

PASTORAL PAPER: Tongues as Initial Physical Evidence: Fire or Form?

TONGUES AS INITIAL PHYSICAL EVIDENCE: FIRE OR FORM?

Jeffrey Whittaker

While attending a strategic meeting for the purpose of formulating the “Vision for Transformation” to be presented during the General Council in session in Washington D.C. in August of 2003, it was abruptly diverted from its course as the conversation took an alarming change of direction. A comment arose from the floor of the meeting (which included the Presbyter Boards from the Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois Districts, along with other select guests) questioning the validity of the doctrine of “Tongues as the Initial Physical Evidence” as it relates to the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Shock and disbelief seized almost everyone in attendance. This doctrine is #8 on the list of the Sixteen Fundamental Truths of the Assemblies of God, and has been called our movement’s “distinctive doctrine”. The meeting, chaired by General Superintendent Thomas Trask, was recessed for a short time so that everyone could catch their breath and regroup. When the gathering reconvened, the discussion quickly returned to the issue of Initial Evidence. The pastor who had originally spoken to the question stated, “During the break there were about ten of us who talked together and all agree that Initial Evidence presents a problem for us”. The next half-hour or so was spent laying out the AG’s historic position, as well as reminding all present of the loyalty expected from them as credential holders to faithfully preach the denomination’s distinctive doctrine. That very night I began to seek the Lord as to the real heart issue that lies behind this debate.

First of all, allow me to clearly state my convictions on this question. I believe that when a born-again Christian comes into a post-conversion encounter with the Holy Spirit of God known as “The Baptism in the Holy Ghost”, that there is a corresponding physical manifestation of speaking with other tongues. I received my own Spirit Baptism when I was just a boy. On a sunny summer afternoon while running through the tall grass behind my Grandma’s house singing “What a Friend We have in Jesus”, I suddenly found that I was singing in a language that was not my own. For what seemed like hours I ran, singing and praying in my newfound tongue, drinking deeply from my relationship with the third person of the Godhead. Ever since that time I have seen literally hundreds of others come into their own transforming encounters with Him! For me it has been only natural to share what I have experienced first hand, as well as what I have learned from the pages of the New Testament. Since my purpose in this article is not to re-teach an accepted doctrine but rather to issue a call to the already convinced, I will not take the apologetic journey through every chapter and verse.

What could be causing so many of our young credential holders and congregants to question the validity of a spiritual reality that has been proven both Scriptural in the classroom as well as powerful in the prayer room? I believe the answer lies in the heart of our American Assemblies of God Sanctuaries, as well as in boardrooms at every level where our philosophies and strategies for growth are formulated. How do we keep growing in this present American culture while still remaining faithful to the original vision of the Apostles and the Pentecostal founders of the Assemblies of God? This seems to be the question of the hour. In his most recent “Perspective”, the official ministerial newsletter of the Assemblies of God, our beloved Superintendent Thomas Trask issued a call to prayer and fasting across our entire fellowship. “...(P)ray for the following: For righteousness to prevail. As a church we experience a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Assemblies of God...” I could not agree more, and I renew my commitment to cry out to God for His continued blessings upon our movement!

For five years I had the responsibility as a District Presbyter of interviewing new applicants seeking credentials. Upon almost all of their graded examinations and application forms there appeared a yellow post-it note that reminded the interviewing team to “make sure of their position on initial evidence”. We would gingerly work the conversation around to the topic before hitting them with “the question”. Time and time again the reassuring response came forth, “of course I do”. But as the years have passed, I have accumulated a sad and alarming collection of private conversations in which leaders have revealed their true convictions to me. In Church after Church, the passionate preaching of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit was not a high priority, and that in too many cases the free exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit was discouraged in the Sunday Morning worship services due to their unnerving affect on visiting guests. Side rooms designated for prayer, or alternative services altogether were set up for those who needed to scratch their Pentecostal itch. This progressive slide into purposeful seekerism, accompanied by the relentless quest for audience approval ratings has caused many to push the Holy Spirit into the back rooms of the church; or out of it altogether. Our young generation of ministers is learning all too well that the “old paths” are not considered relevant to meeting the felt needs of today’s emerging crowd.

I remember well the stories of Azusa Street where worshippers would linger for hours while seeking the living presence and power of the Holy Ghost, disregarding public ridicule and forgetting how much time had been “wasted” on their knees. I treasure the words of one of our honored founders, J. Roswell Flower, who exhorted our fellowship to “court the presence of the Lord”. That statement lodged in my heart the moment I first heard it while a student at North Central Bible College. That timeless quest returns to the mind of the average Pastor when the weekly worship service begins at the local Assembly. The congregation is going into the very presence of the living God who created the universe and poured out His precious blood for them. Their agenda quickly melts away in the radiant heat of His glory, and everything and everyone is His to do with as He wills. One song melts into another, hymn after hymn, chorus after chorus as the congregational praise builds in its intensity and passion. Then, like a refreshing mist, there settles upon the people a corporate sense of the Lord’s presence as they wait to see if God the Holy Spirit has something to say to them. While reverently worshipping before His throne, a lone voice begins to speak in a “babel” that no human mind can comprehend. Lines of foreign speech rise and fall in melodious phrases until they trail off in silence. The congregation again waits in anticipation for the moving of the Spirit through the gift of interpretation. After the message is delivered and assimilated by the Body, a chorus of “Amens” begins

to arise as the leader calls the Church to a meaningful response to what has come forth.

Unconverted guests or those from a nominal church background are blown away by this powerful demonstration of the resurrected Christ and move to the altar under conviction (I Corinthians 14:24-25). Unfortunately at this point, the Pastor glances down at his watch and sees that this chain of events has taken well over forty minutes and greatly threatens the remaining minutes designated for the service. Announcements are quickly given and the special song called for so that a sermon can be delivered before the crowd begins dismissing itself around Noon (knowing that this modern culture can only give about 15 minutes to listening to a preached message). In fact, the collection of visitor response cards yields many positive comments such as, "Great music, just too long. We're going to keep looking". Some key church members even e-mail the pastor to lovingly remind him that many of their friends have begun attending a local "community church" that tailors their service to modern topical issues in a non-threatening manner while using really "hip" music, dramas, smoke, lights, etc. They also lament, "Just when I bring a friend, Sister Ozman or Brother Seemore goes off in tongues and freaks them out! Can't we do that stuff some other time?" The despondent Pastor goes back to his study trying to figure out how to pursue a community shaking move of God while at the same time not offending the seekers with embarrassing outbursts from the Holy Spirit who, it appears, knows nothing about drawing and keeping a crowd. He pushes aside his copies of Wigglesworth, Tozer, Ravenhill, and the Azusa Papers, and reaches for a Ministers periodical that just came in the mail. Instead of finding a confirming voice in the midst of the storm, he finds a condemning voice chiding him for his irrelevance, while offering yet another "leadership weekend" to train him in how to effectively attract today's crowd.

How does a modern Pentecostal Denomination respond to these pressures? I believe the answer is to be found first in leadership that courageously models our ideals, not pragmatic promotion that rewards growth no matter how it's achieved. If there are churches that are quenching the free movement of the Gifts of the Spirit during their "seeker services", there must be a prophetic voice of rebuke that calls them back to the power that has changed the world ever since the first Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem! A local business man or political figure that we covet as a new member in our Assembly, needs more than anything to get his or her \$2,000 suit wrinkled from kneeling at an old fashioned altar, or to have their PhD put in perspective by breaking forth in a strange tongue that breaks their pride while healing their soul!! We must quote the historic heroes of our Spirit empowered faith more than the non-Pentecostal leaders who hold to questionable doctrines and philosophies of this age, while at the same time suffering a conspicuous absence of Pentecostal demonstrations at public gatherings. Many young leaders in our movement are taking their cues from these trends and are confused by the mixed signals sent through our preaching and periodicals, and are not clearly led when making major decisions at the local level. I am not advocating remaining stuck in time as a tribute to the Azusa revival of 1906, or building livery stable churches in an attempt to recapture the "old magic". The Book of Acts itself testifies that the Pentecostal Church found herself equally relevant in the upper room in Jerusalem, the private home of a Roman Centurion, a river bank or prison house in Philippi, or in a temple amongst humanistic philosophers of Athens. With the changing shape of our culture, the church needs to be flexible enough to meet the people where they are, but I believe that pure Pentecost is still up to the challenge. If we must move our ministry to the cafes, school auditoriums, movie theaters, or living rooms, I know that the Holy Spirit will lead us forward. However, the trumpet of leadership must make a clear sound that exhorts Pastors to hold fast to the old paths and weather the trendy storms of modernity and man-centered worship, while assuring them that the meteoric growth and apparent successes of these philosophies are only fleeting at best. When the world finds itself in need of real answers, when they become desperate and in need of a miracle, they will come looking for those "drunk, but not as you suppose" who know how to worship till they drop and pray till the heavens pour out God's Glory. Don't we see it? The Lord has always delighted in operating through what man deems foolish and weak! The 120 saw 3,000 saved in one day, but also suffered mocking from a scornful culture. Paul saw mighty miracles yet almost lost his physical life. The modern Pentecostal Church wants the "Old Time Power", but only if we can still have a seat at the ecumenical and politically correct table with the rest of the global power brokers. We of the Assemblies of God cannot be pleased with an affirmation on paper that makes us appear to be genuine Pentecostals that have been cut from the same cloth as our founding fathers, while at the same time taking our cues from trendy non-Pentecostals who have mastered the art of marketing without manifesting, plays without praise, and oratory instead of oracles. Our church sanctuaries are equipped with "power point projectors", but we must cry out to heaven for fresh anointing and COURAGE to "project points with power". Could an overemphasis on Tongues as Initial Evidence become a sort of false security for a group that has left off the passionate pursuit of the PERSON of the Holy Ghost in the name of reaching the lost?

In the book of Numbers 21:6-9, we read the story of how the Israelites grumbled, incurring the wrath of the LORD in the form of "fiery serpents" that began biting and killing the people. Moses was commanded to fashion a bronze serpent in the likeness of the ones vexing Israel and lift it up on a pole, promising healing to all who would look upon it. This miracle was so powerful and prophetic that it was memorialized by our Lord Jesus in John's Gospel, chapter three, when Christ told Nicodemus "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (vv.14,15). However, we find later on that King Hezekiah was faced with a horrible decision relative to this honored relic that had once been an emblem of God's deliverance. In the Book of II Kings 18:1-4 we read, "Now it came to pass in the third year of Hoshea the son of Elah, king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. And he did what was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done. He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan ("a thing of brass"). How could something that had been so mightily used by Jehovah God now need to be destroyed as an idol? Because it began to receive more attention than the God who had given the historic deliverance! I am not saying that the Lord will take away speaking with other tongues from our movement, but I do believe that

we need to stir ourselves afresh as to what our primary quest as genuine Pentecostals must be.

Several years ago my wife and I were close friends with a couple who was attending North Central Bible College with us. The man had been raised in the Assemblies of God and had his own testimony of a Pentecostal Baptism. His wife however had been raised in a high church denomination that did not preach or experience the “old time power”. An experienced AG Evangelist came to our Assembly and held meetings for three nights with an emphasis on receiving “the Baptism”. During the altar call the preacher lined up the half-dozen or so respondents and began to exhort them. “I’m going to come to each one of you and when I point at you, begin to speak in tongues”. “Don’t pray or worry about what is going on; just make a sound and the Lord will take it from there”. Our friend put herself in the capable hands of this seasoned man and gave up some utterance of garbled sounds when he pointed his authoritative finger at her. “You’ve got IT”, “There IT is”, etc. gushed the man of God. Needless to say, our friend was dejected. “Is this what everyone is so excited about?” “Is this ‘that which was spoken by the Prophet Joel’ that turned the ancient world upside down?” I didn’t know what to say to her, so I simply encouraged her that God is true and that He would not let her down. A couple of weeks later while at work at the Billy Graham Association, I saw my friend coming at me out of the corner of my eye. She looked like a combination of Army Tank and NFL linebacker as she bore down upon my position. “What happened to you?!” I cried out. She joyfully replied, “I was at a prayer meeting last night with some of the old women from church, and while kneeling by the sofa POW! God filled me to overflowing and I spoke in tongues and wept for what seemed like forever!” I rejoiced with her and thanked God for His loving mercy towards my friend who had not gotten “it”, but rather met “HIM” in the same way as the Apostles of old. You see; this evangelist (and others) was more than willing to call people to an instant, scripted Pentecost dispensed by man, and then to give an inflated report in his newsletter of how many “got it” during his latest meeting. As long as the reports reflect results, everything must be fine.

The modern pressures of measurable success, coupled with an audience of consumers that disdain both the embarrassing manifestation of tongues as well as the investment of time needed seek the Lord, is almost more than local church leaders can bear. Once again please allow me to restate my position: I am not concerned that the Lord will stop giving a blessing to His people that Scripture clearly promises, but rather that we will be “given over” to our fixation with the “evidence” while grieving the Spirit Himself. Did I marry my wife just gain the “initial physical evidence” of children, or are children the natural result of a loving “courtship” that took (and is taking) a lifetime to form and maintain? If one has a cold, the initial physical evidence will be a runny nose. However, if one fixates on the physical evidence alone, the true inward condition of the individual could be misdiagnosed. A runny nose could also be the result of sniffing glue or cocaine just as much as from a cold. Tests must be taken to discern the true origin of the external manifestation. I have dear Roman Catholic friends who speak in tongues while fingering their rosaries and thanking Mother Mary for pouring out this wonderful blessing. I have heard Haitian Witch doctors speak in tongues and have been violently cussed out by a man using perfect “King’s English”, but after being delivered could not speak an understandable word of it to me with his own mind. Are we to write everything else off in favor of tongues as “evidence”, or should we demand orthodoxy in Scriptural doctrines that explain and define who is the rightful Savior, Intercessor, and Mediator between God and man? There are too many that are willing to sacrifice the truth as long as it ensures growth and apparent success, instead of studying the apostolic pattern given to us in the Bible. We need much more than signatures on an application or credential renewal form to secure our fellowship’s Pentecostal posterity. If we concentrate on lifting him up (just as Moses lifted up the serpent), He promised to draw all men to Himself. But if we seek to draw men using the wisdom and fallen appetites of an unregenerate market, we will forsake the God behind the blessing and start burning incense to a snake, statue, icon, relic, saint, ecumenical global network, or even tongues. Don’t despair though; godly tongues will continue to inevitably follow the passionate pursuit of Christ as sure as thunder follows lightning, whether it is in an Assemblies of God sanctuary or somewhere else. It’s not too late though... seek Him and all will be given you.