

What They're Saying Now: Some Non-Charismatics Reevaluate Tongues

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Bow-tied waiters glide across the plush red carpet. Sharply dressed gentlemen and elegantly appareled ladies devour crispy bacon, spicy sausage, and fluffy scrambled eggs. The smiling couple beside you probably has a college degree or two. Perhaps they are doctors, dentists, or lawyers. After the meal and some sprightly and cordial conversation among guests, the master of ceremonies steps behind the podium and introduces the morning's speaker: a prominent businessman, a well-known politician, a college professor, he might be any of these. This is a typical breakfast meeting of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, the Pentecostal thrust to the affluent.

Pentecostalism's story is truly one of rags to riches, of ostracism to respectability. The storefront church with its shoebox pulpit is now the largest church on Main Street.

From its unlikely beginnings in 1906, who would have foretold the prominence that the Pentecostal movement would obtain, both socially and theologically?

There are Pentecostals alive today who remember vicious verbal (as well as physical) attacks upon the infant Pentecostal movement. According to Frank Ewart, Dr. G. Cambell Morgan called the movement "the last vomit of Satan" (quoted in R.M. Anderson, p. 142). Harry A. Ironside said he "could count scores of persons who had gone into utter infidelity because of it....Many more...lapsed into insanity....In the last few years hundreds of holiness meetings all over the world have been literally turned into pandemonium's where exhibitions worthy of a madhouse or of a collection of howling dervishes are held night after night. No wonder a heavy toll of lunacy and infidelity is the frequent result" (Synan, *Aspects*, pp. 105-106). The movement "was wicked and adulterous," according to Dr. Dixon. And R.A. Torrey claimed Pentecostalism was founded by a Sodomite (quoted in R.M. Anderson, p. 142) The distinctive practice of speaking with other tongues reminded Sir Robert Anderson of Isaiah's wizards that chirp and mutter (p.24).

Yet even those who find little or no good in today's charismatic renewal have never denied that *something* is going on. A doctor devotes a book to explaining the phenomenon of tongues (glossolalia) psychologically. In a larger volume a linguist concludes that it is a learned response. That something happens has never been denied, but the anti-Pentecostal evaluation and interpretations of that something has radically changed. Respected church leader and critic of the charismatic renewal John R. W. Stott writes, "There can be no doubt that God has used this movement to bring blessing to large numbers of people" (p.7). Merrill Unger wrote three books he stated that "the charismatic revival...represents a sincere quest for God's spiritual best in the believer's life" (New, p. 2). Joseph Dillow testifies, "I know many men whom I admire highly who speak in tongues. Furthermore, I'm not aware of anything but good that has come from it in some of their lives" (pp. 163-64).

Evangelical leader and former editor of *Eternity* Russell Hitt describes the reason for his posture on the new Pentecostalism:

I have come to the position that it is a spiritual phenomenon, being used of God very dramatically in some quarters. It is plainly bringing new life and virility to denominations long since pronounced dead or apostate by many evangelicals. Thousands have been ushered into the kingdom of God and others have received a new endowment of power, despite the theological question this raises. (p.9)

Harold Lindsell, scholar, Baptist church leader, and former editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote these words in a 1969 editorial: "We think that speaking in tongues is a truly biblical phenomenon supported

both by Scripture and empirical evidence...Tongues can be used personally and devotionally, or congregationally” (p. 27). In a later article, he advised Christians with charismatic leanings to “by all means seek both the baptism and tongues” (1972: 12). And in 1983, Lindsell rebutted an anti-charismatic article that denied the existence of twentieth-century charismatic gifts. In essence he told Christian skeptics to look and see what God is doing, “examine the evidences” (*Holy*, pp. 192-93).

Popular author and pastor John F. MacArthur, Jr., wrote the best-selling negative critique titled *The Charismatics*. In the book, MacArthur confesses that “charismatics truly love Jesus and the Scriptures...I thank God for much that is happening in the Charismatic movement. The gospel is being proclaimed and people are being saved. I also believe that through this movement some Christians are recognizing a certain new reality in Christ and making commitments that they have never made before” (p. 13). For J. I. Packer, the experience that charismatics call the baptism in the Holy Spirit is spiritually valid: It empowers, it sanctifies, it deepens awareness of the Father’s love and the Spirit’s presence (pp. 225-227).

The Biblical Validity of the Experience

Cambridge graduate and New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn wrote the most respected exegetical refutation of charismatic theology. But even his critique is not without praise. In fact, his findings support the biblical integrity of the charismatic experience. He writes:

Like earlier “enthusiasts” Pentecostals have reacted against both these extremes. Against the mechanical sacramentalism of extreme Catholicism and the dead biblicist orthodoxy of extreme Protestantism they have shifted the focus of attention to the experience of the Spirit. Our examination of the NT evidence has shown that they were wholly justified in this. That the Spirit, and particularly the gift of the Spirit, was a fact of experience in the lives of the earliest Christians has been too obvious to require elaboration....It is a sad commentary on the poverty of our own immediate experience of the Spirit that when we come across language in which the NT writers refer directly to the gift of the Spirit and to their experience of it, either we automatically refer it to the sacraments and can only give it meaning when we do so..., or else we discount the experience described as too subjective and mystical in favour of a faith which is essentially an affirmation of biblical propositions, or else we in effect psychologize the Spirit out of existence.

The Pentecostal attempt to restore the NT emphasis at this point is much to be praised.

(*Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 225-226)

No doctrine receives more criticism than that which suggests there is yet more for the Christian. Instead of hearing *There’s more for me*, some Christians translate it into *You’re saying that I lack something, that I’m not whole, that you’re better than I am*. But thank God for those who hear *There’s more for me* and reach out in faith and take it. Speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is one of those doctrines that suggest there’s more. For that reason it has come under extreme criticism. On the issue of tongues as initial external evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, Dunn writes the following:

In favour of the Pentecostalist these it must be said at once that their answer is more soundly rooted within the NT than is often recognized. It is certainly true that Luke regarded the glossolalia of Pentecost as an external sign of the Spirit’s outpouring. In Acts 10.45 ff. ‘speaking in tongues and extolling God’ is depicted as proof positive and sufficient to convince Peter’s Jewish companions that ‘the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.’ The Ephesian ‘believers’ speak in tongues and prophesy when the Holy Spirit comes upon them (19.6). The only other passage in which an initial giving of the Spirit is actually described is 8.17 ff., and it is obvious that Luke has in mind here an eye-catching display of ecstasy -something more than sufficient to arouse the envy of an accomplished magician. It is a fair assumption that for Luke the Samaritan ‘Pentecost,’ like the first Christian Pentecost, was marked by ecstatic glossolalia. If so, then the fact is that in every case where Luke describes the giving of the Spirit it is accompanied and ‘evidenced’ by glossolalia. The corollary is then not without force that Luke intended to portray ‘speaking in tongues’ as ‘the initial physical evidence’ of the outpouring of the Spirit.

(*Jesus and the Spirit*, pp. 189-190)

Dunn’s examination and ultimate rejection of the charismatic theology of Spirit baptism leads him to the brink of a doctrine of Spirit baptism that is less attractive to him than charismatic theology. Since his examination verified that tongues did indeed accompany Spirit baptism, and since Spirit baptism is, in Dunn’s theology, equivalent to conversion, then *spiritual manifestations should accompany conversion*.

(Only by dispensationalizing tongues to primitive Lucan Christianity does Dunn escape the force of his own argument.) In this context, Dunn pays a final compliment to charismatic theology:

Accepting that the gift of the Spirit is what makes a man a Christian, how does he and others know if and when he has received that Spirit? In what ways does the Spirit manifest his coming and his presence? What indications are there that the Spirit is active in a congregation or in a situation? Clearly these are questions of first importance at all points of Christian life and activity. And in case it should be thought that I have been less than just to the Pentecostals let me simply add in reference to these questions that Pentecostal teaching on spiritual gifts, including glossolalia, while still unbalanced, is much more soundly based on the NT than is generally recognized.

(*Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 229)

The observable evidences of the baptism in the Holy Spirit—a love for and devotion to the Scriptures, a fervency to proclaim the Gospel, a deeper Christian life, a greater sense of the reality of an preeminence of Jesus Christ, an enduement of power, spiritual invigoration, revitalized churches, and even healed marriages—have overwhelmed many would-be critics of the charismatic renewal (the above listed evidences are taken from non-Pentecostal writers). Although they press for a more balanced and articulate formulation of charismatic theology, these critics concede that it is a movement of God’s Holy Spirit—a movement whose experiences are right out of the New Testament.

Thus the participants in this turn-of-the-century movement—once socially despised and theologically ridiculed—practice their prayer language in the dining rooms of Hyatt Regencies and to the cordial acceptance of many non-Pentecostal Bible scholars.

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