

THE PENTECOSTAL INITIAL EVIDENCE DOCTRINE

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The pentecostal movement has commonly advanced the view that speaking in tongues or glossolalia is the initial evidence of being baptized in the Holy Spirit or being filled with the Spirit. Not all of those who might consider themselves pentecostal would be prepared to assent to this position, however, and of course many devout Christian people outside the movement have attacked it. This position, often called the initial evidence doctrine, has been the object of considerable discussion, and it might seem that nothing more on the subject can be said. Recent work analyzing concepts of evidence, however, can usefully be brought to bear on this issue. My object in this paper is to discuss the meaning of the initial evidence doctrine and then attempt to determine which views relating glossolalia and Spirit baptism receive support in the NT. I should like to add that I do not propose to discuss here the relationship between conversion and Spirit baptism. That issue, while important, is not at stake in my discussion of the relationship of Spirit baptism and glossolalia.

I. THE MEANING OF THE INITIAL EVIDENCE DOCTRINE

The initial evidence doctrine asserts that glossolalia is the initial evidence of the baptism in the Spirit. My attention here will be focused on the concept of initial evidence. For the purposes of this section it does not much matter which expression—whether “baptized in the Spirit,” “filled with the Spirit,” or whatever—is used. I think there are some advantages to sticking to the first of these, although I shall not discuss my reasons for thinking so here, and so I shall speak of the baptism in the Spirit (or Spirit baptism). But before I examine the initial evidence doctrine itself I shall make some observations about the concepts of evidence and initial evidence.

The concept of evidence is an epistemological one. This means that it has to do with situations in which one event is taken as providing grounds for believing that another event has occurred.¹ An important point about evidential claims is that they might be of several distinct sorts. A statement could be confirming (or supporting) evidence for another; a statement could be disconfirming (or undermining) evidence with respect to another; and a statement might be irrelevant with respect to another—i.e., be neither confirming nor disconfirming evidence.

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¹Some theorists prefer to speak of statements as being evidence for other statements rather than speaking of events. I shall make reference to statements in this essay. Carl Hempel discusses this point and other basic points regarding confirmation in his “Studies in the Logic of Confirmation,” first published in *Mind* (1945), later in Hempel’s own *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

Moreover, there is one type of confirming evidence that is known as conclusively confirming evidence, and an important type of disconfirming evidence is conclusively disconfirming or falsifying evidence. It is obvious that proponents of the initial evidence doctrine have wanted to assert at the very least that glossolalia is confirming evidence for the baptism in the Spirit. Whether a stronger evidential claim is involved is of course debatable. Many persons advancing the initial evidence doctrine have undoubtedly thought that glossolalia is conclusive evidence for the baptism in the Spirit.

A second and very important point to observe about evidential claims is that they are not the same as causal claims, although there can be a close relationship between the two in certain cases. Several examples will help to make this clear and will also illustrate causal and evidential concepts in nonreligious contexts. It might be observed that the index of refraction is constant for glass. Now suppose that this fact is taken as confirming evidence that a homogeneous plastic will also have a constant index of refraction. Here an evidential claim between events is made, but there is no causal connection between these events—i.e., the constancy of the refraction index for glass certainly does not cause the constancy of the refraction index of a plastic or vice versa. Consider, by way of a second example, the fact that the observed retardation of the planet Neptune—i.e., its failure to be at a predicted point—was taken as evidence that there was a yet-to-be-discovered ninth planet exerting a gravitational pull on Neptune. This is an evidential claim, but there is associated with it a causal claim—namely, that the gravitational pull of a yet-to-be-discovered ninth planet caused Neptune's movement to be retarded. Here we have a situation where event *X* is said to cause event *Y* and, moreover, event *Y* is taken as evidence that event *X* is the case (even though *X* is not observed).

The two examples just given illustrate that evidential and causal claims can sometimes be paired but not always. Another kind of situation that frequently occurs is where an event *X* causes events *Y* and *Z* but only *Y* is observed, and it is taken as evidence that *Z* will be or could have been observed. In this situation *Y* and *Z* are causally linked but not directly, and one is taken as evidence of the other. An example of this sort of situation can be drawn from medicine. Perhaps a virus causes a physical disorder consisting first of heart palpitation, which is followed by chest pains. The heart palpitation might be viewed as evidence that the person will soon experience chest pains.

It might be noted in passing that some analysts of the concept of causality suggest that reference to causal connections between individual events, such as are suggested above, are really shorthand ways of referring to more complete explanations in which reference is made to lawlike generalizations embracing all events of a certain sort.² For example, the statement made above in illustration that the presence of a ninth planet caused Neptune to be retarded would be regarded as incomplete, for it is not the ninth planet itself that produces the retardation but rather a set of lawlike conditions in the universe pertaining to gravitational pull in conjunction with the presence of the ninth planet that produced it. The only point I should like to make about this view of causation is that

²C. Hempel suggests this in *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 52-53.

while it might serve as a laudable goal for various sciences to strive toward, there still is a place for assertions concerning causal connections between singular events. I do not think that the scrutiny of religious phenomena is anywhere near the point where we might find true lawlike generalizations. I think we will have to be content with rather ordinary causal claims for some time to come. Those who scrutinize the religious phenomena described in the literature of the NT will certainly have to be content with ordinary causal claims, for the writers were obviously not engaged in an activity that one could describe as scientific description.

The initial evidence doctrine makes reference to "initial" evidence. This concept is a curious one, and it deserves closer scrutiny before we actually examine the initial evidence doctrine itself.³ The concept of initial evidence is curious because it appears to introduce a temporal element by virtue of the term "initial," which is then juxtaposed with the time-independent concept of evidence. There seems to be little doubt about the claim that the concept of evidence is frequently understood to be time-independent. By this I mean that whereas an event *X* is evidence for *Y*, the epistemic link between *X* and *Y* is independent of the times that *X* and *Y* are acquired—i.e., if *X* is evidence for *Y*, *X* could occur prior to, after, or simultaneous with *Y*. The following example might help to illustrate the time-independence of the concept of evidence. Let us imagine that a number of very valuable, insured diamonds are missing from the safe of a small company and that the detectives employed by the insurance firm consider the hypothesis, among others, that the robbery was the work of the employer who hoped first to collect the insurance and later sell the diamonds. In their investigation they discover first of all that the company is nearly bankrupt, and soon after they discover that the employer did not tell them the truth regarding his whereabouts on the night of the robbery. It is reasonable to regard both pieces of information as evidence supporting (but not conclusively confirming, of course) the hypothesis in question. Now it would not matter if the discoveries had been made in the reverse order—that is, first it was discovered that the employer's account regarding his location was fabricated and then it was discovered that the firm was nearly bankrupt. Both pieces of information would still be reasonably regarded as evidence for the hypothesis in question, for both bits of information seem to have an epistemic link to the hypothesis. The order in which they are acquired is utterly irrelevant to their being evidence. Moreover their evidential tie to the hypothesis is independent of whether the hypothesis is advanced before the evidence turns up or after. This is why the concept of evidence is said to be time-independent. The adjective "initial," however, introduces a temporal element, for it suggests that there is such a thing as "first evidence." There are several plausible interpretations of the concept of initial evidence, however, that might be suggested. In relation to the example just used, one might perhaps speak meaningfully of the information of the firm's being near bankruptcy as being initial evidence in favor of the hypothesis put forward in the sense that this was the first evidence onto which the detectives stumbled or in the sense that this was the first (in time) that they happened to consider when assessing the reason-

³I have examined the concept of initial evidence in "Criteria of Strengthening Evidence," *Philosophy Research Archives* (1978), and in "Concepts of Weak Confirmation" (1974; unpublished).

ableness of their hypothesis. Two plausible interpretations of the concept of initial evidence are then (1) that it is evidence that happens to be the first that is encountered in the investigation of the reasonableness of a hypothesis, or (2) that it is evidence that happens to be the first that an investigator considers when assessing the reasonableness of a hypothesis.

Glossolalia is said to be the initial evidence of the baptism of the Spirit. There is nothing peculiar in saying that glossolalia is evidence for one's having been baptized in the Spirit. Even if it were false it would not be peculiar. The peculiarity of the claim begins to surface when the adjective "initial" is added. Is the initial evidence thesis meant to imply that there are various kinds of evidence for the baptism in the Spirit but that the first that always happens to be considered or the first upon which one stumbles in investigating claims is glossolalia? This would be a very strange claim to make, because the initial evidence doctrine would then be a universal claim about what evidence people happen to find or look for when attempting to establish whether someone is baptized in the Spirit—that is, the initial evidence doctrine would be reduced to a universal claim about the epistemological activities of those interested in determining whether someone is baptized in the Spirit. It would not be a theological or doctrinal claim at all. I do not think that this is what pentecostals holding to the initial evidence doctrine have wanted to claim.

There is a more plausible way of understanding the initial evidence thesis, one that explains the peculiarity of juxtaposing the normally-temporally-independent concept of evidence with the apparently-temporal concept implied by the word "initial." The initial evidence could well be meant as a shorthand way of referring to the conjunction of two separate theses—namely, (1) glossolalia is evidence for a person's having been baptized in the Spirit and (2) glossolalia is the first physical effect of a person's being baptized in the Spirit. The first thesis is generally held by pentecostals, and some would probably hold the second. The second thesis means that the relationship between baptism and glossolalia is a causal one, not just an evidential one, and in connection with causal connections it often makes sense to identify first, second, third, etc., effects in temporal sequence. Thus the inclusion of the term "initial" might be meant to refer to an initial causal effect of the baptism of the Spirit. While the foregoing account of the relationship between glossolalia and the baptism in the Spirit represents an option that defenders of the initial evidence doctrine might intend, there are others that are possible. The initial evidence doctrine might be intended as the conjunction of two evidential claims rather than as the conjunction of an evidential claim and a causal claim—namely, (1) glossolalia is evidence for the baptism in the Spirit and (3) glossolalia is the only evidence for the baptism in the Spirit. There is no doubt that some pentecostals have held and do hold to this conjunction of theses, but it does not adequately explain the reference to glossolalia's being the initial evidence for the baptism in the Spirit.

Other conjunctions of various theses are possible. One that immediately suggests itself is a conjunction of three—namely, (1) glossolalia is evidence of the baptism in the Spirit, (3) glossolalia is the only evidence for the baptism in the Spirit, and (4) glossolalia is an effect of the baptism in the Spirit. Other possibilities—conjunctions of evidential and/or causal claims—could no doubt be found. In the section that follows I shall address myself to some of the theses that have just

been distinguished from one another and, in addition, to several other similar theses that warrant examination.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT BASIS FOR CLAIMS LINKING SPIRIT BAPTISM WITH GLOSSOLALIA

This examination represents a substantial scrutiny of the NT text—one, moreover, attempted by others. What I propose to do is to concede to defenders of pentecostal doctrines concerning Spirit baptism that key passages most used by them as referring to it in fact do so. I propose next to formulate specific theses linking Spirit baptism and glossolalia and then attempt to determine which theses receive support from those passages that are thought to refer to Spirit baptism.

The passages that have been most commonly construed as a basis for advancing pentecostal doctrines concerning Spirit baptism occur in Acts 1; 2; 8; 10; 11; 19. I will not comment further on this fact here, because it is well enough known by those who have engaged in debate and study on the topic. My primary interest is to formulate various theses, both causal and evidential, and then examine these passages in order to determine which theses receive textual support.

1. *Glossolalia is evidence that one has been baptized in the Spirit.* This simple evidential thesis receives support from the description of an event found in Acts 10-11. (This includes Luke's description of Peter's visit to Cornelius and then Luke's report of Peter's account of the event.) Luke says that the Jewish believers who accompanied Peter to the residence of Cornelius expressed amazement at the fact that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon these Gentiles. Luke then adds that this belief that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out was based on the fact that the Jewish believers heard the Gentiles speaking in tongues. Glossolalia, then, on this occasion is construed as evidence of Spirit baptism.

2. *Glossolalia is the only evidence that one has been baptized in the Spirit.* While glossolalia is construed in at least one account as evidence of Spirit baptism, there is no assertion anywhere in NT literature to the effect that it is the only evidence. It would appear, according to Luke's record, that only a limited number of kinds of events were construed as providing evidence for Spirit baptism, for there is at least one case—namely, that of the Samaritans (Acts 8)—in which the confident assertion is made to the effect that the Spirit “had not yet fallen on any.”⁴ This implies that there must have been some evidence to suggest that Spirit baptism had not occurred, but of course the claim that it was glossolalia that was lacking is not textually supported. So thesis 2 does not appear to be supportable.

3. *Glossolalia is a causal effect of one's being baptized in the Spirit.* This thesis is the obvious causal counterpart to thesis 1. But it is of course a distinct claim

⁴I am of course conceding that the description in Acts 8 pertains to Spirit baptism.

and warrants consideration in its own right. It is a very significant one, moreover, for if it cannot be substantiated, neither could the thesis that glossolalia is the first causal effect of the baptism in the Spirit be substantiated. Lurking behind thesis 3 is the notorious problem of determining the basis for assigning causal relationships between two events. Two conditions commonly used joined as a criterion for asserting that event *X* causes event *Y* are (1) that *X* precedes (or is simultaneous with) *Y*, and (2) that *X* and *Y* vary concomitantly—that is, when *X* is present, *Y* is too, and when *X* is absent, *Y* also is. The description of events in the relevant passages of Acts seem to imply that glossolalia, where it does occur, occurs after or simultaneous with an event regarded by defenders of pentecostal views as Spirit baptism. The descriptions do not explicitly assert, however, that glossolalia is absent prior to Spirit baptism—i.e., the matter of concomitant variation is not specifically mentioned. I suppose it is reasonable to assert that the group of people described in Acts 2 as having publicly spoken in tongues after having been filled with the Spirit (to revert to Luke's description) were speaking in tongues for the first time. The description of events in Samaria in Acts 8 is sometimes used to support what one might call the concomitant variation thesis, but the difficulty presented by this passage, as is well known, is that glossolalia is not mentioned. The description of events in Ephesus given in Acts 19 could also be said by proponents of pentecostal doctrines to imply that glossolalia was absent prior to the imposition of Paul's hands. Such an implication, however, must surely be read into the description. It is not explicitly asserted at all.

There is a second problem in connection with establishing the claim that Spirit baptism is the cause of glossolalia: There seems to be no independent way of establishing that a person is baptized in the Spirit. We are frequently in a position to test causal statements such as "striking matches causes them to light" by virtue of the fact that the cause and the effect are both independently observable. Their concomitant occurrence and temporal order results in a causal statement being put forward. But Spirit baptism, like some other religious experiences, is not an independently observable event. In fact it often is said to have occurred only because certain observable effects have taken place for which it (or some other "spiritual experience") serves as a convenient explanation. The occurrence of glossolalia is much easier to establish. I take it that doing so requires establishing that a person is making verbal sounds that constitute or resemble speech.⁵

In view of the foregoing discussion, thesis 3 can only be given qualified endorsement. Perhaps the reasonableness of giving thesis 3 only qualified endorsement can be understood by asking the following question: Is there anything in the alleged descriptions of Spirit baptism and glossolalia to imply that glossolalia could not occur without Spirit baptism? I think the answer must be "No." If men like Caiaphas and Balaam could prophesy in their spiritual condition, one might well imagine people speaking in tongues without having received Spirit baptism and the close relationship to God that seems to be implied (or required) by it. This

⁵Perhaps one needs to add that this speech glorifies God. Speech that is difficult to account for has been reported from non-Christian contexts from antiquity, but not all of it would generally be conceded to be glossolalia of the kind reported by the NT writers.

possibility seems to rule out the reasonableness of another thesis—namely, the thesis that glossolalia is conclusive evidence of one's having been baptized in the Spirit.

Thesis 3, moreover, should be understood quite weakly to mean that among the causal antecedents of glossolalia is Spirit baptism. Ordinary language often uses locutions like "X caused Y" or "Y is an effect of X," implying perhaps that the only causal antecedent of Y is X. But the locution might be a shorthand way of identifying the most important causal element—the *sine qua non* of the event to be explained. To make an obvious and by no means irreverent point, in order to speak in tongues one must be able to speak. Perhaps one even needs a willingness to speak in tongues.⁶ Presumably when Spirit baptism is cited as causing glossolalia what is implied is that it is the most significant causal factor.

4. *Glossolalia is the first effect of Spirit baptism.* It should be clear by now that this thesis has no direct support in NT literature. There is no explicit assertion to this effect. Moreover even if the four or five incidents of Spirit baptism in Acts did assert that glossolalia occurred immediately after each occasion of Spirit baptism, those cases would not establish conclusively the universal claim represented by thesis 4. Perhaps the most powerful argument available to defenders of pentecostal views would be that the incident recorded in Acts 2 represents a pattern that all subsequent incidents follow but that descriptions in subsequent incidents vary in (or omit) detail. There is no textual support for this view, however, and so thesis 4 cannot be maintained.

5. *The capacity for glossolalia is an effect of Spirit baptism.* This is a significant thesis, I think, although it does not receive direct support. An obvious difficulty attending this thesis is that substantiating the presence of capacities is problematic when no evidences of capacities are present. This does not mean that a statement asserting that capacities are present is not true; it is just hard to substantiate. The reason I think this thesis is significant is because of Luke's record of a comment made by Jesus to the effect that the Spirit's coming upon one would cause one to have power (abilities, capacities), presumably of an unusual sort. This is how defenders of pentecostal views on Spirit baptism have often understood Jesus' comment recorded in Acts 1. This comment, however, is quite general in nature and does not specify that a capacity for glossolalia always follows. A more defensible thesis on the basis of this text, I think, is that supernatural capacities result from Spirit baptism.⁷

6. *The capacity for glossolalia is evidence of one's having been baptized in the Spirit.* I add this thesis, the evidential counterpart to thesis 5, because it immediately suggests itself, but again no explicit textual support for it is available. I suppose that if Spirit baptism produced the capacity for glossolalia, then if that

⁶Defenders of pentecostal views often say that glossolalia requires human participation of a significant sort.

⁷The power that Jesus spoke of as resulting from "the Spirit coming upon them" might well include the powers listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians as well as others, but it is not clear what he had in mind.

capacity were to be present (acknowledging the problem of how it might be detected) it would be evidence of Spirit baptism.

III. CONCLUSION

It seems to me that the most that defenders of pentecostal views can claim concerning the relationship between glossolalia and Spirit baptism is that glossolalia is evidence (but not conclusive evidence) that Spirit baptism has occurred and that glossolalia, when it does occur, is probably caused by Spirit baptism. The view that glossolalia is the first effect of Spirit baptism receives no conclusive textual support. If that is what the initial evidence doctrine is taken to mean or to at least imply, it is unfortunately indefensible.

None of the above is meant to denigrate the significance of glossolalia or the value of Spirit baptism. Indeed I have suggested that Spirit baptism seems to be directly linked by Jesus to supernatural powers. But the extravagant claims made about glossolalia as a *conditio sine qua non* of baptism in the Spirit cannot be supported even on the concession that the NT texts thought by many defenders of pentecostal doctrines to refer to Spirit baptism actually do so. Pentecostals who seek textual support for their views will have to be content with much more modest claims.