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A RESPONSE TO FRANK MACCHIA'S "GROANS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF TONGUES AS INITIAL EVIDENCE"1

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[[HTTP://www.pts.edu/98-2/98-2-tan.htm](http://www.pts.edu/98-2/98-2-tan.htm)]

[Frank Macchia's paper](#) represents one of the growing efforts to articulate and refine the Pentecostal distinctive - initial evidence. I applaud his effort to develop a theology of initial evidence that goes beyond mere defense. A purely defensive apologetic is positionally constrictive to say the least. I heartily agree with him that we need to engage in creative theologizing from within the Pentecostals' own contextual reality that is passionate in our commitment to scripture and at the same time sensitive to the larger Christian community with whom we dialogue. Such theological humility is important. This would help to prevent doctrinal and experiential differences to disrupt our basic unity as the body of Christ. Since "tongues" is integral to our denominational self-understanding and religious life, we need to develop a sustainable theology of glossolalia. Only in this way can we recognize in the difference, the wealth and depth of the whole of our Christian reality and experience.

I am in general agreement with Macchia's position. What I intend to do by way of response is to highlight several related issues from the perspective of one who stands actively in both worlds - the academia and the ecclesia. The issues that I will be addressing are: 1) Disjunction between the academia and the ecclesia; 2) Credal clarity; and 3) Some comments on Macchia's proposal.

ISSUE 1: DISJUNCTION BETWEEN THE ACADEMIA AND ECCLESIA

My dual role as a teacher in a theological school and as a pastoral staff member in an urban church often exposes me to the disjunction between the academia and the ecclesia. First, Macchia's experience with his students at Southeastern College is not unique to him, but common to those in Pentecostal schools as well as in the churches.2 As he has noted, although there is a growing number of theological works in this area, they have not significantly impacted the understanding of the vast majority of Pentecostals. The question remains, why after decades of polemics, are our students still "mystified" about the meaning of our fundamental doctrine? I think one of the reasons is the fact of the disjunction between the academia and the ecclesia. This disjunction is two-pronged - academic debate and the lack of simple but skillful articulation for the general

congregation. For a start, many of the fine debates on this issue are done in the context of the academia. The intricate and complex exegetical, socio-psychological as well as theological arguments are appreciated and understood by the academia. But what of the ecclesia? Besides, whatever understanding is reached academically is seldom communicated to the church at large. Quite often what is done at the academic level remains a mystery to the ecclesia. Perhaps, this is due to our lack of ability to articulate theological arguments simply for the church community. As our students come from our churches, it is no wonder that the lack of understanding persists.

Another factor is that we are so accustomed to validating spiritual realities by experience that we find theologizing unfruitful. This kind of complacency within our tradition which views experience as more superior or spiritual militates against disciplined theologizing. Preferring instead a kind of experiential pragmatism, we are satisfied with our inherited creed because we have tasted it and know that it is real. The reality of our experience prevents us from checking this kind of subjectivistic hermeneutic. Moreover, theological arguments are often convoluted and dry, whereas the experience of glossolalia is so immediate, overpowering, unique and undeniably real that our pragmatism pushes us further away from theologizing. But experience without theology often ill-prepares us for a satisfying apologetic to those who do not adhere to this doctrine. As a consequence, our defense is built upon erroneous ideas and inadequate exegesis and theology. This makes our experience vulnerable to criticism. Having said this, it is important that we realize external criticisms should not set the agenda for our theologizing. If this experience is vital and integral to Spirit-baptism, then, we owe it to ourselves to reach for theological and verbal clarity. As Macchia comments, that doctrine provides the "grammar" for how we talk about our experience, which will also influence the experience and help preserve it as an enduring aspect of the community's religious life.³

There is a need not only for us to find conceptual tools to articulate more simply and clearly our theology of glossolalia, but also a need for the academia to work closely with the ecclesia. Since I am active at the pastoral level, I am frequently confronted by the request, "pray for me to speak in tongues" - such fixation on the consequence of Spirit-baptism reflects a truncated understanding of the Pentecostal faith prevalent in our churches. Unwittingly, tongues has become a status symbol of full spirituality for some. Even though we maintain that the Pentecostal faith is not a tongues movement, our pastoral encounters indicate that this fact has not gotten through.

My experience in both worlds help me to see the need for both the academia and the ecclesia to be involved in theologizing issues that are pertinent to our corporate identity as Pentecostals. Theologizing should not be the prerogative of the academia. It should be the privilege of the total community of God. There is a need for the Pentecostal community to integrate the conceptual and the experiential dimensions of our faith. It is crucial that we go beyond haphazard reflection to a conscious disciplined theologizing. This theologizing will help us in our quest for theological and verbal clarity.

If tongues is integral to our experience of Spirit-baptism, then we cannot allow it to be diluted into a mere experiential sentimentality. The fact that our confession is born of

deep experience does not preclude disciplined, self-critical thought. On the contrary, disciplined theologizing is critical to our religious life and denominational identity. A priori excision of disciplined theologizing brings with it a concomitant theological poverty. Experiential certitude undergirded by thought is the way to sustain a vibrant Pentecostal spirituality.

Dogmatism on the one extreme, abandonment of the practice of glossolalia on the other extreme, and the laissez-faire attitude in the middle, contribute further to this sad state of affairs. With each swing of the theological pendulum, our students and church members become casualties in the "pastoral and academic crossfires." Dealing with the living Spirit of God in experience is a difficult task because a metaxic tension always exists. When we have described all we know of this unique experience of glossolalia in the Spirit-baptism, there is always more than we can understand. None of our theological systems and fundamental truths can encompass the living variegated God. To try to maintain a creative tension between the reality and credibility of our experience and a humility and fairness to our non-Pentecostal faith community is no easy task. Such effort to hold the tension together is suspect. We need to rise above personalities and suspicion to pursue theological and verbal clarity that best express the reality of our experience. Simplistic thinking of the either-or type is inadequate for the task. Klyne Snodgrass powerfully cautions us to avoid the fanaticism of the extremes and the mediocrity of the middle of the road;⁴ for fanaticism tyrannizes and alienates, and mediocrity paralyzes creativity and clarity. These factors are fundamental and must be thoroughly dealt with as we develop a Pentecostal theology of glossolalia.

ISSUE 2: CREDAL CLARITY: THEOLOGICAL IMPASSE AND NON-CONSENSUS

Second, does our statement of faith clarify the complexity of Spirit-baptism and initial evidence satisfactorily?⁵ The fact that theological impasse exists with regard to this doctrine is indicative that we have not sufficiently clarified our creed. If this creed is really integral to our self-identity, then, credal clarity is absolutely critical. Do all of us within the larger Pentecostal community, and more specifically the Assemblies of God, understand our "creed" the same way? Evidently not.⁶ The challenge before us is to find verbal expression of this doctrine that will be both intelligible to the larger Christian community and faithful to the biblical revelation.

This lack of theological and verbal clarity prevents us from arriving at a consensus internally and presenting our Pentecostal distinctive intelligibly to the larger Christian community. Often what is presented is a caricature of our experienced reality that is "too deep for words." Misunderstandings and abuses follow. Gordon L. Anderson has identified some of the misunderstandings and abuses in his article.⁷ Thus, inevitably our creed comes under fire from those outside of the Pentecostal experience. The criticism that Pentecostals have turned "a spiritual phenomenon into a shibboleth of orthodoxy"⁸ is not without justification. A case in point is our statement of faith that baptism in the Holy Spirit is "witnessed by the initial physical evidence of speaking in tongues."⁹ Macchia

evinces that the initial evidence doctrine was not voiced primarily in an effort to guarantee or prove the experience of Spirit-baptism, despite the usage of evidential language borrowed from empirical science.¹⁰ But do all of us understand the term "evidence" non-empirically? Or do some of us, in fact, put it forth as normative and definitive of Spirit-baptism? If we do, then, our position is assailable exegetically and empirically. The minute we try to objectify our claim in empirical categories, we are bound to meet with counter claims. Our exegetical support comes solely from the Acts narrative. Two out of five accounts of Spirit-baptism did not explicitly mention tongues. May we not infer from this ambiguity that there are other non-audio/visual "evidences" of Spirit-baptism? In this regard, Macchia has raised a series of pertinent questions that must not be ignored.¹¹ Apparently, we have not all understood the "creed" the same way. The disparity between our doctrine and praxis is vividly pointed out by W. G. MacDonald:

In the scant theological literature produced by classical Pentecostalism one can find a declaration such as this: "All believers have the Holy Spirit." This statement is all the more remarkable because in practice it is so little recognized and integrated with a total theological view. All too often the oral tradition seems to forget this basic doctrine and implies that one has not "received" the Spirit unless he has received the filling with the Spirit evidenced by glossolalia.¹²

The writings of Riggs, Synan and Hughes should serve as a caution for us.¹³ We need to ask ourselves whether we have clarified our fundamental truth adequately and clearly. If not, then, we need to work at reformulation. Reformulation does not necessitate that we abandon traditional formulation all together. Precisely because this experience is credible we need to reformulate to make it intelligible.

Pentecostals are particularly resistant to the call for reinterpretation and reformulation especially with regard to the normal/normative issue. This fear, I suggest, is unwarranted. The insistence of the Pentecostal on the normativity rather than the normalcy of tongues may be due to a logical confusion. Perhaps, we fear that by substituting the term "normal" for "normative," we will make this experience unnecessary or that we will cease to seek Spirit-baptism altogether. I think the term normal is an important concept. The normalcy of an event does not make the event itself unnecessary or unimportant. There is no causal connection between normalcy and the unnecessary. Normal does not make something unnecessary or less important. It is normal to go bed at night and get up in the morning. Just because it is normal for us to wake up in the morning does not mean that it is now unnecessary for us to wake up. Our lived-reality in the everyday world contradicts this logic. Neither does normalcy eliminate expectancy. On the contrary, because it is normal, we expect it. Gordon Fee comments that "The Pentecostal sees speaking in tongues as a repeated pattern and has argued that it is the normal pattern."¹⁴ Fee has also ably argued that, "If Pentecostal may not say one must speak in tongues, he may surely say, why not speak in tongues? It does have repeated biblical precedent, it did have evidential value at Cornelius' household (Acts 10:45-46)...."¹⁵ This should be our theological posture.

Normalcy clarifies our position and experience better. To insist that glossolalia is normative to Spirit-baptism hinders receptivity. It produces an unnecessary psychological uptightness in the seekers. It also shifts the focus to the physical manifestation of tongues so much so that they forget the more important issue of Spirit-baptism. The normalcy term gives us leeway for embracing the ambiguity of the Acts narrative. Krister Stendahl has this to say:

But there is something in the gambling with the Spirit which lives on the principle, "Why not?" Instead of "Why?" That is the liberation that lies in the Spirit: to change the uptight why into a generous why not. That's the stance of the Spirit.[16](#)

I think this helps us to maintain more adequately a creative tension regarding the initial physical evidence phenomenon. And this tension is,

not like a tightrope where we must fear falling off either side...A more appropriate image is that of a stringed instrument. Properly attached at the two right places, the instrument can be played. If a string is left loose, music cannot be produced. If it is stretched too tightly, the string will break.[17](#)

In reformulation we are trying to encapsulate our unique experience of glossolalia - to make sense of that experience. Since all theology is provisional in nature we need to resist the temptation of making explicit what is implicit. A certain theological tentativeness is essential. I think the term "normal" provides for this tentativeness without eliminating the reality and repeatability of glossolalia in Spirit-baptism.

ISSUE 3: MACCHIA'S PROPOSAL

Finally, Macchia's proposal is a step forward. His proposal places glossolalia squarely within the larger terrain of Christian spirituality. In his proposal the term "sign" is preferred rather than "evidence," because it places us firmly in the scriptures and in dialogue with centuries of theological discussions of gifts and sacraments.[18](#) He sees the tongues of Pentecost as an awesome theophany of God's eschatological purpose. He proposes that the theological significance of tongues as initial evidence is found within the framework of ecumenical witness, "they function as the most striking and outstanding involvement of God in this corporate witness empowered in Spirit baptism."[19](#) Tongues also serve as an in-depth identification with suffering by pushing us beyond our own comfort zone into the vistas of realities greater than ourselves.[20](#) This understanding of tongues is full of significant implications. It goes beyond our narrow Pentecostal and often ego-centered emphasis on the purpose of tongues. Identification, solidarity, protest praxis, global and missionary vision are exciting and powerful concepts. They offer potential for a richer development of Pentecostal theology. However, Macchia did not develop them systematically nor satisfactorily. What is discussed is more the historical understandings of the Pentecostal position. He needs to go beyond establishing theological significance to justification - to fully grapple with the peculiar Pentecostal

insistence of the distinctive role of tongues, the ecstatic dimension of Spirit-baptism. It is here that I think Simon Chan's comments offer possibilities and compliment Macchia's discussion.[21](#)

We need a larger theological framework to validate our doctrine of initial evidence. How then, do we locate this concept theologically? Simon Chan suggests that "theologically tongues are best understood as denoting a certain kind of personal relationship that believers have with God."[22](#) He further comments that to locate the theology of glossolalia in the context of intimacy would then establish the necessary link of glossolalia as the sign of Spirit-baptism.[23](#) In this intimacy where,

relationship involving the soul and its God, at the deepest level of personal engagement in which the soul surrenders totally to the one who is all in all, a highly personalized kind of idiolect becomes not just one of the possible forms of expressions but the only appropriate form there is.[23](#)

Therefore, to raise the question of whether one must speak in tongues in order to be filled with the Spirit is misdirected. Language is the concomitance of intimacy as well as of ecstasy. But, we must recognize that language consists of the verbal and the non-verbal dimensions. Most of the time, encounters of intimacy and ecstasy naturally bring about a verbal outflow of the soul; but at times, only wordlessness seems to be an appropriate response to the awesome encounter. This is truer to the Acts narrative on Spirit-baptism.

I remember vividly my first experience of snow in Vancouver. We were driving to church on that Sunday morning when it snowed (three months after we arrived in Vancouver). We stopped the car and ran out to feel the snow. For those of us who had lived in the tropics all of our lives, this was an experience of a lifetime. The visual and physical impact of snow on my consciousness and body was so overpowering that all I could do was to make monosyllabic responses: "wow, wow, wow, ooh, wow." For that moment I was lost in the delight and wonder of this new experience. There was a deep sense of receptivity in my entire being. With hands outstretched as if in "total surrender," I enjoyed the exquisite sensation of falling snow flakes, all the time uttering the monosyllabic "wows". On the other hand, my husband, who was just as awed by the experience, was running around catching the falling snowflakes completely wordless, not uttering even a monosyllabic response. The sheer joy on his face was the only "evidence" of his awe. Perhaps, this personal illustration can help to serve as a conceptual tool to clarify our position without dogmatism. If we Pentecostals do believe that this experience is for all within the faith, then, we need to work at removing obstacles rather than posing hindrances.

By way of concluding my response I would like to emphasize again that theology is provisional in nature. We must resist the temptation to make what is implicit explicit. What we need is to embrace a theological posture of "why not?," rather than a formalized proposition declaring "must." I would also like to echo an "amen" to Macchia's conclusion,

After all, all doctrine is fallible and seeks to be accountable to the experience of the Spirit and to the only infallible rule of faith and practice, the Holy Scriptures. May all that we do or say continue to reflect this accountability in order to bring God glory.[25](#)

Footnotes

1. This response is based on an earlier version of Macchia's paper, and with the substantially revised nature of Macchia's present paper, which was not available to me, it is possible that some discussions may have become less relevant.
2. Frank Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words: Towards A Theology of Tongues as Initial Evidence," p. 149.
3. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," p. 168. (Page numbers refer to printed journal.)
4. Klyne Snodgrass, *Between Two Truths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 40.
5. The questions raised by Macchia (p. 172) are important for a well-developed Pentecostal theology.
6. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," pp. 151-56.
7. Gordon L. Anderson, "Baptism in the Holy Spirit, Initial Evidence, and a New Model," *Paraclete* (Fall 1993), pp. 1-4.
8. Jean-Daniel Plüss' critique quoted by Macchia, p. 154.
9. The Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, 8
10. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," p. 155.
11. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," p. 172.
12. William G. MacDonald quoting and commenting on Ralph M. Riggs, *The Spirit Himself* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1949), p. 44 in "Pentecostal Theology: A Classical Viewpoint" in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, ed. Russell P. Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), p. 69.
13. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," p. 155.
14. Gordon Fee, "Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent - a Major problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics" in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, pp. 118-32.
15. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent," p. 132.
16. Krister Stendahl, "The New Pentecostalism: Reflections of an Ecumenical Observer," in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, p. 207.
17. Snodgrass, *Between Two Truths*, p. 32.
18. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," p. 153.
19. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," p. 160.
20. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," p. 164.
21. See Simon Chan, "The Language Game of Glossolalia, or Making Sense of the 'Initial Evidence'," in *Pentecostalism in Context: Essays in Honor of William W. Menzies*, eds. W. Ma and R. Menzies, JPTSup. 11 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 80-95.
22. Chan, "The Language Game of Glossolalia," p. 84.

23. Chan, "The Language Game of Glossolalia," p. 86
24. Chan, "The Language Game of Glossolalia," p. 89.
25. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words," p. 173.