

The Holy Spirit in the Age of Pentecostalism

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I. Introduction

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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, 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.

4. 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 100 year 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 26.7% (587 Million) identify as Pentecostal and Charismatic.¹ 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 publically 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.²

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.

II. The Historical Origin of Pentecostalism³: Azusa and the Dialect of Experience and Scripture

7. The traditional marker for identifying the beginning of the Pentecostal Movement is a remarkable revival 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 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.

8. 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 describe its prized gift as a “weird babble of tongues.”⁴ 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.

9. In many ways, 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: One that cannot be fully understood apart from its pre- and post-history, and yet, one that 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.

10. 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. Amongst 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 is that a spirit-filled Christian is not only one who believes that Christ is savior (Luther's insight on justification) and who is increasing in moral holiness (Wesley's idea of sanctification), but who is also 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, of the truth about 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 reason, just as it was by means of signs and wonders that the Holy Spirit 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 preachers was Charles Fox Parham and the Bethel Bible School he founded in Topeka, KS in 1900.

11. Focusing on the Acts Two Pentecost story 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.

12. 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.

13. 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 review. While some Holiness denominations embraced the Pentecostal Movement, many categorically rejected it for a variety of reasons.⁵ 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.

14. For this reason, Pentecostalism quickly ended up exhibiting the full breadth of doctrinal positions that tend to divide, especially, the various Evangelical, Holiness and Fundamentalist-minded denominations and associations out of which they came. In addition, as the Pentecostal message infiltrated into other mainline denominations (including Anglicans, Lutherans and Catholics) under the banner of the Charismatic Movement in the 1970s, it will also sit in relative doctrinal comfort within those theological traditions. Therefore, as a broad movement, Pentecostalism is true to its premise that the Spirit-baptism experience has priority over

doctrine and faithful to its deep pietistic roots. But it does so with a sense of irony. For as it 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 those more intellectually inclined Pentecostals. 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.⁶ 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).⁷ 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 see bogged down in intellectual debate and institutional survival, Pentecostals decided simply to ignore this messy dimension of the church's life. Pentecostal scholars do not see this as an inherent anti-intellectualism within Pentecostalism, but the result of a mission driven imperative that takes precedence.⁸ Determined to be nimble in mission, early Pentecostals postulated a simple, streamlined, pragmatic version of the Christian message of salvation to world, that they, in keeping with the basic theological outlook of the Holiness Movement, called the "Full Gospel." Four – some say five – theological topics combine to fill out the Full Gospel. They are: Jesus as Savior, Spirit Baptizer, Healer, Coming Kings, and some would add Sanctifier if "sanctification" or holiness of life is distinguished from Jesus' role as savior and Spirit Baptizer.⁹

17. Because Pentecostalism exhibits a substantial range of theological diversity, even on the meaning of the elements of the "Full Gospel," one 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 draw on various issues differ?" Invariably, the answer is "Yes": Supernaturalism.¹⁰ It is important to note that for Pentecostalism, Supernaturalism does not imply a rigid metaphysical dualism or a two-teared 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 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.¹¹

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 cease 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 view¹² that God no longer supports or buttress 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, which includes, for Pentecostals, both the forces of good (the Holy Spirit and her influences) and the forces of evil (the devil and its mechanism) engaged in "spiritual warfare," is the hermeneutical lens through which Pentecostals view Scripture and the Christian life. 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) nevertheless, it tends 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.

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.¹³ 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 Arminian¹⁴ 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 are the direct descendants of 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.¹⁵ 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 as Acts 2 reported. 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.”¹⁶

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.¹⁷ Above all, they are very aware of how the message of the movement gets hi-jacked 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 if it were not for its explosive growth, as that second look is being taken, more and more people are seeing that it at least addressing 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 its extraordinary answer it gives. If I understand Werner Elert and the Erlangen School of Theology correctly, that was one of his central concerns, too. To be sure, he addresses it in reference to the way Schleiermacher and Liberal Theology, not Pentecostalism, conceived the connection. But as problematic as Liberal Theology's answer to the relationship between divine reality and experience was, Elert would not accept Karl's Barth's "theology of the Word" which ultimately dismisses the question, lapsing into what Bonhoeffer criticizes it as being, "a Positivism of Revelation." Wrestling with the question of how the divine is "experienced" is 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. Therefore, please consider this a humble start.

32. With regard to Pentecostalism, the first question that often

comes to my mind by non-Pentecostals is this: Are the incredible supernatural experiences they claim to have "real" or are they a figment of the imagination? You 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 whether a "supernatural" experience is "real" 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 cannot tell us if something is "really" supernatural. Therefore, generally, ecumenical dialogue on Pentecostalism brackets this question and so will I here. Suffice it say that those who are involved in Pentecostalism are generally absolutely convinced of the reality of their supernatural experience; those who are not involved are generally inherently skeptical of it. Therefore, the reason Pentecostalism needs to be taken seriously is not because its claims are inherently 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 is the best counsel (Acts 5:38-39).

33. One of the most basic criticisms Pentecostals 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."¹⁸ 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 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.¹⁹ 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. Let me illustrate.

34. As Pentecostals zero in on the Acts 2 Pentecost story, they become focused on the supernatural elements within the story, in this case the miracle of speaking in tongues, and make that the point of the story. That is their hermeneutic. Accordingly, the purpose of the Holy Spirit is three fold: First, it confirm through supernatural signs and wonders (Acts 2:3) the eschatological message that "the last days" are upon us (Acts 2:14), second, it gets the attention of the world (Acts 2:7) through these signs and wonders and, third, it empowers the disciples with supernatural gifts by the Spirit to explain these signs and wonders (Acts 4) to the world. The story is, then,

regarded as literally paradigmatic, that is, it is assumed that the kinds of supernatural manifestations that happened at Pentecost is the new normal for any Spirit-filled gathering. As ingenious as this interpretation is for connecting Pentecostal experience to the Bible, is that really the point of the Pentecost story? I think not.

35. To be sure, the story *presupposes* a supernatural worldview, but does it *proclaim* a supernatural worldview? I think not. The story is all about God being present through the power of the Holy Spirit to deal with the world in a new way: not through the old way of the law, which condemns sinners, but through the new way of the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and raised, which offers the forgiveness to sinners. Distinguishing law and gospel is the hermeneutical key for unlocking the meaning of the text. Let me illustrate this with three points.

36. First, that this spectacle happens on the Jewish Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1) is symbolically and interpretively significant. Pentecost was the liturgical feast day when the Jews observed the event of God's giving of the law to rule over Israel through Moses, 50 days after the Passover. The point of the story is that that dispensation is now coming to an end. To use words from the prophet Joel, referenced by Peter: the law, has seen its "last days" (Acts 2:17), so to speak. From now on, says Luke, let this Day of Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus, mark the beginning of a new day in which the Holy Spirit, not the law, rules in over your lives. What distinguish the rule of the Spirit from the rule of the law is this: the law brings the word of God's condemnation of sinners, the Spirit brings the Word of God's forgiveness for sinners, accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection. This is a pneumatology of the cross because the Spirit brings the benefits of the cross of Christ to sinners.

37. Second, central to the story is not the first set of (two) questions that the crowd asked concerning the supernatural sights and sounds they saw and hear. Remember, those sights and sounds created “bewilderment” (Acts 2:5) in some (How can this be?) and “sneers” in others (Are they drunk?). Rather, central to understanding the text is the last or third question the crowd asked of the apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” (Acts 37). Significantly, that question comes in response to Peter’s clear and poignant sermon connecting the fulfillment of the esoteric words of the Prophet Joel and the messianic Psalm of David to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the answer to this third question is remarkably simple and unspectacular: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38). It is important to note that repentance *and* being baptized for forgiveness of sins *and* receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit are not three isolated things, but the packaged whole that defines the new life in Christ. This side of the resurrection, life in the Spirit has repentance and forgiveness as its basic law-gospel framework: the law’s incriminations are acknowledged in repentance, and gospel’s overruling of the law through forgiveness is received by faith. Whatever other features life in the Spirit might take on is open-ended as the Acts of the Apostles will show.

38. The third point concerns the matter of speaking in tongues. Undeniably, the Pentecost story tells us that the apostles received the supernatural ability to speak in the languages of other nations. But again, so it seems to me, the point of the story is not that such supernatural phenomenon are necessarily part and parcel of the Spirit’s way of making an effect and powerful Christian witness. Rather, the gift of tongues serves to make a basic point about the gospel that was important in the

early life of the church: namely, that it was for everyone regardless of national origin or cultural-legal affiliation. Therefore, the story illustrates another application of the hermeneutical distinction between law and gospel. The nations do not need to learn the Hebrew tongue (or adapt to Jewish law and custom) in order to be included in the promise of the Jewish messiah, Jesus Christ and be part of the reconciled people of God. The work of the Spirit is to accommodate to needs of the nations, by raising up proclaimers who will bring the message of the forgiveness of sins to them. In other words, the apostles are free, as Paul would say, to be all things to all people for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:19-23). When in Rome one is free to do as the Romans do; when in Jerusalem one is free to do as the Jews do. What is important here is the freedom the Spirit gives to the church, in this context, the Apostles, for the sake of gospel mission. In their administration of the gospel they are free to accommodate as they see fit to the language, customs and the cultural heritage of the people to whom they are sent. The Book of Acts is filled with examples of how this law-gospel distinction forms and shapes a variety of missionary practices by the apostles.

39. In my reading of Acts, then, I am not denying that the Spirit might work supernatural signs and wonders. My point is that, true to the character of supernatural works and wonders, they will most likely be spontaneous and rare, not predictable and regular. What will be predictable and regular is the content of the Spirit-filled message: repent and believe the good news. As I read Acts 2, the Spirit appears to be the divine emissary who oversees two kinds of works in tandem: proclaiming and hearing. She ensured that the gospel of Christ was both *proclaimed* to the world (the disciples spoke in the language of the nations, Acts 2:4) and *heard/believed* by the world (the nations heard the gospel in their own language, Acts 2:8). The

point is not how the proclaimers emerged – supernaturally or naturally – but that the message is consistent. And even if Pentecostal communities routinely experience signs and wonders every time they gather – good for them! – the challenge remains that they do not let the signs and wonders overshadow the message, that the signs and wonders serve the gospel of God’s love in Jesus Christ, as Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13.

40. Finally, I want to briefly address the issue of “evidence” concerning the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in the worship gathering. Pentecostals make an important point when they assert that worship is not simply a human activity, but the arena in which God is present through the Holy Spirit to build up the people of God for the sake of faith and mission. In that regard, I would like to think that Luther’s description of the Holy Spirit’s work in his Small Catechism explanation to the Third Article of the Creed would please Pentecostals. One translation puts it like this:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true.

41. For Luther, the whole counsel of the triune God (aka, the gospel) is that sinners get connected to Christ and his saving work so that they might be reconciled, forgiven, justified, have

things made right with God. The problem is, sinners don't have the ability to do that. With regard to God, they are by nature oppositional defiant. That's why the Holy Spirit is necessary. To paraphrase the language of the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is the one person in the trinity who is commissioned to take what is Christ's (his righteous work of dying and rising for sinners) and applies it to sinners (John 16:12-15). That application is synonymous with faith. Therefore, Luther begins his explanation of the third article of the creed on a downer note about our inherent inability to believe. He does that because it is very important for believers to know that they become and remain believers not by their own reason or strength but by the Holy Spirit. To claim otherwise puts them at odds with the Holy Spirit and risks losing what the Spirit has given them.

42. But how does the Holy Spirit do this work of creating faith in Christ? Are his means secret and known only to the Holy Trinity or are they public and essentially knowable to all? To be sure, in asking this question we venture onto very slippery theological ice, the mysterious topic of election. Therefore, let me answer it in a slippery way. The means by which the Spirit works faith are a matter of public knowledge, even though the reason they work on some and not others is not. Therefore, since the means by which the Spirit creates faith is a matter of public knowledge, it is possible to point to the "evidence" of the Spirit's work in the world. In his Small Catechism explanation of the third article of the creed, the "evidence" of the work of Holy Spirit is identified by four specific verbs ("called," "gathered," "enlightened," and "sanctified and kept") with the "Holy Spirit" as the subject or actor, "me" as the object of recipient of the action, and "the gospel" as the public discernable means of the action. We can unpack these four verbs by inquiring into them through four questions.

43. First, am I being “called by the gospel”? Is the gospel being addressed to me through the ordinary, objective means Christ himself has instituted? Here I think the phrase “by the gospel” could be any one of the five means of the gospel that Luther identified in his Smalcald Articles: baptism, preaching, confession and forgiveness, the Lord’s Supper, and the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints. If this is happening, then this is “Exhibit A” for evidence of the Spirit at work.

Second, is there a regular “gathering” of people where the gospel is preached and the sacraments given and mutual love and support is shared? That is to say, is there a community of faith where the gospel is proclaimed freshly and the sacraments administered accordingly? If so, that is Exhibit B for evidence of the Spirit at work.

Third, am I being “enlightened” by his gifts? That is, does the fact that “He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers” give insight or enlightenment on how I think, live, and interact in the world. If so, that is “Exhibit C” for evidence of the Spirit.

Fourth, am I being “sanctified and kept” in the one true faith? That is, not only do I trust the gospel, but is that trust being nurtured and kept alive in me by the gospel? If so, that is my holiness and that is “Exhibit D” for evidence of the Spirit. For remember, sanctification or holiness is not a moral concept whose increase is measured by the standard of law, but a spiritual condition of being “set apart” by faith in the forgiveness of sins.

44. I have no idea whether Pentecostals would identify these very ordinary public ministry activities as “evidence” of the working of the Holy Spirit in the world. They certainly don’t

have the panache of speaking in tongues or healings. But neither would they necessarily exclude such extraordinary supernatural phenomena as tongues or healings from joining them as evidence. I would very much welcome discussion with Pentecostals on this.

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1 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.

2 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>.

3 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.

4 Wikipedia, "Azusa Street Revival," accessed January 18, 2016 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azusa_Street_Revival.

5 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.

6 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 Hollenwegen 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/> .

7 Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans Publishing House: Grand Rapids, 1994).

8 Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostalism a Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark: London and New York, 2013), p. 133-53.

9 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.

10 Vondey, p. 30-34.

11 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.

12 For a brief overview of this concept see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessationism#cite_note-2, accessed February 17, 2016.

13 Albrecht and Howard, pp. 238-40.

14 Those wanting more background on Arminianism may find these two online articles helpful: “What is Arminianism?” at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/arminianism.html> accessed on February 17, 2016, and “A Lutheran Response to Arminianism” at <http://whitefield.freesevers.com/ritchie1.html> accessed on

February 17, 2016.

15 Juan Sepúlveda, "Born Again: Baptism and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Perspective," *Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge*, eds. Jurgen Moltmann and Karl-Josef Kuschel (SCM Press Ltd, London and Orbis Press, Maryknoll: 1996) pp. 105-8.

16 Albrecht and Howard, pp. 238-9.

17 Vondey, for example, seeks to bring understanding to those who are "perplexed" by the apparent lack of coherence in Pentecostalism by identifying seven fundamental "tensions" that reside unresolved in the movement. These tensions encompass almost every aspect of Christian life and thought as is immediately evident from a simple glance at the table of contents, p. vii-viii. In addition to Vondey is Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology*, Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2005. He not only sees the many turbulence in Pentecostalism's interpretation of its own experience and classical doctrinal topics, but offers ways to rethink them and calm them into a breeze that might refresh and invigorate the church for today rather than replace it.

18 Christian Smith and Melina Lindquist Deton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press: Oxford/London, 2005).

19 Cheryl Peterson, "A Pneumatology of the Cross: The Challenge of Neo-Pentecostalism to Lutheran Theology," *Dialog: A Journal for Theology* 50/2 (Summer 2011): 133-142.

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