

The *Praying in the Spirit* Series

“Better Than I Was, Not Better Than You Are”

Robert Graves

“You Pentecostals think you’re better than anyone else, don’t you?” The question startled the young Florida pastor attending his first ministerial association meeting. He stammered briefly and then with wisdom replied, “No, not at all. I am simply better than *I* was before.” The question of spiritual pride has found its way into the minds of many non-charismatic Christians and, unfortunately, has become a great stumbling block.

“One characteristic of the modern tongues-movement,” writes Ronald Baxter, “is that of spiritual pride. The impression often given is, ‘I’ve got it and you haven’t. I’m sorry for you!’” (pp. 22-23). The first chapter of John F. MacArthur, Jr.’s, *The Charismatics* is titled “Are You One of the Have-Nots?” And according to Michael Griffiths, Pentecostals and charismatics “claim a monopoly of the Holy Spirit’s operation” (*Three Men*, p. 25). Merrill Unger, longtime critic of Pentecostalism, writes that Pentecostals believe the outsiders are “ordinary believers” and they are the “Spirit-baptized super-saints” (*Baptism*, p.36).

If Pentecostals and charismatics have done nothing more, it seems that they have convinced some non-Pentecostals that they believe themselves to be superior because they have spoken in tongues. Indeed, spiritual elitism, counting one’s own beliefs as sole “correct” theology, could be a temptation for all Christians, but especially those within revivals or renewals. The nature of renewal demands that some portion of the Church be moving in a different stream than the remainder, and the tendency to see oneself in a different light than one sees the others (no matter which group you are in) is a natural byproduct.

This being said, let me point out two things about pride and tongues. First, contrary to popular belief, the ability to speak in tongues is nothing to be proud of. The baptism in the Holy Spirit with the experience of tongues is not a merit badge but a sign of inadequacy. For years some anti-Pentecostals have been claiming that tongues, even in the first century were signs of immaturity and inferiority (Banks, pp. 19-20; Millikin, p.24). They are right, but for the wrong reason. When I pray in tongues it is a sign of my own inadequacy in the sense that my intelligible powers are insufficient to express my heart’s praise to God. After all, how can I expect my mind to express the joys and cries of my spirit? No, speaking in tongues does not demonstrate a virtue, it underscores a weakness, a human limitation.

In my twenty years in the Pentecostal-charismatic renewal, I have never met anyone who expressed pride in his ability to speak in tongues. According to non-Pentecostal Watson Mills, the typical tongues-speaker has abased himself, has become a fool for Christ’s sake. Human pride has been shattered and self-sufficiency dethroned (p.146).

I have, on the other hand, met many excited and effervescent souls whose hearts could not contain the joy of the Holy Spirit. Some have such zeal to share their experience, they offend many strong and faithful Christians who are not yet convinced that the charismatic experience is for today’s Church—that is, continuously given until the Second Coming of Christ.

Second, this very eagerness to share the gift seems to dispel a motive of boastful, prideful ownership. If pride were involved, there would be no sharing at all. The message would not be “let me tell you” but rather a silent and snobbish, “I’ve got mine; you get yours if you can.”

Has an exuberant charismatic Christian ever approached you and told you about his experience, what it’s done for him, and what it can do for you? Did it turn you off? Well, before you close and lock the door on the person and the experience, think about what it suggests. It says, “If I received this experience, so can you! You know me, all my faults and weaknesses. This experience is for all of us, not just an elite few.”

Maybe you had been a Christian for fifty years when some young, whippersnapper charismatic bubbled over on you. I can understand your discomfort, but when you think about it, you can't but praise God for His wisdom and grace. What this situation tells you is that this vocational gift of the Holy Spirit with the experience of tongues is not earned. It is not merited. It is not for only the elders or bishops. It is for every Christian, despite his tenure as a believer. The only condition for receiving this experience is that you be a child of God, for it is every child's inheritance. This prevents any basis for pride.

This truth is captured in the writings of early Pentecostal pioneer J. E. Stiles:

Since it is His righteousness, which is by faith, that gives [us] a standing before God, . . . we have a standing which is as perfect as the standing which Christ has in the presence of the Father. And how perfect is that? Absolutely and completely perfect. . . . Let us never forget that a Christian has an absolutely perfect standing before God, . . . or else he has no standing at all, and is a lost soul, clear outside the fold. Such a thing as a person having a good, or fair, or poor standing before God is entirely unscriptural, without the slightest foundation in God's Word. We are either saved or unsaved, and as such, we either have a perfect standing in God's family, or no standing at all.

(pp.23-24)

The Baptism and Spiritual Maturity

Along with the misperception of pride about the baptism and tongues, there is apparently a question about the baptism and Christian growth or maturity. Let me say, first, that there are two related points that charismatics and non-charismatics agree on. The first is that this blessing does not affect anyone's status as a Christian. No one Christian is *better* than any other. All are justified and sanctified by the work of Christ. And the second is that we all agree that Christians may differ in their levels of maturity. The great Reformed Presbyterian Abraham Kuyper wrote that "there are in the Church holy, holier, and holiest persons" (p. 452). (Imagine the outcry if a charismatic said this today!) Non-Pentecostals Richard De Haan and Hal Lindsey teach that some Christians are filled with the Spirit and some are not (*Spirit*, pp. 26, 135). Pentecostals and charismatics also believe that the New Testament teaches that there are, beyond the justification point that makes all Christians holy through Christ, varying degrees of maturity. Paul told the Corinthians, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it" (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). So there is agreement generally that Paul's teaching allows for different grades of Christian spirituality.

The difficulty or division on the subject of maturity comes in the minds of some who feel that Pentecostals teach that Spirit-baptism is "an easy shortcut to spiritual maturity" (Burdick, p. 89). They think that Pentecostals remove the "long, sluggish grind of the Christian walk" and telescope it into the instantaneous Spirit-baptism (Paulsen, p. 11). Non-Pentecostal Theodore Epp writes, "When the Spirit enters the life, that is the beginning, not the consummation, of that life. Some believe that once they have received the Spirit and spoken in tongues they have reached the zenith" (p. 115). Non-Pentecostal George Duncan adds, "To so many the experience of speaking in tongues is either the most desirable or the most commendable of the Spirit. If they possess it they feel that this is the final goal of their ambition" (p.59).

There is, of course, no such thing as "instant maturity" in the Christian life and Pentecostals and charismatics know this. In fact, one who has experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit is acutely aware of his (and only his) shortcomings. He is, at times, ashamedly conscious of his need for a more sanctified life. The pre-charismatic pinprick of the Spirit upon the conscience becomes a machete!

The baptism in the Spirit is only a *beginning*. It is like passing through a spiritual gateway, with much now to be done. As Pentecostal Joe Campbell tells us, speaking in tongues is not "the zenith of Christian experience . . . [or] the climax, the pyramid, the apex, . . . [or] the ultimate to be realized. . . . [I]t is *only the beginning*, the fuller preparation for service" (p. 145).

If Spirit baptism with tongues is only a beginning, logically it cannot function to perfect or impart instant maturity to the believer. In fact, McNair argues that the very existence of tongues in a believer's life is sure evidence that perfection is absent: "Having the ability to pray in tongues is not a basis for pride, since the gift is not given in payment for righteous living. It is given to Christians to build them up and help them live holy and more effective lives. *It is therefore a clear sign that the person who exercises tongues has certainly not reached maturity!*" (Love, p.65).

The Baptism and Spiritual Power

According to Pentecostal-charismatic belief, the Christian who attempts to minister without the baptism in the Holy Spirit will do so with a definite disadvantage. One non-Pentecostal has interpreted this to mean that “you are a deficient and defective Christian until you have spoken in tongues” (D. Hall, p.12). MacArthur is of the same mind: “Those holding the charismatic viewpoint are saying in effect that unless you have had ‘the experience,’ which they call the baptism of the Spirit with tongues, you have not reached the place where you can function the way God really wants you to function. You are missing something. You are eight cylinders firing on four, or possibly six at the most. You are just not quite there” (p. 182).

If charismatics are being accused of claiming that one without the charismatic experience is an ineffective Christian worker, the charge would be quickly denied. If, however, the complaint asserts that charismatics feel a non-charismatic Christian worker is not *as effective as he would be with the charismatic experience*, the charge is quickly admitted. After all, power for missions and service is the reason Christ baptizes the believer in the Holy Spirit. It is, to my mind, a telling point that Jesus directed His twelve disciples, supposed “experts” who had sat under His teaching for three years, to wait in Jerusalem after His ascension “for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about” (Acts 1:4). Only then would they be fully prepared-anointed-to go out and minister.

This idea of being empowered for service by the Holy Spirit is not only the sentiment of charismatics and Pentecostals but of such non-Pentecostals as R. A. Torrey, D. L. Moody, John R. Rice, and Martin Lloyd-Jones; a Christian is a more effective witness with the filling than he is without it.

Misperceptions about the baptism abound and, added to that, there have been, as in any renewal, those members who attach unscriptural teachings to their experience. But, as Ervin argues, non-Pentecostals should not construe the mistakes of some who support the baptism as a valid argument against speaking in tongues: “Suppose this charge were true of some who had received the ‘Pentecostal experience.’ Does their failure prove the experience is Scripturally wrong? How many ‘born again’ Christians have brought disrepute upon the Gospel by scandalous lives! Does their misconduct prove the Gospel is wrong?” (*Forbid*, pp. 35-36).

Perhaps your only contact with a charismatic has been with one of these misguided enthusiasts. Maybe as you have been reading this article you have said under your breath, “He sure doesn’t know the charismatics I know.” Then you must decide if you will allow previous bad experiences, long-standing traditions, or long-held erroneous beliefs about tongues to stand between you and your inheritance as a child of God.

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