

IS SPEAKING WITH TONGUES THE INITIAL EVIDENCE OF THE SPIRIT BAPTISM?

(A look at the Initial Evidence Doctrine)

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The Pentecostal Movement began at the turn of the 20th century with the "discovery" of the Initial Evidence doctrine in the book of Acts. Through the years it has been challenged and the arguments both for and against its validity have become much more sophisticated than they were years ago. The purpose of this paper is to look at this doctrine from a critical but sensitive standpoint.

Before considering the biblical issues let me say that I do not write as one who is an outsider. To the contrary, I have been a part of two significant movements that hold to the Initial Evidence doctrine. For seven years I was a part of the United Pentecostal Church which holds that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit *and* that this experience is essential to salvation. For some 5 years I was associated with the Assemblies of God which also holds that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit although they do make a distinction between this experience and the new birth. Therefore one can be saved but yet not speak in tongues. My comments below, then, are based on biblical study, years of firsthand experience and examination of the most significant writings available on this subject.

What is it?

Our first task is to define what it is we are seeking to examine. The Initial Evidence doctrine is simply that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is an identifiable experience in the Christian believer's life recognized by the *inevitable* accompanying sign of speaking with other tongues. "Tongues" are languages other than what are normally spoken by the person receiving the experience. The experience is then supernatural in that one is able to do something that otherwise would not be possible.

Further, this doctrine is not that *some* can or will speak in tongues but rather it affirms that *all without exception* will speak with tongues. Normally the doctrine is associated with the claim that one will receive new power for effective Christian service as a result of this experience.

Biblical Basis

The biblical basis of this teaching is really quite simple. The book of Acts is its foundation stone. If the book of Acts were excluded from the discussion there would be no other source of information since the only other passage in the New Testament that discusses tongues at any length is 1 Corinthians 12-14 which clearly teaches all do not speak in tongues. Also, Paul examines tongues as one of many differing spiritual gifts that are given freely by the Spirit *after* one has been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). No "initial evidence" is then present in the Epistles. The Gospels add no support since the Spirit baptism is something that is prophesied but not realized until the time period discussed in Acts (Mt. 3:11, Acts 1:3-4). Mark 16:17 mentions tongues in a group of other signs. No purpose is assigned to this gift and therefore no additional insight may be gained.

The material from which this doctrine is developed, then, is to be found exclusively in Acts. In particular there are four "cases" that call for examination. They are significant not because they are the only times people are said to be "filled with the Spirit," or somehow moved upon by the

Spirit, in the book of Acts. They are, however, the only passages that give any kind of description of the experience itself as it is *initially* (for the first time) received by the people mentioned. For example, Acts 2:4 is the initial "filling" of the Spirit in the case of the original Apostles and disciples. Acts 4:31 also mentioned the disciples being "filled" with the Spirit but it is assumed that this is a second experience by the disciples and therefore did not require the presence of tongues.

Acts 2 records the initial outpouring of the Spirit on the 120 gathered in the Upper Room. Of course, Acts 2:4 states that they "spoke with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" after they were filled with the Spirit. Acts 8 records the preaching of Philip in a city of Samaria. Though the people believed Philip's message and were even baptized with water, they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. The Apostles then come down to Samaria in order to lay hands on the Samaritans so that they would receive the Spirit. Upon doing such something evidential certainly happened since Simon the magician sought to purchase the power to impart the Spirit just as the Apostles. In Acts 10 the sign of tongues is again explicitly mentioned when Peter preaches Christ to the household of Cornelius (10:44-46). Acts 19 is the final account in which tongues is included. Twelve disciples of John at Ephesus received the fuller revelation of Christ and were baptized and then the Spirit "came upon" them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (v. 1-6).

From these four cases several points emerge. First, there are cases where people believe and yet they receive the Holy Spirit subsequently. Acts 8 is the clearest of these cases. Acts 2 would really not provide support for subsequence since all sides of this controversy must grant that *no one* was "baptized with the Holy Spirit" prior to this time (Acts 1:4-5). It wasn't as if they could have received the Spirit in this way yet did not for some unstated reason. They did believe but yet could not receive the Spirit until this gift was in fact given after the glorification of Christ (Jn. 7:37-39). In Acts 10, though tongues do appear, there is no gap of time between the preaching of the Gospel, faith, and the reception of the Spirit. Acts 19 is also not a good case for subsequence since it appears obvious that these disciples had not yet received the full message of Christ. After they did hear the gospel the Holy Spirit "came upon" them and they experienced two spiritual gifts (tongues and prophecy). There is no good contextual reason for saying that the spiritual gifts here received are any different from what is found in I Corinthians 12-14.

Secondly, the Pentecostalist reasons that tongues function as a uniform sign of the Spirit-baptism in each of these cases. Tongues do not appear in only one of the passages and yet even here there is an implied sign of evidential value (Acts 8). Those who defend the Initial Evidence doctrine rightly argue that *something* happened in this case and it is reasonable to suppose it was tongues since the three other passages so affirm.

Not only is the Spirit-baptism distinct from conversion or faith, it is argued, but it is uniformly accompanied by a visible or audible sign. The next implied argument is that there are no counter examples in the book of Acts. In other words, not only does the Bible positively describe the experience of the Spirit-baptism with an accompanying sign but we do not find examples in which people are baptized with the Spirit *without* an external sign.

In recent years some more sophisticated arguments have been advanced in support of the Initial Evidence thesis. The most important of these center around matters of interpreting historical narrative portions of Scripture and a significant study comparing Luke's terminology in Acts with Old Testament counterparts in historical narrative passages (See Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*). Perhaps the most forceful defense of the Initial Evidence teaching is to be found in the writings of Howard Ervin (*Spirit Baptism: A Biblical Investigation*, see also *Conversion-Initiation and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit*). The bulk of the work done has been to support the idea of subsequence and an evidential sign. Ervin's most mature works do not spend much time defending tongues particularly as the initial evidence of the Spirit-baptism but mainly attempting to defend a distinction between salvation and Spirit-baptism. Part of the reason for this emphasis in Stronstad is that he is making a parallel between Old Testament

prophecy as it was the result of the "coming of the Spirit" upon various personages in the Hebrew Scriptures. We shall return to these developments in our critique.

We can conclude then the case for the Initial Evidence Doctrine by saying that it is a teaching based on a discerned "pattern" in the book of Acts illustrating the way in which early believers experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This pattern demonstrates two key points: (1) the baptism in the Spirit is *distinct* from conversion or faith and (2) the initial sign of this experience was uniformly that of speaking with other tongues.

History

Before embarking on a critical analysis of this doctrine, it is helpful to look at how Christians have historically viewed the matter of the Spirit baptism and the evidential value of speaking with tongues. Instead of journeying through history, I will offer a series of quotes from an important work edited by Gary B. McGee entitled *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspectives on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*. This collection of papers includes two very significant studies by Pentecostal historian Stanley Burgess. His two chapters consider the history of the idea of the Spirit baptism and in concluding his study he writes:

This survey of the Christian idea of a baptism in/with the Holy Spirit and the evidence(s) for that infilling indicates that, while the concept of Spirit baptism was very common throughout the Christian centuries, the modern Pentecostal identification of glossolalia as the "initial evidence" of such baptism is completely novel until the nineteenth-century Irvingites (emphasis added). Amazingly, in almost two millennia of Christian life and practice, no one...associated tongues with the advent of life in the Spirit...what is unique about modern Pentecostals is that they consider glossolalia to be the litmus test of Pentecostal orthodoxy and the valid sign for Spirit baptism...This study demonstrates that Pentecostals, who rejoice in the novelty of their teachings and experiences, are fully justified in classifying their doctrine of initial evidence as distinctive. Throughout the twentieth century, they have clung tenaciously to this teaching, and it has in turn become their rallying point and source of identity (p. 37-38).

Though we are bound first and foremost to the authority of God's word, it is also true that we should not be as those who assume they are the first to study God's word. The history of gifted teachers and thinkers in the life of the Church should humble us to at least consider *why* it was that they understood God's word as they did. If we choose to accept a doctrine that *no one* else has expounded or even recognized before our own time period, we should at least understand fully how and why the same passages of Scripture were understood differently. Burgess has done us a great service by frankly admitting that the Initial Evidence doctrine simply does not have a history before the 1800's. Let me say again, this should at least caution us to carefully consider the Scriptures used to support the doctrine itself.

It is also important to note that Pentecostalism has not only accepted an understanding of the book of Acts that is "novel" but it has also made this doctrine the most important distinguishing feature of its identity. An essential area of contemporary Pentecostal theology, then, was simply absent from the church until modern times.

Observations & Problems

I would like to present a series of observations regarding the Initial Evidence teaching that will help to prepare the way for a solid evaluation of the strength of the evidence and argumentation cited above.

1. Perhaps the first important point to note is that this doctrine is not found in any defined form in Scripture itself. The primary reason why there is so much debate on this subject is because there are no explicit statements in Scripture that give the Pentecostal conclusion based on the Acts passages. No statement like, "All who receive the baptism of the Spirit speak with tongues," or, "The baptism in the Holy Spirit is a distinct, recognizable experience from conversion," etc. These positions are based on inductive reasoning from historical accounts given in Scripture.

We should note briefly here that this observation that the Initial Evidence teaching is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture does not necessarily prove it is wrong. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is not found in a fully developed and defined way in the New Testament but it is the *necessary* foundation for understanding what the New Testament teaches. A doctrine can be legitimately derived from inference *but* we must be careful that we do not infer something that is not necessary. The burden of proof rests on those who seek to teach a doctrine that is not clearly enunciated in the Word of God. I, for example, am happy to share with people why the Trinity is demanded by what the Bible teaches about God simply because it is the best and most all-encompassing way of doing justice to the record of Scripture. We must be sure that the same case exists for Initial Evidence.

2. The Initial Evidence doctrine is based exclusively on historical narrative portions of Scripture. That is, the didactic (teaching) portions of Scripture have no bearing on the matter. The teaching is *supplied* by the Pentecostalist. In other words, the book of Acts simply states that various groups spoke with tongues when receiving the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostalist then concludes that the same is true for believers centuries later. This is a leap in interpretation that is not revealed in Scripture itself. Furthermore, we must maintain that this kind of reasoning is dangerous. It simply does not follow that because God did something in the past that He will do so in the future in the exact same fashion. For example, God parted the Red Sea when the children of Israel were leaving Egypt and drowned Pharaoh's armies. Are we to draw from this that every time God's children face a sea of water that God will part it? Are we also to conclude that in so parting the "sea" God will also destroy our enemies? We may be able to draw principles from these narrative portions of Scripture such as God will finally deliver His people, God's faithfulness to His covenants, etc. This is a long way from saying that a particularity of a historical circumstance is to be judged *normative* for future generations. We could also do the same thing with the book of Acts. Ananias and Saphira were struck dead when they lied to the Holy Spirit. Does this mean that all will fall dead if they repeat the same sin? The answer must be "no" since most likely people lie in one way or another in virtually every worship service not to mention in their personal lives. We would not even be justified in saying that God will kill every person who lies before an apostle since this would mean that we are saying God must always act in the identical same way. This is simply an abuse of narrative passages which are primarily intended for information rather than patternism.

3. The passages in Acts in question (chps. 2, 8, 10, & 19) cannot be considered *normal* occasions. Furthermore, there are factors present in these passages that either cannot be reduplicated today or are generally not present.

In all four cases cited above an Apostle is present. In fact, when Apostles are not present they are called *before* the Holy Spirit is received. This is in spite of the fact that great signs were being performed by one who was not an Apostle (Philip, Acts 8). Peter is present in Acts 10 after a series of divine interventions to get him there. Paul is present in Acts 19 and all of the original Apostles are present in Acts 2. This is at least one accompanying factor that is not reproduced today.

It is difficult to see how Acts 2 can serve as a paradigm of receiving the Holy Spirit in all ages. Not only was this clearly the initial baptism of the Spirit in the Church but it was also accompanied by various external signs that are not reproduced today (tongues of fire, wind, etc.). Additionally, those speaking in tongues were speaking languages that were recognized by the onlookers and actually became a means of attracting their attention to hear the message of Peter and the other Apostles. From this chapter alone there are many other factors present that can clearly account for why God chose to use the sign of tongues on this occasion without resorting to a doctrine of Initial Evidence. The real question is, does the chapter *require* that we conclude with the Initial Evidence doctrine in order to make sense of it? If it does not, and here it surely does not, we are not justified in affirming it.

It is also worth noting that *none* of those in these passages *expected* to speak with tongues. There is no evidence that any of them were instructed on "how" to receive the Spirit or what to expect at that moment. In other words, in every case tongues was sudden and without instruction. Jesus simply told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit was to come. When the Spirit did come *all* spoke in tongues without prior instruction. Acts 10 and 19 are certainly sudden and without preparation (This is true at least in Acts 10. Acts 19 gives no description of instructions other than regarding Christ). Acts 8 would be the only exception to this pattern but really it is not an exception if it is seen that they immediately received the Spirit when the Apostles came to them.

From these observations, we can conclude that if we are wanting to be true to the *pattern* of Acts, then, we must expect an Apostle to be present and that no prior instruction or preparation regarding tongues be present in order to receive the Spirit. We might expand this list of criteria to include the observation that the Spirit always came upon crowds of people. We do not find the Spirit coming upon individuals in any of these chapters. It is important to remember that these are not to be quickly dismissed as incidentals to the situations. They are just as consistent as the sign of tongues. We must be careful not to disassociate what may be necessarily linked in the Acts narratives with the experiences described. They may give insight into the purpose of the events themselves.

4. There is no good reason to separate Paul's discussion of tongues in 1 Corinthians from what we find in the book of Acts. This is a crucial observation since the whole Pentecostal position rests on defining different usages of tongues in the Bible. In other words, tongues as discussed in Paul *cannot* be the same in function as what we find in the book of Acts. If such an identification were made one would have to conclude that all do not speak with tongues but all are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12).

In order to respond to this challenge the Pentecostalist usually seeks to amplify differences in function between tongues in the two sources. For example, 120 speak with tongues in Acts 2 while Paul clearly states that only two or three should speak in tongues and then let one interpret the messages. This is really not substantial, however, since Paul's real concern is understanding. He establishes rules for a congregation that was misusing these gifts and

therefore, in order to preserve the goal of understanding in the gathering, sets down some rules of order. This was not a problem in Acts 2, however, because the languages were understandable to those hearing and therefore did not present the stumblingblock to the unbelievers as was taking place at Corinth. All of the arguments used by the Pentecostalist for distinguishing between tongues in Acts and Corinthians may be answered in this same way. It is unreasonable to argue that Paul would have condemned the use of tongues supposing he knew that if 120 people at Corinth would stand outside their place of gathering and attract the attention of thousands of unbelievers because they heard the wonderful actions of God in their own languages. The circumstances of the cases in Acts were different than the local gathering in Corinth but this is no solid grounds for saying the gift was not the same.

Even if those present in the other Acts passages did not understand what was being spoken in other tongues, it would still not follow that we must say it is of a different nature than what appears in Corinth. For one, Paul does speak about tongues without interpretation (14:2). The Pentecostalists always reason from such passa

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has not been to deal with every argument that may be advanced in support of the Initial Evidence thesis. It has been our goal, however, to provide some lines of reasoning from the testimony of Scripture that certainly lead us away from such a doctrine.

We have found that the teaching in question is not only without a significant history in the Church, but, more importantly, it lacks clear Scriptural support. In such a case, where a doctrine is based on inference, the burden of proof is borne by the one making the assertion. In support of this teaching, a series of historical narrative passages were examined. None of them state that they are to be interpreted as paradigms of subsequent experiences. To the contrary, there are certain historical particularities that forbid such an identification (Apostolic presence, etc.).

The Pentecostal form of argumentation assumes that the historical actions and workings of God are normative for the future. This is found in the common Pentecostal belief that the 20th century church should be a reduplication of the book of Acts. This ignores the *unique* nature of the time-period covered by the book of Acts.

The key passages used to support the Initial Evidence doctrine, Acts 2, 8, 10, are unique historical happenings. This is evident not only by the circumstances surrounding these accounts but also because the many other conversion experiences described in Acts do not emphasize the matters found in these foundational events in the spread of the Gospel to new "people groups" (i.e. Acts 16:30f.).

Acts 19:2 reflects the teaching of the epistles regarding the life of the Spirit. Those who believe are assumed to have received the Spirit. Most modern translations have, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit *when* you believed?" The Greek text is actually more specific, "Believing (*pisteusantes*) received (*elabete*) you the Holy Spirit?" In other words, it was assumed that there was an inseparable connection between coming to believe in Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit. This echoes Paul's teaching that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ do not belong to Him (Rom. 8:9). It is also quite close to Paul's connection between truly announcing the Lordship of Christ and possessing the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). Additionally, all who are in the body of Christ share the common experience of the Spirit-baptism (1 Cor. 12:13). The biblical witness focuses on a new birth of water and Spirit, almost unanimously understood in the history of Christianity as the sacrament of baptism. As the sacrament of faith, then, baptism is the normal way in which the life of the Spirit as a child of God is begun and realized (John 3:5, Titus 3:5, Romans 6:3-5)..

Our challenge to the Initial Evidence doctrine is fundamentally a hermeneutical one. Is it right for us to read the history of God's activities in the past and suppose that God has thereby taught

that He will continually do the same actions? This is not to say that we may not learn from the past. Far from it, Paul frequently spoke of the Old Testament as a "schoolmaster" and as a means of learning the attributes of God. The actions of God in history are "examples" for us, they are profitable for the present (1 Cor. 10:11). Though God destroyed the children of Israel who committed fornication by serpents, however, does not mean we should expect the same to take place following every act of fornication today.

You see, we should not use history as a way of "boxing God in" to a particular way of acting. To the contrary, we should read history for what it purports to be. God worked in the foundational days of the church in unique ways bearing witness both to the ordained Apostles and to the Gospel message itself (Heb. 2:1-4, Acts 2:43). We should rejoice in these comforting and assuring foundations upon which our faith rests. We should not proceed to say, though, that God is bound to act in exactly the same way. This is a misuse of history and Scripture. The epistles provide the normative foundation for the life of the Church. The Initial Evidence doctrine, however, divorces the descriptions of Acts (which do not explain their full meaning) from Paul's instructions regarding spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14. This leaves the Pentecostalist to construct a doctrine *without* the constraints of specific teaching regarding the content of the passages in question.

In conclusion, I encourage the Pentecostalist and the non-Pentecostalist alike to carefully read the book of Acts as well as Paul's careful instructions regarding spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians. The accounts of Acts are a tremendous source of encouragement and should be appreciated just as every biblical account of God's redemptive intervention in the course of the world. Just as the death and resurrection of our Savior speak to us of our salvation, so Pentecost speaks of the great climax of Christ's redemption for the sending forth of the Spirit gave evidence that Christ was now exalted at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33). This unique testimony was granted to all people; Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile. No doubt remains that we also share in this redemption. The historical demonstration of this recorded in the book of Acts need not be repeated again and again in order to assure us of this reality.

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