

SOUTHWESTERN ASSEMBLIES OF GOD UNIVERSITY

School of Distance Education

Reflection Paper: Spirit Baptism and Tongues—Are Tongue the Initial Physical Evidence?

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ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

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Recently, while teaching a church membership class, one of the students raised questions regarding the Assemblies of God doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and our position, as an AG church, on the initial physical evidence of this experience. Though she wanted to become a member, she still had reservations about our Pentecostal distinctive. While I gave a thorough explanation of our teaching from Scripture (and P.C. Nelson's book on Bible doctrines), it seems that she still had some doubts about the matter. This comes a no surprise to me. In my twenty-four years of pastoral ministry in the Assemblies of God, I find this to be the doctrine that people have questioned me about the most. Dr. Robert Harden expresses his concerns along similar lines, stating, "One of the crises that I see in our churches today in the Assemblies of God and in Pentecost in general is that of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the teaching on the baptism in the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup> He identifies an overall trend to deemphasize the baptism in the Holy Spirit, even though it has had a central place in the growth and kingdom advancement that has taken place in the Assemblies of God. Harden warns that this will be a trend that our fellowship will come to regret if it is not reversed.<sup>2</sup>

One contributing factor lies, ironically, with its power and potency in equipping the church. Because the Holy Spirit empowers the church for the forceful advancement of the gospel around the world (Acts 1:8), it would stand to reason that Satan, the church's great adversary, would endeavor to call into question the very engine that fuels the Great Commission. If Satan could undermine the church's confidence in this teaching, he would slow the progress of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Harden, "Biblical Evidence of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit" (MP4 Podcast). July 21, 2010, accessed November 18, 2015,

<http://sagu.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Podcast/Podcast.ashx?courseid=13402975-d7f7-44be-8d2f-426d68694d2a&type=mp4>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

gospel and its influence in the lives of people for good. Therefore, the enemy would try by whatever means necessary to divert people from making the baptism in the Holy Spirit a priority.

Another cause for this decline in emphasis on the baptism in the Spirit likely lies in the significant differences in theological perspectives regarding this important doctrine. Because the church lacks agreement on this all-important matter, it becomes a significant source of division, instead of an empowering point of unity in the church universal. Our textbook identifies five distinct doctrines related to Spirit baptism, each of which has its own variations on a theme. This should not necessarily present an occasion that fuels division among brethren of like, precious faith. As classmate Elise Wood puts it, “I doubt it would honor God to argue these theological differences. We must learn to be gracious and loving toward one another in the midst of any potential differences.”<sup>3</sup> After all, to do otherwise, would add insult to injury for the cause of Christ. Still, our overall lack of unity does undercut the advancement of God’s kingdom in the larger scope of things. Therefore, we make it our task to chart a course for unity by developing understanding first.

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., presents his case for a Reformed View as it relates to the baptism in the Spirit. Overall, the Reformed view would state that the believer receives Spirit baptism at conversion. He arrives at this assumption, in part, because he defines the expression “baptism in the Spirit” as the initiation that the believer receives into the body of Christ that accompanies conversion according to 1 Corinthians 12:3.<sup>4</sup> Kaiser writes, “The major line of demarcation in our two positions, that are otherwise so closely related, is that Luke's work of the Spirit is placed

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<sup>3</sup> Elise Wood, Darrin Vail, and John Cantu. “Thread: Charismatic and Pentecostal Differences.” December 5, 2015, accessed December 7, 2015, [https://blackboard.sagu.edu/webapps/discussionboard/do/message?action=list\\_messages&forum\\_id=15365\\_1&nav=discussion\\_board\\_entry&conf\\_id=6105\\_1&course\\_id=5327\\_1&message\\_id=284739\\_1#msg\\_284739\\_1Id](https://blackboard.sagu.edu/webapps/discussionboard/do/message?action=list_messages&forum_id=15365_1&nav=discussion_board_entry&conf_id=6105_1&course_id=5327_1&message_id=284739_1#msg_284739_1Id).

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Del Colle et al., *Perspectives on Spirit Baptism: Five Views*, ed. by Chad Owen Brand (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2004), 31.

outside of the salvation process and made to be a separate use of the same term that Paul shares with Luke, namely, being ‘baptized in the Holy Spirit.’”<sup>5</sup> By placing this strict limitation on the definition of Spirit baptism, the Reformed perspective cannot accommodate a Lucan application that identifies it as a separate experience following conversion.

Generally speaking, Reformed Christians’ rejection of the baptism in the Spirit as a subsequent experience stems from the source of Scripture that affirms Spirit baptism as a second work. Specifically, critics say that Luke serves as the primary source of Scriptural support for this teaching, almost all of which comes from Acts. They contend that biblical narrative, like the book of Acts, cannot provide instruction for normative Christian practice. Instead, didactic passages of Scripture, like Paul’s epistles, take precedence over biblical narrative.<sup>6</sup> However, Stanley M. Horton rightly observes that Paul’s didactic writings were directed to a people who already viewed speaking in tongues as normative. Therefore he saw no need to teach about what was already in practice throughout the early New Testament church.<sup>7</sup>

To be fair, Kaiser himself does not embrace the argument against Scriptural narrative in its entirety.<sup>8</sup> Also, to his credit, Kaiser stands apart from other Reformed theologians in that he does not agree with the cessationist doctrine as it related to the other charismatic gifts.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, confusion in the use of the term “baptism in the Spirit” has likewise led to a misapplication of Scripture as it applies to Spirit baptism versus the public gift of tongues. By erroneously linking Paul’s question, “Do all speak in tongues?” (1 Corinthians 12:30) to the baptism in the Spirit (rather than to the public gift of tongues and interpretation), he calls into

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 36.

question something that the Bible teaches is clearly meant for all believers (Acts. 2:39). True, the public gift of tongues is not given to all believers, but the baptism of the Holy Spirit is. Still, in the end, Kaiser sums up his view on the matter:

We conclude then, that Spirit reception is part of Christian initiation. It refers more properly to those, who at Pentecost, Samaria, and Caesarea, and to all who subsequently believed on Jesus, were incorporated by God, in the Holy Spirit, into one spiritual body of Christ, regardless of all other distinctions, be they of gender, color, age, denomination, nationality, or one's status in society. To have God's Spirit is to believe (Rom. 8:9, 14).<sup>10</sup>

Yes, I agree with Kaiser that all believers do have the Holy Spirit in a measure. However, those who support the Reformed perspective once again confuse receiving the Holy Spirit at conversion with the subsequent experience of Spirit baptism, which once again leads to misapplication in the end.

Another view of Spirit baptism, the Wesleyan perspective, comes by way of H. Ray Dunning. Right from the beginning, he alerts the reader with the task before us: "Attempting to describe the Wesleyan view of any aspect of the Christian life presents the interpreter with a difficult task since there is considerable ambiguity in how the tradition is interpreted."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this poses a challenge as it relates to clearly defining the Wesleyan doctrine of Spirit baptism. Even so, in the Wesleyan view, sanctification lies at the center of pneumatology, and as a result is inseparable to the issue at hand.<sup>12</sup> Without trying to generalize too much, the distinguishing feature, then, becomes sanctification. The general consensus among Wesleyan theologians seems to indicate that the baptism of the Holy Spirit carries with it the new birth and successive fillings that produce Christlike character.<sup>13</sup> Advocates of this perspective, then, would view sanctification as an identifying factor in the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 225.

In the end, Dunning's presentation of this perspective does not communicate a clearly defined doctrine of Spirit baptism. Perhaps because it was never fully developed by Wesley himself. Further, bifurcation over time shifted the focus to empowerment to a limited degree at some point.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, for the Wesleyan, the work of the Holy Spirit has a Christological focus resulting in sanctification,<sup>15</sup> a point with which we, as Pentecostals, would agree. Still, it leaves the impression that this aspect of Wesleyan theology never reached full maturity. I say this only because it carries so much ambiguity with it. However, as Horton observes, it likely served as a valuable forerunner to the Pentecostal experience that would follow some time later.<sup>16</sup>

Ralph Del Colle presents a Roman Catholic view of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Ironically, this view has much compatibility with the Pentecostal perspective. However, this is not so much because it has a well-defined theology that has developed along the same line.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, it seems that the Catholic view is a response to the Charismatic outpouring of the twentieth century. The church, it appears, examined this phenomenon and then backtracked to find support in already existing Catholic doctrine.<sup>18</sup> As such, it has room for remarkable similarities to our own Pentecostal teaching. However, for the baptism in the Holy Spirit to be viewed as acceptable Catholic doctrine, the church requires that the experience must have some compatibility with the sacraments, rather than be viewed as a replacement for any.<sup>19</sup> Yet, one can readily see elements of similarity with conventional Pentecostal teaching.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 249.

On the other hand, because the church seeks to “form fit” these things to existing Catholic teaching and practice, it merely makes room for the operation of the supernatural, rather than teach the baptism in the Holy Spirit as normative for all believers.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the working of the Spirit doesn’t always fit neatly into our theological expectations. In this regard, Horton makes a good point: “As Pentecostals some of us were at first hesitant to recognize what God was doing in the Charismatic movement. Most of us now recognize the sovereign working of God the Holy Spirit.”<sup>21</sup>

Larry Hart presents yet another perspective on the baptism in the Holy Spirit—a Charismatic view. In terms of pneumatology, Hart presents a very well-developed theology of the Holy Spirit, one which shares much in common with conventional Pentecostal teaching. As he himself puts it, “Scratch the average Charismatic, and underneath one finds a classical Pentecostal.”<sup>22</sup> Rather than belabor the many points that we have in common, allow me to call attention to the few areas of disagreement with the Charismatic view as presented.

As well developed as his position is, Hart makes this admission: “There is no one ‘Charismatic position’ on Spirit baptism.” Ultimately, this will present a problem. A lack of agreement on a fundamental matter of doctrine will eventually lead to confusion in theological practice and potentially leaves the door open to aberrational behavior and doctrinal error. Sound teaching protects the church from spiritual fads that sweep in and out of the church, “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Ephesians 4:14, ESV).

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 150.

One significant point of disagreement that Hart raises has to do with the initial physical evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (or the apparent lack of one in his position). Hart claims, “Whenever people ‘received the Holy Spirit’ or ‘received the gift of the Holy Spirit’ or were ‘baptized in the Holy Spirit’ in Acts—that is, whenever they became Christians—the Charismatic dimension was already present within their lives!”<sup>23</sup> In other words, he presents a variation on the view that the believer receives all the fullness of the Spirit at conversion, without the need for a subsequent experience. Though it may not manifest itself at that time, the potential exists and may indeed follow.

Furthermore, like most Charismatics, he does not view speaking in tongues as the initial physical evidence, what he refers to as a “law of tongues.”<sup>24</sup> While they may be present in a believer’s life, the lack of speaking in tongues does not mean that a person has not been baptized in the Spirit.<sup>25</sup> However, this does not fit the pattern clearly established in Acts by Luke. If anything, I suspect it represents an attempt to rationalize and explain why all believers do not speak in tongues, even though the baptism in the Holy Spirit is promised to all believers. Moreover, while Pentecostals view tongues as the initial physical evidence, the experience does not carry any spiritual superiority with it. Horton notes, “As Pentecostals today, we do not view tongues as the *sine qua non* of spirituality.”<sup>26</sup>

I need not add the disclaimer that, as an ordained Assemblies of God minister, I agree wholeheartedly with Stanley Horton, who presents the classical Pentecostal position on this issue. He presents a very convincing argument in favor of the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial physical evidence of speaking in other tongues. While the lion’s share of verses that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 173.

support this as an experience subsequent to conversion do occur in Luke, this should not diminish the strength of this argument. For one thing, the Assemblies of God position paper states, “It is important to recognize that Luke wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>27</sup> What the position paper refers to as historical narrative, classmate William Miller refers to as “theological history.”<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the paper points out that the Scriptures speak extensively elsewhere regarding other aspects of the Holy Spirit’s ministry.<sup>29</sup>

Robert Harden states emphatically that he also believes that the initial physical evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is speaking in other tongues.<sup>30</sup> He urges skeptics to examine church history, the experiences of the church fathers and the events before and since the Pentecostal outpouring at the dawn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, Harden maintains that the common denominator of various moves of the Holy Spirit that sprung since then is speaking in tongues.<sup>31</sup>

For example, in referring to Peter's observation at the house of Cornelius in Act chapter 10, he identifies speaking in tongues as the signifier that the Gentiles received the very same gift of the Holy Spirit that the apostles and other disciples received at Pentecost. For Peter, this serves as a litmus test that God had included the Gentiles as recipients of the gospel message and all the promises associated with it, including the promise of the Holy Spirit. Speaking in tongues

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<sup>27</sup> General Council of the Assemblies of God General Presbytery, “Baptism in the Holy Spirit,” ag.org. August 9-11, 2010, accessed September 4, 2015, [http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Position\\_Papers/pp\\_downloads/PP\\_Baptism\\_In\\_the\\_Holy\\_Spirit.pdf](http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Position_Papers/pp_downloads/PP_Baptism_In_the_Holy_Spirit.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> William Miller, Michael Beeson, and John Cantu. “Thread: Reformed Tradition and Tongues.” December 1, 2015, accessed December 7, 2015, [https://blackboard.sagu.edu/webapps/discussionboard/do/message?action=list\\_messages&forum\\_id=15364\\_1&nav=discussion\\_board\\_entry&conf\\_id=6105\\_1&course\\_id=5327\\_1&message\\_id=283811\\_1#msg\\_283811\\_1Id](https://blackboard.sagu.edu/webapps/discussionboard/do/message?action=list_messages&forum_id=15364_1&nav=discussion_board_entry&conf_id=6105_1&course_id=5327_1&message_id=283811_1#msg_283811_1Id).

<sup>29</sup> General Council of the Assemblies of God General Presbytery, “Baptism in the Holy Spirit,” 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Harden, “Biblical Evidence of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit,” 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

served as proof to Peter and his associates that they were now heirs to the same promise, as prophesied by Joel.<sup>32</sup>

Harden makes an excellent point by calling attention to a clear passage of time in between the Samaritans' receiving salvation and baptism in water and their receiving the Holy Spirit as a result of the apostles laying hands on them. If, following the initial outpouring on the day of Pentecost, they received all the fullness of the Holy Spirit at salvation, why then did they have to call the apostles to lay hands on them to facilitate receiving the Holy Spirit if they already had the Spirit in his fullness? Furthermore, something had to get Simon's attention to the degree that he was willing to pay money for the power to lay hands on people and impart the Holy Spirit. In order for Simon to view this as a marketable commodity, he had to have noticed a profound outward manifestation. The only consistent sign given in all of Acts that signifies the receiving of the Holy Spirit (regardless of the recipient) is the evidence of speaking in tongues.<sup>33</sup>

I will admit that I started out already supporting the Assemblies of God position on this issue. However, reading the other perspectives on this teaching have only strengthened that conviction. While others did make valuable points in support of their positions, the experience, as a whole, showed me what a thorough and well-developed doctrine the Assemblies of God has on the baptism in the Holy Spirit. As compared with other faith traditions, I found myself impressed with our doctrinal development related to the baptism in the Holy Spirit. While we may have our blind spots, this point of doctrine identifies a critical strength in our fellowship. It is a sorely needed reality that our churches must embrace and experience anew in our generation. May God give us an even greater revival as the coming of Christ approaches!

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

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