

I. Prologue:

At the meeting of Superintendents, Presidents and Deans at the National Office in June 2009, David Wells asked those present to name what they considered the top three theological/doctrinal issues facing our fellowship. Among the responses, initial evidence, holiness/life-style issues, and biblical authority were mentioned repeatedly. Eschatology was also named.

Various factors lie behind the shift in pentecostal belief and practice over the last century. Not the least of these is the change in the socio-economic status of Canadian pentecostals. As we have moved up the scale, our gaze has shifted downwards, from things above to things below. There is another factor here, and it is one that we can do something about – a loss of our identity. As we have lost sight of who God called us to be -- our contribution to the Kingdom – our thinking about our beliefs and practices has begun to drift in new directions. Perhaps we might say that some of our beliefs have faded from view altogether.

Our aim is to look at various aspects of faith and practice with an eye to historical, biblical and theological considerations. Instead of dealing with issues partitively, we will approach them aspectively. That is, instead of treating these subjects independently of one another, we will consider them as various aspects of our pentecostal identity.

The committee is not just concerned with Spirit Baptism and initial evidence. We cannot treat this subject in isolation from other aspects of faith and practice. In other words, a promotional push for Spirit Baptism is not the cure-all for our movement. For this practice to be relevant today, it should be redefined in light of our calling as a movement, and then re-envisioned as a central aspect of community life. Pentecostalism is not about speaking in tongues as a private recreational activity; pentecostalism is our way of fulfilling our God-ordained purpose.

Religious movements, as all social movements, are complex phenomena, not reducible to one or two readily discernible features. To outline a religious group with a few distinctive attributes is to sketch a caricature rather than a portrait. Such description, while convenient for differentiating between similar groups, does little to evoke the actual life or *Sitz im Leben* of a group.

Early twentieth century Pentecostals were most easily identified by their emphasis on Spirit Baptism. Talk of Spirit Baptism dominated the pages of their periodicals and newsletters, and it was what struck early observers who attended their meetings as most inspiring or most troubling. The characterization of Pentecostals as those who spoke in tongues served to distinguish them from other Christian communities, but it was only a partial description back then, and it is less suited now.

The Charismatic Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the so-called Third Wave begun in the 80s has globalized speaking in tongues as a common spiritual expression. What was once largely a practice of Pentecostals is now mainstream. To define Pentecostals as those who speak in tongues, therefore, does little to differentiate our movement. Indeed, no singular behavioral trait serves to describe us. Herein lies the dilemma of fashioning a pentecostal identity on anything less than a broader foundation. And if we are not sufficiently descriptive, we will fail to be prescriptive.

The aim of the Theological Study Commission in engaging the question of our identity, is not about rebuilding the walls that once set us off from other believers. As people of the Spirit we rejoice that we now share so much in common with other fellowships -- pursuing the things of the Spirit for the glory of God. At issue is whether we will make the contribution to the Kingdom of God that we are particularly suited for. As Brian Stiller said when addressing a group of pentecostal ministers about their role in the global church: "God doesn't need more charismatics. He needs Pentecostals to be Pentecostals."

To this end, we will examine various aspects of our belief and practice, and do so with consideration for our beginnings. We will look at biblical and historical roots to hear again the call of God on us and how the first ones in our movement responded to it. There is no intention here to tie us to the past, some Golden Age, anchoring us to outdated means of fulfilling our mission. That said, we should listen to their counsel and pay attention to their actions. Jacques Barzun, toward the end of his 800 page consideration of 500 years of Western Culture, posited 12 “generalities” (rather than laws) he had observed. One of them is pertinent for us: “A movement in thought or art produces its best work during the uphill fight to oust the enemy; that is, the previous thought or art. Victory brings on imitation and ultimately boredom.” [*From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present*, p. 655]

Pentecostals at heart are innovators and risk takers, entrepreneurs who follow the leading of the Spirit. This is the way we began; this is the way we must continue, that is, if we are to remain pentecostal. Nevertheless, to forget the divine inspiration of the first Pentecostals, that is, to be victims of historical amnesia, is to forfeit a heritage that serves to point the way to fulfilling our destiny in the Kingdom.

May God help us. .

II. SPIRIT BAPTISM (Stronstad); PENTECOSTAL ESCHATOLOGY (Johnson)

Spirit Baptism and apocalyptic eschatology are two of the primary constituent elements of pentecostalism and from the inception of the movement they have been interconnected. It was this perfect blend of hope and power that lay at the heart of pentecostal belief and practice. An eschatological interpretation of Spirit Baptism gave shape to pentecostal beginnings, fostering a “missional church” long before the term became a buzzword. Their appropriation of Peter’s quotation of Joel 2 in Acts 2 that *in the last days* God would pour out his Spirit was central for early pentecostal self-understanding. If Peter

could say that the coming of the Spirit marked the last days, how much more did it seem true for those at the turn of the century who experienced Spirit Baptism *en masse*. They typically described themselves as a Latter Rain movement – the recipients of the last days’ outpouring of the Spirit.

This connection between their understanding of eschatology and Spirit Baptism went further. Since they were at the end of the end, they would not settle for an interpretation of their experience of Spirit Baptism that the Spirit was only for them. They were convinced that the Spirit would enable them to finish what Jesus had commanded: to preach the gospel throughout the world. The Spirit was not just a sign of the soon return of Jesus, but was also the means to bring about a great revival before the *parousia*.

Roger Stronstad’s great contribution to biblical studies is his work on the narrative in Luke/Acts. [I will not attempt to summarize Roger’s work here; this paragraph highlights a few aspects.] His work is better known in the scholarly community than it is in our fellowship, which we hope will change soon. In both monographs and articles, Roger has made the case that the Lukan understanding of Spirit Baptism is that of prophetic speech. This prophetic speech is the fulfillment of the promise made by Jesus in Acts 1.8, that the community would receive power for witness. He has arrived at this conclusion by meticulous attention to the text of Luke and Acts, observing patterns and motifs in the Lukan narrative. For example, Luke is precise in his use of terms: he employs the terminology of “baptism in the Holy Spirit” to describe the reception of the Spirit and “filled with the Holy Spirit” to indicate subsequent fillings.

III. The Integrating Belief Of Early Pentecostalism: Jesus, Soon Coming King

An interrelated set of beliefs and practices formed the identity and energized the mission of early pentecostals. One particular belief served a hermeneutical role, serving to shape beliefs and practices (many of which were inherited from Holiness or other evangelical

groups) into a distinctly pentecostal ethos. While the Baptism of the Holy Spirit with tongues as the sign was certainly at the heart of what made Pentecostals different from those who preceded them, that doctrine took on its particular shape and thrust due to another conviction. And it is this conviction that continues to distinguish a pentecostal interpretation of Spirit Baptism from a fairly common Charismatic view of it. [Whereas pentecostals have looked to Lukan texts, and seen the work of the Spirit through the Church for mission in the world (revival movement), Charismatics have focused on Pauline texts and seen the work of the Spirit within the Church (renewal movement).]

The integrating belief for early pentecostals was that Jesus was coming soon. This one hope, more than any other singular belief, shaped the life and practice of early twentieth century Pentecostals. In other words, this expectation permeated the atmosphere of early pentecostalism, affecting all that was said and done. Stephen Land thinks that it was the expectation of the soon return of Jesus that prompted the first pentecostals, many of whom were coming out of the holiness movement, to intensify their holiness practices. It was surely the belief in the soon return that prompted what Vinson Synan called “the missionaries of the one-way ticket.” With a belief in the empowering of the Spirit and the urgency of the hour (and for some of the first missionaries, a belief in xenolalia), some pentecostals actually sold what they had to raise just enough money to get on the boat. And the disregard many of the early pentecostals had for the values of this world was entirely consistent with their apocalyptic sense of the end. This world was quickly passing away. The Kingdom of God was already breaking in with power.

In the early Pentecostal attempt to restore primitive Christianity, they also adopted her eschatology. The first Christians constructed their life and practice on the understanding that they were the community experiencing the arrival of the days of God’s promise. The last days, the days the prophets spoke of, had arrived with the Messiah. But then he left, with a promise to return. Their eschatology was “already and not yet,” to use the popular terminology of G.E. Ladd. The time of God’s visitation had already begun in Jesus, but

the completion of God's work on earth and in heaven was still future.

Others have noted the Christological focus of early pentecostalism. Before Aimee Semple McPherson named her denomination Foursquare, the idea of a recovery of a Christ-centered proclamation -- the Fourfold Gospel, or the Full Gospel -- was already being preached in Alliance circles. As A.B. Simpson taught, the Fourfold Gospel was Christ as Saviour, Christ as Sanctifier, Christ as Healer and Christ as Coming King. The Pentecostals who would form the initial nucleus of the Assemblies of God (US) and the PAOC would substitute Baptizer for Sanctifier. No first generation Canadian pentecostal emphasized this Christology more than A.H. Argue. His preaching regularly rehearsed these four aspects of pentecostal theology. Each of these four emphases has an eschatological aspect. There is salvation and healing and Spirit Baptism because Christ has come, and these works of Christ are increasing in frequency because Christ is a soon Coming King. Jesus was at the center of early pentecostal theology and practice, particularly as the one who was soon to come for them.

If the "not yet" was a driving force for them, directing the outworking of their spirituality to a lost world, it was accompanied by an intense experience of the "already" of Jesus' presence. The experiential nature of pentecostal worship is one of our trademarks, and our tendency to bring an experiential perspective to our preaching and Bible reading is one characteristic that has drawn the concern of other evangelicals. This approach came naturally (supernaturally) to pentecostals. Pentecostalism was birthed in an atmosphere of the experienced power of God. Believers were baptized in the Spirit, healed of diseases, delivered from bondages. The earliest reports of their meetings chronicled their heightened sense of the presence of God among them. They responded in extended times of prayer and song, and did so, as Paul phrased it, with the mind and with the Spirit. Not surprisingly, the curious who gathered to see what was going on in their meetings often found themselves drawn in by what they observed. Consequently, an expectancy for more of God pervaded future meetings, filled camp meetings and kept saints lingering at

makeshift altars into the wee hours of the night.

The early pentecostals experienced the already of the Kingdom in vivid and concrete fashion. This is indicative of an experiential approach to spirituality, that is, a spirituality that invites the believer to participate in the things of the Spirit. A gathering of Pentecostals is an opportunity to encounter God with life-transforming results. The Kingdom is already breaking in as the Spirit reveals the power of God in individual lives.

And this sense of the nearness of God's presence only intensified their belief in the imminent return of Jesus. As they sensed the presence of God among them, it only reinforced what they fervently believed. They worshipped and prayed as if Jesus the Baptizer and the Healer was among them. How easy it was, then, for them to believe and act as if Christ's return was near. As they felt him close, it only strengthened their sense that his return was close. Their conviction about the already of God's Kingdom, being experienced in salvation and empowerment in their gatherings, only strengthened their resolve to live in light of his return. In other words, these ideas of "the already and the not yet" were bound together.

As we consider ways to renew our movement, our understanding and teaching of eschatology should be examined. The Achilles' heel of a revival movement is its built-in obsolescence. It is a movement of the short-term, which prepares a people for transformation, a new reality. A revival movement, by definition, is either in revival or preparing for one. Such a cyclical view is ideal for the short-term, but chaotic in the long-term. Factor in the pentecostal belief that revival prefaces the end of the world (evidenced by a decline in social conditions, the world "going to hell in a handbasket"), and there is a further complication. As one student of mine suggested, the sooner we get rid of this idea of the soon return of Jesus, the better off we will be. After all, he said, He hasn't come yet. No argument on that last point.

A movement can only cry “Jesus is coming soon,” meaning soon, so often before people stop believing it. The cry recedes into the background, or is repeated liturgically, but without the passion once associated with the idea. Moreover, we have adopted eschatological systems that in the long run may be counter-productive to Kingdom economy. Our fascination with the Rapture and the prophetic charts (“when are we getting out of here?”) may have moved us away from engagement with the mission we were given. To use the phrase engraved on the communion table at Lasalle Pentecostal Church when I was a kid, we must “occupy until he comes.”