

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

Colleagues,

In the two weeks since our last post the world's attention has swiveled to Rio de Janeiro, where the point I made in my introduction to said post is on vivid display. Rio is a spirited place at the moment, awash in all manner of energies and forces. To call them Olympic is accurate. Some are strong enough to shape the mood and mindset of nations, if only temporarily. In case you missed it, minuscule Fiji crushed mighty Great Britain in some species of rugby and won a gold medal, its first-ever. The jubilation in Suva was instantaneous. *The Guardian*, a British paper, used a telling headline to report that: "[Rugby is our religion](#)." If you take the time to scan the article, you'll notice how that spirit of victory is reordering relations between the country's ethnic groups, at least for this week. Powerful indeed!

Just as powerful is the spirit of self-absorbed nationalism that caused most Americans to miss the joy in Fiji. ("Fiji? Like, who cares?") To point this out is, of course, to offend against that spirit. If, in doing so, I offend any of you, please, my apologies, albeit half-hearted. I am, after all, the aging remains of an American kid who grew up in another part of the world. That changes one's perspective. Or, as we could also say, it imbues one with a somewhat different spirit.

With that, back we swivel to Steve Kuhl's reflections of this past January on the one and only Holy Spirit. I was planning to send you the rest of it in one batch. Second thoughts have

prompted me to break that into two pieces, three in all for the entire paper. This week's segment brings you some helpful observations on the shape and rationale of Pentecostal worship practices. These will also explain what's going on, and why, at the "non-denominational" church down the road. After that will come the start of Steve's engagement as a Lutheran thinker with Pentecostal claims and emphases. I should mention that in choosing the break between this and next week's concluding segment I ignored his formal outline in favor of the unfolding logic of his argument. The great account of Pentecost in Acts 2 will be the focus for next time.

Two other quick matters:

First, my thanks to the handful of you who have responded to some posts of the past few months. I've been hoarding these for a while. I'll share the best of them with all of you as soon as we're done with Steve.

Second, I've been delinquent about passing along assorted reading tips that have come my way of late. Another future post will attend to that. For now, I point you to a book that belongs in the library of every Crossings-minded person. The title is *Gift and Promise: The Augsburg Confession and the Heart of Christian Theology*. Augsburg Fortress is the publisher. The combined energies of Editors Ron Neustadt and Steve Hitchcock are the reason it's out there as a thing to buy, and read, and treasure. Here's how Ron describes it:

Gift and Promise celebrates the heart of Christian theology that is expressed in the Augsburg Confession. In the first three chapters Ed Schroeder establishes the "hub" of that theology as it gets expressed in Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession, justification by faith alone. Then, nine of Ed's students discuss how that hub gets articulated in Augsburg's remaining

articles of faith.

Steve Hitchcock and I believe not that this volume is not only timely as we prepare to observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, but that it will remain a valuable reference and resource for teaching well into the future.

I should underscore that supplies are limited. Copies are being sent at the moment to anyone who makes [a gift of \\$25 or more to Crossings](#). You can also order directly by sending a \$25 check to Crossings, P.O. Box 7011, Chesterfield, MO 63006. Write "book" on the Memo line. We're guessing, of course, that once you've browsed the book you'll want to buy another copy for someone else. Think friend, colleague, neighbor, bishop: anyone who could use a jolt of solid law-and-gospel thinking, and the wondrous Spirit that drives it.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Holy Spirit in the Age of Pentecostalism (Part 2 of 3)

Steven C. Kuhl

IV. Worship as the Liturgical Encounter with the Supernatural

23. It is important to recognize that the supernaturalism of Pentecostalism is not like the Supernaturalism of Shamanism. Pentecostal supernaturalism does not seek to compete with the scientific knowledge and practical benefits that naturalism has yielded. Therefore, we do not generally see Pentecostal ministers setting up shop or walking down the street performing miracles for people as though miracles were their cottage

industry. Indeed, that was the error of Simon Magnus in Acts 8. For the most part the kinds of miracles and wonders that Pentecostals experience do not happen in a demonstrable way in the world in general, though they do happen there, but in the church gathered, that is, in worship. The Spirit demonstrates its power and reality in worship because the purpose of those miracles and wonders are to confirm the truth of the gospel of salvation therein proclaimed. They are understood to be serving the gospel mission of the church just as they did for the apostles in New Testament Times. Therefore, nothing is more characteristic of Pentecostalism than its worship. Worship is mission because worship is the encounter with the gospel confirmed by the Supernatural wonders of the Spirit.

24. To mainline Christians whose worship focuses on the orderly administration of the Word and Sacraments (what might be characterized as a thought-out dialectic of God's gracious promises and our trusting responses), it may seem strange to think of emotionally laden Pentecostal worship as following a liturgical structure and enacting specific liturgical rites. But, as Daniel Albrecht and Evan Howard have noted, the categories of liturgy and rites, while not traditionally part of Pentecostal language, aptly describe Pentecostal worship. ¹ In general, the Pentecostal worship experience unfolds in three parts, which Albrecht and Howard call macro-rites: 1) an initial time of "Praise" that 2) builds up expectation for hearing the "Prophetic Word" that 3) leads into the "Altar Service" where miraculous demonstrations of the Spirit take place. While each may appear to be purely spontaneous, they are not. They are well planned, but planned in a way that gives freedom to the believer's response.

25. The formal indebtedness of Pentecostal worship to the "New Measures" of Charles Finney and his 19th Century revivalist

movement is obvious. Indeed, the worship style of Evangelicalism in general is formally indebted to this style. But what distinguishes Pentecostals from Finney is the theology that informs the style. Finney fostered an unapologetic Arminian ² theological outlook that ascribed to the human person an innate (semi-Pelagian) capacity to “come to Jesus.” The purpose of the worship service, he believed, was to create the psychological conditions for doing this through the use of emotion and excitement. Therefore, developing culturally useful worship techniques and experiences to entice people in that direction was the goal of worship. The praise worship phenomenon in non-Pentecostal churches today descends directly from Finney. There is nothing supernatural whatsoever in Finney’s understanding of worship and the faith experience; it is purely psychological.

26. If I understand Pentecostalism correctly, it proceeds from a very different premise. It is not, in the least, *consciously* manipulative in its intents, even though many of its critics will charge it as being *unconsciously* so. Indeed, Pentecostalism, in my judgment, seems to be at best silent or ambivalent on Finney’s program and the Calvinist-Arminian debate that informed it—at least if the theologians I have read are representative. Worship is for Pentecostals an objective, supernatural experience of the Spirit, not a subjective, entertainment event meant to move people in purely psychological ways. Faith and the Christian life is about the mysterious working of the Spirit to transform individuals who have been “born anew” and, thus, changed at their core. ³ Do worshipers get filled with ecstasy? Certainly. Could Pentecostals simply be playing out Finney’s program in an unconscious or ideological way? Perhaps. But there is no way to prove that, and that would not be the assessment of Pentecostals.

27. In essence, then, Pentecostals liken Christian worship

generally to what they imagined took place when the disciples gathered together on the first Christian Pentecost. Believing the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8 as not simply historically specific but universally paradigmatic, every Pentecostal gathering proceeds with the expectation of experiencing the promised, miracle-filled outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Acts 2 reports. In anticipation of that promise, they begin the first macro-rite of the liturgy by singing praises to God, which “both lifts the congregants toward God in adoration and prepares their hearts for the hearing of the Word,” the second macro-rite of the liturgy. During the second macro-rite the Scripture is read, a sermon is delivered, and other kinds of word-acts happen: Testimonies are spoken, prayers are offered, and prophecies are heard. Some may speak in tongues and others may interpret them. As Albrecht and Howard put it, “if Luther restored the ‘priesthood’ of all believers, Pentecostals have restored the ‘prophethood’ of all believers.” Finally comes the third macro-rite, the “altar service.” During this time the congregation is called to respond in any way the Spirit moves them. As Albrecht and Howard note, those who wish to have specific needs met in a tangible, supernatural way are especially invited up to the “sacred [altar] space where conversation, reconciliation, healing, deliverance and other forms of ‘doing business with God’ are transacted.” ⁴ _

28. To be sure, Christians who have both 1) a deep appreciation for the Spirit-bearing—dare I call them, “supernatural”—rites or sacraments that Jesus instituted (especially, the Lord’s Supper) and 2) an experiential awareness of the importance of the penitential accent that pervades the New Testament witness will undoubtedly find Pentecostal worship and spirituality naively one-sided and severely wanting. But in offering this critique I get ahead of myself. The point is this. For Pentecostals, worship is an encounter with the supernatural, the Holy Spirit,

in an ecstatically experiential and outwardly evidential way, with tongues being the “initial evidence” and other signs and wonders accompanying it. Worship is the experiential arena that confirms the supernatural conviction of the Pentecostal faith.

V. Some Theological Questions for Our Pentecostal Brothers and Sisters.

29. I have tried to present a fair and sympathetic historical, theological and liturgical picture of the emerging Pentecostal tradition by focusing on what reputable Pentecostal scholars would identify as its best qualities and its most important contributions to the challenges that face Christianity and its mission today. Be assured, Pentecostal theologians and leaders are very aware of the aberrations and “tensions” in their movement: triumphalism, superstition, chicanery, and anti-intellectualism, to name a few. ⁵ Above all, they are very aware of how the message of the movement gets hijacked and distorted by positive thinking philosophies and the so-called “health and wealth gospel.” And while it is true that Pentecostalism would have never ever received a second look were it not for its explosive growth, as that second look is being taken, more and more people are seeing that it at least addresses many of the right questions, even if one is not completely satisfied with its answers.

30. The central question that Pentecostalism addresses is the sticky one of the connection between human experience and divine reality. Of course, this is not a new question; it has been asked since the rise of pietism. But Pentecostalism brings new urgency to the question in light of the extraordinary answer it gives. If I understand Werner Elert and the Erlangen School of Theology correctly, that was one of their central concerns too. To be sure, in addressing it they were responding not to

Pentecostalism, but to Schleiermacher and liberal theology, the latter having described the relationship between divine reality and experience in ways that were highly problematic. Karl Barth would deal with this in his “theology of the Word” by dismissing the whole question as ultimately irrelevant. Elert could not accept this. Nor could Bonhoeffer, who would criticize Barth’s approach as a “positivism of revelation.” Wrestling with the question of how the divine is “experienced” continues to be one of the central challenges to Christian theology today—and it necessarily leads to the question about the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian theology and experience. Indeed, that is Crossings’ concern, too: crossing the gospel into people’s lives in a way that is experientially meaningful.

31. In what follows, I want to engage, in broad strokes, the two major foundational topics important to Pentecostalism that I identified above: First, supernaturalism as the central hermeneutical category for understanding the Holy Spirit and, second, the liturgy as the arena wherein the evidence of the Holy Spirit is confirmed in an outwardly experiential way. To be sure, these two topics are intimately intertwined and they cannot be addressed exhaustively here. Consider this as nothing more than a humble start.

32. With regard to Pentecostalism, the first question that non-Pentecostals often raise is this: are the incredible supernatural experiences they claim to have “real,” or are they a figment of the imagination? One might think it would be easy to test this question, but, as it turns out, it is not. For any attempt to find a rational method for testing the reality of a “supernatural” experience necessarily involves us in a category mistake. The best that a rational method can do is tell you whether an experience is “natural,” that is, whether or not it conforms to the laws of nature in a predictable, expected way. Since supernatural experiences are by definition outside the

bounds of the natural, a rational method can tell us nothing about the "reality" of such an experience. This is why ecumenical dialogue on Pentecostalism tends to brackets this question. So will I here. Suffice it say that those who are involved in Pentecostalism are, as a rule, absolutely convinced of the reality of their supernatural experience; those who are not involved are, also as a rule, inherently skeptical of it. Therefore, the reason Pentecostalism needs to be taken seriously is not because its claims are reasonable by the standards of modernity, but because it is the fastest growing Christian, if not religious, movement the world has ever seen. Something is happening here—and that is undeniable. Perhaps the advice of Gamaliel (Acts 5:38-39) is the best counsel for those on the outside who try to assess it.

33. One of the most basic criticisms Pentecostals have leveled against mainline Protestant churches is that they have sold out to the naturalistic zeitgeist of the Modern Age. The result, they say, has been a world stripped of belief in a living God eager to bless it and a church bereft of the power of the Spirit to proclaim it. Perhaps the first thing we Protestants should say to Pentecostalism is "mea culpa." There is truth in this criticism. Scratch the theological surface of many mainline Protestant denominations and what you find is not a bold confession of the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and raised, but some variation of what sociologists of American religion, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, have termed "Moralist Therapeutic Deism." ⁶ If ever there is a theological system that bends to the naturalist spirit of our age, certainly this is it. But is the brash, bold supernaturalism of Pentecostalism the Biblical antidote to this capitulation to naturalism? Might a naïve supernaturalism be as dangerous as a naïve naturalism? Might not a bold assertion of supernaturalism as easily miss the mark of the gospel as a timid capitulation to

naturalism? Might it not be that, precisely because the New Testament writers lived in a world that took supernatural phenomena for granted, they had the intellectual challenge of showing how the point of the gospel was actually not about God's might over the world but God's condescension to be weak for the sake of the world—that is, for the world's salvation? And doesn't that mean that Christian pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit) needs to be foundationally a "pneumatology of the Cross," as Cheryl Peterson has noted? ⁷ I also think so—and I also think that the classic text of Pentecostals, the Acts 2 Pentecost story, properly read with the New Testament's hermeneutic of distinguishing law and gospel supports this view.