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INITIAL EVIDENCE OR EVIDENT INITIALS?
A EUROPEAN POINT OF VIEW ON
A PENTECOSTAL DISTINCTIVE

Jean-Daniel Plüss

INTRODUCTION

Pentecostalism is a comparatively young and fast growing movement. Not surprisingly, it is also ideologically in motion. The theologizing of Pentecostals is a result of experiences they have come to cherish and reflections in view of these experiences, relating them to the religious and other traditions they are acquainted with. As their ideas on the significance of Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues (glossolalia) developed, they were at the same time interacting with cultural trends, social changes and new worldviews. From that point of view, it can be expected that Pentecostals in different parts of the world would put different emphases and generate a variety of reflective material on an experience they believe they have in common.

Hence, writing as a European I make no claims to be able to speak in the name of European Pentecostals, not even of Pentecostals north of the Alps,¹ but I would like to illustrate how easy it is to reach different conclusions by making a few comparisons. With my musings, I would like to engage in a dialogue on the significance of speaking in tongues as a gift of the Holy Spirit, ask a few questions relating to the value of an “initial evidence” doctrine and finally suggest where the present discussion could take us.

¹ I will be focusing on Scandinavia, the British Isles and the German-speaking area, because there the missionary influence of North American missionaries, for instance the Assemblies of God or the Church of God, has been relatively limited or contained within their own group.

BAPTISM IN THE SPIRIT AND SPEAKING IN TONGUES IN NORTHERN EUROPE

News of baptism in the Holy Spirit and of speaking in tongues spread in Europe quickly through the writings and travels of T. B. Barratt, a Norwegian minister, who had visited the revival at Azusa Street, Los Angeles. The acquaintance with the notion of Spirit-baptism, that the Holiness circles had preached and sought for about two decades, and the phenomenon of speaking in tongues melted together as a dramatic experience empowering people to serve Christ. The gift of the Holy Spirit as described in Acts 2 was suddenly a new reality. However, the interrelatedness of glossolalia and being blessed by God's Spirit, did not automatically produce a doctrine of "initial evidence." In many European countries, it is common parlance to refer to glossolalia as a gift of the Spirit or sign² of the baptism in the Spirit, hence allowing for a greater theological context for that self-transcending experience. The words "sign" and "gift," of course, are common biblical terms with a generous semantic meaning, whereas the word "evidence" is rather scientific and rational in nature.

In Finland, the Pentecostal movement always retained its identity as a movement rather than as an institution or denomination. Consequently, there are no official statements on Spirit baptism,³ and its theology can be seen as in dialogue with the only other large Protestant body left in that country, namely the Lutheran Church. Theological books by Pentecostals that devote a section on baptism in the Holy Spirit, are careful to mention that the connection between tongues and Spirit-baptism is mainly practical and not dogmatic.⁴ Mauri Viksten's *Terveen opin pääpiirteitä*, which was most commonly used before Kuosmanen's book, does not even mention tongues in his section on the "Baptism in the Holy Spirit." He does, however, say in his chapter on "Discernment of the Spirits," that speaking in tongues is a sign of Spirit-baptism based on Acts, and adds that not all speak thereafter, but

² For Scandinavia, a personal letter by Jan-Ake Alvarsson, Oct. 6, 1998. This is also the case for Great Britain (see below), the Netherlands and the German-speaking countries.

³ A letter by Veli Matti Kärkkäinen, Oct. 6, 1998.

⁴ Juhani Kuosmanen, *Raamatun opetuksia* (Vantaa: RV-Kkirjat, 1993), pp. 148-50.

for some it is a permanent gift.⁵ It seems clear that in the Finnish context there was no need for argumentation or justification, and consequently, no need to elevate the phenomenon of speaking in tongues to a dogma.

In Great Britain, there are two large white Pentecostal denominations, the Assemblies of God and the Elim Church. The first, as the name indicates, has affinities with the mother church in the U.S.A. Consequently, it can be expected that the Assemblies of God of the British Isles teaches that speaking in tongues is the “initial evidence” of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Donald Gee, the most prominent leader of their movement from the early 1920s to the late 1950s, has defended the theory that speaking in tongues is directly related to the baptism in the Spirit. But it is worth pointing out that he himself testified to being baptized in the Spirit weeks before he ever spoke in tongues.⁶ The influential British Pentecostal magazine *Confidence* provides an excellent case study for teaching on the baptism in the Holy Spirit during the first decade of the movement. Various European authors contributed articles under the editorship of A. A. Boddy. Allen White conducted a study of the pneumatology of early European Pentecostalism and concluded,

The writers of *Confidence* present a balanced approach to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the community of believers. Their de-emphasis of tongues... provides a clearer perspective of the place of tongues in the church. Tongues are regarded as a sign of the Spirit's work, yet the sign is not to be held in high regard, but rather what the sign points to, the person of Jesus Christ. In this perspective the

⁵ Mauri Viksten, *Terveen opin pääpiirteitä* (Vantaa: RV-Kirjat, 1980), pp. 102-106, 142-47. I am indebted to V. M. Kärkkäinen for the research and translation of the above.

⁶ “... as I declared my faith it seemed as if God dropped down into my heart from heaven an absolute assurance that these promises were now being actually fulfilled in me. I had no immediate manifestation, but went home supremely happy, having received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit ‘by faith’.” Donald Gee, *Pentecost* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1932), p. 8 as quoted in David Bundy, “A New look at Donald Gee: The Pentecostal Who Grew in Wisdom and Stature,” *Assemblies of God Heritage* 12:3 (fall 1992), pp. 9-11, 28-30 (10).

Scriptures, love, the fruit of the Spirit, and the mission of the church are all held above tongues.⁷

If we look at the Elim Pentecostal Church, we find, in line with their more moderate theological views, a rejection of the “initial evidence” theory⁸ or at least diverging opinions.

The Pentecostal experience, if we may call it like that, came to Germany and Switzerland through Norwegian missionaries. It met fertile ground in the context of Holiness and Pietistic groups. Here the experience met considerably more opposition, especially among the traditional evangelicals. Authors like Jonathan Paul, Christian Krust and Leonard Steiner clearly stated that it could not be argued responsibly that every person baptized in the Holy Spirit had to speak in tongues by necessity.⁹ They were also concerned to remain in dialogue with the Reformed tradition to which they were indebted. Further more, they were busy to defend glossolalia from criticism that claimed it to be uncontrolled (i.e., unholy) behavior and as such a manifestation of the demonic.¹⁰

If we look at the contexts in which Pentecostalism arose in those countries, we can point to the following: a) The religious discussion among the Evangelical churches was very much centered on sanctification, the gifts and the fruit of the Holy Spirit, perhaps a reaction to the academic theology of the day. Scientific arguments smacked of worldliness; b) The philosophical context was characterized by the waning influence of idealism (e.g., Hegel), anti-rationalism (e.g., Kierkegaard) and agnosticism (e.g., Nietzsche). To put it differently, the

⁷ Allen White, “The Pneumatology of European Pentecostalism, as Recorded in *Confidence Magazine*,” *Assemblies of God Heritage* 12:3 (fall 1992), pp. 12-15, 31 (31).

⁸ Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals: The Charismatic Movement in the Churches* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 200.

⁹ See for instance, Chr. Krust, *Was wir glauben, lehren und bekennen* (Altdorf bei Nürnberg: Missionsbuchhandlung, 1963), pp. 74-75; also Leonard Steiner, *Mit folgenden Zeichen: Eine Darstellung der Pfingstbewegung* (Basel: Mission für das volle Evangelium, 1954). For a summary see Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals*, pp. 236-37, 330-341.

¹⁰ Hollenweger devoted a whole chapter in his book *The Pentecostals* to this topic, pp. 218-30.

mood was somber, reflecting the fact that an age of distrust and suspicion had begun (e.g., Freud, Heidegger, Bultmann); and c) The social context of those early Pentecostals was perhaps not as turbulent as in the United States as we shall see. Those who did travel to spread the news of a new Pentecost were a few ministers and missionaries, not the common believers. Unlike in the U.S.A., there was no extraordinary demographic shift to urban areas, no need for extraordinary mobility. The industrial revolution in Europe had caused that a century earlier.

A COMPARISON WITH THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

If we compare the religious, philosophical and social contexts of Northern Europe with those of the United States we can notice remarkable differences.¹¹ Let us first look at the various emphases.

A) As is generally known, the religious context significant for emerging Pentecostalism was largely influenced by the Methodist movement, especially the Holiness groups. There was a yearning for the blessing of the “latter rain,” an equipping of the saints for the last days. Sermons were preached on the necessity for a new Pentecost.¹² But also the new religious sects experienced a parallel interest in the transcendent, some with phenomena similar to what Pentecostals would experience: Mormonism (visitations and visions), Jehovah’s Witnesses (prophecy) and Christian Science (healing) just to mention a few. They seemed to respond to a similar thirst for direct spiritual guidance in a quickly changing world.

B) The most significant philosophical influences in the United States at the turn of the century were probably pragmatism and a scientific optimism. People like William James argued, “If it works it is

¹¹ For the sake of argument I will focus on those American groups upholding an “initial evidence” theory. I am aware that some American Pentecostals have followed a somewhat different path, cf. Harold D. Hunter, “Aspects of Initial-Evidence Dogma: A European American Holiness Pentecostal Perspective,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1:2 (July 1998), pp. 185-202.

¹² Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995), pp. 47-48.

true.”¹³ Empiricism gave a boost to the developing sciences and new inventions kept people in awe. There was a sense of analytic optimism, verification by method was possible.

C) Finally the social context was characterized by rapid urbanization and increased mobility. Floods of new immigrants, unprecedented mass migration, the hope for job opportunities in the West set the stage for immense social upheaval (racial conflicts and appalling urban infrastructures to mention just two) and a fertile ground for the Pentecostal message.¹⁴ The new frontier was like a “second work of grace” a new chance for a new beginning. A new century had started with a new agenda. The people were not tradition-oriented as in the Old World, but were eager to seize new opportunities and look for new answers.

Hence we see that the early Pentecostals in the United States were reacting with a different set of tools as they were trying to reply to the questions of the critics or outsiders. They explained the new power and peace they found through the infilling by the Holy Spirit *in no uncertain terms*. A biblical paradigm such as Acts 2 was *proof that legitimated* their experience. Their testimonies of healing were *pragmatic evidence* of the divine blessing. Speaking in tongues was *obviously* a missionary gift etc.

To make it clear, I do not intend to ridicule the early Pentecostal testimonies and explanations. They do make perfect sense given the circumstances. Neither can or should they be reasoned away. Even today they do have a fundamental claim on us. However, it has been my intention to show that whereas the North Americans were occupied with *legitimization* of glossolalia, the Europeans sought for a *validation* of tongues. While most Pentecostals in the U.S.A. developed a notion of “evidence,” their brothers and sisters in Europe preferred to speak about a “gift” and a “sign.”

¹³ He even applied it to religion saying, “If the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word it is true,” Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity, 1969), p. 146.

¹⁴ For an impressive account of the development of Los Angeles between 1880 and 1910, see Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, pp. 50-53.

THE PRESENT DISCUSSION

At present many Pentecostal leaders, especially in the western world, are faced with an uncomfortable realization that less and less members in their churches can testify to a religious crisis experience in their life, which they can attribute to the working of the Holy Spirit. Whereas in the past, an experience like speaking in tongues often led to a deeper commitment to service and devotion, many believers now seem content with other, perhaps more superficial, forms of religious affirmation. Some statistics in the United States claim that only 30% or even less, of people regularly attending a Pentecostal church do or have ever spoken in tongues.¹⁵ At stake is, that the third and fourth generation of Pentecostals are apparently loosing a Pentecostal distinctive. At the same time the rise of charismatic groups like the Third Wavers, the emergence of new spiritualities and esoterism, the emphasis on the subject and the fancies associated with an approaching new millennium seem to create competition in the spiritual domain. It is quite understandable that a new discussion on “initial evidence” has arisen. In this regard we can notice three different approaches: a) a dogmatic response, b) a programmatic answer, and c) an approach that seeks to redefine the issues.

The dogmatic response can, for instance, be noticed in some circles of the Assemblies of God in the United States of America. The teaching on “initial evidence” has developed in to “initial physical evidence.”¹⁶ Recently, some have suggested an amendment to “initial, immediate, physical evidence.” The fear of loosing a Pentecostal identity prompts these leaders to further qualify an original distinctive. After all, has not Pentecostalism been known as the tongue speaking movement? The problem is that by adding qualifiers one makes a notion less but not more meaningful, because the concept becomes overloaded. In the beginning there was a teaching based on a normal experience, then it

¹⁵ An informative survey on current attitudes among the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada on Spirit baptism, tongues and their utilitarian purposes can be found in, Randal Holm, “Chapter 5: Spirit Baptism” [<http://www.epbc.edu/chapter5c.html>].

¹⁶ “The Initial Physical Evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit,” Position Paper of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, approved by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God on August 18, 1981.

was made normative, i.e., elevated to a doctrine, now those that choose a dogmatic response seem to aim at dogmatizing a dogma.

A programmatic answer can be noticed in Europe. The aim there is to popularize the teaching on the baptism in the Holy Spirit, the practice of speaking in tongues etc., by publishing books on pneumatology¹⁷ and by offering special weekends, 4-day seminars and the like, where the baptism in the Spirit, or should I say the experience of speaking in tongues, is being sought.¹⁸

The third group is trying to redefine the notion of baptism in the Spirit and/or the value of speaking in tongues. A good example is the articles on "Initial Evidence" in the July 1998 issue of the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*.¹⁹

I believe all three approaches express valid concerns, but at the same time they may run the danger of missing the mark. Let me briefly point to some positive and some negative aspects. The dogmatic response laments the "loss of power" in many Pentecostal churches. Their valid concern is to rekindle "power for ministry," which in a typical Pentecostal fashion is related to obedience to the Holy Spirit's control in the believers lives. The negative aspect is, as stated above, that they dogmatize an experience which is fundamentally a mystery. It is, in my opinion, an inappropriate response to a gift from above.

The second group, providing a programmatic answer, wants to counteract the waning of Pentecostal phenomena quickly by introducing practical measures. Positively, they directly address their constituency

¹⁷ For instance David Petts, *The Holy Spirit: An Introduction* (Mattersey: Mattersey Hall, 1998), 140 pages and Werner Kniessel, *Der Heilige Geist im Leben der Christen* (Zürich: Jordan Verlag, 1986), 186 pages.

¹⁸ So at present in Germany and Switzerland at Christian convention centers and Bible schools.

¹⁹ To mention just three examples, Robert Menzies, "Evidential Tongues: An Essay on Theological Method," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1:2 (1999), pp. 111-23 does some redefining by shifting emphasis from biblical to systematic theology; Roli G. de la Cruz, "Salvation in Christ and Baptism in Spirit: A Response to Robert Menzies, 'Evidential Tongues: An Essay in Theological Method'," pp. 125-47 by pointing to other emphases in a Asian context; Frank D. Macchia, "Groans Too Deep for Words: Towards a Theology of Tongues as Initial Evidence," pp. 149-73 by suggesting that tongues can be seen as a self-transcending sign with far reaching theological and socio-religious implications.

and focus on their spiritual needs. The potential problem may lie in the overemphasis on experience at the expense of sustaining teaching. Or to put it differently, once the experience of speaking in tongues has been popularized again, what will the next experience be that the believers will want to turn to?

Finally, we have the group that is concerned with re-definitions. Their valid concern is to find appropriate responses to the issues involved for the present time. Glossolalia, for instance, has hardly been considered in terms of its psycho-linguistic function. The Christian is, especially in his or her use of language, aware of his or her sinfulness. With one's tongue (i.e., language) the individual is capable of telling lies, or at least formulating thoughts that mislead people. The medium of communication is stained. On the other hand, he or she praises God and His holiness with it. At least subconsciously the person is aware of this unworthy tool of doxology. By speaking in tongues, however, the believer has an opportunity to praise God in a language that was never defiled.²⁰ This too is a truly Pentecostal expression, a gift of grace that has hardly been recognized. However, the "re-definers" must not forget that they may run the risk of being misunderstood, in the sense that some people will respond to their teaching simply by talking about their ideas; but to talk about a potential reality is not the same as being in touch with that reality.

CONCLUSION

I would like to suggest three tasks which seem essential for the fruitful continuation of dialogue on the issue of "initial evidence." First, those involved are called to discern the fundamentals. What is at the core? Maintaining a distinctive (at least verbally) or responding to the transcending prompting of the Spirit? Walter Hollenweger rightly points out that for most Pentecostals baptism in the Holy Spirit is a crisis experience; i.e., of the Spirit's presence and power, usually manifested by speaking in tongues, but also through other charisms such as healing,

²⁰ We may, for instance, read the first part of Romans 8 in that context.

foreknowledge, communication through art, and a variety of other gifts, that are unmistakably contributing to the Christian ministry.²¹

Second, the dialogue with the leaders, teachers and the churches will benefit from encouragements in faith and practice. What is needed are exemplary life styles and helpful teaching. In a globally communicative world, this may mean sharing the testimonies of non-westernized Pentecostals, to those who, to a large extent, have lost touch with the dynamic power of the Spirit promised in the books of the Bible. This could be taken a step further, namely by listening to Christians of other traditions; how they encountered the power of God's Spirit and how they testify to the gift of God's presence in this world.

Finally, I believe that we need to maintain a sense of mystery (not magic) in matters pertaining to the gifts of God. It means respecting the Spirit's work in and with us -- receiving it as a gift that calls us to acknowledge, praise and commit ourselves to the Giver. Here we can rejoin the experiences of the Spirit that are already evident in the Old Testament; a humbling vision of God's magnitude and glory (Ezek 1:1-28), being lifted up and strengthened by the Spirit (Ezek 2:2, 6; 3:12-14) and focusing on a commission on behalf of others (Ezek 2:3-3:11).

²¹ Walter J. Hollenweger, "Wie erlebten die ersten Christen den heiligen Geist," *Sexauer Gemeindepreis für Theologie* 12, 9./10. (Dez. 1995), pp. 1-22 (8-10).