

A Response to Jonathan Black's "Jesus, Not Just His Blessings:

A Pentecostal Theology of Encounter with Christ at His Table"

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Since I am largely in agreement with Black's fine presentation, I will focus my response on extending the trajectories opened by his paper. Black shows that the early Pentecostals possessed a sacramental instinct which is deeply rooted in the ancient church. They stood in contrast to two extreme positions found in contemporary Pentecostals and charismatics. One is the memorialist view that explains the Eucharist in purely rationalist terms and expunges it of all mystery. The other is the magical view that reflects two seemingly opposing impulses, namely, the ancient animistic and the modern technological impulses.

Although Black has less to say about the memorialist view than the magical view, it is important to first take note of the shift from the sacramental view to the memorialist view of the Lord's Supper in the second half of the twentieth century, as it provides an important backdrop for understanding modern charismatics' attraction to the magical view.

In P.C. Nelson's *Bible Doctrines* (1948), an exposition of the AG Sixteen Fundamentals of Faith, we still see traces of a sacramental theology in his explanation of the Lord's Supper:

The Lord's Supper is a healing ordinance. If you are sick and afflicted in your body and can discern the healing virtue in the body of the Lord, typified by the bread, you may receive healing and strength for your body as well as for your spiritual nature (1 Cor. 11:30-32).¹

Nelson acknowledges some connection between the "symbolism" and the spiritual reality. "The ordinances of the New Testament help us to sense the reality of spiritual things." "The Lord's Supper speaks to our hearts, to our eyes, and to our touch and taste." The tangible sign "gives us a sense of reality which perhaps we could acquire in no other way."² Nelson is seeking to articulate, with the limited theological vocabulary at his disposal, the truth that the physical elements are not empty signs.

¹ P. C. Nelson, *Bible Doctrines* (Springfield, MO: GPH, 1948), p. 73.

² *Bible Doctrines*, 62, 74-75.

This sense of sacramental reality, however, is entirely absent in William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton's expanded exposition of the Sixteen Fundamentals.³ Here we find no reference to the Lord's Supper as a healing ordinance. Their stance is unequivocally non-sacramental, if not anti-sacramental. In their own words, "[b]iblical Christianity is not ritualistic or sacramental." They then proceed to speak against the alleged teaching of "sacramental churches that grace is received whether or not the participant has any active faith."⁴ For them, the Lord's Supper is simply to provide "object lessons."⁵

A similar shift is found in the Elim Church in the United Kingdom. Richard Bicknell notes that some of the early Pentecostals coming from Methodist and Anglican backgrounds were sacramentalists. A. A. Boddy, a former Anglican, and one of the founders of the Pentecostal Missionary Union, even endorsed infant baptism.⁶ But their "non-denominationalism" and ecumenical spirit did not remain for long as Pentecostals, rejected by mainline Protestantism, found themselves sharing common cause with evangelicals.

Still, at least up to the 1960s, Pentecostals continued to maintain some form of sacramental understanding of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper and the practice of anointing with oil for healing continued to be observed regularly in their revival meetings. In fact, Bicknell notes that they so revised the evangelical understanding of the ordinances as to render them "almost unrecognizable."⁷ But by the 1990s the Lord's Supper became marginalized as Pentecostals align themselves more and more with evangelicals in their common stance against sacramentalism.⁸ The special benefits traditionally linked to the Lord's Supper are now seen as

³ *Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: GPH, 1993).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶ Richard Bicknell, 'The Ordinances: The Marginalized Aspects of Pentecostalism,' in *Pentecostal Perspectives*, ed. Keith Warrington (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 204-222 (213-14).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 212-13.

blessings that can be received at any point in the worship service, making the Lord's Supper as a healing ordinance redundant.⁹

The shift from a sacramental to a memorialist view is symptomatic of a broader trend of Pentecostal churches in the West towards the “evangelicalization” of Pentecostal faith and practice in the second half of the twentieth century. The main factor giving rise to this process was the perceived threat of liberalism. Pentecostals had more in common with late nineteenth century evangelicalism than mainline Protestantism. It would be more natural, therefore, to gravitate towards hardline evangelicalism in the face of two major threats from the liberals: their “social gospel” and their rejection of the authority of the Bible. In realigning with the evangelicals who once rejected them, Pentecostals have, unfortunately, distanced themselves from their own distinctive heritage and embraced the anti-sacramentalism of the evangelicals.

But the beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a swing in the pendulum. Third Wave charismatics, who are evangelicals-turned-charismatics, under the influence of church growth specialists like Charles Kraft and Peter Wagner started to promote a highly “supernaturalized” form of Christianity by focusing on the realm of the unseen world of the spirit. They advanced various techniques of church growth like identifying and naming evil spirits inhabiting individuals and nations, “strategic level spiritual warfare” and such like. The result was a radical swing towards an ultra-supernaturalism. It is in this highly charged atmosphere that we can understand why the teachings of Beni Johnson and an Asian megachurch pastor on the Lord's Supper have become widely accepted.

Although Black focuses more on the modern magical view of Beni Johnson, I think we need to understand this phenomenon also in the context of the ancient animistic worldview

⁹ Ibid., 220-21.

which is much more apparent in Asia than in the West, although it is not entirely absent in the West either.¹⁰ Johnson's view was picked up by an Asian megachurch pastor—sometimes almost word for word. What makes his teaching so appealing in Asia is that despite its embrace of modernity, animism is still very much alive, which explains why his magical views about the Lord's Supper have been readily received not only in his own church but in many other Protestant churches as well.

But what are we to make of the popularity of the teachings of Johnson and others in the West which is largely governed by modern technology? On closer examination, ancient magic and modern technology are two sides of the same coin. Both are driven by the same primal desire to harness the powers of nature and exercise control over the world by means of "technique". For the ancient magicians, the technique was some prescribed ritual or secret incantation; for the modern magicians, it may be "command prayer", naming the demons during exorcism or, in the case of the Lord's Supper, using the power inherent in the blessed bread and wine. As Black has noted, for Johnson, the Lord's Supper is a "tool" to be used for various spiritual ends. This is spiritual technology which appeals especially to our modern technological mindset. Both ancient or modern magic appeal to the sense of wonder at the mystery of the world and the engineering impulse to control it. Christians must recognize these magical compulsions for what they are. They reflect fallen humanity's desire to be "gods", to be "in charge", to be answerable to no one but themselves. This is not Christianity but hubris!

Black's research in early Pentecostal history shows that both Baptist and Wesleyan Pentecostals had a strongly sacramental understanding of the Lord's Supper even if they are not always explicit or precise in articulating that understanding. The work of Kimberley Alexander,

¹⁰ See e.g. Michael A. Leedom, "Death in Naples," *First Things* (Aug/Sep 2009), <https://firstthings.com/death-in-naples/>, accessed 6 June 2006.

however, shows that between the two, the Wesleyan Pentecostals were theologically more amenable to a sacramental worldview compared to the Baptist Pentecostals due to their differing understandings of grace. The former viewed grace as a power at work in the soul while the latter viewed it in strictly relational and juridical terms. For Baptist Pentecostals, grace is more relational than ontological: It is God's favour towards sinners rather than God's transformative power at work. For Wesleyan Pentecostals healing practice is set in a communal context where the elders of the church play an active role such as laying on of hands and anointing with oil, whereas for Baptist Pentecostals healing comes from claiming the "finished work" of Christ. The result is a less communal and more individualistic practice of healing.¹¹

Be that as it may, both had a strong sacramental view of the Lord's Supper in their early history based on their common understanding of 1 Cor 11: 29 – 30: "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." From the standpoint of formal logic, their argument is a fallacy by assuming that if failing to discern the body causes sickness, discerning it must cause healing. What is notable is that this passage became the locus classicus for nearly all these writers to affirm the Lord's Supper as a healing ordinance.

Their understanding of the biblical text may be exegetically questionable, but it does not mean that their sacramental instincts should be dismissed on that account. According to Black, their conclusion about the Lord's Supper as a healing ordinance was validated by their *experience* of the indwelling Holy Spirit who brought them to a real encounter with Jesus at the Lord's Table. The theological argument, however, came later in the works of D. P. Williams.

¹¹ Kimberly Ervin Alexander, *Pentecostal Healing: Models in Theology and Practice* (Blandford Forum, Dorset: Deo Publishing, 2006), 198-215 *passim*

The key to a proper understanding of the sacraments is the presence of Christ. As Black has rightly noted, it is Christ who meets us in the bread and wine. Sacraments are not tools as the spiritual technologists would like us to believe, but are meant to draw us into a deep relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

This emphasis on encountering Christ at the Table is crucial for understanding the early Pentecostals' teaching. Dare we say that they were inchoately grasping at some such concept as "real Presence"? The Eucharist is not a tool that can be manipulated to advance certain ends, no matter how noble those ends may be, but it is about the means by which we receive Christ, encounter him, and enter into communion with God and each other in the Body of Christ. All these are possible by the action of the Holy Spirit. This is why in the eucharistic prayers of all major Christian traditions, there are minimally two components that are always present: the words of institution and the epiclesis, which calls on the Father to send his Spirit on the gifts of bread and wine so that they become the body and blood of Christ and we are made one in Christ. The epiclesis in the United Methodist Church is typical:

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,
and on these gifts of bread and wine.
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed by his blood.

Thus, for the early Pentecostals, healing occurred in the context of relationship with Jesus and each other, not in isolation from these relationships. This is why it had to be received together with others, not privately. This focus on corporate life implies that the Lord's Supper must always be understood in the broader work of the church's pastoral care—which is sorely lacking where spiritual technology prevails.

Let me conclude with a story told to me by one of my former students which illustrates my point. When his mother-in-law was hospitalized, the church sent her a box of pre-packed communion elements and told her to take it three times a day for healing. No one from the church visited her. A Methodist pastor who happened to be around saw the distress of this poor woman and prayed for her and ministered to other family members. When she passed away, her family, including those who were not Christians, decided to join the Methodist church.

When technical efficiency overrides personal presence, as exemplified by the transactional use of pre-packaged communion elements, the deeply personal dimension of pastoral care is lost. Church begins to look more and more like a well-oiled corporation than a communion of saints. We need to recover the early Pentecostal sacramentality if we are to be a communion marked by genuine hospitality towards all. This is my primary takeaway from Black's paper.