

**THE
PENTECOSTAL TRADITION
AT BAY**

by

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SECOND PREFACE

The following essay has not circulated for almost a decade. I am making it available again because I believe my colleagues in the Pentecostal movement may be ready for its message. I hope so.

The Reformation of the Church is stalled. The Pentecostal movement which showed such promise a generation ago is dead in the water. The things I predicted when this essay originally appeared have occurred. Read it for yourself.

Pentecostals are waiting for Jesus Christ to "split the eastern sky". This is the year 2000 A.D. (1997, vulgar). Our calendars are 3-4 years off. Our Lord was born 3-4 B.C. Everybody knows this, yet we act as though the wrong Year 2000 (the one which will happen in three years), bodes with some kind of prophetic significance. 1997 is the year that is really the dawn of the Third Day (millennium). If nothing happens this year, I believe traditional eschatology will begin to unravel. People will be looking for answers. You will find some of them in this essay. I hope you will read it enough times to understand it.

American fundamentalism is imploding intellectually, although not numerically. The Pentecostals can find a new future if they can return to their roots - *their true roots* - rather than this Gnostic aberration called "fundamentalism."

I have written numerous essays which carefully explore those roots. This essay represents one area of research, one aspect of our heritage which must be revived. If you desire a list of my publications, please correspond with me at the address below.

God bless you.

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PREFACE

Back in 1980, I preached an easily forgettable sermon in my home-town, Pentecostal church. In the sermon I identified two opposing factions fighting for the soul of the Pentecostal movement. The one was the optimistic, "Word of Faith" faction led by Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, and their sympathizers. The other was the more pessimistic and traditional faction of the denominational leadership. I predicted that the conflict between these two factions would come to a crisis point within five years. I was right.

In 1985 David Hunt published his presumed exposé of the "positive confession" movement (of which the Word of Faith leaders were a significant part): *The Seduction of Christianity*, a book in which he tried to link it with occultism and the New Age movement. His book caused a furor in Evangelical circles. Many joined him in a chorus of criticism on this burgeoning development in the Pentecostal churches. And while not a traditional Pentecostal himself, he became the authoritative critic for many Pentecostal leaders who also opposed this new rival (e.g. Jimmy Swaggart and David Wilkerson).

Intoxicated by the book's success, Hunt wrote a sequel, *Beyond Seduction*, in which he ostensibly took to the defense of true Christianity, as he saw it, and which he rather carelessly lumped Reformed Pentecostals (Pentecostals who adhere to the tenets of Christian Reconstructionism) with these same groups.

I do not fault Hunt for his attempt to condemn the pervasive self-centeredness and often heretical theology of the positive confession groups - flaws for which they hold no monopoly of, incidentally. Rather, I take issue with his arrogant pessimism which results in unwarranted rebukes of a theology that has endeared itself to Pentecostals for well over a century: a teaching which encourages the personal application of God's covenantal blessings found promised in His Word. My principal concern in preparing this essay was to warn my Pentecostal colleagues that arguments like Hunt's ultimately require a repudiation of the Pentecostal faith. Sadly, this has happened already to large portions of the Pentecostal denominations, in practice, if not in proclamation. Many Pentecostal churches are no different than any other Fundamentalist church. They have become "Baptistized." Their doctrinal distinctives have become a dead letter.

My religious background is rooted in the Pentecostal/Holiness wing of Southern Fundamentalism. I feel equipped to speak to this issue, for it represents the fruit of my personal struggle. At the age of 12, I experienced the "baptism of the Holy Ghost" with the initial evidence of speaking in other tongues - standard of the Pentecostal creeds. I grew up in southern Missouri and avoided liquor, tobacco, "honky-tonks," devil music, dancing, and in general, the "worldliness" the holiness Pentecostals condemn. I have lived, breathed, and preached these

traditions. Educated in their Bible schools, and having pastored in their oldest Pentecostal denomination, I believe I speak to these issues in good faith.

This essay first appeared in shorter form in 1982 and was sent to a number of my colleagues in the Pentecostal movement. It was received with a deafening silence. I was condemned to watch on the side-lines, powerless to stop the strangling of the heritage I love - the Pentecostal tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the religious phenomenon of this century has been the Pentecostal movement. Although consisting of numerous splinter groups, a practice typical of Anglo-American Protestantism, it has grown to many millions of adherents and sympathizers. Not only in the United States has its success been meteoric, but around the world, Pentecostalism flourishes. Even in the Communist regimes of Russia and China, the Pentecostal faith and message refuse to be stamped out.

This success transcends all denominational boundaries. Its message has invaded the nominal churches and even some quarters of Roman Catholicism (especially in Latin America). Its strength does not lie in the brilliance of denomination planners and strategists. It lies in the hand of God.

Pentecostalism has been called "the Third Force," exceeding the dynamics of the preceding Catholic and Protestant ones. When its message has been pursued to its matured expression, it may someday replace them as the leading representation of the Christian faith.

Why, then, do I assert that the Pentecostal tradition is at bay, when faced with such marvelous success? I say the *tradition* is at bay, while the *movement* continues to benefit from the *inertia* of that tradition's influence. It takes generations for ideas to work their way into society and affect it. My years of circulating among Pentecostal lay folk, pastors, and leadership, with my acquaintance with much Pentecostal literature, has convinced me that most Pentecostals do not know what a Pentecostal is. It is obvious that a tradition cannot long endure if it is not known and understood. It requires a leadership that is capable of articulating it.

Thus, while an institution may continue and perhaps even grow numerically, if it loses its understanding of self-identity, it *will* cease to exist in any meaningful way. The mighty Mississippi river, when it loses the "definition" of its banks, disappears into the mighty ocean.

THE TRADITION DEFINED

The Pentecostal churches and denominations are commonly distinguished for their emphasis upon the "baptism of the Holy Spirit," in most cases accompanied by the supernatural "gift of tongues" (i.e. glossolalia). When I refer to the Pentecostal movement, it is to those Fundamentalist churches which share such a common experience and emphasis.

This common experience, however, is not the essence of the faith and tradition of which I speak. Therefore, it is not within the scope of this essay to defend the merits of that doctrine, except to note the two major approaches to the baptism among Pentecostals. I make a distinction between traditional Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals known as "Charismatics." Traditional Pentecostals arose out of the "Holiness" revivals of the Arminian sects during the last half of the 19th century. In fact, Phoebe Palmer, an old-style Methodist evangelist, called her meetings "Pentecostal camp meetings" many years before the Pentecostal denominations were born.

The Charismatics are comparatively new. Arising in our generation, the Charismatics have come out of the mainline denominations and have been heavily influenced by their modernist, Barthian theology. The Charismatics tend to look for the fulfillment of a personal (often psychological) need in the Holy Spirit baptism. They also tend to create a false dualism of Spirit v. Law, which belies the influence of liberal theology.

Traditional Pentecostals, on the other hand, tend to see the baptism as a source of power for service to advance God's kingdom. This perspective they have inherited from the Holiness tradition, which taught a doctrine of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Also, having been disciplined by the orthodoxy found in 19th century Evangelicalism, they have been more willing to incorporate Old Testament moral standards into their practice. Because of this difference, there has always been an uneasy alliance between Pentecostals and Charismatics.

It was probably William Seymour, the black preacher at Azusa Street, who popularized "the tongues as evidence" doctrine around which most Pentecostal denominations have built their doctrinal distinctive. But before Azusa Street, there was Asa Mahan (former President of Oberlin College) and the Keswicks, who brought to acceptance the term "baptism of the Holy Spirit" late in the 19th century. And earlier still, as we noted above, "Pentecostal" was coined by the

Wesleyan-Holiness camp meeting preachers. Pentecostalism began as a movement long before the denominations came into existence. In fact, it can be argued that the formation of the Pentecostal denominations was a step that arrested the theological growth of the movement; for it created a religious hierarchy, and hierarchies are customarily skeptical of theological innovation and growth.

Nevertheless, the denominations were formed for the purpose of protection against persecution - an action which has been vindicated, obviously, by their astonishing numerical growth.

What of the tradition of which I speak? Pentecostal theology finds its roots in the Covenant theology of Oberlin College, particularly that of the celebrated preacher, Charles Finney.

Covenant theology, because of its belief in the immutability of God and the transcendence of moral law, teaches that the whole Bible applies to all men of all time. With this foundation, Finney at Oberlin articulated the only adequate theology for Pentecostalism: *that it is a systematic application of the promises of God*. But since man can only come to God on His terms, Finney prefaced his Pentecostal faith with Covenant theology in the form of New School (or Moral Government) theology. *The blessings of God's promises are privileges administered according to His Will, not as rights determined by man's will*. Finney did not lose sight of the sovereignty of God.

Couched in his postmillennial expectations (typical of New School theologians), Finney defined the baptism as an endowment of power for ministry to usher in the triumph of the Kingdom of God in the Church, and then, society at large. In his opinions Finney sometimes stood alone and was often misunderstood. But his message was compelling and offered American Christianity such a stirring and resourceful theology that it is still on the theological frontiers a century after his death.

His faith in the efficacy of the Atonement was on par with that of the Early Church. The New Covenant was what the Old promised: man pardoned from sin, liberated from Satan's authority, and redeemed from the principle of death. Later in the 19th century, the Pentecostals would embrace this view and teach *that the promises of God can be taken at their face value by God's people now*. The tradition which formed, although not always understood, was one which searched out the provisions of God's Covenant with His People - commandments which were to be obeyed and the promises which were to be believed and pleaded.

This became the Pentecostal tradition.

THE CRISIS WITHIN PENTECOSTALISM

When a religious movement grows and prospers, such that its detractors acquiesce to its permanent place in society, then the movement's leaders will often seek to come to terms with the *status quo*. They will tone down their rhetoric against the religious mainstream in order to become a part of that mainstream. Thus, the new movement is absorbed by the Establishment, maintaining its distinctives by creed only, while in practice, slowly melting into the ways of the rest of human society. This process has already occurred to the Pentecostal movement in the United States.

The change is evident in theology as well as personal morals. The agents for this change, more than anywhere, have been the schools, colleges, and seminaries of the movement. Without a literature of its own, these institutions relied extensively upon textbooks written by non-Pentecostals or writers educated in non-Pentecostal institutions. Unlike most segments of American evangelicalism, modernism has made little inroads in Pentecostal theology (except for the liberal Charismatics, as noted earlier). But in their revolt against "legalism" (morals based upon Fundamentalist tradition), students have leaned toward the antinomianism of the Charismatics. And that has produced much ferment in the southern-based denominations.

However, the greatest danger to Pentecostalism does not lay here. Rather, it is found, ironically, on the conservative end of the theological spectrum. To protect themselves from liberal theology, Pentecostals have relied too much upon fundamentalist Baptists. Baptist theology, as I will soon show, is just as deadly to Pentecostal faith and practice, as is liberalism.

It is paradoxical, but true, that modern Pentecostalism espouses an eschatological system which is often used by its opponents to hermeneutically deny the validity of Pentecostal distinctives: tongues, physical healing, miraculous answer to prayer, and so on. *That eschatology is dispensationalism.*

Dispensationalism received its modern expression through the pen of a Baptist theologian - C. I. Scofield. Dispensationalism has since become a doctrinal distinctive among Baptists and most Fundamentalists (although it can be argued - especially by Reformed theologians - that dispensationalism is implicit in Baptist theology.) Most Baptists have been critical of the Pentecostal movement from its beginning, and they will use dispensational arguments to resist its claims. Recent

camaraderie among Pentecostals and Baptists (witness the Baptist Charismatic, Pat Robertson) has been a joining of forces against a greater foe (i.e., secular humanism), rather than an irenic resolution between the two theologies.

Dispensationalism is a system of hermeneutics which stands in direct contradiction to Covenant theology, the source of Pentecostal beliefs. Where Covenant theologians will divide the human race into two classes - covenant keepers and covenant breakers - dispensationalists will divide it into three - Jew, Gentile, and Church. Covenant theologians will argue that the Church is the Kingdom people. Dispensationalists will say the Jews are. Covenant theologians see the entire Bible belonging to the Christian - every chapter, every verse, every line. Dispensationalists see the Bible applied differently to different classes of people and at different time periods.

Who has not heard this dispensational argument: "That Scripture does not apply to us today, but to the Jew during a different dispensation?" It is my contention, that the more consistently this hermeneutic is applied; the more Scripture is discarded until we are left with a few scraps of the Pauline Epistles. Some dispensationalists have gone so far as to deny the Sermon on the Mount applies to the Christian! *For all practical purposes, Fundamentalists have as much of a gutted Bible as do the Liberals.*

Pentecostals have strangely embraced dispensationalism, but not as consistently. And no wonder! If dispensationalism is true, then the Baptists are right: the "gifts of the Spirit" did go out with the Apostles.

One can measure the inroads this Baptist theology has made in the Pentecostal churches by observing their reaction to Kenneth Hagin's ministry and his Rhema graduates. Kenneth Hagin's teachings have caused a polarization within many Pentecostal churches. His followers profess faith in the "positive confession of God's Word," and emphasize the spiritual gifts and blessings Pentecostals profess to believe. Hagin's additional "blessing," which he incorporates into the Pentecostal system, is material prosperity. The fanatical emphasis his followers have placed on this aspect of his theology has tended to discredit the movement.

The significance of his ministry is its reaction against the profound pessimism and introversion among many Pentecostal denominations over the last generation. Dispensationalism has narrowed the vision of this once optimistic movement. Few Pentecostals still envision an extensive and victorious revival culminated by the return of Christ. Like the Baptists, they see a retreating church, at best not surrendering, at worst, barely avoiding general apostasy. Not so with Kenneth Hagin. He has partly resurrected the Pentecostal ideal of the movement's pioneers, such as Smith Wigglesworth and F. F. Bosworth - whom I regard as the last, great statesmen of the Pentecostal tradition. They saw a retreating devil and a marching Church in the last days.

Of course, I cannot espouse Hagin's theology because it deliberately distorts the covenant responsibilities that go along with covenant blessings. By neglecting the discipline of God's Law as the true source of blessing and victory, it is too promotive of self-interest.

Regardless, I can appreciate and defend his optimism and his insistence on taking the promises of God at face value. A true Pentecostal will do so.

POSTMILLENNIALISM: THE ORIGINAL PENTECOSTAL DISTINCTIVE

It would be good to make clear that I believe in the imminent, corporeal return of Christ to earth as a prerogative of Divine Sovereignty. That is, I believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in bodily form to the earth when God is pleased to utter the command. When that coming will occur, no one knows except the Father (Acts 1:7).

What I have just stated is a completely orthodox position. It is impossible for mere mortal man to know the timing or the sequence of events which lead up to the coming of our Lord. Therefore, a view of Bible prophecy *cannot be used as a test of orthodoxy or fellowship, unless it affects other cardinal doctrines in heretical ways.*

Thus, my opposition to dispensationalism is not based upon a disagreement over Bible prophecy. Rather, its negative impact on other doctrines are my concern: the doctrine of Biblical law which affects personal holiness, the doctrine of the Church which affects salvation, and the doctrine of the Church's mission which affects evangelism and discipleship. Dispensationalism has had a negative impact on the Pentecostal movement in these areas.

Postmillennialism teaches that it is the mission of the Church to drive the wickedness of Satan's kingdom out of the earth, just as the angels drove it out of heaven in Revelation 12. Scriptures, such as Matthew 16:18-19, Luke 10:19, and Mark 3:27, bear witness to this view.

Of course, dispensationalism claims that such passages are not for us today, but for the Kingdom Age. This is an implicit denial of God's sovereignty over His creation; for history is a part of His creation. And if He is not controlling and ruling over history, then we have a deistic God. But if God is ruling over history, then we must be in the Kingdom Age. Indeed, there was never a time when we were not in the Kingdom Age; for there was never a time that God was not King. "The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all" (Psalms 103:19). See also Matthew 28:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22-26.

The important thing to remember about the Millennium is that the only explicit passage describing it in the entire Bible is Revelation 20, and that in strong metaphor. The Millennium is nowhere described as a period of utopian

perfection. That does not occur until after the New Heaven and New Earth. *To properly define it, the Millennium is that time in human history when God will do for mankind what He could have and would have done for ancient Israel, except now on a global scale. "And in thee (Abraham) shall all families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 12:4).*

When the systematic application of the promises of God in His Word are pursued to their logical conclusions, the consequent blessings are identical to the Millennial Reign. Upon this deduction, we say that postmillennialism is an integral part of Pentecostalism. To a man, the precursors of the Pentecostal movement were postmillennialist. In this sense we can say that even Jonathan Edwards was a Pentecostal. It was his postmillennial theology which gave American Protestantism a vigorous faith and optimism for the future. And it was his view of the Millennial blessings for our present time that provided a theological basis for the Pentecostal confidence in the promises of God.

This connection was made in Finney's Pentecostal theology. In his reply as to why the promises of God have not been fulfilled, he said:

Another reason is, a disposition to defer the fulfillment of the promises to the millennium. In my apprehension, this is the very reason why the millennium has not already come: because the church (is) waiting for the effect to precede the cause. The millennium will be the fulfillment of these promises. Before they can be fulfilled they must be believed and pleaded. But the church seems to be waiting for the millennium first to come, and then they will lay hold of the promises How long shall the church thus act? How long shall the promises that are conditioned in their very nature upon our faith remain a dead letter in the Bible because the church is waiting for the fulfillment before they are believed.

And as to the Millennium and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, he adds:

(The) church may have received more or less of the New Covenant precisely according to their understanding of the fulness of the promised blessings and their faith in the promises . . . I have already said that since the seed has come to whom the promise was made, that is, Christ, that we are to regard the promise of the universal effusion of the Holy Spirit as a promise in the present tense, to be so understood and pleaded and its present fulfillment urged by the church. Until the church come to understand this as a promise actually become due and now to be received and treated by them as a promise in the present tense, the millennium will never come.

Such compelling statements were what motivated me, as a Pentecostal, to take a long look at the Christian Reconstructionist movement. This movement is largely the work of Presbyterian theologians (e.g. R.J. Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, Dave Chilton, Gary North, etc.). These men have provided a theology for a conquering Church. And although Presbyterians, they belong to the tradition of

the Presbyterianism of the Puritans and Jonathan Edwards with his immediate successors. They share the same roots with Pentecostalism, which explains why the fastest growing theological camp within the Pentecostal churches is that of Reformed Pentecostalism.

CONCLUSION

The Pentecostal movement existed long before the self-appointed, Pentecostal denominations came into existence. The "tongue-talking" Pentecostals simply appropriated yet one more of the many promises in God's Word - that of present access to the gifts of the Spirit. The Holiness sects which preceded them went as far as sanctification and victory over personal sin, and no farther.

Later, the Charismatics arose claiming the promises of God for physical health and material prosperity and challenged traditional Pentecostals with a faith they professed, but no longer practiced.

Reformed Pentecostals, a group which emerged in the 1980s in alignment with the Christian Reconstruction movement, have gone the ultimate distance in the quest for Christian victory: that of building a Christian civilization which will enjoy the societal benefits of international peace, prosperity, longevity, ecological renewal, and the Millennial blessing in general.

As for the Pentecostal denominations, they are poised for one of two directions: 1) either a return to their roots in Covenant theology and postmillennialism, or 2) to Baptist theology and hyper-dispensationalism. Either direction will radically change them. The former will lead them to their destiny; the latter will cause their absorption into the larger Gnostic trends of American Christianity.

FOOTNOTE ADDENDUM: When I first wrote this short essay in 1982, I had no knowledge of *our* heritage, as Pentecostals, in the ancient Celtic Church. The term "Celtic Church" refers to the people - many of them our ancestors - of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and related peoples who resisted the hegemony of the Roman Catholic institution and preserved their apostolic heritage. They were a people who were lovers of the Word and faith. They saw great miracles. They believed in spiritual gifts. To this day, Wales is known "the land of revivals." John Wesley's greatest achievements were among the Welsh. Pentecostal roots in America are concentrated in the Celtic high country of the Appalachians. There is an important connection here to an "almost lost" heritage. If you want to learn more about it, contact this author at the following address for additional essays: James Wesley Stivers. P.O. Box 8701, **Moscow**, ID 83843.