

**“There Is No Spoon”:
Assessing the Boundary between Classical Pentecostals and Charismatics**

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“In 1906 there were no persons identified as ‘pentecostal’ or ‘charismatic’ as those terms are currently understood” (Bundy 2002, 417).

“It is often impossible now to distinguish between ‘Pentecostals’ and ‘Charismatics,’ and there are often as many theological and liturgical differences between classical Pentecostals themselves as there are between them and Charismatic churches” (Anderson 2004, 144).

“I am not a ‘classical Pentecostal,’ a ‘neo-Pentecostal,’ or a ‘Charismatic Pentecostal.’ I truly believe I am a ‘biblical Pentecostal’” (Crabtree 2003, 5).

Introduction

In the film *The Matrix* Neo, the film’s hero, must discover and embrace his identity as “the one” in order to free humanity from the false world of the Matrix. In a crucial scene, Neo finds himself in a room of kindergarten-aged children, all of them “potentials” waiting to discover if each is “the one.” One young potential sits on the floor, bending spoons with his mind. Neo takes the spoon and tries to repeat the trick, unsuccessfully.

Spoon Boy: “Do not try and bend the spoon. That’s impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth.”

Neo: “What truth?”

Spoon Boy: “There is no spoon.”

Neo looks again at the spoon, repeating: “There is no spoon,” and bends it successfully.

Arguably, it is at the moment Neo accepts the “truth” that there is no spoon – that the spoon is a computer-generated construct of the Matrix program – that he makes possible his identity as “the one.”

Leaving aside the Eastern philosophy of *The Matrix*, I found myself positioned similarly to Neo when I was commissioned to assess the impact of neo-pentecostal/charismatic pneumatology on classical pentecostal spirituality. My “spoon” was the definite, concrete boundary distinguishing classical pentecostal identity from neo-pentecostal/charismatic identity. And, like Neo, I found my only way successfully to bend it was to accept the truth: “There is no spoon.”

The Problem

The problem is that there is no compelling, concrete characteristic distinguishing pentecostals, “classical” or “charismatic.”

The term “charismatic” came into play in the 1960s when Episcopalian Jean Stone reported in *Time* and *Newsweek* about Dennis Bennett’s spiritual baptism and consequent dismissal as rector in Van Nuys (Anderson 2004, 148). Here the term identified the pentecostalization of historic, mainline churches, though in the 1970s “The terms ‘Pentecostal’ and ‘Charismatic’ began to be used interchangeably and

the term 'neopentecostal' was applied to the 'nondenominational' churches, later also referred to as 'neocharismatic'" (Anderson 2004, 156).

As a means of distinction, Roman Catholic priest and charismatic Kilian McDonnell coined the phrase "classical pentecostalism" "to refer to that which was present in the pentecostal churches founded since 1900 and to distinguish it from charismatic renewal in the historic churches" (Robeck 2002, 853).

In the 1980s, C. Peter Wagner introduced a scheme distinguishing three "waves" of Spirit renewal in the twentieth-century church: First, the "classical pentecostals," identified denominationally; second, the "charismatics," the Spirit's move into mainline churches; finally, "I see in the 80's an opening of the straightline evangelicals and other Christians to the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that the Pentecostals and charismatics have experienced, but without becoming either charismatic or Pentecostal" (Wagner 1983), cited in (Synan 1997, 271). Wagner's "third wave" became associated with the Vineyard churches and other independent charismatic groups such as the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, though some identify TACF as a "fourth wave."

On one hand, Wagner's waves and the language of "classical pentecostal" and "charismatic" supply a straightforward means of distinguishing pentecostal and charismatic groups. On closer inspection, however, we find such marked diversity within same groups and, simultaneously, such marked overlap between differing groups to justify questioning what, concretely, distinguishes one group from another. As Anderson observes, "there are often as many theological and liturgical differences between classical Pentecostals themselves as there are between them and Charismatic churches" (Anderson 2004, 144).

Supposed Distinguishing Marks of Classical Pentecostalism

Even a survey of classical pentecostal beliefs and practices reveals a hegemony of convictions. Within the same supposed group we find conscientious objectors and just warriors; egalitarians and complimentarians on the ordination of women; promoters each of racial integration and segregation; Trinitarians, and baptists into only Jesus' name; some entirely sanctified and others only in process; those eternally secure, and those sure they can lose their salvation; faith marked by tongues human or by tongues heavenly, or also by handling snakes and drinking strychnine.

The differences among classical pentecostals are substantial and many. For the purposes of this short paper, I will examine only two supposed marks distinguishing classical pentecostals from charismatics: the experience of tongues as initial evidence, and pentecostal pre-history and the Azusa Street revival.

Tongues as Initial Evidence

Tongues as initial evidence is often considered the hallmark distinction of classical pentecostalism. It is unquestionably a doctrine early pentecostals were forced to defend, a doctrine certain mainline charismatic churches felt necessary to adapt, and a doctrine current in the Statements of Faith of most denominational pentecostals today. What is questionable is whether it is a characteristic sufficiently *distinct* to differentiate classical pentecostals from others. Both historical and contemporary research suggests it is not.

Historically, tongues as initial evidence has not been universally characteristic of all classical pentecostal individuals or groups. Di Giacomo reports:

Even though the 'initial evidence' doctrine may be defined as fundamental in the theology of most classical Pentecostal churches, unanimity among Pentecostals on this point is elusive as the oldest Pentecostal denominations in Europe and South America do not include it in their creeds. It was even challenged in the very early years of classical Pentecostalism by its most influential leaders such as Azusa Street mission leader William Seymour and Assemblies of God evangelist and general presbyter F.F. Bosworth. Some non-North American classical Pentecostals such as Minnie Abrams of Pandita Rambai's Mukti Mission in India, and Willis Hoover, founder of Chilean Pentecostalism, also challenged or did not include initial evidence in their statements of faith. (Di Giacomo 2009, 17-18).

Corwin Smidt's *et al.* recent survey of US churches shows the contemporary inadequacy of tongues to distinguish classical pentecostals from others:

Although the gift of tongues may be visibly present within Pentecostal denominations, it is far from universal...the fact that the gift of tongues is not universally present even in Pentecostal denominations demonstrates the inadequacy of using it as the sole criterion for defining membership in the spirit-filled movement. On the other hand, speaking in tongues is hardly confined to Pentecostal denominations. Tongues-speakers constitute nearly three-fourths of those in nondenominational charismatic churches and about one-fifth of those black churches affiliated with non-Pentecostal denominations (Smidt, et al. 1999, 116-17).

Thus although tongues may mark classical pentecostals *generally* it cannot define classical pentecostals *exclusively*. Besides nondenominational charismatic and black churches noted by Smidt *et al.*, many mainline charismatics continue to associate the initial experience of the Spirit with tongues, even maintaining baptismal language (Hocken 2002, 517). On the flip side, "After five generations the reality is that not all people who attend Pentecostal churches speak in tongues" (Di Giacomo 2009, 16). In 1988, C. Verge noted even among emerging PAOC ministers that "some of them would not insist that one is not filled with the Spirit unless he or she has spoken in tongues" (Verge 1988, 44); cited in (McGee 1991, xvii).

To be clear: the question here is not whether tongues is essential doctrinally to classical pentecostalism. The question is whether the practice sufficiently *distinguishes* classical pentecostals from other groups, notably charismatics. The evidence suggests it does not.

Azusa

The Azusa Street revival serves as a second rallying point for distinguishing classical pentecostals. As noted, it was around the events of the 1900s McDonnell first coined "classical pentecostalism," and Hocken points out "There has never been any charismatic equivalent of Azusa Street" (Hocken 2002, 515). But although the "Azusa-ization process" (Wilkinson 2009, 3) has long been a benchmark of classical pentecostal identity, "the assumption that all classical Pentecostal denominations trace their origins to the Pentecostal mission on Azusa Street in Los Angeles would be inaccurate" (Di Giacomo 2009, 18).

Globally, "Because there are multiple origins, sites and centres of the global Pentecostalist movement, there are reasons to challenge the one-sided Western model of an undulatory expansion 'from the West

to the rest.” (Westerlund 2009, 4); cf. (Daniels 2006). Consequently, Burgess cautions against “Amerocentric historiographic assumptions” that suggest pentecostalism originated from a particular American locale (Burgess 2001, 86), and Bundy decries: “Certainly no theory that makes the American experience paradigmatic can explain the global realities of pentecostalism” (Bundy 2002, 417). Beyer remarks: “No centralized agency was primarily responsible for founding the movement or spreading it around the globe, even though the Azusa Street mission in Los Angeles receives a kind of symbolic place of honour in this regard” (Beyer 2009, 270-71).

Although Azusa indelibly influenced Canadian pentecostalism (Di Giacomo 2009, 19), the Church of God in Christ (1885) and the Church of God (Cleveland) (1886) – two of the US’s largest classical pentecostal denominations – consciously self-identify as pre-Azusa. Four Square pastor Jack Hayford, on the other hand, originates all three charismatic “waves” from Azusa (Hayford and Moore 2006).

Further complicating the Azusa connection are the competing claims to pentecostalism’s pre-history. Although Azusa pentecostals have been commonly linked with the Wesleyan-Holiness movement (Synan 1997), competing histories claim more formative ties with Puritanism (discussed in (Cerillo 1999)) and, increasingly, from among the anabaptists (Clark 2004); (Mittelstadt 2008). Miller notes Canadian pentecostalism’s particular indebtedness to the Mennonite Brethren in Christ (Miller 1994, 45-46), and PAOC’s earliest leaders emerge from myriad church traditions, mainline and evangelistic.

Classical and Charismatic Pentecostals: Unity and Diversity

My point in the foregoing discussion on tongues and Azusa is this: the complexity and diversity marking the charismatic movement nonetheless marks classical pentecostalism as well. Pentecostalism has been from the beginning a faith on the fly, adapting to and adopting local social and theological currents, simultaneously challenging and re-channelling those currents. “[T]he Pentecostal movement, which was diverse already at the outset, has become increasingly varied” (Westerlund 2009, 2), thus far defying any successful metatheory to explain it (Bundy 2002, 417) or any clear-cut way to define it.

The boundary dividing classical and charismatic pentecostals thus becomes arbitrary. From an outsider perspective in the 1980s, evangelical J.I. Packer observed: “Pentecostals are relatively unaffected [by the charismatic movement], but that is natural since, from their standpoint, charismatic renewal is just the rest of the church catching up with what they themselves have known for two generations” (Packer 1990, 145). Internally we know, of course, denominational pentecostals felt severely affected by the charismatic renewal, identifying it as something “other.” It has been nevertheless difficult for both insiders and outsiders *consistently* to articulate just what makes charismatics “other.”

Indeed, students of pentecostalism and the charismatic renewal are forced often to look past supposed differences between the “movements” and identify instead their underlying unity. It is thus significant that Hocken concludes his comparison between classical pentecostals and charismatics by noting: “The grounds of opposition to the pentecostal movement and to CR [Charismatic Renewal] have varied very little, thus confirming the basic spiritual unity and identity of the two currents” (Hocken 2002, 517). Similarly, Newberg observes: “All dissimilarities aside, the Charismatic movement should be seen as a constituent part of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movements, known in the parlance of insiders as ‘the renewal movement’” (Newberg 2006, 89). Hayford and Moore identify classical pentecostalism and the charismatic movement collectively as testimony to “the charismatic century” (Hayford and Moore 2006),

and Albrecht observes: “Ultimately, they share in a common religious movement, the twentieth-century Pentecostal movement” (Albrecht 1999, 41).

I close with Reed’s analysis of the “waves” of charismatic renewal:

An alternative interpretation is that these waves represent periodic recalibrations or adjustments of a movement that is now far more comprehensive and complex than initially estimated...Given the speed of cultural and global change, the worldwide scope of the movement and its innate cultural adaptability, the waves may simply be those visible moments – about once a decade – when the movement now wrapped around the globe partially remakes itself for the next phase. Like turning around an ocean liner, the direction will be discerned only after reviewing the cumulative effect of a series of waves...[W]e may be observing the multi-faceted, complex phenomenon of a movement globally connected by a common experience of God while simultaneously interacting with cultures that are legion. Only the next generation with a longer trajectory from which to view this series of waves will be qualified to assess more accurately their nature and function (Reed 2009, 209).

Application and Direction

If there is little substantially that differentiates classical pentecostal and charismatic identities, what does this mean for denominational pentecostals? Specifically, what might this mean for the PAOC? I offer three suggestions:

1. Dismantling the Charismatic “Other”

There is a tendency within some pentecostal contexts severely to restrict the Spirit’s operation from fear we might too closely resemble the charismatic “other.” I urge we, as a denomination, not be ruled by this fear. David Wells shares repeatedly his desire that we model passionate, Pentecostal leadership: “We are not ‘cessationists,’” he writes, “so we must welcome and model that all of the Spirit’s gifts and expressions are active” (Wells 2008, 7). This does not mean we simply accept whatever comes down the pipe, but by accepting charismatics as “us” and not “them,” we may open ourselves to new moves of the Spirit that show us to be neither “dead wood” nor “flaky” (Wells 2008, 11).

2. Intentionally Missional

Second, the consistently complex social and cross-denominational makeup of both classical and charismatic pentecostals should spur us to continue open engagement with others, Christian and not. Our movement offers a distinct voice on the Spirit that can and has transformed the world. To remain faithful to that tradition, our local assemblies, theological institutions, and ministries in Canada and abroad must resist becoming closed clubs: "For (PAOC) Pentecostals only".

3. Distinguishing Ourselves from *within*

Finally, accepting the "truth" that we are part of, not concretely distinct from, the wider charismatic renewal grants us perspective from which to consider our denominational identity. Just as we have amiably distinguished ourselves from the AG or the Apostolic Church of Canada, we might non-defensively consider our distinct, denominational contributions *within* the renewal movement. This Commission is an important step to that end.

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