-history, and yet, it contains within it the seeds for a radical rethinking, renewal, and reappropriation of Christianity for its time. Therefore, let us take a look at that pre- and post-history of the Azusa Street event.
11. In what I've said so far, one might get the impression that the Azusa Street experience happened unexpectedly, out of the blue. That is not true. Among the Wesleyan Holiness preachers and teachers (those who saw "sanctification" as a second, distinct work of grace in addition to "justification" or conversion), the idea was emerging that there was still another work of the Spirit missing in the Church. The idea was that a Spirit-filled Christian is not only one who believes that Christ is savior (Luther's insight on justification) and is increasing in moral holiness (Wesley's idea of sanctification), but also one who is empowered for mission, the initial sign of which is speaking in tongues. This latter point was especially important in light of a growing eschatological feeling that the end of the world

was coming soon, making the need for rapid mission outreach paramount. What better means could the Holy Spirit use to convince a world, duped by the naturalism of modernity, about the truth of the Christian message concerning the reality of the living, active Spirit of God, than through a display of supernatural power in this experiential way? As Pentecostals would reason, just as it was by means of signs and wonders that the Holy Spirit, working through the apostles, convinced the pagan world of the truth of God and Christ, so also it will be through signs and wonders that God will convince the modern world as well. A chief figure among these early preachers was Charles Fox Parham and, with him, the Bethel Bible School he founded in Topeka, Kansas in 1900.

12. Focusing on the Pentecost story in Acts 2 as the Biblical paradigm of the Spirit-filled Church/Christian, Parham surmised that the gift of “speaking in tongues” was the “initial evidence” that such a Church/Christian is existing and that subsequent gifts would, then, naturally follow—healing, prophesying, the interpretation of tongues, etc. With this conviction he asked his students to test it out by seeking the “baptism in the Holy Spirit” (which entailed waiting in prayer, fasting and expectation as Jesus instructed the apostles to do) and see if the promise of the Spirit would not come upon them with same identifiable signs as evidenced in Acts 2. On January 1, 1901, Agnus Ozman was the first to speak in tongues and a few days later other students did too. When news got out that Pentecost had come to Topeka, criticism of Parham’s school and students came from both religious and secular sources, calling it a “Tower of Babel.” In light of this the students began to doubt if their experience was real or imaginary. This will be an enduring issue for Pentecostalism. Is the experience really of the Holy

Spirit's doing or is it a fabrication of human desire? With no clear way to test their claims, true Pentecostals are those who are self-evidentially convinced it is real and non-Pentecostals are those who are self-evidentially convinced it is not. Anyway, by April, 1901, the students left, the school closed, and Parham sojourned in both Missouri and Texas where he continued his work and slowly gained a following, especially in light of his accent on healing.

13. One student who became convinced of Parham's basic premise was William Seymour, who, as we described earlier, presided over the sustained, three-year long, "Pentecostal revival" at the Azusa Street Mission. While there is no official count as to how many thousands of people actually visited Azusa, we do know that at its peak its official paper *The Apostolic Faith* had 50,000 subscribers. That the Azusa Street event came to an end is not necessarily inconsistent with Pentecostalism's self-understanding. From the beginning Pentecostalism did not see itself as a separate denomination among the denominations, but as a *movement* of the Spirit intended to renew every denomination.
14. Of course, that did not happen. On the contrary, as Pentecostal Christians shaped by their Azusa experience went back to their mostly Holiness, Methodist and Baptist denominations (with a smattering of Quakers, Mennonites and Presbyterians) to share their Pentecostal message, they were met with mixed reviews. While some Holiness denominations embraced the Pentecostal movement, many categorically rejected it for a variety of reasons. [ref]Those Holiness denominations that embrace the Pentecostal message and became Pentecostal include the Church of God, the Church of God in Christ, and the Pentecostal Holiness Church. Those Pentecostal

denominations that formed anew when Pentecostals found no welcome in their predecessor churches, include the Assembly of God (1914), the Pentecostal Church of God (1919) and the Pentecostals Assemblies of the world (1916), which formed because of a split within Pentecostalism over the doctrine of the Trinity.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azusa_Street_Revival

accessed January 17, 2016.[/ref]This led many early Pentecostals into the position of forming their own denominations by default, meaning they were also faced with the problem of making doctrinal decisions on the numerous topics that gave rise to denominationalism.

15. For this reason, Pentecostals quickly ended up exhibiting the full breadth of doctrinal positions that tend to divide, especially as evidenced in the various Evangelical, Holiness and Fundamentalist-minded denominations and associations out of which they came. In addition, as the Pentecostal message infiltrated other mainline denominations (including Anglicans, Lutherans and Catholics) under the banner of the Charismatic Movement in the 1970s, it would also sit in relative doctrinal comfort within those theological traditions. As a broad movement, Pentecostalism is faithful to its deep pietistic roots and true to its premise that the Spirit-baptism experience has priority over doctrine. But a sense of irony attends this. For as the movement takes concrete form in any particular community of faith, debate over doctrinal issues will be unavoidable, raising questions about the sufficiency of that pietistic premise.

III. The Working Theological Hermeneutic of Pentecostalism: Supernaturalism

15. As the above interpretive history of Pentecostalism discloses, the relationship between the priority of the

Pentecostal experience and the role of Christian doctrine is rather ambiguous. This fact has not escaped the notice of Pentecostals who are intellectually inclined. Among Pentecostals, interest in the intellectual dimension of the Christian life traces its beginnings back to the 1970s and the rise of the Charismatic Movement within the mainline Christian churches. At the forefront of this intellectual interest is Swiss theologian and author Walter Hollenweger (born 1927), a Pentecostal who makes his ecclesiastical home in the Swiss Reformed Church. [ref]See Mark J. Cartledge, "Pentecostal Theology," *The Cambridge Companion to Pentecostalism*, ed. By Cicil M. Robeck, Jr. and Amos Yong (Cambridge University Press, New York: 2014), p. 260. Cartledge identifies Walter Hollenweger as the "Father of the academic study of Pentecostalism" and the brief *Wikipedia* description of his work and writings presents him as a proponent of a Pentecostalism that has something intellectually and ecumenically to give to the life of the global church. To get a quick look at some – a very small portion – of today's leading Pentecostal scholars see Andrew Dragos' blog at <http://seedbed.com/feed/pentecostal-scholars/>. [/ref] Today there are hundreds of Pentecostal scholars and schools all around the world. Significantly, interest in cultivating the intellectual side of faith is also being urged among Evangelicals generally as evidenced by Mark Noll in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994). [ref]Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans Publishing House: Grand Rapids, 1994). [/ref] While the impact of this intellectual work has not yet touched the popular life of Pentecostalism, it is certainly helpful, I think, for showing those of us outside that tradition what constructive contribution Pentecostalism thinks it can make to the challenges that

face global Christianity today.

16. It is important to remember that Pentecostalism emerged as a movement among preachers intent on bringing the experience of Pentecost upon the church in order to empower it for mission in the world in light of the imminent return of Christ. Critical of a church that they saw as bogged down in intellectual debate and institutional survival, Pentecostals decided simply to ignore this messy dimension of the church's life. Today's Pentecostal scholars do not see this as an inherent anti-intellectualism within Pentecostalism, but the result of a mission driven imperative that takes precedence. [ref]Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostalism a Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark: London and New York, 2013), p. 133-53.[/ref]Determined to be nimble in mission, early Pentecostals postulated a simple, streamlined, pragmatic version of the Christian message of salvation to the world. In keeping with the basic theological outlook of the Holiness Movement, they called it the "Full Gospel." Four—some say five—theological topics combine to fill out the Full Gospel. They are: Jesus as Savior, Spirit Baptizer, Healer, and Coming King. Some would add Sanctifier if "sanctification" or holiness of life is distinguished from Jesus' role as Savior and Spirit Baptizer.[ref]Daniel E. Albrecht and Evan B. Howard, "Pentecostal Spirituality," *The Cambridge Companion to Pentecostalism*, ed. By Cicil M. Robeck, Jr. and Amos Yong (Cambridge University Press, New York: 2014), p. 236.[/ref]
17. Because Pentecostalism exhibits a substantial range of theological diversity, even on the meaning of the elements of the "Full Gospel," an overarching area of theological thought that Pentecostal scholars have been focusing on is Pentecostal hermeneutics. They in essence

ask, "Is there a distinctive theological framework for doing theology that is essential to the Pentecostal experience, even if the theological conclusions they reach on various issues differ?" Invariably, the answer is "Yes": Supernaturalism. [ref]Vondey, p. 30-34.[/ref]It is important to note that for Pentecostalism, Supernaturalism does not imply a rigid metaphysical dualism or a two-tiered cosmology consisting of the natural and the supernatural, but of an easy going interaction between a personal God (the Supernatural) and his creation (natural). In other words, they tend to take the picture of God's interaction with nature in Genesis 2 as more than figurative. While God may be invisible to the human eye—and in that sense Genesis is figurative—nevertheless, his supernatural work is apparent in the fact that things counter to natural processes happen in nature. Therefore, the major premise of Pentecostalism is that God can and sometimes does act on nature in a way that circumvents what science knows as the natural processes. Indeed, this view of supernaturalism is the logical assumption to be drawn from the experience of miracles and religious ecstasy.

18. As Pentecostals reflect on the witness of the Old and New Testaments in light of their Pentecostal experience, supernaturalism is the common denominator. As they read the Scriptures they note that before the prophets spoke and the apostles preached they were caught up in the supernatural working of the Spirit. Before Jesus discloses his identity and enters into mission, he is caught up in the supernatural power of the Spirit to proclaim good news, to perform miracles, to enact healings and to produced signs and wonders, with the greatest sign and wonder being his resurrection, his triumph over death, the victory of the supernatural over the natural. Not only is

this supernatural worldview the presupposition of the Acts 2 Pentecost story, but that story, as Pentecostals read it in light of their experience, describes the supernatural phenomenon that is the “initial evidence” of the bestowal of the Spirit’s power upon the church: speaking in tongues. While Classical Pentecostals, Charismatic and Third Wave expressions of Pentecostalism may disagree on the extent, nature and function of speaking in tongues, they do not disagree on the fact. The fact of speaking in tongues and other ecstatic, miraculous supernatural experiences is simply a given, by the Holy Spirit, that is self-evident to anyone who has experienced them. [ref]Mark J. Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia: An Empirical-Theological Study* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002). As I understand Cartledge, it is impossible to test for the experience by empirical means because it is an experience that is of the Spirit and, therefore, beyond human probing. The point is to interpret the experience in a way that is theologically consistent with Scripture.[/ref]

19. It would be tempting to assume that Pentecostalism has simply lapsed into the pre-Enlightenment worldview that Fundamentalism resorted to in its war against the naturalistic worldview of modernism. Remember, naturalism states that there is no reality beyond the natural, and that reports in the Bible of miracles and other kinds of supernatural claims are rooted in a pre-scientific explanation of the natural world. While many mainline Christian traditions proceeded “humbly” in the face of naturalism’s assertions, recognizing that the “worldviews” of Bible times and modern times have significant differences, Fundamentalism boldly repudiated it. This it did by asserting the “inerrancy of the Bible” in all things, including its reports on supernatural miracles and wonders, which must be regarded as literally,

historically, and factually true. But it did so with this caveat: namely, that God had ceased to buttress the preaching of the gospel with supernatural demonstrations of power, as he did in apostolic times, because it is no longer needed. Now, for Fundamentalists, the Bible itself is the only evidence needed.

20. Although Pentecostalism shares Fundamentalism's inerrant view of the Bible, it rejects categorically Fundamentalism's cessationist view [ref]For a brief overview of this concept see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessationism#cite_note-2, accessed February 17, 2016.[/ref]that God no longer supports or buttresses the preaching of the gospel with supernatural evidence. It is precisely the experience and testimony of Pentecostalism that the Spirit does accompany the preaching of the gospel with signs and wonders, and specifically with the "initial evidence" of tongues and subsequent wonders, and through them animates his Church. But this supernaturalism is not asserted, by Pentecostal theologians, to be a backward retreat into a pre-Enlightenment worldview, but rather a forward charge that is perfectly compatible with the emerging post-modern worldview for which personal experience and intuition takes precedence over institutions, rationalistic proof, and tradition.
21. While people today, including Pentecostals, have come to appreciate all the advances that modernism's naturalistic assumption has yielded in the areas of health, technology and the like, nevertheless, there is also a deep existential feeling that naturalism does not tell the whole story of life. Neither the human person nor the natural world in which we live can be reduced to mathematical equations or chemical processes. There is something more about life that touches us on the level of

“experience,” however that is defined, that cannot be isolated and studied in a laboratory or brought under our control and examined in a mechanistic way. Pentecostalism speaks to that feeling.

22. Therefore, openness to the supernatural, Christianly conceived, is the hermeneutical lens through which Pentecostals view Scripture and the Christian life. For Pentecostals, this includes “spiritual warfare” between the good forces of the Holy Spirit and the evil forces of the devil. While Pentecostalism with its supernatural worldview is still viewed with skepticism in that part of the world that gave birth to rationalistic modernism (particularly Western Europe and, lesser so, North America), it tends nevertheless to sit quite comfortably in the developing world of the global South and East as the demographics attest. What that means, of course, is open to debate. A rationalist, on the one hand, will say that the religious growth of Pentecostalism is linked to the preconceived supernatural worldview it confirms in pre-modern cultures, while a Pentecostal, on the other hand, will say that its growth is linked to the fact that it speaks to actual lived spiritual experience in this postmodern age.