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“Initial Evidence, Again”

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A RESPONSE TO MAX TURNER

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Turner in his essay “Tongues: An Experience for All in the Pauline Churches?”¹ raises a number of questions regarding my understanding of initial evidence and the doctrine of subsequence. The foregoing essay, in part, addresses some of these questions. There are, however, a few points which my essay does not directly address that I would like to take up at this point.

Turner may well be right when he pointed out that the sharp distinction I made between tongues as initial evidence and tongues as prayer is “not found in the NT” (p. 251). But that is really beside the point. If the initial evidence doctrine is to be defended on grounds other than from direct biblical references to it, then the NT evidence regarding the nature of glossolalia cannot be used either to defend or debunk the view that Pentecostals do experience tongues in these two ways. My distinction is an attempt to make sense of the distinctive way Pentecostals have experienced glossolalia at the point of their initiation into a new relationship with God they termed Spirit-baptism. I have said that tongues as initial evidence makes the best sense when it is understood as denoting a relationship of intimacy characterised by receptivity or passivity. I believe that within such an understanding of Spirit-baptism a strong case can be made for tongues as the initial evidence on theological and philosophical grounds.

Turner, however, thinks that not all who claimed to be filled with the Spirit had an overwhelming sort of ecstatic experience. The key term is receptivity, and as a phenomenological description of Spirit-baptism, it has a much wider application than it at first appears. Receptivity does not refer to only one particular psychological state; there may well be

¹ *Asian Journal Pentecostal Studies* 1:2 (July 1998), pp. 231-53.

different degrees of passivity and different ways of expressing it, including what Turner describes as “power,” “electricity” and “tingling” (p. 251). What I wish to maintain is that the element of receptivity to the “Other” must be present if the doctrine of initial evidence is to make any sense.

Perhaps a parallel situation could be cited to clarify this point. Phenomenologists of religion like Geerhardus van der Leeuw, Rudolf Otto and Joachim Wach have long ago taught us to see that in any religious conversion there is always a transition from one state to another, not only “a reorientation of power but also of a surrender of man’s own power in favour of one that *utterly overwhelms* him and is experienced as sacred and as ‘wholly other’.”² (Nowadays we would probably call it a paradigm shift.) But the fact that for some, conversion is a movement (or even series of movements) involving imperceptible changes in one’s religious consciousness rather than a single crisis experience (as is most commonly reported in evangelical conversions) does not falsify this phenomenological description. The “ideal type” (or “stereotype” as Turner prefers) of conversion the phenomenologists are describing may well include a range of different experiences from the very dramatic to the relatively quiet type.³

Maintaining the distinction between the dual function of tongues does not mean that tongues that occurred at one’s initial Spirit-baptism necessarily precludes anything less spontaneous, neither does it imply that tongues spoken subsequently are completely devoid of “ecstatic” elements. The kind of tongues that occurred at one’s initial Spirit-baptism may well be repeated in the course of one’s spiritual development much as the Three Ways are seen increasingly as repeatable events.⁴ I had highlighted their difference only, but said nothing about their similarity. The one condition that must be met in

² G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1933, 1963), II, p. 534. Emphasis are mine.

³ A. D. Nock in his classic study of conversion, *The New and the Old in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), ch. 1 has analyzed a range of psychological states that are compatible with it, and at the same time he could still speak of conversion in terms of radical reorientation.

⁴ E.g., see Mark O’Keefe, “The Three Ways,” *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 13:1 (February 1992), pp. 76.

order for us to say that the statement, “tongues is the initial evidence of Spirit-baptism,” is true is that the initiation into the Pentecostal reality is marked by a sense of receptivity signaled by spontaneous breaking out in tongues.

Turner asked why tongues should be “the exclusive and privileged marker” (p. 251). But it is interesting that the alternative signs he mentioned are in fact different types of ‘extraordinary’ language: abba, silence, groans, spiritual songs (whatever it is). Even if it is one’s “own language” that is spoken at Spirit-baptism it is still language that is stretched beyond the level of ordinary discourse. One should, rather, be asking why in Spirit-baptism there would inevitably occur some kind of strange *linguistic* phenomenon. What we are encountering here (on Turner’s terms) are different languages functioning within the same language game. They are all, in a sense, “glossolalic.”

It should be obvious that I have pushed the concept of glossolalia beyond its New Testament usage and transformed it into a theological symbol for the Christian’s initiation into a kind of personal relationship with God characterized by receptivity. In this respect it is an experience not very different from that found in the mystical tradition of the church, although there are also significant differences, as the foregoing essay has sought to show.

I agree with Turner that theologically Spirit-baptism must be interpreted within the conversion-initiation complex. But conversion-initiation itself could be seen as having a number of distinct realities which the sacramental view helps to clarify. To date most evangelicals, including Turner, have not so much as rebutted the sacramental interpretation as simply dismiss it. I am suggesting that perhaps we need to see the doctrine of subsequence as the Protestant equivalent of the sacramental view of conversion-initiation. The doctrine is necessary for conceptualizing the nature of spiritual progress. Perhaps “subsequence” may not be as precise as any of the ancient theories (like the Three Ways) in schematizing the nature of spiritual progress, but without some such schematization it is questionable whether the present Pentecostal-Charismatic reality, that an increasing number of evangelicals have come to accept, could be successfully bequeathed to the next generation. The stakes are much higher than we realize.