

Canonical Theism as Ecclesial and Ecumenical Resource

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Abstract

This article seeks to survey the movement of canonical theism as a way of introducing it to a Pentecostal readership for the purpose of establishing possible links that could be beneficial for both groups. In particular, the essay utilizes some of the claims of canonical theism to reconsider the place and function of initial-evidence thinking within Classical Pentecostalism. Additionally, the essay explores how the Pentecostal experience and understanding of God would substantiate further the underdeveloped claims to theism that the movement makes.

Keywords

canonical theism, canonical heritage, glossolalia, Spirit baptism, initial evidence

At the 45th Annual Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society in a session devoted to the canonical theism project, William J. Abraham, the spearhead behind the group, remarked (and I paraphrase), “Most people think that I am moving toward Orthodoxy through this project when in fact it may be more appropriately called Pentecostal.” On the surface, the remark is quite sensational: That a group, mostly composed of Abraham’s past doctoral students (many of whom are in mainline Protestant denominations), would be promoting a project that in one sense could be labeled Pentecostal is an amazing development. And yet when one reads the manifesto of the group,¹ the claim makes sense. The canonical theism project is an exciting development within contemporary theology in that it takes seriously the work of the Holy Spirit in time, within people, and through institutions, offices, and materials for the

¹ William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk, eds., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); hereafter *CT*.

purposes of salvation and healing. As Abraham notes, "Canonical theism is not one more speculative effort in systematic theology; it is an attempt to find an expression of the faith that nourishes the soul and that provides shape and motivation for lively involvement in the life and ministry of the church."² Rather than relegating the Spirit's work to a potentially solipsistic and exclusivist spirituality, Abraham and his colleagues are offering a robust role for pneumatology within the Church's history, life, and practices.

From the Pentecostal side of the matter, it is unclear if Pentecostals will gravitate to the canonical theism project,³ but my contention is that they should, for canonical theism has the potential of re-envisioning and repairing several features of Pentecostal identity as it is promoted and negotiated today. The present essay, then, introduces canonical theism to the Pentecostal community, employs features of canonical theism for the express purpose of aiding and improving elements associated with Classical Pentecostal identity formation, and concludes with salient remarks that can serve to extend the possibilities between canonical theism and the Pentecostal fellowship.

Introducing Canonical Theism

The impulses associated with canonical theism were first expressed in radical form with the publication of Abraham's celebrated work, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*. In this text, one sees on display an open negotiation of what in fact contributes to the understanding of the term canon; Abraham notes that "canons" are lists of persons, materials, or practices that the Church over time recognizes as means of grace.⁴ Although popularly used primarily in reference to the Bible, the term *canon* can designate a number of resources that the Church finds helpful in its way of life as a community that seeks to live out God's call in the world. Additionally, through the use of the term *means of grace*, Abraham brings to the conversation the Wesleyan understanding of the

² "The Emergence of Canonical Theism," *CT*, 141.

³ In this article, I am focusing exclusively on Pentecostalism, particularly Classical Pentecostalism; various instantiations of charismatic renewal would congenially recognize the value that canonical theism provides for the church catholic; such different responses potentially point to a long-overdue dialogue between Classical Pentecostals and Charismatics on the theological and spiritual benefits of thinking in terms of a canonical heritage.

⁴ Abraham defines the means of grace as "various materials, persons, and practices which function to reconnect human agents with their divine source and origin. They are akin to medicine designed to heal and restore human flourishing" (*Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 1).

topic with all of its nuances and qualifications, including a healthy dynamic of divine-human interaction in which the divine activity is first and foremost and yet human activity is vitally involved in what could be termed “active waiting” upon the presence of God.⁵

The running argument of *Canon and Criterion* is that canons are categorically different from criteria. If canons are means of grace that serve the church in encountering the presence of God for the purposes of salvation and healing, criteria promote the specific aim of epistemological judgment and verification. What one notes here is a shift from the ontological to the epistemological, a move that Abraham argues took place in the Western Church after the Great Schism of the eleventh century. At this time, a number of theological and subsequently cultural and philosophical forces perpetuated an emphasis not so much on *what* is true but on *how one knows* something is true. In other words, the shift took place in which an account of justification and verification for the possibility of making truth claims became a standard, initial step (functionally, then, a prolegomenal move) believed to be warranted before truth claims were made. Some kind of external and conceptual foundation was thought necessary before plausible and sufficiently self-conscious remarks were to be postulated.

As he documents the historical narrative and its developments throughout *Canon and Criterion*, Abraham notes that this shift in theology had a number of consequences. Among these, one was to privilege epistemology (and with such a move, inevitably *specific* epistemologies) in the theological task in a way that one does not find in the early church. Of course, epistemology has always been part of the theological task, but its place of privilege as prolegomenal is a relatively recent phenomenon. The early church in fact never ratified a specific doctrine of revelation or a theory of epistemology as part of its conciliar achievements, and Abraham does not find this silence to be vacuous; in fact, the silence may say something about epistemology’s place within theology that many may not see today, namely, that the Church has always allowed and tolerated sundry epistemological proposals in its second- and third-order reasoning. A second implication of this shift is that rather than providing more occasions for unity, the emphasis on epistemology has actually compounded church divisions. “Getting one’s epistemology right” is not the entryway to greater ecumenicity or catholicity; rather, multiple authorities are appealed to in this process (for instance, the Bible or the pope), and each of these in

⁵ For John Wesley’s understanding, see his sermon “The Means of Grace” in Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 378-97.

different ways.⁶ Ensuing from these varied appeals are incommensurable claims, and these in turn occasion subsequent divisions. Finally, the emphasis on epistemology has impaired both academic theology's self-understanding and its relationship to the Church. Theology too often has been an end in itself, a guild-oriented specialization that adjudicates internal and oblique tensions and issues rather than one that develops and extends its original aim as an ancient discipline within the university, namely, as an advanced form of catechesis in which people are brought to a deeper acquaintance with the canonical heritage of the church for the purpose of being immersed evermore continuously and deeply into the grace-filled, healing presence of God. In a sense, the prioritization of epistemology within the theological task, the act of morphing a canon into a criterion, has had the effect of esoterically framing and functionally reducing the content and aim of theology, which in turn has left the church bereft of vital resources for its spiritual nourishment.

When one moves to canonical theism's eponymous volume, one sees a group of essays that outlines many of these nascent impulses in a more sustained fashion. Although alluded to in the historical forays of *Canon and Criterion* and in additional reflections in some of Abraham's other works,⁷ the movement needed further elaboration and expansion, including in such areas as theological education, character formation, liturgics, sacramentology, iconography, episcopacy, and the like.⁸ In the introductory chapter to the volume (and in some ways to the movement as a whole), Abraham notes that canonical theism stems from the academy and yet is committed "to providing resources for the awakening and sustaining of spiritual life for local Christian congregations."⁹ With such a vision, the contributors to the volume are attempting to think against and through the traditional distinction between

⁶ Abraham lifts up a helpful hypothetical example to illustrate the point in *Canon and Criterion*, 4-5: A person appealing to the Ten Commandments, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul to condemn adultery as wrong because these authorities "say so," regardless of feelings, experience, reason, and other, deemed speciously unreliable and error-prone, resources, is promoting a "very particular epistemology of morality" and in so doing employs Scripture as a criterion of moral judgment. I take Abraham's point here to be that such usage is not necessarily wrong but oftentimes insufficiently self-aware, both epistemologically and hermeneutically.

⁷ For instance, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 14-23.

⁸ Further reflections along these lines have been offered in Abraham's *Festschrift*; see Paul L. Gavriluyuk, Douglas M. Koskela, and Jason E. Vickers, eds., *Immersed in the Life of God: The Healing Resources of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁹ Abraham, "Introduction," *CT*, xii.

the academy and the church in such a way that mutual exchanges can in turn invigorate the life and purposefulness of both.

One of the guiding assumptions of canonical theism is that the Holy Spirit has given the church a number of resources to use in the process of discernment and faithful living. These resources constitute what canonical theists call the “canonical heritage” of the church and are of great theological and spiritual value. “Thesis IX” of a programmatic chapter within *CT* gives a more sustained expression of what constitutes this canonical heritage:

Canonical theism is intimately tied to the notion of the canonical heritage of the church. The church possesses not just a canon of books in its Bible but also a canon of doctrine, a canon of saints, a canon of church fathers, a canon of theologians, a canon of liturgy, a canon of bishops, a canon of councils, a canon of ecclesial regulations, a canon of icons, and the like. In short, the church possesses a canonical heritage of persons, practices, and materials. Canonical theism is the theism expressed in and through the canonical heritage of the church.¹⁰

These canonical materials are not ends unto themselves; rather, they serve a therapeutic-salvific purpose: “For canonical theism the core of the faith is not scripture, or creed, or liturgy, or this or that great voice from the past, and the like. The core is the great gift of medicinal salvation mediated through the great canonical heritage of the church, a marvelous, manifold, developmental work of the Holy Spirit before and after Pentecost.”¹¹

The plenitude of the canonical heritage is in sharp contradistinction to its underutilization by the church and academy, for these latter constituencies often elevate one or two features of this heritage (usually through the taxonomy of “Scripture” and/or “tradition”) and do so to their detriment. Not simply on historical grounds but also on theological ones, there is a need for amplifying what functions as canonical within faith traditions. Along these lines, Paul L. Gavriilyuk makes a compelling case from early church history when he stresses that the *regulae fidei*, or proto-creeds, not only preceded the formal canonization of the Christian Scriptures but in many ways influenced the canonical process itself¹² and in turn should shape the hermeneutical

¹⁰ Abraham, “Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses,” *CT*, 2.

¹¹ Abraham, “Introduction,” *CT*, xvi.

¹² See Paul L. Gavriilyuk, “Scripture and the *Regula Fidei*: Two Interlocking Components of the Canonical Heritage,” *CT*, 27-42.

process today.¹³ Summarily, the *regula fidei* provides the framework by which to understand Scripture's unity.¹⁴

Canonical theism repeatedly presses the origin, means, and end of this canonical heritage and does so in a consistently and thoroughly pneumatological way: "Thesis X" of the programmatic essay suggests that "[t]he canonical heritage of the church came into existence through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was active in motivating, energizing, guiding, directing, and overseeing their original production in the church."¹⁵ Furthermore, "Thesis XIII" observes that "[t]he ongoing success of the canonical heritage of the church depends on the continuing active presence of the Holy Spirit working through the relevant persons, practices, and materials."¹⁶ In a move especially appealing to Pentecostals, Abraham does not limit canonical theism's vision of canon strictly to the biblical canon (which has tended to be the case in the Western church, particularly Protestantism) but moves to consider canon as a "means of grace . . . through which the Holy Spirit reaches and restores the image of God in human agents."¹⁷ With this last suggestion, of restoring the image of God, canonical theism narrates the goal or *telos* of the canonical heritage as salvation: "Thesis XI" declares, "The canonical heritage of the church functions first and foremost soteriologically. It operates as a complex means of grace that restores the image of God in human beings and brings them into communion with God and with each other in the church. Each component is primarily an instrument to be used in spiritual direction and formation."¹⁸

What one notices immediately in the proposals of canonical theism is its attempt to particularize the prominent place of epistemology. In building on *Canon and Criterion*, Abraham and his followers are committed to particularizing the place of privilege granted to any epistemological theory in part because modernity's privileging of epistemology has resulted in dead-end gridlock with regard to the framing of theological justification; a representative line indicative of this sentiment is Abraham's repeated comment: "Epistemological

¹³ Gavriilyuk shares this point with Robert W. Wall; see the latter's "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics," in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 88-107.

¹⁴ Gavriilyuk, "Scripture and the *Regula Fidei*," *CT*, 36.

¹⁵ Abraham, "Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses," *CT*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 ("Thesis XVII").

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

problems require epistemological solutions.”¹⁹ Given his past work, Abraham is essentially calling the church to be more self-critical, especially as it has all too easily allowed canon to become criterion and means of grace to become epistemological foundations.²⁰

This call is especially directed to the Western church, for it has spawned, perpetuated, and capitulated to the exigencies of certain epistemological concerns. For Roman Catholicism, much of this activity has revolved around the rise and function of papal infallibility;²¹ for Protestantism, the epistemic norm has been Scripture.²² The *Sola scriptura* principle on display in various Protestant rationalizations and justifications of theological claims is one that Abraham believes distorts Scripture’s purpose.²³ Scripture is not first and foremost an epistemic verification tool; as a means of grace, Scripture’s purpose is to

¹⁹ Abraham, “Introduction,” *CT*, xvi. As a Christian philosopher, Abraham does not discount the importance of epistemology; quite the contrary, its domain of inquiry is important as intellectual challenges arise within the church, but Abraham is quick to point out that epistemology serves a specific end, and no single epistemology has been ratified by the church over the centuries, nor need there be given that the state of philosophical questions is in flux over time (see “Thesis XXV,” “Thesis XXVI,” and “Thesis XXVII” in “Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses,” *CT*, 6). Whatever happens within the domain of epistemology (a domain that Abraham labels “midrash”), the canonical heritage of the church still stands and is worth acknowledging on its own terms, including its proclaimed purposes or ends.

²⁰ Especially in *Canon and Criterion*, Abraham notes it is easy, maybe even to a degree gradually intuitive, that canons become criteria; even if increasingly “natural,” the tendency is not, in specific instances, necessarily salutary, both for the church and for epistemology.

²¹ For a helpful summary of the theme, see Mark E. Powell, “Canonical Theism and the Challenge of Epistemic Certainty: Papal Infallibility as a Case Study,” *CT*, 195-209; a more extensive treatment can be found in Powell’s *Papal Infallibility: A Protestant Evaluation of an Ecumenical Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

²² One of the great contributions of canonical theism is its exposure of how epistemologically determined theology has become across the varying faith traditions. Part of this point is emphasized in “Thesis XVIII”: “On the surface, commitment to canonical theism appears to involve a turn to Roman Catholicism and a move away from Protestantism. This is false. Both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism work with a radically epistemic conception of canon. . . . epistemology rather than soteriology is primary in the conception and reception of canon in both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism” (Abraham, “Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses,” *CT*, 4). Through such emphases, I take it that canonical theists are opening the possibility for a conception of the theological task that can accommodate a vibrant spirituality, one that privileges embodiment, performance, and encountering the triune God. In many ways, this vision parallels important features found in the traditions of Orthodoxy, Wesleyanism, and the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement.

²³ Functionally, the principle has also had a way of influencing discourse on matters of doctrine, as Jason Vickers has noted with regard to the Trinity; see his *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

invite and point readers to God.²⁴ As with Scripture, so for the rest of the canonical heritage: Canonical theists believe that the work of the Spirit has produced a number of resources to bring us to God, making ontology, and not epistemology, their focal point.²⁵ Precisely from an emphasis on ontology can one then move to the end of God's work, which is healing and salvation.

Pentecostalism at a Tradition-Based Crossroads

It is unclear whether Pentecostals will gravitate to canonical theism because of their long-held suspicions regarding the spiritual integrity of Christian embodiment across the centuries. Of course, such a perspective is chauvinistic in a modernist, semi-Protestant, and semi-fundamentalist kind of way. The canonical heritage that Abraham and his collaborators advocate will probably sound excessively "Catholic" to the average Pentecostal who, for better or worse, tends to believe that outward mediations of grace and the notion of "tradition" as a whole are the stuff of rote and heartless "religion" because, it is argued, they stifle the legitimacy and sincerity of individual expression and choice. The intuition is semi-Protestant in that it pivots off a skepticism of the anthropological side of these issues, be they motives, practices, rituals, habits, and the like. The charge would be that humans and human sinfulness have a way of obstructing and manipulating the work of God across time. And finally, the tendency is semi-fundamentalist because if mediation throughout history is considered unreliable, then the need is created for finding something that is reliable, and for most Pentecostals, the resource of choice has been Scripture and/or spiritual experience. In many ways, this move is a consequential mistake, for it has perpetuated the privileging of epistemology by positing one epistemology over and against another.²⁶ All of these elements

²⁴ In this light, canonical theism's approach to Scripture is not that different from various expressions associated with the theological reading of Scripture now prominent in both biblical studies and theological guilds.

²⁵ See "Thesis XXI" in Abraham, "Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses," *CT*, 5. Although perhaps misleading, I take the use of "ontology" by canonical theists to mean the presence and work of the triune God as manifest in the life of the worshipping community.

²⁶ An extended quote from Abraham is appropriate here: "Over the centuries various protests against the epistemizing of the canonical heritage of the Church have surfaced within Protestantism. Pietism, early Methodism, and Pentecostalism represent a Protestant underworld of protest which has sought to return to a soteriological vision of the Scriptures. Uneasy with a purely cognitive approach to the Christian faith, its inhabitants have searched the Scriptures for salvation, and have been remarkably successful for a time as agents of evangelization. Beginning as movements of piety which arose as quests for the life of the Spirit, they quickly became ecclesial

complicate the acceptance of canonical theism's major proposals by contemporary Pentecostals.²⁷

On second glance, however, some points of continuity can emerge when one presses beyond the surface differences. Although early in their history Pentecostals were very skeptical of Christian antiquity, the tide has changed among the more recent generations of Pentecostal scholars. Many are now inclined to recognize that the Spirit's work has been influencing and sustaining the life and witness of the church throughout its history and across confessional lines.²⁸ Not only does this recognition stem from a more sober self-understanding of the Pentecostal movement as a whole, but it also emerges out of an expansive view of the work of the triune God. Essentially, the triune God's presence and work cannot be limited to the first and twentieth centuries, for ironically such thinking betrays a species of cessationist thinking, the form of which Pentecostals have had to counter when justifying their own worship practices and experiences to other Christians.

As the Pentecostal movement has endured generational transitions, it has had to work against a skepticism of the anthropological, for now the viability of the Spirit working across time and among people has become a necessity of identity construction so that the movement can have theological integrity and legitimacy over time. With such practices as the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, footwashing, and sharing of testimonies, Pentecostals have implicitly recognized the possibility of divine grace being mediated. And when one takes

institutions which were constituted by various components of the canonical heritage of the Church. . . . Invariably they moved to a Protestant conception of Scripture, complete with its epistemic categories, even though this often sat uneasily with their usage and their original intention. As they matured over the years, they were readily drawn into adopting the prevailing epistemological strategies of their elder brothers and sisters in the Christian family. . . . At a much more sophisticated level, *protest took the form of a rejection of the prevailing epistemic orthodoxy in the name of an alternative epistemology* (*Canon and Criterion*, 474-75, emphasis added).

²⁷ I believe the case would certainly be different for Charismatics, but Classical Pentecostals would find canonical theism a challenge to accept, especially in those contexts in which Pentecostalism has emerged as a prominent alternative to those who are dissatisfied with other, more "tradition-oriented" fellowships (most notably, Roman Catholicism in certain parts of the world).

²⁸ Perhaps the most significant figure in this camp has been Stanley Burgess with his sampling of pneumatological expressions across antiquity. His trilogy of historical works is a treasure worth mining: *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984); *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Sources* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989); and *The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997). Interestingly, Burgess indirectly recognizes the heart of Abraham's proposals in a survey chapter of the Spirit in Christian antiquity; see "Evidence of the Spirit: The Ancient and Eastern Churches" in Gary B. McGee, ed., *Initial Evidence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 8.

into account the Wesleyan wing of the movement, the theme of sanctification and the attendant possibilities of exemplary Christian saints from the past collectively make for a significant overture to the possibility of a canonical heritage.

Finally, although Pentecostals have always attended to the vital place of Scripture in their worship and lives, it is an open debate whether Pentecostals can adhere to *Sola scriptura* reasoning without compromising significant features of their identity. Although many Pentecostal denominations (especially in their North American exemplifications) have gone along, either explicitly or implicitly, with various doctrinal strands often deemed central to an “evangelical agenda,” Pentecostals have historically had significant tensions with fundamentalist readings of Scripture, since, for the former, it was the presence and work of the Spirit that made Scripture both reliable and fruitful for the worshipping community.²⁹ The same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures was the one who was illuminating them in the context of Pentecostal worship and embodiment. From a “traditional” Pentecostal point of view, Scripture was attended to as a means of grace, although that language was unintuitive.³⁰

For these and other reasons, I believe Pentecostals are at a place where they can recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in persons, materials, and practices over time because their history, experience, and ecumenical engagement have opened the possibility for admitting as much. In this sense, I think that Pentecostal scholars can find wonderful theological allies among the canonical theists, but such possibilities would mean some adjustments for both camps, and these could very well be of a salutary kind for each.

The Epistemic Constraint of Initial-Evidence Reasoning: A Test Case

What would a direct interchange between canonical theism and Pentecostalism look like? When *Canonical Theism* does mention Pentecostalism directly, the instances usually occur within a context in which other great traditions within Christianity, namely, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and occasionally Eastern Orthodoxy, are considered. In the vastness of canonical theism’s scope,

²⁹ An early writing that pushed this differentiation with philosophical sensitivity is James K. A. Smith, “The Closing of the Book: Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and the Sacred Writings,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (1997): 49-71.

³⁰ Much of this logic exists in the classic article by Jackie David Johns and Cheryl Bridges Johns: “Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992): 109-34.

one sees a genuine effort to help the church universal as it presently stands within its various constituencies. Naturally, such scope leads to the postulation of very general claims.

In Abraham's introduction to the volume, he notes that "Pentecostalism is coming of age intellectually, but it is unsure if it will really find a hearing in the church as a whole."³¹ Perhaps this detected uncertainty stems from Abraham's belief that Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement are thriving in the so-called Third World, yet many folks in the West continue to caricature it as "something of a joke that is all too readily and continuously available on national television"; he contends that "ecclesial bureaucrats" practice a form of censorship so that they talk pluralism while practicing exclusion, with the assumption being that Pentecostalism is one of the victims of such exclusion.³² Clearly, such remarks demonstrate Abraham speaking from and chiding the American Protestant establishment. Through such rhetoric (of a sort few others dare muster), I believe Abraham demonstrates that he is a sympathizer and friend of Pentecostal-Charismatic embodiment.³³ His passing remark, though, is worth pondering: Is this observation by Abraham true, and if so, does Pentecostalism validly hold it? Does the Protestant establishment continue to caricature and so chauvinistically exclude Pentecostalism? What role can canonical theism play in ameliorating this situation? From my limited perspective (as well as that of some of my ecumenically minded colleagues), I continue to find certain pockets of the rank-and-file evangelical movement to be *more* resistant to Pentecostalism than some corners of the mainline Protestant establishment, which leads me to believe that a bright future may exist between Pentecostals/Charismatics and those one could call "evangelical-mainline" Protestants. Personally, I see canonical theism as one expression of that hopeful future.

And yet Abraham and his colleagues also find certain issues to be challenging for contemporary Pentecostals. Abraham notes that "Pentecostalism and evangelicalism will dissolve into forms of ecclesial mutiny and liberal Protestantism if they do not find a bigger horizon in which to operate."³⁴ Again, the statement comes in the midst of one-line generalizations that are directed to all the major divisions of Christian embodiment, so it is difficult to know

³¹ Abraham, "Introduction," *CT*, xiii.

³² *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

³³ In another work, Abraham is quite sympathetic to the Charismatic movement when he summarizes the renewal efforts of Dennis Bennett; see *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), Chapter 2.

³⁴ Abraham, "Introduction," *CT*, xv.

exactly what Abraham has in mind without further elaboration.³⁵ Generally, though, one can assume that the issue in Abraham's mind is the following: Pentecostalism, like evangelicalism, elevates certain features of the canonical heritage (and by consequence deemphasizes others) when it thinks of its identity on its own terms and in relation to other ecclesial traditions, and both the privileging and reduction involved in this process potentially pave a dire road ahead when the ramifications of such handling fall short in light of unforeseen challenges and concerns that face any tradition over time.

Jason Vickers continues the engagement with the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition in his contributions to *Canonical Theism* and, in turn, raises a very important issue. Vickers's initial chapter highlights the overall *telos*/purpose of the canonical heritage of the church, which he labels therapeutic or medicinal. This point is very amenable to an ancient Christian (and specifically Eastern) understanding of soteriology, one that employs the language of healing, *theosis*, and the like. Through varying quotes from the ancients, Vickers highlights the repeated claim of canonical theism that "the full range of canonical materials, persons, and practices should be seen as effects of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit."³⁶ The poignant remarks directed to Pentecostals occur when Vickers attempts to disabuse the overall penchant by ecclesial communions for utilizing the canonical heritage not so much as resources for healing but as epistemic criteria that in turn establish theological coherence/certainty for purposes of justification, verification, and discrimination. All of the major church traditions are chastened in some way by Vickers for their selective epistemic use of the canonical heritage, including Pentecostals and Charismatics: "Likewise, [canonical theists] resist the tendency in some charismatic-Pentecostal theology to overemphasize the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the unique charismatic gift of speaking in tongues."³⁷ At two other moments, Vickers speaks similarly: "Likewise, some Pentecostal-charismatics are prone to appeal to the activity of the Spirit in giving supernatural gifts such as the gift of speaking in tongues as validation for either their tradition or their church,"³⁸ and "Pentecostals who appeal to the gifts of tongues as the distinguishing mark of true Christianity or the true church necessarily disunite

³⁵ Abraham does extend the thought particularly with regard to evangelicalism in the chapter "Canonical Theism and Evangelicalism," *CT*, 256-70.

³⁶ Vickers, "Medicine of the Holy Spirit," *CT*, 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

themselves from Christian traditions which either do not possess or which do not emphasize this gift."³⁹

Now, of course, these claims are generalizations, even if nuanced ones at that. As in the case of Abraham above, so with Vickers: They are generalizations that occur within broader analyses concerning sundry church communions, and so readers would do well to recognize them as broadly and generally as they are offered. The force of generalizations, of course, is that they only require a few instantiations for their relevance to be justified to some degree. In this regard, I have no doubt in Vickers's ability to conjure instances to justify his generalizations, for I too can do so, and such a state is perhaps an indictment of the Pentecostal academy for its inability to participate actively and effectively in catechesis within the movement at large. I characterize this evaluation as an "indictment" because I am of the persuasion that Pentecostal embodiment has never been simply and narrowly about glossolalia;⁴⁰ that it is often thought to be occurs because of perceptions and judgments *both from within and without* the movement, and lamentably, this state of affairs has been and continues to be problematic for Pentecostal embodiment today.

The larger point Vickers makes, though, is alarmingly honest in exposing in this instance how tongues *functions* for Pentecostal theological inquiry, for at least in part, Vickers undoubtedly has in mind the Classical Pentecostal understanding of tongues as being the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Classical Pentecostals functionally have used glossolalia to underwrite a species of epistemic certainty for the purposes of distinguishing who have been baptized in the Holy Spirit from those who have not.⁴¹ This move is problematic when it becomes the basis for evaluating/discriminating various forms of Christian experience and when it becomes an end in itself so that the pinnacle

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁰ If one steps back from the fray that often surrounds these discussions, one can recognize that glossolalia is not, as a religious phenomenon, unique to Pentecostalism. What would be unique to the Pentecostal experience and expression of glossolalia is its role within Pentecostal worship, and that context calls upon a vast network of understandings, practices, and expressions, which include most prominently a guiding view of the character of God and God's work in the world.

⁴¹ Both Frank Macchia ("Tongues as a Sign: Towards a Sacramental Understanding of Pentecostal Experience," *Pneuma* 15, no. 1 [1993]: 61-76) and Simon Chan (*Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* [JPTSUP 21; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], Chapter 2) argue on historical and theological grounds that concomitantly relating glossolalia to Spirit baptism involves more than simply evidentialist or epistemic concerns; however, one cannot escape the impression that most Pentecostals would resort to epistemic forms of thinking when elaborating rationales for initial-evidence understandings of glossolalia.

of Christian experience rests on the manifestation of glossolalia by a particular person. In other words, canonical theists, both explicitly but even more so through the thrust of their general proposals, challenge Classical Pentecostals to think through the epistemic rigidity and utility that they have associated with tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism.⁴² One wonders if the narrative that Abraham elaborates of the shift to the privileging of the epistemological is not also apropos to the Pentecostal understanding of tongues as initial evidence.

Within Classical Pentecostalism there have been instances of softening the epistemic rigidity of this claim. One strategy for doing so is to particularize the language of "initial": Through a reading of 1 Corinthians 13 and other passages, one could say that tongues is not the only evidence of a Spirit-empowered life, nor is it the most important;⁴³ however, the supernatural flair of tongues coupled with the privileging associated with the language of "initial" make a corrective such as this one hard to sustain; nevertheless, it is a corrective that is much needed across the Pentecostal spectrum because of the epistemic pigeonholing that tongues in turn suffers because of such construals. In his mature thinking, William J. Seymour moved to particularize the place of tongues in Spirit baptism, but, as Cecil Robeck notes, Seymour would not make for a pristine representation of North American Classical Pentecostalism as that type is often currently construed; rather, given the way matters have transpired, he would most likely be labeled today a "proto-charismatic."⁴⁴

Another strategy for softening this epistemic rigidity has been the attempts to think of glossolalia as sacramental. The pioneer on this front has been Frank Macchia, and on many levels, he has answered the critiques of the canonical

⁴² Charismatics on occasion have posed this issue; see Henry I. Lederle, "Initial Evidence and the Charismatic Movement: An Ecumenical Appraisal," in McGee, ed., *Initial Evidence*, 131-41. A discussion that needs further development is sustained by Frank Macchia in "God Present in a Confused Situation: The Mixed Influence of the Charismatic Movement on Classical Pentecostalism in the United States," *Pneuma* 18, no. 1 (1996): 33-54.

⁴³ See Steven J. Land, "Be Filled with the Spirit: The Nature and Evidence of Spiritual Fullness," *Ex Auditu* 12 (1996): 108-20. Other prominent Pentecostal thinkers have advocated a similar approach.

⁴⁴ See Robeck's chapter "William J. Seymour and 'the Bible Evidence,'" in McGee, ed., *Initial Evidence*, 72-95. The historical and theological irony of Seymour in relation to Classical Pentecostalism is shocking, and one wonders if contemporary Pentecostals have considered with sufficient transparency and diligence that when they claim Azusa as the founding revival for the movement they are, in turn, pointing to an event spearheaded by one who did not hold what some find to be the "distinctive" feature of Pentecostal identity. The irony is on display when Chan remarks that a "character like William J. Seymour comes close to embodying the Pentecostal ideal type" (*Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, 7-8).

theists through his constructive insights.⁴⁵ Macchia is aware of the epistemic pitfalls of initial-evidence thinking and works to counter them; as he noted almost two decades ago, “Beneath the dogma of tongues-as-evidence was the assumption that tongues symbolized an encounter with God that may be termed ‘theophanic,’ or as spontaneous, dramatic and marked by signs and wonders.”⁴⁶ This eschatologically theophanic approach to glossolalia not only places the focus on God and God’s self-revelation within the economy but it also works against the degeneration of tongues as a “dogmatic and rigid set of criteria for religious experience that betrays the impulse of Pentecostalism toward spontaneity and freedom in our encounter with God.”⁴⁷ As a sign of the divine presence, glossolalia is inherently a sacramental practice; it serves an ontological (i.e., soteriological) purpose prior to any subsequent epistemological purchase it may have for the theological task.

Nevertheless, initial-evidence thinking continues to function as a (if not the) distinguishing theological feature of Classical Pentecostalism when it is compared to other Christian sub-traditions by both those inside⁴⁸ and outside of the movement, and such an inordinate emphasis causes a number of difficulties, perhaps especially pastoral ones. In fact, this danger is what led Seymour to step back from the understanding as it crystallized in Parham’s thought; as Robeck mentions repeatedly, Seymour, out of pastoral concern, wanted to avoid materializing and idolatrizing tongues, a move that is “heathen,” to use Seymour’s term. Robeck continues, “By adopting the initial evidence theory as doctrine, Seymour argued, those who did so were deceived and at the same time became deceivers. They were guilty of idolatry by which they were more concerned to guarantee their own theological conceptions than they were concerned to allow for God to be free to be made self-evident by means other than tongues. In short, Seymour argued, God should be allowed to be God, and as God, he is free to choose whatever manifestation God might wish, including tongues. But insofar as Seymour was concerned, God would not be limited to speaking in tongues for evidence of the Spirit’s

⁴⁵ See both his “Tongues as a Sign” and “Sighs Too Deep For Words: Toward a Theology of Glossolalia,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992): 47-73. I will be focusing on the latter essay in what follows.

⁴⁶ Macchia, “Sighs Too Deep For Words,” 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁸ Burgess appears to agree: “It seems to me that the real historical distinctive of modern Pentecostalism is its insistence that tongues be viewed as the ‘the initial physical evidence’ for Spirit baptism” (“Evidence of the Spirit,” *Initial Evidence*, 3). As it has hopefully become clear throughout this essay, this author finds such an assessment to minimize Pentecostal experience and embodiment through the use of excessively epistemic terms.

baptism.”⁴⁹ I believe canonical theists would be quite sympathetic to such theological reasoning and epistemic particularization by the leader of the Azusa Street Revival.

What about “Theism”?

In admitting that canonical theism could have a very important role to play in helping Pentecostalism claim its tradition in a more intentional and nuanced way, it is worth asking what Pentecostalism could contribute to this nascent movement. Pentecostal scholarship has been flourishing for some time, and part of its task (perhaps similar to canonical theism in this way) has been to “serve academic theology by suggesting creative ways in which the gap between charismatic experience and academic theology might be bridged.”⁵⁰ I would like to extend this trajectory to canonical theism, particularly as it relates to the second term of its self-avowed title.

Although it is very clear how the title of this movement is related to the term *canonical*, it is not as obvious how it relates to “theism.”⁵¹ Given both Abraham’s tome *Canon and Criterion* and the eponymous edited volume, it is apparent that canonical theists are working against the conflation of canons and criteria in Christian theology, especially in light of the modern inclination to privilege epistemological considerations as first and foremost to any philosophical (and subsequently theological) endeavor. The thesis is actually quite simple, compact, and compelling.⁵² The “theism” feature of the title, however, is at this stage quite underdeveloped. From all indications, the reason why Abraham and his collaborators have opted to label their proposals a species of

⁴⁹ “William J. Seymour and the ‘Bible Evidence,’” in McGee, ed., *Initial Evidence*, 87. In my own ministry, I too have grown to appreciate Seymour’s point, for I am thinking here specifically of cases in which people feel they are “second-rate” Christians because they have not spoken in tongues, yet they often show a number of gifts and charisms that are not on display by some who do speak in tongues; such an evaluation and its promotion inevitably foster a myopic valuation of tongues as an end in itself, functionally privileging the gift rather than the Gift-Giver, which in turn profanes that which is sacred because God’s role and place are usurped for something else in the spiritual life.

⁵⁰ Macchia, “Sighs Too Deep For Words,” 50.

⁵¹ This assessment is offered in light of canonical theism’s current form; those associated with the movement are looking to develop a systematic theology that would be shaped by their aims and concerns, so the situation may change in due course.

⁵² The thesis may be a bit too simple, as the thoughtful review by John Webster of Abraham’s *Canon and Criterion* would suggest; see “Canon and Criterion: Some Reflections on a Recent Proposal,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 2 (2001): 221-37.

“theism” is precisely to avoid the promulgation of the epistemizing of theology, and yet, if epistemic problems are the issue, then, like Abraham himself says, epistemic solutions are required. In other words, it is hard to escape the impression that in chastening the role epistemology plays within theology (as important as this chastening is), the movement continues to work with and be shaped by epistemic concerns and categories.⁵³

How could “theism” play a greater role within the common work of canonical theists? If canons function essentially as means of grace that bring healing and repair to the world, then an account of the character and work of the Christian triune God is required so that the matter becomes clearer as to the source, nature, function, and end of divine grace. The significant transition between the volumes *Canon and Criterion* and *Canonical Theism* is one from history and philosophy to ecclesiology and theology. Yet, the implications these considerations have for theology proper, namely the Christian account of God’s being and work, do not claim center stage. This neglect is what contributes to canonical theism continuing as primarily an epistemological proposal (even with its explicit remarks of valuing primarily the ontological realm).

Ironically, the Pentecostal understanding of glossolalia as a theophanic expression of God’s self-disclosure within the economy of divine grace is a way in which Pentecostals could substantiate more fully the term *theism*. Operating from the hermeneutical conviction of interrelating their experience of the triune God with the voice of Scripture’s witness of this God, Pentecostals can and do keep the category of “theophany” an open one, one that can do theological work in the here and now because the sundry ways God has acted in the past are indicators and possibilities for the ways God will act today. These revelatory possibilities fill Pentecostals with a sense of both awe and holy fear, and the spontaneous and mysterious features of theophanic/revelatory moments, because they have at their root and as their focus an encounter with the triune God, are “the heartthrob of Pentecostal spirituality”; these encounters

⁵³ In the opening line to his first thesis, Abraham notes, “*Canonical theism* is a term invented to capture the robust form of theism manifested, lived, and expressed in the canonical heritage of the church” (“Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses,” *CT*, 1); he subsequently attempts to distinguish certain theisms from canonical theism but allows others to stand, leaving it to theologians to analyze them on the basis of “merit.” Abraham does not make it sufficiently clear what “merit” means and how it would be meted. By its titular expression, Vickers’s chapter “Canonical Theism and the Primacy of Ontology” would suggest the most promise for elaborating the “theism” side of the issue, but this essay, too, falls short on this score; the reader is left with the promising claim that “the Holy Spirit works in and through ecclesial canons, initiating persons into the fullness of the triune life of God” (*CT*, 157), yet there is little indication of what this “fullness” would look like “on the ground.”

with the triune God are the source of Pentecostalism's longstanding attraction to tongues.⁵⁴

From the properly theological side, Pentecostals approach the triune God as the One who knows his purpose and ends from the beginning and who has brought these out to bear within salvation history in a free, spontaneous, mysterious, loving, grace-filled way. One such sign of this activity is tongues. Other signs and events, such as healings, exorcisms, dreams, testimonies, the laying on of hands, the anointing in preaching, prophecy, and others have all played a part in the Pentecostal construal and appropriation of a canonical heritage.⁵⁵ All of these contribute to the coherence and meaningfulness of God-talk, for they have as their referent One who is not limited by the strictures of time, space, or language and yet who operates coherently and meaningfully in the establishment, repair, and healing of fellowship between himself and the created order.

When Pentecostals do "get it wrong" in their practices and belief structures, they can appeal to a critical and corrective "apparatus," but rather than being largely epistemic, this "apparatus" is more appropriately labeled doxological because it explicitly recognizes the dispositional and affective⁵⁶ condition of being *coram Deo* (before God).⁵⁷ This relational state is eschatologically shaped

⁵⁴ Macchia, "Sighs Too Deep For Words," 55.

⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, Classical Pentecostals can learn to deepen and broaden their understanding of the canonical heritage to include other elements that are more prominently expressed within other Christian sub-traditions, but it is true that Pentecostals have operated with an understanding of this heritage, one that is at odds in varying degrees with other fellowships. Fascinating about Chan's treatment of glossolalia is that he considers it a means of grace in similar ways to how canonical theists view the canonical heritage; however, Chan makes the subsequent move of locating glossolalia and Spirit baptism as integral features of what he labels "Pentecostal asceticism" (see *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, 77-82). By locating Spirit baptism within an ascetical framework, Chan can give an account of the Christian life that narrates dynamically ways in which canons function as medicines of the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁶ Of course, this work was pioneered by Steven J. Land in *Pentecostal Spirituality* (JPTSUP 1; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); additionally, Chan is in agreement with this point, and his phrasing with regard to glossolalia, that it "makes the best sense when it is understood as signifying a reality which configures gracious and powerful affections in a distinctively Pentecostal way," is apropos here (*Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, 41).

⁵⁷ I borrow this phrasing from Macchia. I am not suggesting that Pentecostalism need not seek to gain a greater sense of its identity and tradition for the purposes of self-assessment and self-critique, as Chan charges the movement to do in *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*; however, I believe that central to this identity is the belief that God's Spirit is at work in a more fundamental and intrinsic way than is possible to understand at a given moment; therefore, to continue with Chan, his remark that "[u]nfortunately, for much of their history Pentecostals have been better at telling their story than explaining it to their children" may lead

through and through in that it stems from and is directed to One who is only known in part; as Macchia notes, “The paradox of encountering the divine reality as present but not yet, as near but still out of reach, as revealed but still veiled is essential to glossolalia as a spoken mystery.”⁵⁸ And so, the mystery surrounding tongues (as a crisis of language that erupts from being *coram Deo*) points to the mystery that is God, and this transcendent God who breaks into the mundane does so at choice moments and for decisive purposes, ones that often include both mercy and judgment, love and fear, building up and tearing down. Tongues and other features of the Pentecostal understanding of the canonical heritage function as instruments that God uses to convict and shape God’s people over time, be it in their thinking, feeling, desiring, or witness. This openness to the Spirit’s work, one not simply of empowering but of convicting, regenerating, and sanctifying, is a hallmark of the Pentecostal experience of God within the self-understood eschatologically conditioned context of Pentecostal worship.

Conclusion

By way of summary, I believe that canonical theism can fruitfully interact with Pentecostalism in that what is at stake for both constituencies in their focus on the presence and work of the triune God in the person of the Holy Spirit is the kind of authentic transformation of the self that in turn vitalizes and makes possible the basis for epistemic claims. Such healing makes possible authentic Christian witness. Both groups would want to prioritize the ontological as a way of acknowledging the Spirit’s role in birthing and pruning Christian witness and performance. Canonical theism is remarkable in that, as a movement stemming primarily from a mainline Protestant context, it considers as running questions the authenticity, truthfulness, and general shape and ground of the Christian life.

With the routinization of charisma always a danger for movements, Pentecostals are in need of any and all resources for reclaiming and reconstruing for

to an unhelpful bifurcation, one that privileges or finds most adequate the epistemic. Although I am largely sympathetic with Chan’s program, I would add that telling the story *is* a form of traditioning and that explanation can be both a deepening and reductionistic endeavor. In this regard, I think Kenneth Archer to be exactly right in “A Pentecostal Way of Doing Theology: Method and Manner,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 3 (2007): 301-14 (306).

⁵⁸ “Sighs Too Deep For Words,” 59.

a new age those features of their collective identity that are most important. Rather than allowing such routinization to take the form of overdetermined epistemic claims, Pentecostals are charged with the task of “handing over” that which they have received in trust, which is nothing less than a witness to the works and character of God on display in the doxological life of the church. In this regard, canonical theism can play a wonderful part in helping Pentecostals be less compelled by certain epistemic traps, and in turn, Pentecostals can share the sights, sounds, and testimonies that flow from their experience of the Spirit’s work within their corporate life of worship. That these groups are searching for faithfulness in discerning and articulating the work of the Spirit in the body of Christ is a testimony of God’s providential care and love for the church. More pointedly, these common aims suggest that we as Christians are all beneficiaries and participants of the reality both culminating and stemming from Pentecost, that eschatological reality of God’s self-disclosure and self-presencing that serves as our only source of hope and truth.

