

## The Focus of the Charismatic Experience: Tongues, the Holy Spirit, or Christ?

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Robert Graves

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The strongest criticisms leveled at the charismatic renewal seem to center on two theories: one, the experience is tongues-centered, and two, the experience is Spirit-centered. The two have in common, of course, the inference that the source and focus of the baptism and its attendant gifts are something (or someone) other than Jesus. Let us take a look at whether or not these two charges are accurate.

### Is the Pentecostal-Charismatic Experience Tongues-centered?

More than one critic of the charismatic renewal has labeled it the “tongues movement.” This, of course, does not speak highly of it. In fact, it’s hard to think of a more degrading label! The implication is that what many believe to be a work of God is in fact the work of carnal man based on incomprehensible gibberish.

According to one non-Pentecostal historian, tongues-speaking for the Pentecostal has become “an end in itself, and the central teaching of the Pentecostal movement” (R. M. Anderson, p.96). For non-Pentecostal Donald Burdick, this may be too mild an indictment. He suggests that Pentecostalism seeks “to convert people to tongues” instead of to Christ (p. 88). Non-Pentecostal minister Robert Gustafson also believes that “the mission of the tongues movement is not to lead souls to Christ but is to evangelize the gift of tongues” (p. 95).

While we will see that these accusations of tongues-centeredness (glossocentricity) are not justified, they at least remind us that tongues for tongues’ sake is a dangerous and deplorable doctrine. It might be compared to putting more importance on the ringing of the doorbell than the guest at the door. Christians who wish to enter into this dimension of power and service should understand that the evidence of tongues is a mere external sign of a dynamic interior work being wrought by the Spirit. Anyone desiring to be used to edify the Body with an utterance of tongues should understand that the most important gift is the one needed at the moment, and the gift of tongues, per se, is no more important than any of God’s charismata. Uppermost in our minds should be the desire to serve and honor God. Servanthood and God-centeredness are the hallmarks of Christianity, charismatic or otherwise.

And if anyone should stray from these principles, we have these words of the late Pentecostal leader Donald Gee to hearken us back:

Nothing more surely defeats the purpose of any love gift than for the recipient of it to put the gift before the giver. Yet such a danger is decidedly real where spiritual gifts are concerned. There can easily arise a morbid ‘gift-consciousness’ that dwells upon either the real or the fancied possession of some spiritual gift far more than upon the life of fellowship with the Giver. There have been believers who have become so taken up with gifts and offices that the whole subject has become nauseous. Only the divine Giver can satisfy the soul—never His gifts.

(Concerning, pp. 78-79)

From the beginning of the twentieth-century Pentecostal outpouring, leaders have instructed those receiving the gift not to become infatuated with tongues but to preach Jesus. “In the first year of the work in Los Angeles [1906],” wrote Pentecostal pioneer A. W. Orwig, “I heard W. J. Seymour say, ‘Now, don’t go from this meeting and talk about tongues, but try to get people saved’” (Dalton, p.45). Pentecostal Joe E. Campbell was acutely aware of the dangers of glossocentricity when he titled his *book Warning! Do Not Seek for Tongues*. And his chapter titled “Something Far More Important than Speaking in Tongues” establishes *love* as the “motive spring from which all gifts of the Spirit should proceed” (p. 138). There is

life after tongues! A life to be crucified; a life to bow to the Lordship of Jesus Christ; a life of servanthood to God and man.

There can be no excusing those Christians who have set the gift of tongues on a pedestal as an end in itself—there can be only correction. If there are charismatic and Pentecostal teachers who treat tongues-speaking as something other than a means or help, they are producing stunted disciples for Christ and must rethink their position.

And by the same token, non-Pentecostals who consider the renewal as tongues-centered need to rethink their positions as well. While it is a mistake to label the charismatic renewal a “tongues movement,” the mistake is understandable. After all, the spiritual gift of tongues has been a distinctive of the baptism in the Holy Spirit since the day of Pentecost. Being a more vocal and outward spiritual manifestation, the gift of tongues undoubtedly draws attention.

First is the natural curiosity surrounding the experience of speaking in tongues. As Harold Horton says, people “are always asking us about the gift and compelling us to discuss it” (p. 131).

The name Dennis Bennett is familiar to most Pentecostals and charismatics. He was the first high church figure to make *Time* and *Newsweek* with his charismatic experience. The late Rev. Canon Dennis Bennett resigned from his Episcopalian parish in 1981 to found, with his wife Rita, the Christian Renewal Association. He was considered an “elder statesman” of the charismatic renewal for many years, and was made a “Canon of Honour” in 1980 in recognition of his work for renewal. In his spiritual autobiography, *Nine O’Clock in the Morning*, he tells of how it all began.

One Monday a friend, an Episcopal rector, visited him and his wife and told them the story of a “bizarre” couple in his church who had started attending faithfully after years of inactive membership. The more Bennett heard about the couple, the more bizarre they sounded. The rector explained: “They’re just there—looking happy. They glow like little lightbulbs. They’re so loving and ready to help whenever I ask them. In fact, I don’t have to ask them—they volunteer. They’ve started tithing. . . .”

The Bennetts eventually met the couple and discovered that this couple had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit and had spoken in other tongues. Curiosity got the best of them and, thus, triggered their inquiry into the baptism and the phenomenon of tongues.

I realize that the Bible says there is nothing new under the sun, but in my associations with Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals alike I have learned to expect the unexpected when the conversation turns to tongues. In fact, the very basis for my discussing this subject is that *people have questions about speaking in other tongues*. Such inquiries compel Pentecostals and charismatics to address the issue, whether they want to or not!

The second reason this gift draws attention is that tongues-speaking is “manifested in each case when believers receive their baptism in the Holy Spirit” (H. Horton, p. 131). It is easily shown that Scripture inextricably links the baptism in the Holy Spirit with charismatic activity (see Acts 2, 8, 10, 19). True, there occur conversions and Spirit-fillings that are merely stated (or implied) without elaboration. Charismatic activity is not mentioned on these occasions, but neither is it said not to have occurred. On the other hand, wherever Luke describes a filling with or baptism in the Holy Spirit and includes outward evidence as part of that description, that evidence is consistently tongues-speaking (Acts 2, 10, 19). Moreover, in the pivotal, model-like occurrences of Spirit baptism recorded in Scripture, tongues appear without fail. Luke builds his model or paradigm upon the Spirit baptism of the Jews (Acts 2) and the Gentiles (Acts 10-11 1) in which cases speaking in tongues was evidence that the baptism had taken place. Furthermore, given the high incidences of Spirit baptism with tongues today and given the positive effects of this experience, it is apparent that, pragmatically, any denial of tongues is not reasonable and most probably based upon bias.

The third reason tongues draw attention is that the gift is “so obviously and arrestingly supernatural that it challenges at once those who do not believe in the supernatural” (H. Horton, p. 131). Many Christians have testified that when they received the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the New Testament signification of tongues-speaking, they also received a greatly increased hunger for the Word of God; others have expressed a greater desire to pray; still others have found themselves with a heavier burden for the lost. Now it should not be thought that studying the Word, praying, or witnessing is an “arrestingly supernatural” activity (although for some of us it comes close!). On the other hand, speaking in unknown tongues can be very arresting—it arrested 3,000 souls on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41)! Luke describes the Jerusalem crowd who witnessed the Pentecost phenomenon of tongues as “amazed and perplexed.” Some asked, “What does this mean?” Others answered, “They have had too much wine” (Acts 2:12-3). As tongues testified to the rigid religionists of Luke’s day, so they testify to listeners today: Be filled with the Spirit!

Fourth, the value and function of other gifts are more certain. Charles Conn, Church of God historian and theologian, believes that tongues-speaking is often avoided or neglected simply because its purposes and benefits are not understood (even though Paul wrote more about this gift than any other gift). In his book *The Balanced Church*, Conn suggests that no other gift poses the problem that the gift of tongues poses:

Such gifts as the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, the discerning of spirits and faith work quietly in the heart and mind of the individual. There is rarely any public awareness of them. The gifts of healing and the working of miracles are manifestly beneficial, because any effort to relieve suffering and foster healing can only be looked on as something commendable. Even prophecy may be tolerated, even though not appreciated, as understandable and impassioned exhortation. It is different with tongues, for unbelievers are unable to understand what is said and often fail to see its purposes and benefits. Speaking with other tongues has become the chief distinction of the Pentecostal movement, as well as its greatest stigma.

(pp.135-136)

Fifth is the relation of tongues to the New Testament Church. The question often arises, *Did spiritual gifts operate before the New Testament bestowal of the Spirit?* The answer is a conditional yes. There are about twenty-three spiritual gifts listed throughout the New Testament epistles. Of these twenty-three, all but two are found in the Old Testament and the Gospels. Those gifts prior to Pentecost that are often considered spectacular (for example, healings, miracles, prophecies) are portrayed as operating by the direct intervention of God or in the ministries of a select few. But after the charismatic (vocational as opposed to regenerative) bestowal of the Spirit at Pentecost, the gifts operate in the context of the Spirit-gifted community of faith and the yielded vessel. Peter teaches that this bestowal is a fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams” (Acts 2:17). The selective and temporary granting of the Spirit in the Old Testament is now universal and lasting.

I mentioned that all but two New Testament gifts appear in the Old Testament. These two are tongues and interpretation, significations of a new era. Not the era of the redeemed, for that goes back into the Old Testament, but the era of the Church—a new era with a distinctive sign, ever reminding the Body of Christ on earth that this same Jesus who was crucified, God has made Lord and Christ and has given unto Him the Spirit whom He poured upon the Church (not the world; Acts 2:39-41). Perhaps this is why some in the renewal tend to stress these two distinctive gifts.

The words of Donald Gee, written in 1927 ring true today: “It [the manifestation of tongues] is God’s unique sign gift, reserved for this present dispensation in which we live. Is it any wonder, therefore, that we stand unflinchingly for its continuance until that which is perfect is come in the new age when we shall see Him ‘face to face’?” (*Concerning*, p.68).

### **Is the Pentecostal-Charismatic Experience Spirit-Centered?**

If the renewal is not tongues-centered, so the argument against it goes, it is at best Spirit-centered. While many non-charismatics have come to understand that the focus of the renewal is not tongues, many then conclude that it points to the Spirit and not Christ. For instance, Anthony Hoekema writes: “Implicit in Pentecostalism is a kind of subordination of Christ to the Holy Spirit” (*Tongue-Speaking*, p. 117). According to Michael Green, Pentecostals and charismatics “make the mistake of concentrating on the Spirit to the prejudice of the Father and Jesus” (p. 53). And J. Vernon McGee warns Pentecostals, writing, “You are saying a dangerous thing when you suggest that I must now go to the Holy Spirit, come around to the back door, and He’ll slip me something that Jesus did not give. You are saying that my Lord is accused when you do that” (quoted in Pyle, p. 119).

Are these accusations justified? Have we put Christ in a subordinate, or secondary position? This is an important issue. But if it can be demonstrated that Pentecostal-charismatic experience and theology are Christ-centered, I trust that this complaint will be resolved and no longer stand between the non-charismatic and his Christian inheritance.

### Glorifying Christ

In John 14 Jesus tells His disciples that He must leave them. Evidently their dismay at hearing this elicited these comforting words from Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to

you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). But not only did Jesus leave something with them, He promised that the Father would, in His name, send something to them—the Counselor, or Holy Spirit. “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. . . . All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (verses 16-17, 25-26).

Jesus calls the Spirit “another Counselor,” the Spirit of truth who will remind the disciples of Jesus’ words and works. Thus, the Holy Spirit does not draw attention to Himself, but points to Jesus. In John 16 Jesus says, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (verses 13-14). The believer who allows the release of the Holy Spirit in his or her life finds him or herself drawn to Jesus as never before. Certainly, the Spirit is not to be slighted, for He is coequal with the Father and the Son, but His purpose or mission is to strengthen the Church for spreading the good news of Jesus. The Holy Spirit testifies of Jesus. So, while we sing “Praise the Name of Jesus,” we can also sing, “Come, Holy Spirit, We Need Thee.”

“Any work that exalts the Holy Ghost or the ‘gifts’ above Jesus will finally land up in fanaticism,” wrote Pentecostal pioneer Frank Bartleman in 1906. “Whatever causes us to exalt and love Jesus is well and safe. The reverse will ruin all. The Holy Ghost is a great light, but focused on Jesus always, for His revealing” (p. 86). This has been the belief of mainstream Pentecostal-charismatic theology from its birth to the present. The Spirit will always draw attention to Jesus. Christ will always be exalted by the Spirit’s work. When people are glorified, when programs are glorified, when movements are glorified, we can be sure that it is not the work of the Spirit of Christ (W. Horton, p. 173). Pentecostal-charismatic theology demands that Jesus be glorified. If there is one book that puts to rest the charge of Spirit-centeredness, it is charismatic Thomas Smail’s book *Reflected Glory*. In the following passage, Smail concludes that it is in fact the Spirit who transforms us into the very likeness of Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18):

A Spirit who could derogate from the glory of Christ crucified in order to promote a more dazzling glory of his own, who passes by the sufferings of Christ in order to offer us a share in a painless and costless triumph, is certainly not the Holy Spirit of the New Testament. He glorifies, not himself, but Christ, and therefore his mission is to reveal the full glory of Calvary, and to bring us into possession of all the blessings that by his death Christ has won for us. Here also the work of the Spirit is to take the things of Christ and show them to us, so that, in the way appropriate to us, we may reflect his glory and be shaped into his likeness.

(p.105)

The Christ-centeredness of Smail’s Pentecostal-charismatic experience was featured in his teaching from the very beginning. In fact, a young woman interpreted his first public glossolalic utterance with these words: “There is no way to Pentecost except by Calvary; the Spirit is given from the cross” (p.105).

### Jesus The Baptizer

The Pentecostal-charismatic doctrine of Spirit-baptism is premised upon the activity of Jesus as the agent of the baptism. The fact that not one, not two, not three, but all four of the Gospel writers record John the Baptist’s proclamation that Jesus would baptize believers in the Holy Spirit, underscores the importance of this baptism and the One who performs it (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). Luke continues this theme in Acts, where he illustrates from Church history the experiential and conspicuous nature of Spirit baptism, as history discloses the Lord Jesus Christ as the mighty Baptizer of all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike (10:14-48; 11:15-17; 19:2-7).

The charismatic experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit demands an encounter with Jesus Christ. A so-called “charismatic” experience that does not find its source in Christ the Baptizer does not exemplify the New Testament concept of Spirit baptism. A Christian does not go “around the back door” to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit—he opens the front door, even as in salvation, and there is Jesus!

It is more than interesting that the most Christ-centered sect in the history of Christendom came out of Pentecostalism and remains Pentecostal. The “Jesus only” Pentecostals baptize in the name of Jesus only. For them, God is a threefold being (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but there is only one person, Jesus (Quebedeaux, II, p.40). Of the origin of the “Jesus only” doctrine, Pentecostal Steve Durasoff has reasoned that “the baptism in the Spirit had drawn many Pentecostals *closer to their Lord Jesus* and they welcomed a

doctrine that seemed to further exalt Him” (p.80; emphasis added). It is also interesting that some non-Pentecostals, in search of an explanation of the meaningfulness of the charismatic experience, decide that Pentecostals and charismatics have confused being born again with being baptized in the Holy Spirit (Hillis, p. 25). While those who have had both experiences understand a clear distinction, this reasoning affirms that, for these non-Pentecostals, Christ is seen at the center of the charismatic experience.

### The Cross in Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology

The emphasis on the saving blood of Jesus has been predominant in Pentecostalism from the very beginning. In the 1906 Pentecostal revival in Los Angeles, William J. Seymour stressed the atoning work of Christ constantly (quoted in Clayton, p.37). Frank Bartleman, an eyewitness chronicler of the Azusa Street revival, wrote that

Jesus was “all, and in all.” . . . All comes through and in Him. The Holy Ghost is given to “show the things of Christ.” The work of Calvary, the atonement, must be the center for our consideration. The Holy Ghost never draws our attention from Christ to Himself, but rather reveals Christ in a fuller way. . . . There is nothing deeper nor higher than to know Christ. Everything is given of God to that end. The “one Spirit” is given to that end. Christ is our salvation, and our all.

(p.85)

Pentecostal-charismatic theology is thoroughly grounded in the life, work, and teachings of Christ. It recognizes the Spirit’s conception of Christ, the Spirit’s anointing of Christ, the Spirit’s enabling of Christ, and finally, the Spirit’s descent by declaration of Christ (John 16:5-15). Without Christ, without the cross of Calvary, there would be no Pentecostal-charismatic theology (Gause, p.68; Smail, p. 117).

No other theology I know captures better the element of reciprocity among the persons of the triune Godhead: the Father gave us His Son by the Holy Spirit; the Son with the Holy Spirit showed us the Father; and from the Father in the Son’s name the Spirit was given to believers. Although other theologies may teach doctrines identical to these, only the Pentecostal-charismatic theology allows a twentieth-century demonstration of the latter: The Father gives the Holy Spirit to His children (Luke 11:13; John 14:16-17) because of the work of Christ (John 7:39) and through the agency of Christ (Acts 2:33, 38-39; See also Acts 1:8; 2:4; 10:45-47; 11:16-17). Various terms were used in the New Testament for the vocational manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer).

### Personal Experience

In my own life, the baptism in the Holy Spirit with tongues has intensified my relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Also, it has created within me a desire to minister to the Christian and non-Christian alike. Additionally, I have had a greater awareness of God’s will for my life and, as a result, a greater sensitivity to sin in my life. This last effect, however, is wedded, somewhat paradoxically, to a greater realization of God’s love for me.

A Lutheran pastor testified after his charismatic experience, “I have never loved Jesus or felt His love for me more keenly. . . . About a month after the baptism of the Holy Spirit, I suddenly realized I was witnessing to people about Christ in a different way than I had before. There was a freedom and a sense of reality that had not been there before—I find every aspect of my life affected by this blessing. And each new manifestation has a single common denominator: *Christ at the center of it!* In one way or another the baptism of the Holy Spirit serves to glorify Christ” (quoted in Hillis, p.22; emphasis added).

This pastor’s testimony and my own may be multiplied many times over as, after the baptism, persons find themselves openly expressing praise to Jesus more and more.

Undoubtedly, these are important questions: *Is the Pentecostal-charismatic renewal less than Christ-centered? Is it tongues-centered or Spirit-centered?* No. Both theologically and experientially, the Pentecostal-charismatic experience proves to be focused upon our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, without whose direct agency we could not have the Holy Spirit.

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