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The Paradox of Pentacostalism

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Reid Simmons (I have changed his name) paused a moment in his sermon to give his interpreter time to translate his latest sentence.

The crowd of Japanese who had gathered at the Tokyo street corner to hear what the American GI had to say, suddenly brightened—and kept their eyes on him instead of turning them to his interpreter. Reid repeated his sentence and waited again for the translation. Then someone spoke up: “You don’t need to be translated, sir. You’re talking Japanese!”

He was indeed. And for the next twenty minutes, Reid appealed to his listeners in their own language to give their hearts to Christ. Six of them said they would.

Reid Simmons was a new Christian at this time. After the Korean War he had been stationed with the U.S. Army in Alaska. To kill time, he had picked up a book by Billy Graham, and it had led him to Christ. Transferred to Japan, he hunted up local Christians and began evangelistic preaching on street corners while they interpreted.

Immediately after this occasion when he preached in Japanese, he and his friends studied their Bibles with special excitement. For the first time they noticed Acts 2:1-4: “When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, . . . and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

Not long afterward, Reid returned to the United States. “Do you know of any church that talks in tongues?” he asked people. Soon he was a member of one of the largest “pentecostal” denominations in America.

When he told his new Christian friends about his Japanese experience, they were delighted. Outsiders often complain that pentecostals merely speak gibberish. Reid

seemed to prove that “tongues” could be real languages.

To their disappointment, however, Reid was unable to repeat his Japanese experience, even though his friends strongly encouraged him to.

He tried to please. As they prayed for him, he prayed for himself; and one day it appeared that their prayers were answered. From deep down in his being something new gushed forth, a flow of sounds and syllables that filled his friends with exquisite joy.

But it wasn’t Japanese! It was not, in fact, any known language.

Reid told me later that letting the “tongue” break out from time to time made him feel good and helped him preach more fervently. But “talking in tongues” among the pentecostals and preaching in Japanese on a Tokyo street corner remained two separate and distinct experiences for him.

Puzzled, he went to college to train for the pentecostal ministry—and this led to a moment of decision. As he studied his Bible assignments, he discovered that several doctrines taught by his new church did not seem to be based on Scripture. It occurred to him that pentecostal tongues talking, so different from his miraculous gift of Japanese, might also be unscriptural. He prayed intensely and one day decided to resist the impulse to talk in tongues. Suddenly the desire left him, never to return. Reid changed to another denomination and is now teaching in a Christian school in the Middle West. He is personally convinced that pentecostal tongues talking has nothing to do with evangelistic preaching in foreign languages.

Recent Growth

Pentecostalism is said to be growing rapidly today. Like Reid on his return to the United States, thousands of other people are eagerly seeking to talk in tongues.

In New York last July, 7,000 people attended the 1973 meeting of the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International, the largest annual gathering in their history. An International Lutheran Conference on the Holy Spirit held

last year in Minneapolis attracted 8,000. In what may be the most astonishing development of all, 20,000 people last June lined the Notre Dame stadium to participate in a pentecostal-type celebration led by 600 Catholic priests and a scarlet-robed cardinal. Seven years ago the first annual charismatic gathering in Notre Dame drew an attendance of 90! It is estimated that 200,000 American Catholics are currently involved in pentecostalism. If plans carry, February and March, 1974, will see a World Conference on the Holy Spirit conducted in Jerusalem with an ecumenical attendance of 3,000 Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox.

We must of course be on guard for news-media dramatics. Even if, for example, the estimate of 200,000 Catholic pentecostals is correct, 45 million Catholics remain outside the movement! Most Americans are not talking in tongues. Just the same, many of them, like Reid Simmons in his “pentecostal” days, puzzle about the phenomenon and wonder whether it is of the Lord or not.

Their concern deserves our careful attention.

Pentecostal Paradox

One of the most scholarly books on the tongues movement is *The Pentecostals*, by W. J. Hollenweger,¹ a minister who served ten years as a Pentecostal pastor and who retains his sympathy for tongues speakers. Another helpful work is *Tongue Speaking*, by Morton T. Kelsey,² an Anglican priest who appreciates the pentecostals in his own congregation. Much of what follows in this article is based on information presented in these friendly and well-informed books.

When you ask people who have talked in tongues to tell what the experience meant to them, they are likely to tell of a deeply satisfying event that led them to enjoy the Bible, love Jesus, and give offerings. They may also tell about people who were miraculously healed at pentecostal meetings, and quite likely they will insist that ecstasy is not essential for talking in tongues.

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When we look closer, however, a paradox appears. Pentecostals teach that their talking in tongues is the result of a direct and personal "baptism" of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, they say that this is "the only experience a Christian needs in order to have the fullness of Christian life."³

Now, the Holy Spirit in pentecostal theology (as in ordinary Christianity) is as truly "God" as is the heavenly Father; and, of course, to pentecostals as to other Christians, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Should we not then expect that pentecostals, who claim to have had an experience with God uniquely superior to those enjoyed by all other Christians, should demonstrate a kind of love richer and broader than that shown by all other Christians? And since the Holy Spirit is the source of wisdom as well as of holiness (Ephesians 1:17), should we not expect to find in their behavior a unique soundness and maturity of judgment?

Sad to say, however, typical pentecostalism does not meet those expectations. Indeed, after an initial experience of warmth and joy, it often yields the very opposite.

Some churchmen today hope that pentecostalism will provide the cement that will at last bind the world's churches into sweet ecumenism; but if it does bring Methodists, Baptists, and Catholics together, it will do more for them than it has accomplished for the pentecostals themselves. Pentecostalism is deeply divided, and most of the separate denominations regard all the others as not worthy of the name "Pentecostal!"⁴ In fact, in one tongues-speaking church a woman had a "vision" once in which she was shown that the other pentecostals were actually controlled by demons!⁵

No one is perfect. We do not criticize pentecostals for their faults. Not at all. We ask God to forgive them. We regretfully refer to their problems only in order to evaluate their claim to be uniquely baptized by the Holy Spirit. For that matter, pentecostal writers themselves readily admit that they have serious problems.⁶

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The Paradox of Pentecostalism

C. Mervyn Maxwell

Pentecostalism is sweeping the mainline churches today. Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics are speaking in tongues and visiting faith healers. Many Christians are concerned. Should they be speaking in tongues too?



Paradox of Pentecostalism

(Continued from page 17)

One of the most visible characteristics of pentecostalism has been the number of energetic "faith healers" which it has produced. Because God is good and wants His followers to have only what is good, faith healers insist that any believer can expect instant healing merely for the asking. They claim thousands of miracles and collect millions of dollars. Not a few contemporary pentecostal authorities, however, frankly admit that only a small percentage even of the persons who appear to be cured by these men remain permanently healed after the excitement passes.⁷ Indeed, they look with disapproval on the "arrogance" and "moral lapses" of their own faith healers.⁸

Another pentecostal paradox appears when we inquire about Bible study. Tongues talking helps some people enjoy their Bibles; but for many it makes Bible study virtually unnecessary. For example, the large pentecostal membership in Brazil depreciates all book learning, including Bible study,⁹ and "Zionist" pentecostalism among the Bantus of Africa is so tainted with heathenism as to be an embarrassment to the whole movement.¹⁰

Yet both Brazilian and Zionist pentecostals talk in tongues and think they are full of the Spirit.

Another pentecostal paradox is the direct harm that tongues can do. Morton Kelsey, who is a psychologist as well as a priest, reluctantly confesses that children and uninhibited persons who are encouraged to talk in tongues may suffer real psychological damage. "This accounts, at least in part," he says, "for the moral excesses of the early days of the pentecostal move-

ment" which are "so lamented by their more perceptive writers."¹¹

We are driven to ask, how can an infilling of our loving God damage a person or lead him to "moral excesses"?

How could it?

Biography of a Movement

The pentecostal paradox can be solved by a variety of methods. One is to take a look at the history of speaking in tongues.

Biographers of modern pentecostalism usually say that it was born in both Kansas and California. In 1900 a group of people led by Charles F. Parham studied what the New Testament says about tongues, and early the following year experienced what they thought was the gift.

Parham traveled widely with his new message and by 1905 was holding meetings in Texas. Neeley Terry, a black woman from California, attended a Parham meeting. On her return to Los Angeles she persuaded her friends to invite one of Parham's converts, the black preacher, W. J. Seymour, to speak in their church. Seymour's first sermon offended the people, but in the prayer circle that gathered at his lodgings tongues broke out suddenly. The group, now numbering whites as well as blacks, prayed and shouted for three days and three nights nonstop. Soon they secured an old church, and the Azusa Street Mission was launched.

Testimonies of converts and unfavorable publicity in newspapers attracted attention to the Azusa Street Mission. Soon tongues-speaking "pentecostal" congregations sprang up all over America and in countries overseas.

The new movement grew vigorously, formed a number of separate denominations—notably the Assemblies of God and the Church of God (Cleveland)—and then, as it grew older, lost much of its original warmth.

In the 1960's a new wave of pentecostalism began to spread across America, this time inside the traditional churches. In contrast to the Topeka and Azusa Street beginnings of "classical" pentecostalism,

this new movement, known as "neo-" (that is, new) pentecostalism, was born among university students and respectable members of Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Catholic congregations. Today it is neo-pentecostalism rather than the classical form that is experiencing the more dramatic growth in America.

This simplified outline does not do justice to the full facts. Modern tongues speaking did not really originate in Topeka but can be traced much farther back. French children (the little prophets of Cevennes) and English Quakers talked in tongues in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as also did Catholic Jansenists at about the same time. In the nineteenth century tongues speaking was prominent among the early Latter Day Saints (Mormons); at the dedication of their tabernacle in Salt Lake City hundreds of elders spoke in tongues. Shakers also spoke in tongues. In Britain in 1831 tongues occurred in a congregation of Edward Irving, one of the most popular and effective ministers in the Church of England at the time. And we could speak of other manifestations as well.

Mention of the French children and the Mormons and Edward Irving must cause us to stop and ponder. The little prophets of Cevennes went from talking in tongues to militant revolution, killing and being killed. The Mormons practiced polygamy. Edward Irving's immense congregation was reduced to anarchy. His conscientious associates sorrowfully asked him to resign, and three years later he died, confused and dejected, at the age of 42.

Were the French children and the Mormons and the "Irvingites" really and truly filled with the Holy Spirit? Were they really blessed with a unique and holy baptism, superior to anything experienced by all other Christians?

The Paradox Resolved

Because of the weaknesses in pentecostalism, some people solve its paradox by attributing its tongues talking to demon posses-



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sion; but this only introduces a second paradox. After all, pentecostals appear to be about as good and honest on the average as most other Christians. If, then, we ought not to attribute their tongues to the devil, and if we cannot attribute them to the Holy Spirit, is it not reasonable to see in them an emotional experience, the value of which varies from person to person?

Morton Kelsey, sympathetic as he is, comes to this conclusion; and I think that he is justified not only from what I have said thus far, but also by two further observations I would like to make.

1. Talking in tongues may seem unique and different to people who haven't had time to read much about the past, but to anyone who is acquainted with nineteenth-century revivals, it is only one of several similar phenomena. When America was young and its frontier was large and lonely, camp meetings were very great events. By hundreds and thousands, people left their log cabins to hear fervent preaching and to get individual religion.

During these meetings it was common, at moments of peak interest, for large numbers of people to fall uncontrollably to the ground. Referring to it as "being slain of the Lord," preachers saw this falling phenomenon as a fulfillment of Isaiah 28:13, just as pentecostals today view their tongues as a fulfillment of Acts 2.

Another response, known as "the jerks," made people's heads turn violently from side to side. Women with their hair curled into buns often jerked so forcefully that their hairpins flew out releasing long strands of hair that snapped like

lion-trainers' whips. Barking like dogs occurred at some camp meetings, and shouting was especially characteristic of the Methodists.

Jerks, falling, barking, shouting—and sometimes "visions" and talking in tongues—were all regarded in frontier revivals as evidence of God's power, and they brought to repenting sinners a sense of assurance and peace. People arrived at camp meeting hoping for these phenomena to take place. And if they were susceptible persons, they fulfilled their own desires.

The parallel with pentecostalism is apparent.

2. Finally we must make a quick comparison between Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14, the two major chapters in the New Testament that discuss talking in tongues.

The original tongues experience occurred in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, A.D. 31, and is described in Acts 2. It came to 120 persons who were "with one accord in one place"—all united in their love for one another and for the Lord. Empowered with their new gift, they immediately proclaimed the gospel in the native languages of people who had come to Jerusalem from many parts of the world to attend the Feast of Pentecost.

A few decades later, however, very different tongues talking arose in the Greek city of Corinth. Paul did his best to bring sense out of the nonsense. Unfortunately, many of the Corinthian Christians were so proud of their "gift" that they did not trust even Paul's judgment. This made it necessary for him, tactfully, to refrain from calling their experience a counterfeit, but instead to offer wise counsel which, if followed, would nonetheless cause them to reject it.

In 1 Corinthians 14 he forbade all women to talk publicly in tongues—a piece of advice acceptable in those days in view of the status of women at the time. Then he told the men that two or three of them—and only two or three of them—could use their tongues at any given church service, and he limited even this permission to occasions when someone was present who could interpret what they said. He added

that as for himself he would rather preach five words intelligently than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue!

Clearly the phenomenon in Corinth was not the same as the one in Acts. Christians in Corinth were not "of one accord in one place" but were, in actual fact, immoral and quarrelsome—as the rest of 1 Corinthians conclusively reveals. Furthermore, their "gift" served no great evangelistic purpose. It was not used, like the true Pentecostal gift, to win foreign converts. Neither did Paul suggest that if they tried to, they could ever use their tongues to win converts. He did *not* tell them to go to the docks and win converts among the sailors and businessmen who streamed into Corinth from all over the Roman Empire. He did *not* tell them to use their gift in Britain, or in Spain, or in any other pagan country. He did *not* encourage them to use it very much even in church, where conceivably foreign-language visitors might be present. The only place where Paul permitted them to use their tongues unrestrained was the privacy of their own homes. Obviously, they were not speaking real languages, but only making emotional noises.

Reid Simmons decided that talking in Japanese was a true fulfillment of the gift of Acts 2, a genuine, useful, and evangelistic gift. He decided that so-called pentecostal tongues talking is like the emotionalism of 1 Corinthians 14.

Would it not be a good thing if everyone recognized that what is called pentecostalism today is not true Pentecostal language speaking as described in Acts 2, but is more akin to the emotional Corinthian phenomenon which Paul so earnestly sought to play down?

1. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972.
2. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1964.
3. Kelsey, p. 77.
4. Hollenweger, p. xix.
5. Hollenweger, pp. 25-26.
6. See, for instance, Kelsey, p. 83.
7. Hollenweger, pp. 68, 355.
8. Hollenweger, p. 35.
9. Hollenweger, p. 92.
10. Hollenweger, p. 161.
11. Kelsey, pp. 84, 222-224.