

Evidential Tongues: An Essay on Theological Method

Robert P. Menzies

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Pentecostal movement is facing an identity crisis. Any discussion of the doctrine of evidential tongues, if it is to be meaningful, must face this fact. This crisis is the product of an historical process which has been at work since the middle part of this century: the assimilation of the Pentecostal movement into mainstream Evangelicalism. This process of assimilation, although gradual and unobtrusive, has significantly impacted the theology and practice of both the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. And, while it is the Pentecostal movement, which now finds itself at a strategic crossroads of self-definition, the direction it takes will inevitably impact the broader Evangelical world. The following essay will seek to describe the origin and nature of this self-identity crisis, outline the central questions which have emerged, particularly as they relate to evidential tongues, and suggest how Pentecostals might constructively face these challenges.

2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The theological roots of the Pentecostal movement are firmly planted in the nineteenth century Holiness movement and American revivalism. This fertile soil nurtured the fundamental affirmations that characterize Pentecostal theology and the approach to scripture upon which they stand. These theological affirmations were, for a variety of reasons, produced in isolation from other sectors of the Christian community. However, with the advent of the Second World War, this quickly changed. Pentecostals frequently found themselves in close proximity to their Evangelical brothers and sisters. New relationships developed, fostering an atmosphere of openness. The Pentecostal movement rapidly began to identify with the broader Evangelical world. Pentecostal Bible colleges featured textbooks produced by Evangelical scholars; their students flooded into Evangelical seminaries. Evangelical institutions and publications impacted the ethos of Pentecostal churches and significantly influenced the outlook of the laity. Now, almost a century after its genesis, the Pentecostal movement finds itself in a new environment: American revivalism has given way to modern Evangelicalism. The major tenets of Pentecostal theology remain the same; but the way we as Pentecostals approach scripture - the hermeneutic, which supports our theology - has been significantly altered. The hermeneutic of Evangelicalism has become our hermeneutic.

The newly adopted Evangelical hermeneutic supports most of the theological doctrines Pentecostals hold dear - those we share with our Evangelical brothers and sisters.¹ Yet this hermeneutical shift represents a very real challenge to those doctrines distinctive to Pentecostalism. Specifically, I refer to the Pentecostal belief that baptism in the Spirit is an experience subsequent to (or distinct from) conversion and that glossolalia represents its initial physical evidence. These cardinal doctrines, formulated prior to the assimilation of the Pentecostal movement into the larger Evangelical community, are based on an approach to scripture that is not entirely compatible with the new hermeneutic shaped by Evangelicalism. Thus, Pentecostal ministers frequently find themselves espousing a theology which is based on an approach to scripture that (if not they themselves) a significant portion of the members of their congregation no longer accept as valid. Now this does not mean that Pentecostal theology is wrong, but it does suggest that we cannot simply rely on the legacy of the past, if we hope to offer credible biblical support for our theological positions. The

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