

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

June 1995

Copyright 2003 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

Email: [Jrob1517@aol.com](mailto:Jrob1517@aol.com)

Website: [www.trinityfoundation.org](http://www.trinityfoundation.org)

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

## Contemporary Religion *versus* the Gospel

Edited by John W. Robbins

### *The Charismatic Movement*

The modern Pentecostal movement is an offshoot of the American holiness movement. It made its appearance in this country in 1900. One of its leaders has called it "the greatest ecstatic movement in the history of the Christian church." It is distinguished by its overwhelming emphasis on an experience—often called the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This baptism is usually, if not always, identified by ecstatic speech, which Pentecostals call "the gift of tongues." This gift of tongues is regarded as the sign that one is baptized in the Holy Spirit. Before 1960 Pentecostalism was a movement outside the mainstream of the Protestant church. It was very sectarian, and most churches looked upon Pentecostalism as a divisive, offbeat type of religious fanaticism.

About 1960, Pentecostalism took a new turn. It began to jump denominational barriers. The ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues began to appear among Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians—indeed there was hardly a Protestant church that escaped the Pentecostal invasion. This new interdenominational phase of Pentecostalism became known as neo-Pentecostalism, or the charismatic movement.

While the old ("classical") Pentecostalism was regarded as a divisive and sectarian movement, neo-Pentecostalism appears to be uniting and non-

sectarian. Demonstrating a new openness toward all branches of the church, the charismatic movement broke down all denominational barriers. The Pentecostal experience is available to people of different religious traditions, liberal and conservative.

When the charismatic movement was getting underway in the Los Angeles area in the early 1960's, an Assembly of God preacher remarked, "We used to be the leaders in experiencing the baptism in the Holy Spirit, but not since the Spirit has visited the great historic and Protestant churches. I know an Episcopalian priest in this city who is so liberal he neither believes in the virgin birth nor the resurrection. Yet he has recently received the baptism in the Spirit and exhibits a marvelous power in his ministry."

It makes no difference where one stands in the theological spectrum when it comes to participating in the Pentecostal experience. The "gift of the Spirit" is available regardless of denominational or doctrinal loyalty. The most recent "gift of the Spirit" is uncontrollable laughter.

### *Romanism*

Since 1969 the Roman Catholic Church has become openly charismatic. Pentecostalism appears to be the first factor for more than 400 years which is able to bridge the gulf between Romanism and Protestantism. Dr. Henry van Dusen and many

others have suggested that it has the potential of healing the wound of the sixteenth century. Pentecostals and Roman Catholics are ending their bitter religious rivalry in South America. And all over the world Protestant and Catholic Pentecostals are meeting together to sing, "We are one in the Spirit."

Rome has, since 1967, shown a real openness toward the charismatic movement. Thousands of her priests and nuns are embracing the charismatic experience. In June of 1970, more than 20,000 Roman Catholic Pentecostals gathered at Notre Dame University for the seventh Charismatic Renewal Conference. One of the featured speakers was a powerful prince of the Roman State-Church, Cardinal Suenens from Belgium. He came to give his enthusiastic approval to the charismatic movement within the Catholic Church. He said: "The charismatic renewal has extraordinary ecumenical implications . . . . Many important breakthroughs are happening in a wonderful way in the charismatic renewal. It will be a great impetus for Christian unity. Christians of different churches need to experience themselves as belonging to the same family, as being brothers, and that is happening in the charismatic renewal."

Speaking at the Presbyterian Charismatic Conference in March 1973, the Cardinal said: "Our unity has to be done quickly because the Holy Spirit is leading it, God is desiring it, and the world is in need, badly in need, of that visible unity . . . . I see the heads of the Christian churches coming together . . . . Let us come back home: home means the Upper Room, Pentecost." The Cardinal stood before the Presbyterians, holding the hands of two of their leaders (Jim Armstrong and Rodman Williams) and singing, "We are one in the Spirit."

Rome has become far more open toward "evangelicals." *The Catholic Digest*, July 1972, presented a feature article lauding Billy Graham. The Jesuit author wrote, "Billy Graham is orthodox. I have read nothing by him that is contrary to Catholic faith." In some places priests are being instructed to become familiar in the use of "evangelical" terminology like "getting saved" or being "born again." Roman Catholics join with neo-

evangelicals in cooperative efforts like Evangelicals and Catholics Together.

### *Neo-evangelicalism*

In the last few decades "neo-evangelicalism" has also emerged. Neo-evangelicalism began 50 years ago as an attempt to separate from the separatism of some fundamentalists. "Neo-evangelicals" (who are no more genuinely evangelical than the neo-orthodox are orthodox) felt a desire to enjoy fellowship with other "evangelicals" across denominational boundary lines.

In the past 25 years the neo-evangelical movement has shown an increasing openness and sympathy toward the charismatic movement and the Roman Catholic Church. If we may take *Christianity Today* as representative of the neo-evangelical movement, we may discern a real warming of the relationship between neo-evangelicals and Pentecostals. At first *Christianity Today* was decidedly negative toward Pentecostalism and Romanism. Then it became tolerant. Now it is very sympathetic to both. As long ago as 1972 *Christianity Today* said: "The force that appears to be making the greatest contribution to the current Christian revival around the globe is Pentecostalism . . . . A new era of the Spirit has begun . . . . An evangelical [*sic*] renaissance is becoming visible along the Christian highway from the frontier of the sects to the high places of the Roman Catholic Communion." In the September 6, 1973, issue, Clark H. Pinnock wrote: "The new Pentecostal movement seems to this observer to be a genuine movement of the Spirit of God renewing his church . . . . It thrills my soul to see multitudes of people allowing the Spirit to operate freely in their midst."

Neo-evangelicals are also embracing Romanism. There is a great deal of optimism about the changes which appear to be taking place in the Roman Catholic Church. Many are trying to heal the wound of the Reformation.

### *Liberalism or Modernism*

Influenced by developments in Germany in the nineteenth century, especially by the German

theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and the later "higher critics," modernism or liberalism first appeared in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century and blossomed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States. Princeton Seminary Professor J. Gresham Machen wrote a book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, in an effort to stop the growth of liberalism in American churches. In his book, Machen argued, quite correctly, that Christianity and liberalism are two different religions: "the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology."

Among the cardinal doctrines of liberalism and modernism were a denial of the sufficiency and authority of the Bible, and an appeal to personal experience as the basis for one's religion. Machen put it this way: "It is not true at all, then, that modern liberalism is based upon the authority of Jesus.... The real authority for liberalism can only be 'the Christian consciousness' or 'Christian experience....' The only authority, then, can be individual experience.... Such an authority is obviously no authority at all, for individual experience is endlessly diverse, and when once truth is regarded only as that which works at any particular time, it ceases to be true."

For the Bible, liberalism substituted personal experience; for the understanding, emotion; for doctrine, personal stories. Machen summarized the difference between liberalism and Christianity in these words: "liberalism is totally different from Christianity, for the foundation is different. Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men."

## *Neo-Orthodoxy*

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a reaction against the scientism and anti-supernaturalism of liberalism began in Europe. One of the leading theologians of

the movement that came to be known as neo-orthodoxy was the Swiss pastor Karl Barth. Barth denounced the humanism and naturalism of liberalism and defended divine revelation and the supernaturalism of the Bible. But neo-orthodoxy was not what it at first appeared to be. Rather than returning to the old orthodoxy, the authority and sufficiency of the Bible, the neo-orthodox theologians added a new variety of religious subjectivism: the thought of the relatively unknown 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. They emphasized paradox, not understanding, and taught that one must have an encounter with Christ, not believe a creed. They reacted against the rationalism of liberalism with the irrationalism of Kierkegaard. God became Totally Other. Scripture became paradoxical. Faith became illogical. Logic—mere human logic—was suspect, if not abandoned altogether. The neo-orthodox too substituted religious experience for Scripture.

## *A Fivefold Union*

The charismatic movement is open to neo-evangelicals, Roman Catholics, liberals, and neo-orthodox. Romanism is open to charismatics, neo-evangelicals, liberals, and neo-orthodox. Not to be outdone, neo-evangelicalism is open to charismatics, Roman Catholics, neo-orthodox, and liberals. This apostate quintet is moving closer and closer together in a growing bond of sympathy. There is a theological reason for this. Each emphasizes *inner experience*. The uniting factor is that the message of each movement—Romanism, neo-evangelicalism, the charismatic movement, liberalism, and neo-orthodoxy—is *the centrality of religious experience*.

In the September 1972 *Christian Herald*, a Presbyterian woman testified to what it is like to speak in tongues. She wrote: "All the joys of my life were blended together in one ecstatic moment—all the fun of childhood, my first date, the moment when the man I wanted asked me to share life with him, the exultation of the finished sex longing . . . I had the sensation I was almost floating instead of walking."

Anyone who knows anything about the classical medieval doctrine of *gratia infusa* knows that the mystical inward experience of infused grace is the central concern of Roman Catholic piety. The charismatic emphasis has found great acceptance in the Roman Church because, as its theologians have recognized, Pentecostalism "is in profound harmony with the classical spiritual theology of the Church" (Edward O'Connor, *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church*, 183). Rome, which has rejected the Biblical doctrine of salvation by *imputed* righteousness, is very much at home where inward experience is the supreme emphasis.

Not to be outdone by either Protestant or Catholic Pentecostals, the neo-evangelical movement is hawking the gospel of marvelous inward experience. This is not a new thing in the neo-evangelical movement. For years revivalism has laid great stress on dramatic "heart" experience. Neo-evangelicals have generally had far more to say about the subjective experience of conversion than about the mighty acts of our salvation in Christ. Groups like Campus Crusade for Christ and InterVarsity make their focus the inward experience of receiving Christ into the heart, "the exciting discovery of the Spirit-filled life," the development of "the radiant Christian personality."

Basically, there is no great theological difference between Romanism, the charismatic movement, neo-evangelicalism, neo-orthodoxy, and liberalism. The message of each centers on the inward experience of the believer. This pursuit of a dramatic, satisfying experience is the burning passion of contemporary religion.

## *The New Testament*

By contrast, the apostles were men who turned the world upside down with the preaching of the historical Gospel, not by running around telling people about their exciting religious experiences.

Can you imagine the apostle Peter standing up on the day of Pentecost and declaring, "Friends, I want to tell you about the marvelous experience we had this morning when we were baptized in the Holy Spirit. I felt a great sensation of peace right down to

the balls of my feet . . ."? Can you imagine one of the Mary's adding her glowing testimony, "I want to tell you what a thrill it is to speak with tongues. All the joys of my life were blended together in one ecstatic moment—the fun of childhood, the excitement of my first date, the exultation of the finished sex longing . . ."? Ridiculous! Blasphemous! This plain fact stands out in Holy Writ: Genuinely Spirit-filled people were so preoccupied with the *message* of their crucified, risen, and ascended Lord that they made scarcely any reference to their own experience. Their experiences, of course, were genuine. But their experiences were not their message.

Luke is the New Testament writer who makes frequent references to people who were "filled with the Holy Spirit." When Zacharias was "filled with the Holy Ghost" (*Luke* 1:67), he opened his mouth and proclaimed God's redemptive works. When the praying disciples were "all filled with the Holy Ghost," Luke very pointedly adds, "and they spoke the Word of God with boldness . . . And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (*Acts* 4:31, 33). The Spirit causes them to preach the Gospel, not experience.

This pinpoints the vital difference between the Holy Spirit's illumination and religious mysticism. When the Spirit is poured out, something is *said*. There is an intelligible message. In mysticism something is *felt*. The one bears testimony to the objective message of God's redemptive activity in Christ on behalf of his people. The other bears testimony to some indescribably subjective happening and feeling.

## *The Nature of the Gospel*

We have said that the only focus of the apostles was the Gospel—the good news about Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The Gospel is historical and objective. When people believe the Gospel and become preoccupied with God's marvelous work for them in Jesus Christ, it certainly brings them a new experience. The Gospel radically changes them, regenerates, and sanctifies them. All this is the fruit of the Gospel. But it is not the Gospel, and they are not saved by these experiences. The

greatest treachery takes place when men take what should be the fruit of the Gospel and make it the Gospel. It is like using God's gift of grace to rob him of his glory. The New Testament order is the Gospel over experience. It is mortal heresy to place experience over the Gospel.

If the Gospel does not hold first place, it holds no place. Paul's greatest difficulty was with people and churches who were continually inclined to place the Gospel in a subordinate role to their own religious experiences. See it in the churches at Corinth, Galatia, and Colosse. What was the issue in Corinth? Some of the Corinthians were becoming so preoccupied with their spiritual gifts that they were forgetting the Gospel. So Paul had to write to them: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached unto you, which also you have received, and wherein you stand; by which also you are saved, if you keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless you have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (*1 Corinthians 15:1-4*).

It is not so hard to reconstruct what was happening at Corinth, Galatia, and Colosse, seeing that the believers there faced temptations identical to ours. False teachers came among the believers, saying, "Paul brought you the Gospel. That is fine—just what is needed to start the Christian life. Now you must go on and rise higher. We bring to you the secret of the deeper life, the full Gospel and real secret of victorious living." This is *the* great heresy of the New Testament church and of the church in every subsequent century. It was the heresy of relegating the Gospel to something that has great significance at the time of Christian initiation, but after that believers are supposed to go on to higher things.

Luther had to contend with the same sort of mentality in his day. The enthusiasts were prepared to admit that Luther made a good start with the doctrine of justification through faith in God's work in Jesus Christ. But, like the charismatics today, they felt that the great Reformer was very deficient

in his doctrine of the Holy Spirit's work in human lives. Wishing to go beyond justification by grace, the enthusiasts cried, "The Spirit, the Spirit!" The center of their interest was God's work in the human heart, but tragically, like all those who make this the center of their message, they could not see anything higher than their own spiritual navels.

Luther understood the mentality of heresy when he described how people were constantly inclined to put the Gospel behind them: "One must not surely stay forever with the same matter, but continue and progress [say the sects]. Dear people, you have now heard the self-same stuff for so long a time; you must rise higher." When the Spirit-filled fanatics reproached Luther, he replied: "I slap your spirit on the snout."

### *The Relation of Gospel and Holy Spirit*

As church history has amply demonstrated, nothing threatens the supremacy of the Gospel as much as a preoccupation with experience. It is therefore urgent that we understand the true role of the Holy Spirit in human redemption. We must therefore address ourselves to this vital question: *What is the relationship between the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit's work today?*

The answer is clearly given in the words of our Lord to the apostles: "When he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth; for he shall not speak of himself. But whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak; and he will show you things to come. He shall glorify me; for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you" (*John 16:13-14*). As Christ came into this world to reveal the Father (*John 1:18; 14:9*), so the Holy Spirit comes to reveal the glory of Christ's work. Concerning God's work for us in Christ, the apostle Paul declares: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for them that love him. But God has revealed them unto us by his Spirit . . . Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the

things that are freely given to us of God" (*1 Corinthians* 2:9, 10, 12).

No one could comprehend the significance of Christ's work without the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who comes to us (because of Christ's work) with fullness of divine power. Nothing less than Pentecost is needed to understand what Christ has done for us. This fact is clear from the New Testament record. It was not until Pentecost that the real significance of Christ dawned upon the disciples. It was Pentecost that gave to the disciples that illumination into Christ's person and work. Not until Pentecost did they fully realize that they had actually been living in the presence of the Lord of glory. By the gift of the Spirit they were lost in the awesome wonder of the Incarnation, and they could talk of nothing else.

We also need the Holy Spirit to understand what the disciples understood. Then we will know that the human mind can contemplate nothing greater than this:

God himself made a visit to this planet in the person of his Son. It was the Creator of Heaven and Earth who was borne in that donkey's feed box. It was the Lord of glory who was wrapped in those swaddling clothes. He who owned the cattle on a thousand hills had nowhere to lay his head. It was the Judge of all who was arrested at midnight by sinful men and arraigned before corrupt courts where he was abused, spat on, and bruised by sinful men. The Judge of all became the judged of all. The vile rabble judged him worthy of death—not a decent death, but the cruelest, most shameful kind of execution reserved for those regarded as the dregs of the Earth. Heaven numbered him with the transgressors. God laid our sins upon him and treated him as we deserve. Having borne our sins and suffered their consequences, having satisfied the justice of the Father, Christ rose from the dead, triumphed over death, and ascended into glory.

As we survey God's awesome act of atonement in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us faith by hearing the message of Christ (*Romans* 10:17). As John Calvin said, "Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit." Christ became our man. He took our

human nature upon his divine nature. He was our representative. Just as we were united to Adam, our first head, and were really and legally in Adam when he sinned (and were made sinners by his act of disobedience—*Romans* 4:18-19), so we are united by faith to our head and representative, Jesus Christ. His righteousness legally and judicially became our righteousness. Our sin legally and judicially became his sin. He is punished; we are saved. The good news is not only that he lived, died and rose again for us, but that, as believers before God, we were represented by Christ when he lived, died, arose, and ascended to glory. By the grace of imputation and substitution, God's people lived a perfect life in Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago; our sinfulness was punished, slain, and buried in Joseph's tomb. And when Christ rose from the dead and ascended into glory, we legally rose in him and were made to sit down on the right hand of God's favor with him (*Ephesians* 2:5-6). In Christ, God purged us, perfected us, and took us to the throne of glory. The good news is that we have been washed clean in Jesus Christ and taken into perfect fellowship with God. The good news is not, "Be patient, God is not finished with me yet," but "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus;" it is the message that God is finished with us in Jesus Christ, for "you are complete in him" (*Colossians* 2:10). Christ is our righteousness.

The Spirit's chief work is to make us believe these truths. Christian faith is not faith in our experience—it is not faith in our new birth; it is not faith in our commitment and surrender; it is not faith in our faith. It is faith in Christ's person and work. When Paul reaches his glorious climax in presenting the Gospel to the Romans, he challenges tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present and things to come to condemn or separate him from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Upon what was Paul's confidence based? On his Spirit-filled life? Does Paul encourage himself by thinking of his new birth, his baptism, his Spirit-filled ministry, or his great missionary experiences? No! "Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (*Romans* 8:34).

The foundation of the apostle's confidence is objective. It is based wholly on the historical Gospel.

## *Conclusion*

Contemporary religion lacks the New Testament evidence of the Holy Spirit's work. Instead of being preoccupied with Christ's person and work as were the apostles and Reformers, contemporary religious figures are preoccupied with religious experience. Instead of being based on the Bible alone, it is based on personal experience, on infused righteousness, on the gifts of the Spirit.

But wherever the Holy Spirit is poured out, there you will find men and women preoccupied with the objective Scriptures and the objective Gospel—Christ our Representative, Christ our Substitute, Christ the Surety of the better covenant, Christ our high-priestly Intercessor at the right hand of God, Christ guiding the affairs of human history toward the day of his coming in glory. Where God's people are thus preoccupied with Christ and the Bible, there and there alone is the evidence of the Holy Spirit.

*Extensively revised and adapted from Present Truth, a defunct magazine.*