

A REFLECTION ON THE “INITIAL EVIDENCE” DISCUSSION  
FROM A PENTECOSTAL PASTOR’S PERSPECTIVE

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I have been asked by the editors of the *Journal* to present, from a pastoral viewpoint, my perspective on the Pentecostal distinctive of tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At this stage of my ministry, pastoral responsibilities more than take up my time and energy, and they prevent me from doing more research to interact with the literature and to do extensive footnoting or bibliography normally related to a scholarly article. Beyond that, other Pentecostal scholars have arisen that are better able to debate the issues and creatively come up with insights.

Having apologized for my inadequacies, however, I will attempt to share my observations that may help awaken crucial issues. The subject is too vast because of historical, theological, experiential, and hermeneutical methodology implications. The question for the local church is the life transforming experience of God. The month I am writing this article we have had over one hundred of our children and youth filled with the Spirit and speaking in tongues for the first time.

ISSUES

At heart the issue is: Can the experience of speaking in tongues be considered normative? Can this experience be phrased in doctrinal terms? Some say there is no “smoking gun”-- no verse commanding “You Shall All Speak in Tongues.”<sup>1</sup> Others suggest love, character, or miracles are

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, F. F. Bosworth, *Do All Speak With Tongues?* (New York: Christian Alliance Publishing, n.d.), pp. 9, 17-18.

equal, if not better, evidences that one has been filled with the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> They may go as far as to say tongues may be normal and expected in the early church, but not normative.<sup>3</sup>

The early twentieth century Pentecostals had to stake out a position. Other churches were casting judgment on Pentecostals as being doctrinally wrong and emotional.<sup>4</sup> Some even labelled Pentecostals demonic! But Pentecostals saw a basis in Acts for a separate experience of grace called the baptism of the Holy Spirit whereby all could expect to speak in tongues, and that the doctrinal position and emphases of most churches did not reflect the reality of the Acts experiences. In short, theology made no room for the experience, and the experiences of the early church did not inform the theology of that time. J. Roswell Flower, perhaps trying to reconcile differing perspectives, felt one may be filled with the Spirit before speaking in tongues but that the initial outward evidence was tongues. He implied there may be a time gap between actually being filled with the Spirit and speaking in tongues but that the empirical knowing was the evidence of tongues.<sup>5</sup>

Today great revival is sweeping the church worldwide, more souls are being added to the church, and the charismatic Pentecostal revival is seen as the strongest force in Christianity, bringing in up to 80% of conversions from the non-Christian world. Instead of the Lord's despised few, Pentecostals are at the forefront of leadership in Christianity! Within this great revival are several positions:

1. Tongues are only one of the signs of the baptism of the Spirit. It is a prayer language that all may seek, but not all may obtain.<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, M. F. Abrams, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Kedgaon, India: Mukti Mission Press, 1906), pp. 69-70.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Larry W. Hurtado, "Normal, But Not A Norm: 'Initial Evidence' and the New Testament," in *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspectives on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*, ed. Gary B. McGee (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 189-201 (190).

<sup>4</sup> One example is the older Holiness churches such as the Church of Nazarene and Fundamentalist churches.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Roswell Flowers, "How I received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit," *Pentecostal Evangel* (January 21, 1933; reprinted September 7, 14, 1952); *Idem*. "Is It Necessary to Speak in an Unknown Tongue?" (n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Henry I. Lederle, "Initial Evidence and the Charismatic Movement: An Eccumenical Appraisal," in *Initial Evidence*, pp. 131-41 (131-32, 136-38).

view avoids the doctrinal issue and moves to the pragmatic "experience all the Holy Spirit has for you!" Amazingly in these congregations often 80% or more of the people speak in tongues! Wimber said this about the Vineyard church in Anaheim.

2. To claim Holy Spirit baptism as a second work of grace by faith. Outward signs either will come later or are not significant. Bill Bright of Campus Crusade promotes this.<sup>7</sup>
3. To focus on the value of tongues. Jack Hayford describes it as our privilege or God's provision for us.<sup>8</sup> Robert Menzies rightly focuses on the missiological emphasis.<sup>9</sup> Simon Chan speaks of intimate experience with God that breaks forth in tongues as a natural consequence of being full of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Frank Macchia in seeking to pursue new ground on the meaning of tongues, helps us to see tongues as essential to the gift. To him, tongues reveals human speech is limited in describing the mystery of God's redemptive presence.<sup>11</sup> We do not know how to pray. We long for more in the midst of a suffering creation and a limited humanity. It pushes us beyond human and cultural boundaries to see the missionary vision of God. Many Pentecostals had only focused on the outward evidence as a test of orthodoxy. In doing so they fell into the same trap that the early evangelicals and fundamentalists of the early twentieth century fell into: that doctrinal rightness was more important than what the experience did for us. As a result, many Pentecostals speak in tongues but have not applied that

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Bright, *The Holy Spirit: The Key to Supernatural Living* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1980); *How to Be Filled with the Spirit* (Manila, Philippines: Philippine Campus Crusade for Christ, 1971, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Jack Hayford, *The Beauty of Spiritual Language: My Journey Toward the Heart of God* (Dallas: Word, 1992), pp. 95-98.

<sup>9</sup> Robert P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts*, JPTSUP 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> 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. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 80-95.

<sup>11</sup> Frank D. Macchia, "Sighs Too Deep for Words: Toward a Theology of Glossolalia," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992), pp. 47-73; "Tongues as a Sign: Towards a Sacramental Understanding of Pentecostal Experience," *Pneuma* 15:1 (Spring 1993), pp. 61-76; "Discerning the Truth of Tongues Speech: A Response to Amos Yong," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 12 (1998), pp. 67-71; *idem*. "Groans Too Deep for Words: Towards a Theology of Tongues as Initial Evidence," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1:2 (1998), pp. 149-73.

experience to revolutionize their lives. Russell Spittler, focusing further on the experience, shares in classes at Fuller Seminary: that there are many experiences in the Holy Spirit that culminate in the experience of speaking in tongues.<sup>12</sup> That was obvious in the disciples' lives. They had seen signs and wonders as they walked with Jesus, they had performed miracles themselves, Jesus had breathed on them in John 20:21, and finally on the day of Pentecost, they spoke in tongues. Well known Latin American evangelist Carlos Annacondia places a major experiential emphasis on tongues in his book, *Listen to Me, Satan!*

We must clarify what we mean by the baptism of the Holy Spirit and why tongues is integral to that definition. Just as Marshall McLuhan said, "The medium is the message," tongues, properly understood is not only the evidence but the essence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit!<sup>13</sup>

#### TONGUES: INITIAL EVIDENCE

Let me clarify my position before I raise what I consider to be crucial issues for our movement. I believe tongues is the initial outward evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I believe it is normative and not merely normal. Can God fill someone with the Spirit apart from tongues? Of course He can! God can do anything. We cannot force God into a mould. To me the doctrine of tongues falls into the area of biblical knowability, of the outward evidence. How else can we know (biblically) and not just subjectively that we have been filled? Miracles in Samaria did not prove they were filled. Being struck by sunlight and having God talk to someone on the Damascus road was not filling. Seeing Jesus rise from the dead was not "it." The apostles knew because the Holy Spirit came upon others in the same way they received at Pentecost. The practice of tongues, however, falls in the category of privilege and universal need.

The Pentecostal movement has sometimes faced the wrong direction, answering the wrong questions, isolating the doctrine of initial evidence as a test of orthodoxy. We have focused on the initial evidence without

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<sup>12</sup> Russel P. Spittler, "Glossolalia," *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley Burgess, Gary McGee and Patrick Alexander (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 335-41.

<sup>13</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam, 1967).

understanding the fullness. Tongues is spiritual experience, not just doctrine to be analyzed. We must not merely react to those who oppose our position, we must be visionary. See the purpose, not just the orthodoxy. New Testament theology is theology on purpose.

Pentecostals sometimes fight the nineteenth century Holiness issue: Is the second work of grace for holiness (Holiness tradition) or power (Keswickian position)? The problem with the Holiness position was how to determine whether one attained such holiness. Then, holiness dealt with issues as theatre going, drinking, anger, wrong thoughts, etc. But holiness means a holy God invites sinful humans into relationship and service!

Pentecostals fight issues of normal vs. normative. Gordon Fee has helped Evangelicals stretch their thinking to the possibilities of tongues as normal New Testament experience.<sup>14</sup> Pentecostals have focused on the Luke-Acts material to show possibilities of normativity through theological intent.<sup>15</sup> This may have forced us into further defending the orthodoxy test.

In the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the twentieth century, hungry hearts sought to be true to all that God has said in his word. It was the bringing back of an old truth that would foreshadow the greatest revival the world has ever seen. This revival spread rapidly among the denominations and in the Roman Catholic Church. Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship was strong on tongues as the evidence of the baptism in the Spirit. Many Charismatics, however, were simply happy with the new experience but did not define it in the same ways classical Pentecostals did. They saw millions filled with the Spirit and speak in tongues, not focusing on doctrinal necessity but rather experiential reality.

We must re-examine our position on what tongues means and show how vital it is to whole Pentecostal worship and lifestyle. Theological rightness does not always lead to experiential fullness. As the classical Pentecostal movement we should have been the key resource for the Charismatic movement on tongues, gifts and deliverance. We have not developed further the whole context of Spirit-empowered living. At times

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<sup>14</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984) and Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: the Spirit in Luke-Acts*.

we have forfeited our mandate for the defense of one aspect of the mandate. We have been afraid to say the wrong thing for fear of censure by our colleagues, so we have not said much that is new.

The baptism of the Spirit transforms our relationship to God, helps us to expect the hand of God in the present and look to the future. By its very nature, when we focus on the rightness of the initial point, we miss the point! The best reinforcement of the Pentecostal doctrine must be in the lives of Pentecostal pastors, congregations, and ministries.

The intrinsic nature of tongues makes it the suitable gift evidencing Spirit baptism. That intrinsic nature must be understood and exercised to find fruition in our lives. "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself" (1 Cor 14:5). Tongues edifies because at heart it represents a communication in our spirits through the Holy Spirit to God! It is not a mystical, super-spiritual attainment. There is a divine purpose, and fulfilment of that purpose must be examined. Tongues is both outward evidence and internal operation in one!

My former colleague and good friend Roger Stronstad argues that throughout the Bible, Spirit-enduement had outward sign and vocational purpose. He argues strongly that we are not only a priestly people, but a prophetic people as well.<sup>16</sup> I believe that can only happen when we see that the outward sign as also part of the inward equipping. In the Old Testament, miracles, prophecy, wisdom, visions were given, not only as outward signs but also were part and parcel of the equipping for vocation. When the dove descended upon Jesus, He spoke under prophetic anointing to the crowd fulfilling the Isaiah 61 passage and confirming His calling. Tongues and empowering are not two separate things.

Tongues is the very tool that enhances our witness and walk with the supernatural Lord. There is power in fruitful living, in obeying the word of God, in organizational structure, in good scholarship, and in the miraculous. None of us would deny that. But the tongues is unique in that it is God's Spirit touching our spirit in praise—that highest possible communication and priority for our lives. From this position of powerful worship we step beyond ourselves to God's power to confront the enemy, deliver from bondage, and minister to one another. Tongues, if applied correctly, becomes powerful.

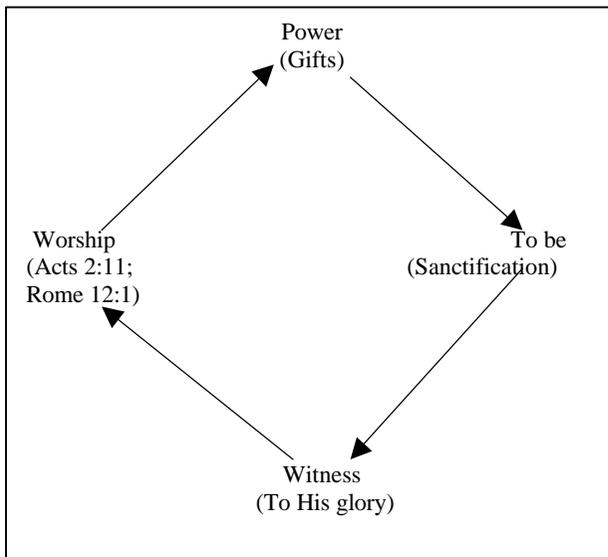
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<sup>16</sup> Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology*, pp. 59-62.

### WHY TONGUES?

It is time to take another look at the vital significance of tongues and how it relates to the ultimate evangelisation of the world. Early Pentecostals felt the reason God chose tongues as the initial evidence were as follows: tongues indicate a missionary gospel for all peoples on earth; tongues indicate control of the most unruly member of the body, tongues is a new sign for a dispensation in which God is doing a new thing. These were all good reasons, but I believe a close look at Acts 1:8 will reveal a wholistic perspective that may make tongues a living vital experience everyday in our lives. I see four key reasons why God chose tongues: power, sanctification, witness, and worship.

Firstly, God gives power. Those who minister to the Lord in tongues frequently tend to move readily in gifts. The early church experienced Pentecost. They knew of the shaking of God in their lives. They went forth in the boldness of that experience, ministering gifts of the Spirit. Gifts flow out of communion with God, being close to the heart of God and seeing the greatness of God. The empowerment is not simply to speak forth a witness but a release of all that God desires to do in our beings.



Secondly, God gives power to be. The Greek word *marture*" refers, not simply to a point of witness, but to a lifestyle dedicated to God. This is sanctification. It is being separated to serve God. Miracles without holiness will destroy witness. There is no staying power. A life of integrity and holiness is essential to true power with God. Holiness without miracles can become a self-serving, spirituality that leads to pride. But holiness and miracles keep us humbled before the awesomeness of God. We can claim no credit. We just want to be yielded to Him. We want to be cleansed channels of His blessings.

Thirdly, God gives power to be witnesses. What are we to be witnesses of? The answer is in the passage: the glory of God and the kingdom of God. Some witness to sadness and defeat. A victorious Christian has seen the greatness of God inspite of his own situation. He reflects joy and freedom. The major theme of the entire Bible is the glory of God and God's victory over Satan. We witness to the greatest issue of Scripture! Jesus is conqueror!

Fourthly, there is a close correlation between Acts 1:8 and Acts 2:11; 10:46, and 1 Cor 14:2, 15-16. The essential nature of speaking in tongues is the Holy Spirit touching our spirit to worship Him! Why do we feel edified when we speak in tongues? God touches our spirit with His greatness and awesomeness. Why do we wish to praise God when we have tongues and interpretation! This is not always the case with prophetic utterance. It is because when God's Spirit touches a fellow believer, the individual is overawed at the greatness of God. We want to rejoice with the believer over God's victory experienced at that very moment in the congregation. Usually an interpretation of tongues will challenge people to see God's goodness, love, holiness, heart, and concern, and we shall respond in praise.

We must see how each of these four reasons helps the other three. Worship enhances power! Where is our power from! Is it in magical incantations, psychic abilities, or inborn sixth sense? No, it is in relationship with God, knowing His heart, seeing His hand. That is where the gifts flow! We are nothing in ourselves. We desperately need His touch every day! That is why Paul says, "I speak in tongues more than all of you. (1 Cor 14:18). He needed to enter God's presence and see what the Father is doing! Then he could be the vessel God wanted him to be.

Worship enhances sanctification. We have power to be. When we truly worship God, we want none of the glory. Rather, we want our lives to glorify God in every aspect. We see His holiness. We want to be cleansed. We see His will, and we want to obey. Our walk will back our talk. We will love our brothers and sisters because God loves him. We

will see God's overall perspective instead of be overwhelmed with our problems.

Worship enhances our witness. We have power to be witnesses. If we must witness to His glory, how better to do that than in the victory of Jesus Christ. When we are released in praise, our lives are changed. People will not only hear the words, they will know the music of our Christian experience.

All four of these purposes go together. Some try to move in power without really giving God the worship due only to Him. Perhaps their lives are not backing up their claims. They justify immoral actions, mishandling finances, mistreating family. In turn, this lack of integrity hurts Christian witness.

Some worship without seeing how that worship should help them touch the world. Then, God's power does not touch the non-believer. Sanctification becomes inward – that which defines how Christians behave amongst each other rather than how we are to be the salt of the earth. Witness is weakened and fewer souls are saved.

Some try to witness without a daily victorious relationship with the Lord. They feel dry and stressed out. No longer are they sensitive to the Spirit's leading. No wonder just speaking in tongues without realising the purposes of the baptism of the Holy Spirit can become a dry ritual.

In years gone by, Pentecostals have taken the position that the baptism of the Holy Spirit has two aspects: empowering and the outward evidence of tongues. I propose that this twofold division is not the case in either the Old or New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the outward evidence was part of the enduement of power, the equipping!

Examine the case of Gideon, Samson, the judges, the prophets, all who moved in the Spirit. The outward sign and the empowering were closely intertwined. When a prophet received an anointing from above, he prophesied. When Samson received an anointing to destroy the Philistines, power was revealed in his life. When Gideon was anointed for leadership, all Israel saw it, and followed. When Bezalel and Aholiab received an anointing for building the tabernacle, God showed them how to do it. Just so, in the New Testament, tongues is far more than an outward sign of an inner empowering. It is part of the empowering that should be used daily and effectively in our lives.

### CONCLUSION

My prayer is that we, as a Pentecostal movement, will be Pentecostal in practice and in understanding. For instance, the Assemblies of God has grown from 300 in 1916 to thirty million today, and this means God's hand has greatly blessed the Pentecostal movement as a dynamic spiritual force in twentieth century Christianity. We Pentecostals have attained strength and maturity. We no longer need to simply defend the orthodoxy of a doctrine. We need to move from here to the understanding and development of that doctrine to all that God meant for it to be. If we realize how powerful this gift is, we will not relegate it to the shelf nor to the archives of past experience. We will be practicing Pentecost every day of our lives!