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Open Letter to Charismatic Lutherans

PAUL F. HUTCHINSON

THE AUTHOR IS PASTOR OF CHRIST LUTHERAN CHURCH, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, AND has been actively involved in aspects of the charismatic movement.

Charismatic Lutherans have received something they call "the baptism in the Holy Spirit." By this term is meant the Pentecostal experience, namely, that after one has become a Christian there is a subsequent experience, an infilling of the Holy Spirit evidenced by the gift of speaking in tongues. This second (or third in some cases) experience is the essence of Pentecostalism.

This Pentecostal definition of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is only the latest among a half dozen other definitions of the baptism in the Holy Spirit that at one time or another have been advocated by various Protestants in the past 450 years. It is hardly new to speak of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. What is new is to connect it with speaking in tongues. This connection is just 72 years old.

The Pentecostal definition of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is the direct descendant of American Perfectionist and Holiness definitions of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The theological thread that unites them right down to the present is the Arminian theology. Arminian theology is a throwback to Catholic theology especially in the areas of anthropology and in the definition of the nature of the Christian life. Both the Arminian and Catholic definitions of the nature of the Christian life allow for perfection in terms of infused grace, the results of grace in man, and in the possession of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Lutheran definition of perfec-

tion is perfection in faith. This basic distinction is blurred or ignored by Arminians including Pentecostals.

Charismatic Lutherans who accept the Pentecostal definition of the baptism in the Holy Spirit need to beware of at least two things. First, the doctrine of original sin stands, and we poor sinners confess it in the general confession of sin. Some charismatic Christians are talking perfectionism and freedom from sin. Second, Christian joy must be based on the objective acts of God in Christ and on the Word of God in your infant baptism. To search for lasting joy in the gifts of the Spirit; to base your joy on any rich and deep experience; to base your theological convictions and assurances on your experience—these emphases lead to error.

Between 1500 and 1900 I have found no Protestant source that advocates the second-blessing doctrine—no matter how defined—and at the same time holds a high and realistic doctrine of infant baptism. Brothers, we seek the renewal of the church. We may and do experience repeated infillings of the Holy Spirit subsequent to our initial reception of the Holy Spirit whether in water baptism or in adult conversion. This much is Scriptural. However, it is wrong to seek the church's renewal by denying or questioning the objective means of grace, particularly infant baptism. This precious gift is the purest Gospel unconditioned by intellectual attainment or human worth. To retain in-

fant baptism indicates you have understood the objective grace of justification, just as the rejection of infant baptism proves that one has not really understood the Gospel.

When the baptism in the Holy Spirit is separated from the initial reception of the Holy Spirit in infant baptism or adult conversion, when the baptism in the Holy Spirit is defined as an experience subsequent to one's initial reception of the Holy Spirit, then certain dangers open up. These dangers are that one who has not had a subsequent experience to which he can testify is not fully Christian; that the subsequent experience is therefore necessary; and that it must be proved in a certain way, namely by speaking in tongues. These dangers are subsumed under one head—legalism.

These legalistic dangers call one's justification into question. That is hardly the intention, but the danger is there. Those Christians who are unable to achieve a subjective experience so defined are no less God's children. It is not for us to say how one may receive the Holy Spirit, nor by what operation, save only that He always honors and works in and through the means of grace, Word and Sacrament.

Having defined the baptism in the Holy Spirit as the initial reception of the Holy Spirit in infant baptism or adult conversion, then the Gospel, the objective grace of justification, and the means of salvation are protected from legalistic corruption. Parenthetically, to define faith as merely the required intellectual acceptance of certain doctrines—this and nothing more—is equally a legalistic corruption of the Gospel.

With such a definition of the baptism in the Holy Spirit one may look for and

welcome spiritual experiences subsequent to one's initial reception of the Holy Spirit. Such subsequent spiritual experiences are really profound blessings that are properly called infillings of the Holy Spirit. These experiences release the gifts in and through us that were bestowed in water baptism. One may be anointed to preach; one may become powerful in Bible scholarship. Another may speak in tongues, or prophesy, or discern and cast out evil spirits, or rule and govern God's church. No necessity may be attached to these experiences. Palpable evidence such as speaking in tongues may not be required as necessarily proving that one is filled with the Holy Spirit. The real test is an objective one—to confess Christ as Lord, His doctrine, and to love the brethren.

I hear charismatic Lutherans saying they were not Christians before this experience that they call the baptism in the Holy Spirit. People who talk this way are seriously confused. If they are correct, if they really weren't Christians prior to their experience, then what happened to them was a conversion experience. If they were, as I suspect, Christians before their experience, then what happened to them was an infilling of the Holy Spirit and a deepening of faith in Christ's promises based on their initial reception of the Holy Spirit in infant baptism. The release of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in their Christian life likewise stems from their infant baptism.

Charismatic Lutherans should not refer to themselves as "Spirit-filled." This term is offensive. It implies, and your fellow church member infers, that he is not Spirit-filled. Do not judge your fellow member. Bear his burdens and faults and praise the Lord for him.

Some members who have had a rich and blessed experiential infilling of the Holy Spirit are probably new to experiential Christianity. Don't be carried away by your zeal. Zeal without the knowledge of doctrine becomes misleading. Lutherans should not make a doctrine of their experience. No Christian should. Experience is no test of doctrine. Experience can validate false doctrine. Rather than making a doctrine of our experience, we should experience the truth of sound doctrine, and our doctrinal standards are clear and explicit.

Those Christians who do not understand the charismatic experience should not judge those who do, except that all alike should confess Christ's doctrine in love for one another. I can see certain blessings accruing to the Lutheran Church through the charismatic renewal, if the church wants them. However, these blessings are not automatic. For example, charismatic Lutherans are not necessarily more skilled in the proper distinction between, nor application of, Law and Gospel; nor are they necessarily more concerned for sound doctrine. Indeed, some have given up the distinction and look for an ideal ecumenical unity of the Spirit in which denominational differences have little place.

The charismatic renewal is often accompanied by a premillennial and dispensational scheme of history that is false. Those who assert that the Holy Spirit is preparing Christ's Bride for the rapture by the Pentecostal Spirit-baptism have accepted the premillennial scheme. Those who think of history in terms of the early-rain/latter-rain scheme may only be espousing a Pentecostal-dispensational con-

tempt for the institutional church. Both of these beliefs come from the Fundamentalist tradition and can only corrupt sound Lutheran doctrine.

In these days of popular disenchantment with the institutional church, it ill behooves Lutherans to scorn tradition. Through the institutional church we have access to the treasures of the past. Only the institutional church — no renewal movement — can get us into the future. Beware of these premillennial and dispensational schemes that despise the institutional past and deny the future. We are dealing here very sketchily with a false eschatology that denies the cross and, by the so-called rapture, separates the Gospel from the Kingdom. This is again a legalistic corruption of the Gospel. Jesus Christ rules on earth by the Gospel; the church will be under the cross to the end of time; the Kingdom will come after Judgment Day.

There are far more and better resources for church renewal enshrined in the Lutheran Confessions. The peculiar and radical understanding of the Gospel receives no better human statement than in our Confessions. May all Lutherans take heed thereto.

Finally the essential doctrinal content of Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism or the charismatic renewal is not speaking in tongues. Jesus promised power — not tongues. Based as it is on many promises of our Lord such as Luke 11:13, the charismatic renewal involves a mighty powerful experiential filling of believers by the Holy Spirit. Provided no necessity is implied, then this much may be embraced by Lutherans. Surely there is nothing more soundly Lutheran than to claim for oneself

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the clear promise of our Lord. The experience may, and in many cases does, release the gift of tongues or other gifts of the Holy Spirit, but again no necessity may be attached to these palpable signs follow-

ing. We may seek spiritual gifts, but especially we must constantly seek to confess Christ, His doctrine, and to edify and love one another.

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