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The Pentecostal Doctrine of Baptism in the Holy Spirit

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THE DOCTRINE OF THE BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT:
FROM A PENTECOSTAL PASTOR'S UNEASY CHAIR

Narciso C. Dionson

INTRODUCTION

Students electing class officers in a Pentecostal Bible institute were advised to nominate only those who had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This was supposed to be in accord with the selection of church officials in Acts 6:3. As I began my pastoral ministry I followed without reservations the pattern I learned in Bible school. When the time came to organize the board of deacons, none of the people I thought were best qualified to assist me were Spirit-filled. They were good people and I thought they were full of wisdom—but they were not full of the Holy Spirit!

To remedy the situation I arranged a retreat where I taught about the baptism. I uncovered apprehensions, including being filled with unholy spirits! We began tarrying and I went around laying hands on the brethren. Praise the Lord that all of them gloriously received the baptism with speaking in tongues as evidence! In my second church I faced a slightly different situation: a brother for whom I had the highest regard just could not receive the baptism. It was puzzling because it was his conversion and testimony that opened the door for many new people to join the fellowship. A call to another assignment saved me from the dilemma of having to exclude him from nomination in the church board. Later on I learned that the succeeding pastor waived the qualification aside and nominated him anyway. Today he is one of the staunchest leaders of the congregation. As far as I know he has not yet spoken in tongues.

The two circumstances I have described illustrate my ambivalence towards the classic Pentecostal doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues. On the one hand, there is appreciation for the experience itself, perhaps the most awe-inspiring experience of my entire life. I cannot but desire that others receive what I received. On the other hand, while I cherish the experience, the ecclesiastical stipulations that logically followed the doctrinal emphasis do not fit squarely with pastoral realities. Many times I asked myself, "Was my successor wise in waiving aside the baptism as qualification for church board membership, thus defying denominational policy?"

There are wider implications, as I would find out later. Since I cannot become a valid minister without this baptism, how can non-Pentecostal ordination be valid?¹ I find myself caught between a rock and a hard place. If I accept the validity of non-Pentecostal ministry, I undermine the necessity of Spirit-baptism in ordination, but if I hold rigidly to the baptism as the *sine qua non* for ministry, I lose fellowship with non-Pentecostals.² Puzzlement led to study and reflection. It crystallized into two issues both of which relate the question of the baptism of the Holy Spirit to my responsibility as a shepherd of the church.

First, there is the issue of definition. The term, "baptism in the Holy Spirit" as we Pentecostals understand it, was borrowed from Holiness revivalism with its emphasis on personal spirituality. Is it time to drop that linkage and locate Spirit-baptism within the larger experience of the entire people of God?

Secondly, there is the issue of unity in the local church and the churches. Rather than leaving it to each pastor to think through the ramifications of his or her Pentecostal faith, important as that exercise is, perhaps a century after Charles Parham the climate has become favorable to undertake a broad based consensus on questions affecting Pentecostal dogma. Could such a move serve to unite the churches of God regarding this issue?

¹ See the *District Charter* (Western Visayas District Council of the Assemblies of God in the Philippines, 1994), article XX, section 3, a2, stipulating the "baptism of the Holy Spirit with initial physical evidence of speaking in tongues" as qualification for acceptance into the ministry of this District Council of the Assemblies of God.

² I have yet to find a Pentecostal church with a non-Pentecostal pastor although I have Pentecostal friends who have pastored in Methodist and Baptist churches.

These are questions from a pastor who also reflects upon his faith and the answers I propose are tentative.

DEFINING SPIRIT-BAPTISM

Recent debate about the baptism swings between two options: the baptism of the Holy Spirit as an aspect of conversion and as second stage experience.³ Both options limit the scope of the baptism to a personal initiatory experience. I prefer a third option, one that locates Spirit baptism in the history of the church as people of God.

The latter half of the last century was marked by an earnest quest for personal sanctification. The distinguishing mark of the Holiness movement was its emphasis upon entire sanctification or sinless perfection as attainable in this life through a second work of grace. In 1867 a call was issued to churches in the United States “irrespective of denominational ties” by the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Christian Holiness to “furnish an illustration of evangelical union, and make common supplication for the descent of the Spirit upon ourselves, the church, the nation, and the world.” It was hoped that those attending would “realize together a Pentecostal baptism of the Holy Ghost.”⁴ Vinson Synan marks the opening of this camp meeting on July 17, 1867 as the formal beginning of the Holiness movement. Actually the roots go back much further. As early as 1839 Asa Mahan, a colleague of Charles Finney, published a book entitled *Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection*. In 1870 the same author published *Baptism of the Holy Ghost*. Thus Spirit-baptism is not a uniquely Pentecostal terminology. Towards the end of the 1900s, a radical wing of the Holiness movement was emerging, “emphasizing such new doctrines as divine healing, the premillennial second coming of Christ, a ‘third blessing’ of ‘the fire’ and puritanical mode of dress.”⁵ “This shift, so helpful in understanding the rise of modern Pentecostalism, is but a strand in the thick cable that ties

³ Roger Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture, and Theology* (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 1995), p. 97.

⁴ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 36.

⁵ Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement*, p. 75.

this movement to its nineteenth-century origins.”⁶ The parting of the ways that would bring about modern Pentecostalism came when Charles Parham, himself a Holiness preacher, urged his students of Bethel College in Topeka, Kansas, “to search for the true evidence of Holy Spirit reception” directing them to Acts 2 and speaking in tongues.⁷ Henceforth Pentecostalism would be distinguished by the belief in a personal experience of the baptism with the Holy Spirit which is subsequent to conversion and evidenced by speaking in tongues resulting in empowerment for service.

Parham’s discovery is important both in what it abandoned and in what it retained. Parham abandoned the subjective Holiness evidence of Spirit-baptism and put in its place a visible outward experience verifiable by any onlooker.⁸ He abandoned personal holiness as the object of Spirit-baptism and put in its place power for witness. But he left unchanged the nature of baptism in the Holy Spirit as a second stage personal experience of the individual Christian believer. I believe that by borrowing Holiness revival terminology, Charles Parham unwittingly led future Pentecostals (and those who disagree with them) into a theological *cul de sac*. Subsequence and evidence have since constituted a major stumbling block in the path of other Christians by accepting the Pentecostal doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. It is worth noting that the term “baptism in the Holy Spirit” itself is nowhere employed in the Scriptures. It is never found as a noun but as a verb and always in the future tense and only used of the experience of the church on the day of Pentecost: “He shall baptize you” or “You shall be baptized” with the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16). When Pentecost came they were said to be “filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues,” *not* that they were *baptized* with the Holy Spirit. Recalling the outpouring of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles of Cornelius’ household, Peter did not say they were baptized with the Holy Spirit but that the Holy Spirit “came on them as he had come on us at the beginning” (Acts 11:15). When Paul met the Ephesian

⁶ Russell P. Spittler, “Theological Style among Pentecostals and Charismatics,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth B. Kantzer*, eds. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 291-98 (296).

⁷ J. R. Goff, Jr., “Parham, Charles Fox,” *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 660-61 (660).

⁸ Speaking in tongues is not just initial evidence, but initial *physical* evidence.

believers, he did not ask them the question that is often asked of believers seeking admission to Pentecostal churches, “Were you baptized with the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues?” He said, “Have you received the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

The absence of the term in Scripture, after the day of Pentecost, should alert us to the possibility that Spirit-baptism itself is basically a turning point, an historical event, a happening meaningful to the life of a people. There are two possible ways of looking at an event. We can think of it much like the Independence Day of the Philippines. We can celebrate June 12th today; we can remember it; we can even resolve to become more worthy of those who paid with their lives for our freedom because of our present reflection of it. But June 12, 1898 itself is an unrepeatable event; Rizal and Bonifacio and Aguinaldo are as dead as a doornail.

There is another way of looking at an event however. The eruption of Mt. Pinatubo is one example. It is an event that is still wreaking havoc upon the life of the people of Central Luzon in the Philippines. Pentecost as a historical event continues to touch our lives today because the Holy Spirit (like Pinatubo’s lahar) is still with us. We are not left with a mere memory. What happened at Pentecost was unique in that it signaled a new beginning for a Spirit-filled people of God. Thus the fulfillment of the eschatological promise carries with it an imperative: Having been baptized in the Spirit, be filled with the Spirit.

This is not just a play on words. What is true of the life in the Spirit is also true of other New Testament categories. We are risen with Christ so we put to death the works of the flesh (Col 3:1, 5). The church is one so let us be united (Eph 4:3-6). Because we are children of God we walk like daughters and sons of God (Eph 5:1, 2). So we seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit not as a new experience with God but rather to realize what is potentially ours.

After Pentecost the Holy Spirit filled the believers, was received by them, fell or came on all of them; it is never said that they were baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 11:44; 19:2, 6). It seems to me that in the baptism in the Holy Spirit, we are dealing with an expectation, an eschatological event, a future turning point in God’s dealing with his people that was fulfilled in Pentecost. The baptism in the Holy Spirit was the event that ushered in the new age of the Spirit. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is the event: filling, receiving and coming upon are descriptions of Holy Spirit activity during and after the event. The Holy Spirit can come on all, not only to a chosen few as in Old Testament times, because the

promise of the Father that the people of God would be baptized in the Spirit was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

Although I agree with the formula, “one baptism, many fillings” unlike Stronstad I see the one baptism not in the individual personal initiation into the Holy Spirit but in the eschatological fulfillment of God’s Old Testament promises to pour out His Spirit upon all flesh (all his people).⁹ If we accept the definition of the baptism in the Holy Spirit as eschatological fulfillment, we no longer have to be drawn into the debate whether the purpose of Spirit-baptism is soteriological or missiological, whether it is conversion initiation or second stage blessing. I would rather suggest that we turn our attention back to the eschatological framework of NT theology. Peter’s sermon is couched in eschatological longing fulfilled: “This is that....” Pentecost is the confluence of several OT eschatological streams. There was Moses longing that all the people of God would prophesy (Num 11:29). There was Ezekiel’s vision of the rebirth of a new people of God (Ezekiel 37). There was Joel’s hope of a universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit to reverse the years that the locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25, 28-32). And of course there was John’s Coming One, the Baptizer with the Spirit and with fire, and Jesus’ description of the Holy Spirit as gift and promise of the Father (Acts 1:4, 5). Pentecost then was like D-day, marking a turning of the tide in God’s dealing with his people and the nations. It inaugurated a new day of the Spirit. Paul did not see the gift of the Spirit as completed in Pentecost however. The Spirit of God has come indeed but as earnest, as guarantee of what is yet to come (2 Cor 5:5). Thus we can speak of the Holy Spirit having come already in fulfillment of OT promises but whose fullness is not yet, still awaiting the terminus of this present age and the ushering in of the consummation of the kingdom of God in the age to come.

Between the two poles of the “already” and the “not yet” is the present experience of the church. Already we are being filled by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is no longer the possession of a few but is available to all, even to those who were formerly not people of God (Acts 10:45). On the other hand, not all who received Jesus received the Holy Spirit in this eschatological role—this is the significance of the Samaritan and Ephesian episodes (Acts 8:16; 19:2). Some believers are “known to be full of the Spirit” implying that others were not (Acts 6:3). Believers have to be exhorted to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18), rather than to be drunk with wine implying that believers may be tempted to seek

⁹ Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture, and Theology*, p. 97.

substitutes for the authentic work of the Spirit. Today we groan inwardly, even though the Holy Spirit already helps us in our weaknesses and intercedes for us (Rom 8:23, 26-27). The Spirit has started His work in us but not perfected. We see through the glass, yes, but darkly. We are caught in the crosscurrent created by the new wind of the Spirit and the flow of the spirit of this age which still is. One has just begun; the other is passing away.

What Pentecostals say about being baptized with the Holy Spirit really ought to be understood as being filled with the Spirit which is the present, ongoing activity of the Spirit. I agree with Pentecostal scholars who see in Luke's language of "filling with the Spirit" not sanctification or conversion but prophetic inspiration.¹⁰ Speaking in tongues definitely falls in the category of the prophetic. The Pentecostal crowd's interpretation that the disciples were drunk fits well into the observable behavior of people who are in the "prophetic state."¹¹ But there ought to be no confusion between happenings in an event and the event itself.

UNITY IN THE BODY

Although pastors may be aware of difficulties in communicating as well as applying Pentecostal doctrine, nevertheless there are constraints that prevent them from bringing these questions into the open. Pentecostal pastors have to declare loyalty to official church dogma. Churches desiring affiliation with a Pentecostal denomination have to include statements of faith in their constitutions and by-laws. I am not saying that pastors are blindly giving assent to denominational distinctives for fear of losing their credentials. There is a very strong conviction that Pentecostalism is "latter rain revival" and "the full gospel." It is not merely that Pentecostalism has an added doctrinal dimension that other Christian communions do not possess. The experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is in itself a highly emotionally charged event that contributes greatly to the conviction of having reached an apex of spirituality. There is actually a commitment to

¹⁰ Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), p. 80.

¹¹ The new Hiligaynon *Maayong Balita Biblia* (Manila: Philippine Bible Society, 1983) translates "prophesied" of Num 11:25 as *nagsinggit sila nga nagwalay* meaning "they shouted and thrashed," i.e., in ecstasy.

the Pentecostal doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit that strengthens the belief that Pentecostal dogma is faith once-and-for-all delivered to the saints. Stock answers are available to answer the usual questions. If some people do not get the baptism, it is due probably to their own unreadiness (it might even be a matter of unresolved sin). A subtle pressure to “produce” Spirit-filled people in the church (as verification of orthodox Pentecostal doctrine) sometimes results in unorthodox methods. Every so often we have evangelists visiting us with a guarantee of getting everybody to “receive the baptism” with embarrassing results for both the people and the pastor who are left behind.

So the statement of faith not only clothes the experience with words, but transforms it into a war cry. Frank Macchia cites a criticism of the dogma of tongues-as-initial-evidence as an attempt to turn an experience into a “shibboleth of orthodoxy.”¹² Church history is replete with similar incidents. Hans Küng recounts how the word “catholic” evolved in two hundred years. When it was first mentioned by Ignatius of Antioch in 110 AD, it simply meant the entire body of churches. In the third century, during the struggle with heretics, the word shifted meaning to churches having official doctrine.¹³ But here the contradictory nature of catholicism as orthodoxy began to reveal itself for even as the church proudly declared its catholicity in terms of orthodoxy it was denying its catholicity in terms of universality!

The process of orthodoxy in the early church developed over a period of centuries. Even the question of the New Testament canon was not put to rest until well into the fourth century with Luther reviving the issue by his rejection of the Book of James. Compare the slow evolution of creedal statements in the church of the first millenium with the rapidity in which doctrinal statements become rigid confessions of faith in Pentecostal churches. The doctrinal formulation of the baptism in the Holy Spirit was made at the turn of our century. Less than fifty years afterwards, the major Pentecostal denominations had been established, bearing the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a basis for fellowship.

Orthodoxy built a doctrinal wall that separated true believers from heretics, providing a sense of safety. Like the monarchical bishopry it was meant to protect the church. The same mechanism may also have the opposite effect, however. Cecil M. Robeck Jr. drew attention to the

¹² Jean Daniel Plüss, quoted by Frank Macchia in “Groans Too Deep for Words,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1:2 (1998), pp. 149-73 (154).

¹³ Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Shedd and Ward, 1967), pp. 297-98.

paradox of wall building in an article¹⁴ inspired by Robert Frost's *The Mending Wall*. As an admirer of Frost's poetry myself, allow me to quote a more lengthy passage to better appreciate the poet's thought:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
 He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
 If I could put a notion in his head:
 "Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offence.
 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That wants it down."¹⁵

If you prefer pines rather than apple trees, why be free to do so. But we build our walls too eagerly and too soon and now we are afraid of cows intruding into each other's territories! The issue is not that Christians believe differently: the apostolic churches allowed room for a wide spectrum of diversity. But we build walls when we say to others, "Because of my experience of the Spirit, I live in a higher plane than you. You need me but I don't need you."

To Paul the very experience of the Spirit is a sign not of division but of the unity of the body: "There are different kinds of gifts but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service but the same Lord.... There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...we were all given one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor 12:4-6, 13). No exclusivist attitude here!

It is now nearly a century since Charles Parham and his students at Topeka, Kansas, defined the baptism of the Holy Spirit in terms which has since become the classic expression of Pentecostal belief. It is a good

¹⁴ Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?: Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2:1 (1999), pp. 87-103.

¹⁵ Robert Frost, "The Mending Wall," in *The Road Not Taken* (New York: Henry Holt, 1971), pp. 112-13.

sign that Pentecostals themselves (and not just their detractors) are taking a second look at Pentecostal dogma. Pentecostalism has made a deep impact upon Christianity worldwide. While there has been increasing acceptance of certain aspects of Pentecostalism such as in the domains of worship and spiritual gifts the same cannot be said of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and evidential tongues which is the heart of Pentecostalism. Has the time come for a Pentecostal *aggiornamento*? Rather than having each pastor to settle the matter for him or herself, perhaps a humble search for doctrinal clarity through a council of churches may be what is needed to settle theological differences that separate Pentecostals from their brethren. David S. Lim would like to see Pentecostals move into the stream of Evangelicalism but it is better I believe that the entire people of God move into the main stream of the Spirit!¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The Pentecostal churches are coming of age. In less than a hundred years Pentecostals have moved from the margins to the center of action in the Christian world. More is the reason to turn the light upon our cherished beliefs. Awareness of the growing presence of Pentecostals moved James D. G. Dunn to write his critique of the classic Pentecostal formulation of the baptism in the Holy Spirit with initial evidence of speaking in tongues.¹⁷ His was not the last word, of course. We believe that we are a prophetic people. Prophecy is of no private interpretation, however. "Let the prophet speak," Paul exhorted; he also added, "Let the others judge" (1 Cor 14:29). We Pentecostals have spoken indeed and with fervor. Now let others judge us and I say "amen" to that!

¹⁶ David S. Lim, "An Evangelical Critique of Initial Evidence," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1:2 (1998), pp. p. 219-29 (223).

¹⁷ See the Preface, James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Reexamination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).