A healing service at a convention of the Tomlinson Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee in 1941.
Discerning the Spirit: Spiritual Manifestations in Early Pentecostalism

By D. Allen Tennison

Pentecostals have long been known for their openness to spiritual experiences. Whether it was speaking in tongues, seeing visions, dancing in the Spirit, or even levitating (as will be explained below), early twentieth-century Pentecostals were open to a wide variety of experiences within their worship that distinguished them from other Christian groups. There was some disagreement, however, over specific manifestations of the Spirit and how to strike a balance between orderly worship and the freedom of the Spirit. The lessons learned by early Pentecostals in these struggles may still be useful today.

Value of Manifestations

Early Pentecostals often cited three factors in the support of spiritual manifestations: 1) their Biblical foundation, 2) their supernatural nature, and 3) the positive spiritual benefits that resulted from the experience. Spiritual manifestations were important to early Pentecostals partly because they served as an evidence of the truth of the gospel. The apparent supernatural character of a true manifestation of the Spirit was useful in proving the Pentecostal message.

According to famed evangelist Maria Woodworth-Etter, spiritual manifestations were confirmations of the truth being preached, and they had tremendous impact on listeners. Or as another Pentecostal wrote concerning non-believers, “if they will not believe the ‘proclamation’ they may believe because of the works—the manifestation of the Holy Spirit.” Those who preached without the expectation of these signs were sometimes viewed as unwilling to put their faith into practice.

Early Pentecostals warned against the declaration of a “signless gospel.” According to D. W. Kerr, an early Pentecostal educator and executive presbyter in the Assemblies of God, “A signless gospel is a spineless gospel; and spineless men preach a spineless gospel.” R. E. McAlister, a founder of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, stated strongly, “A signless gospel is a Christless gospel.”

Spiritual Gifts as Manifestations

Many Pentecostals labeled as a spiritual manifestation any physical effect from or response to the presence of the Spirit, including but not limited to the spiritual gifts listed in the letters of Paul. They believed that these effects signaled the Spirit’s presence and could act as evidence to the truth of the gospel. The spiritual gifts most commonly cited as useful to evangelism were miracles and divine healing.

A. P. Collins, a former general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, pointed out that in the book of Acts, 3000 received Christ at Pentecost after they heard speaking in tongues, while 5000 received Christ when a lame man was healed at the gate called Beautiful. He wrote, “A mightier work was done ... I believe God wants us to emphasize the doctrine of Divine Healing.” According to Frank Lindblad, no other manifestation of the Spirit is as effective in pointing to the gospel as that of healing.

Among all the spiritual gifts listed in the Pauline epistles, speaking in tongues received the lion’s share of attention in early Pentecostal literature—even more than divine healing. While much has been written about the Pentecostal theology of tongues as the evidence of Spirit baptism, speaking in tongues was also seen as an evidence of the gospel. One way tongues served as an evidence of the gospel was when it could be positively identified as a particular human language, unknown to the speaker, thus validating its supernatural character.
William Piper, pastor of the Stone Church in Chicago, recognized his wife’s tongues as Latin, and favorably compared the interpretation of tongues that was given with the translation he later made using a Latin dictionary.

The Apostolic Faith (Los Angeles) reported that the speech of a Ralph Groeniuk of Hermon, California, was identified as Polish and Russian by a Sister Rosenthal at a revival on the corner of 24th and Hoover in Los Angeles. Henry G. Tuthill claimed he knew a person who recognized an utterance in tongues as his mother tongue and had sworn to such in a statement signed by a notary. William Schell announced that the people who understood an instance of speaking in tongues as a language familiar to them were so numerous, “Any Pentecostal Assembly can start a man on a road of investigation which will enable him to quickly find some of those persons who have heard their native tongues spoken by the Spirit of God.”

Early Pentecostals recited numerous stories of recognized tongues, although some of the stories repeated the same incident. Incidents of tongues speech said to be recognized included some African dialects, Arabic, Armenian, “Chinese” (Mandarian or Cantonese are rarely specified), Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi or other Indian languages, Italian, Latin, Native American languages, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, and Welsh. Similarly, non-English speaking cultures reported tongues in English. While it could be questioned whether the tongues speech was genuinely identified or merely assumed to sound like one of the above languages, early Pentecostals believed that the identification of speaking in tongues as a known and living language was not uncommon.

**Manifestations Related to Spiritual Gifts**

Most, if not all, Pentecostals accepted manifestations that could be specifically identified in Scripture as spiritual gifts. Many Pentecostals also experienced manifestations that seemed tangentially related to biblical spiritual gifts, including variations on speaking in tongues. One example was writing in tongues, sometimes translated through the “gift of interpretation” and also identified as a particular language.

According to historian Vinson Synan, George F. Taylor was so well known for interpreting written tongues, or “grapholalia,” that for two years people sent him their writing examples for his interpretation. After those two years, however, he was no longer able to interpret. This activity as a whole is rarely mentioned beyond the first years of Pentecostalism;
more popular was singing in tongues as either an individual experience, or as corporate singing in what was called a “heavenly choir,” which many believed had divine origins as groups of Pentecostals were able to harmonize with each other in tongues. They sometimes reported hearing heavenly music which led their singing.

Donald Gee counseled that the singer in the Spirit should show restraint if the congregation could not join in the “ecstacies of the singer,” though an “obvious and consistent exception would plainly be made if the whole company were swept as a harp by the unseen hand of the Holy Spirit at the same time, and such singing were in perfect chorus.”

A final variation on speaking in tongues involved a special manifestation related to the deaf and mute who were said to speak in tongues with sign language.

**Extra-Biblical Manifestations**

Manifestations related to speaking in tongues could still fall under the category of spiritual gifts. But how did Pentecostals justify calling something a manifestation of the Spirit if it did not belong to that category according to the lists of Paul? Pentecostals in general defended individual physical responses as manifestations of the Spirit by asking two questions: 1) Were examples of these manifestations found somewhere in Scripture? and 2) Did the manifestations lead to the edification of believers or to the evangelization of non-believers?

One Pentecostal made the following case for unusual manifestations:

Some have accepted the former, but rejected the latter, saying they believed the speaking in tongues, singing in tongues, etc., was of God, but that they did not believe the shaking, falling on the floor, etc., was of God. I contend that one is as much from God as the other, for the same power that speaks in tongues shaks (sic) the bodies of those who speak in tongues... I often asked, “What is the use of these manifestation?” My answer is, “Their value lies in what they evidence. They are unmistakable evidences that the power of God is working.”

Some contended that a manifestation needed only to be mentioned once within Scripture as a reaction to the presence of the Spirit to be construed as a manifestation of the Spirit. For example, if Elijah could outrun the chariot of Ahab under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, then...
why couldn’t running around a church be considered a manifestation of the Spirit? Scriptural narrative became a source for Christian practice in addition to prescriptive biblical text. Manifestations defended this way included running in the Spirit, levitating, dancing, leaping, trembling, falling, weeping, falling into a trance, having a vision, etc. The practical results consisted of blessing and evangelism; a manifestation was deemed appropriate if it resulted in conversions or, more commonly, a sense of personal blessing from the Holy Spirit.

The following list of manifestations is not exhaustive but is exemplary of the types of activities recognized as signs of the Spirit within Pentecostalism. Some manifestations which had a strong supernatural flair included hearing and seeing beyond the natural realm, such as the hearing of invisible instruments during worship, or a heavenly choir. Maria Woodworth-Etter said of these manifestations that they put the “fear of God on the people, and causes a holy hush to come over the congregation.”

Visions were more common, including visions of angels and of flames or balls of fire over individuals, whole congregations, or church structures. A future executive presbyter of the Assemblies of God, F. F. Bosworth, recounted that during a revival, “One night a large ball of fire came into the tent and fell upon the head of a brother who came that day from Mishawaka to seek for the baptism in the Holy Spirit. At the very instant the ball of fire fell upon him, he magnified God with a loud voice, and in a language which he had never learned, while the audience looked on in tears.”

Minnie F. Abrams argued that this manifestation of seeing fire was literally the fire portion of “the baptism of the Spirit and fire.” In the Tomlinson Church of God’s The White Wing Messenger, visions of fire served as a sign of God’s pleasure over the proceedings or individuals associated with the manifestation. A lesser cited manifestation was that of hearing wind.

Levitation was an uncommon response, but was also reported as a spiritual manifestation. By levitation, Pentecostals meant both feelings of weightlessness as well as claims of being lifted off the ground. It was sometimes defended as a sign of the coming rapture of the church when the Spirit would lift bodies off the ground. A. J. Tomlinson, general overseer of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), told of being “enshrouded with a power that raised me off the floor and that carried me some little distance and let me down again.”

Some manifestations could be classified as involuntary physical responses to the Spirit such as shaking, falling to the floor, and kicking or jerking. One Pentecostal wrote,

Almost everyone that receives that Holy Ghost under this “Latter rain” outpouring jerks more or less according to the power that is displayed. People can’t sit still. They often try to hold themselves but this makes it worse. They are sometimes jerked and thrown about with such force that it would seem they will be almost torn to pieces. But they enjoy it and the more they are jerked the better they feel.

More celebratory physical responses included “holy laughter” and “dancing in the Spirit.” Perhaps the most “overcoming” physical response was being “drunk in the Spirit” which was manifested exactly as it sounded. William Booth-Clibborn describes his own experience as loss of motor control so that he had to be carried away by others.

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Need for Balance and Orderliness

Many Pentecostals and, indeed, non-Pentecostals, questioned whether these
extra-biblical manifestations were of the Spirit or of the flesh. Two of the better known early Pentecostal evangelists, Aimee Semple McPherson and Smith Wigglesworth, were critical of certain types of Pentecostal manifestations. According to Wigglesworth, shaking, jumping and falling were not spiritual manifestations because they did not communicate edification to other believers. Speech, but not physical movements, could be manifestations of the Spirit. He wrote that Pentecostals “must not have a good time at the expense of somebody else.”

Aimee Semple McPherson believed that the Spirit did not lead people to manifestations such as lying on the floor and jumping, because this failed to attract outsiders. She further noted that a “principle difficulty” within the movement was a focus on manifestations without being balanced by a heart for evangelism. McPherson noted that she received criticism from both sides—from the cold churches which declared she “had too much fire and was too Pentecostal” and from the more zealous missions which claimed that she “was compromising, quenching the Spirit and not Pentecostal enough.” She humorously dismissed these criticisms as evidence of her balance: “With one smiting me on the one side and one up on the other, I was able, without the slightest difficulty, to maintain a reasonably even balance.”

Many early Pentecostals recognized that improper practice of spiritual gifts could lead to fanaticism. In 1916, the Pentecostal Holiness Church (PHC) experienced a controversy over spiritual gifts when a revival in Virginia, in which gifts such as divine healing and prophecy were in abundance, turned more radical. Demons said to be floating above the services were rebuked, and divine revelations of a personal nature became more common such as revealing secret sins or who was to marry whom. Finally, a prophecy which predicted the destruction of the United States and the protection of China caused a number of members to make their way to China. The ministers involved in this fanaticism were dismissed from the PHC.

While most Pentecostals recognized the need for orderliness in spiritual manifestations, there was disagreement on the degree of orderliness required. According to Donald Gee, a leader in the British Assemblies of God, the Spirit...
could not be behind disorderliness because the nature of the Spirit is that of “a perfect gentleman.” The disorderly nature of some manifestations could lead to an outright rejection of any manifestation, a risk Pentecostals took with utmost seriousness. Too little order, however, was considered better than too much, if it resulted in fewer manifestations.

66 Resisting the Spirit was a more serious sin for most early Pentecostals than disorderly worship. Despite her own negative feelings toward some manifestations, Aimee Semple McPherson warned against prohibiting any spiritual manifestation, even if it is a suspected counterfeit, because the presence of the real would alone be enough to overwhelm the fake.

67 Frank Bartleman, an early chronicler of the Azusa Street Revival, warned that prohibiting the fake may even prevent the real manifestation from occurring: “We found early in the ‘Azusa’ work that when we attempted to steady the Ark the Lord stopped working.”

68 E. N. Bell responded sharply to the phrase, “Holy Roller” by saying that Pentecostals did not roll on the floor and that such a manifestation was “nonsense and dishonoring to God.” Yet he immediately added, “But if God’s mighty power takes all the strength out of one and he falls in a heap before the Lord, this is not foolishness and we say to God to work as it pleaseth Him.”

69 When later questioned whether a Pentecostal minister must “jump and shout,” Bell replied, “I hardly see how one could have much power and glory and not have any manifestation or shouting; nor can I see why these things in reason or in the Spirit should be objectionable to those who are themselves filled with the Spirit.” He went on to say, though, that the manifestations of the flesh should not be confused with the work of the Spirit, and that the only way to deal with manifestations is on a case by case basis.

70 Most Pentecostals did not reject any type of manifestation outright. The exceptions included specific practices such as the handling of dangerous objects including snakes or hot coals, and the making of animal or machine noises. These were rejected by a majority of early Pentecostal leaders because of their lack of Biblical foundation or a foundation on good biblical interpretation, and the possible negative results that could follow such experiences.

71 Maintaining Proper Focus

Early Pentecostals objected to making spiritual manifestations the point of their worship. Joseph Tunmore spoke for many when he critiqued believers who seemed to live for signs rather than for the Spirit. He compared Pentecostals who seemed to have an unhealthy interest in manifestations to babies who “love a rattle.” He wrote, “When they begin to brawl just let them hear the rattle and it is all right again.” Missionary Alma Doering differentiated between Pentecostals who sought the blessing so they could be equipped to help others and those who sought a blessing for its own sake out of their own “spiritual lusts.”

72 Well-known healing evangelist Charles Price argued against placing too
great an emphasis on manifestations, which could be the cause of disorder or division in a service, because the Spirit would never do either. He wrote, “I most emphatically believe that many of the people who have sought manifestations and demonstrations have found them and yet have not found the Holy Spirit.”

Or, as Canadian Pentecostal leader R. E. McAlister put it, “There is a marked difference between following signs and having signs following us.”

Whether a manifestation would be permitted depended on the source of the manifestation. No manifestation could be rejected if the Spirit was behind it, which would mean one was “resisting the Spirit,” but if it was clear that a manifestation came from some other source, then discipline was needed.

Leaders were aware of the human role in spiritual manifestations. Even while stressing that the “Spirit must have His way,” they also encouraged self-control because the Spirit did not maintain absolute control of the human body. They recognized that personalities remained present at the time of a manifestation. However, otherwise acceptable manifestations were at times deemed out of order if the fleshly nature seemed still in control.

Some manifestations were deemed out of order, not because of their fleshly nature or lack of fruit, but because they were Satanic counterfeits. D. W. Myland, following a tri-partite anthropology, divided the nine gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 into three spiritual, three psychical and three physical gifts. The physical gifts, which included tongues, healing and miracles, could be imitated by Satan, who worked in the physical realm. Myland warned believers that physical gifts must be dominated by the spiritual and psychical gifts that Satan could not imitate.

Pentecostals, citing Scripture (I Cor. 12:3 and I John 4:2), offered one consistent way to judge the spirit behind a person’s actions—to question the person on the nature of Jesus. If he or she was able to testify to Christ as Lord or some other basic Christological issue such as His soon return or His incarnation in the flesh, then it was believed that there was no demonic spirit behind his or her action. The Pentecostal Holiness Advocate called the Holy Spirit the “conservator of orthodoxy” when sound doctrine was defined in “its relation to Christ.” According to Frank Lindblad, this test applied both to Christians and to individuals who embraced other systems of belief, including Buddhism, Islam, and Christian Science.

A fail-safe test to determine whether a specific spiritual manifestation was of the Spirit was whether it contradicted the Bible. Pentecostals placed a high value on the authority of Scripture. The Spirit would never add anything to Scripture

A specimen of Agnes Ozman’s grapholalia which appeared in the Topeka newspaper just after the outpouring of the Spirit at Charles Parham’s Bethel Bible College.

Members of the Tomlinson Church of God and the Latin American Council of Christian Churches gather in Cleveland, Tennessee, for a healing service in 1936.
or go against the teachings of Scripture, so that the Bible remained a standard by which to judge those things said to be “of the Spirit.” At the same time, the Bible was the “sword of the Spirit” and could not be preached or heard properly without the power of the Holy Spirit.

For most Pentecostals, balance was the watchword. The Spirit and the Bible should not be placed in opposition to each other. Biblical interpretation needed the Spirit to avoid becoming dry and lifeless, while spiritual manifestations needed to be judged according to the Bible to avoid falling into fanaticism. Maria Woodworth-Etter told her audience to test the Spirit by the Word, and not by signs. William Seymour warned that if Pentecostals began to go by signs rather than the Word of God, then they would be no different than spiritualists.

According to the Bridegroom’s Messenger, the Spirit would not even fall on a congregation that did not honor the Word of God. Pentecostals agreed that the Spirit must be allowed to have His way within a congregation. It was to be expected that the Spirit’s presence would lead to physical manifestations among the seekers. As long as the Spirit remained the source or at least the reason for the manifestations, they would lead to the edification of the individuals involved and might even be used to witness to Christ. According to Gee, because the Spirit’s work was to reveal Christ, the Spirit would never operate a gift that drew attention away from Christ or provoked fear and confusion in the unbeliever witnessing its exercise. Pentecostals should be careful in the way that they used the gifts in the presence of non-Christians. Gee writes, “There can be no real conflict between proper manifestations of the Spirit and true soul-saving work.”

Ultimately, Pentecostals would willingly consider and defend a physical manifestation as evidence of the Spirit’s presence if the manifestation did not contradict Scripture and if it pointed people to Christ or edified the community. Pentecostals agreed that order rather than confusion marked the Spirit’s work, but disagreement existed over what constituted a sufficiently-orderly service. If a manifestation led to others receiving a “blessing,” and especially if it aided in evangelism, Pentecostals generally accepted it as a sign of the Spirit’s presence, even if such acceptance separated them from other Christian groups.

Today in American Pentecostal churches there may be fewer experiences of extra-biblical manifestations, such as running in the Spirit or hearing a heav-
enly choir. Many Pentecostal churches now lean toward a more orderly worship service, and they seem to have less fear of resisting the Spirit than did early Pentecostals. Yet there are still debates among Pentecostals regarding the proper practice of spiritual gifts as well as questions concerning extra-biblical manifestations in some present-day charismatic revivals such as the apparent supernatural appearance of gold. A study of how early Pentecostals navigated similar issues, with their insistence on biblical precedents and spiritual benefits, could provide needed guidance. –

D. Allen Tennison (Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary) is associate professor of theology at North Central University, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

NOTES


2Concerning This Movement,” The Apostolic Herald (Seattle, WA) 3 (April 1909): 3.


5Back to Pentecost: Gifts of Healing,” Pentecostal Evangel, December 11, 1920, 1; T. B. Barratt, “Tongues, Signs and Visions, God’s Order To-day,” Pentecostal Evangel, December 8, 1928, 6-7; and Woodworth-Etter, Holy Ghost Sermons, 110.


9“The Miracle of Speaking In Tongues,” The Apostolic Faith (Los Angeles) 1:9 (June to September 1907): 2.


11William G. Schell, “Gibberish or Real Languages,” Weekly Evangel, November 13, 1915, 1. While this was almost certainly an overstatement, the fact that this remark could be made, illustrates an early Pentecostal confidence in recognizable tongues as a proof of their message. An extreme example of this recognition as proof can be found in an account during an exorcism in which it was said that demons understood the tongues. See Gerard A. Bailey, “Diversities of Operations But the Same Spirit,” The Latter Rain Evangel 1:10 (July 1909): 24.


15“The Last Great Outpouring.,” 1.


17Percy N. Corry, “First Corinthians, Fourteen,” Pentecostal Evangel, October 30, 1926, 8-9; and Kinne, 15.


19Baker, 138-139; Carothers, 19-20; Florence

20Baker, 138-139; Corry, 8-9; Hermon Harvey, “The Gift of Tongues.” *Pentecostal Evangel*, July 9, 1921, 1; and Kinne, 15.


23Baker, 138-139; and “The Last Great Outpouring,” 1.

24Carothers, 19-20; Kinne, 15; and “The Last Great Outpouring,” 1.

25“The Last Great Outpouring,” 1; and White, 18.


28Harvey, 1; Kinne, 15; Lawrence, “Article VII,” 6; Lee, 1; Henry McLain, “In Jail for Jesus’ Sake,” *The Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles) 1:3 (November 1906): 4; and “The Last Great Outpouring,” 1.

29“The Last Great Outpouring,” 1.


31Corry, 8-9.


34“Pentecost in Other Lands,” *Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles) 1:6 (February to March 1907): 1.


44“Everywhere Preaching the Word,” *The Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles) 1:10 (September 1907): 1; Lawrence, “Article VII,” 4; and “Supernatural Occurrences,” 1.


Booth-Clibborn, 54-55.


Aimee Semple McPherson, “Be Filled with the Spirit,” *The Bridal Call* V:VIII (January 1922): 4; and “The Narrow Line of ‘Is Mrs. McPherson Pentecostal? No! Yes?,’” *The Bridal Call* VI:V (October 1922): 7. Interestingly, the former article was written in response to critics within Pentecostals who claimed she had abandoned the movement in the attempt to reach a wider ecclesiastical audience for her ministry.


Aimee Semple McPherson, *This Is That*, 464.

Bartleman, *How Pentecost Came to Los Angeles*, 49.


Doering, 13.


Bell, *Questions and Answers*, 84-85; “The Holy Ghost and Wisdom,” 1, 3; and “Tactics, Demonstrations, Operations,” 5.


Lindblad, 75-76.


