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Toward Pentecostal Prolegomena II: A Rejoinder to Andrew Gabriel

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Abstract

This rejoinder responds to the recent exchange begun by Andrew Gabriel concerning the viability of divine impassibility within Pentecostal circles. The article hopes to make clearer the guiding assumptions and ends that drove the original article in question, particularly in terms of how the witness and reception of Christian tradition and the explicit and ongoing recognition of the analogical constitution of God-talk can further serve the efforts of constructive Pentecostal theology, particularly as they relate to the doctrine of God and divine attribution.

Keywords

prolegomena, Pentecostal theology, divine attribution, classical theism, divine impassibility

I wish to begin by expressing my gratitude to Andrew Gabriel who has charitably and yet critically engaged my work¹; I believe both attitudes are often missing as a complementary pairing within theological exchanges. I hope to extend the conversation in the same spirit. I am aware that Gabriel has something at stake in these discussions,² but I will mostly focus in this article on clarifying my perspective as I believe many of its features can grow clearer in light of Gabriel's analysis.

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¹ Andrew K. Gabriel, 'Pentecostals and Divine Impassibility: A Response to Daniel Castelo', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20.1 (2011), pp.184-90.

² See Andrew K. Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Divine Attributes* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), especially Chapter 5.

I

In the original article,³ I tried to give a sense of my academic journey or ‘testimony’ with regard to divine impassibility; my hope was that folks who would have questions about a Wesleyan-Pentecostal advocating divine impassibility might see through this ‘testimony’ how I came to advocate the theme. Part of what also spurred me to write the original piece when I did was seeing repeatedly a number of Pentecostal scholars making a rhetorical move that I find highly questionable. The move entails something like the following: ‘A is appealing and meaningful; A is not like B, because B is a corruption from tradition, whereas A is lively, more biblical, and truer to experience’. This rhetorical strategy has been used by many, but some of its most prominent espousers would be those who advocate the open view of God. Pentecostals have followed suit and used this strategy, sometimes framing ‘A’ in terms of a relational God that one sees on display in Scripture or the God of Pentecostal experience; on occasion, the open view and the Pentecostal view have been conflated since the two have a number of common concerns and assumptions. Of course, option ‘B’ is what has been termed by many as the God of ‘classical theism’, and with this designation, one usually associates a number of divine attributes, including divine impassibility.

To say that ‘A is appealing and meaningful’ requires justification and elaboration as all theologically evaluative statements do. In its most sophisticated forms, I find open theism to be an important dialogue partner for Pentecostal theology because of the common appeals that can be made to the biblical portrayal of God in covenant relationship with God’s people, the vitality of prayer, and other important matters; these are themes that can substantiate ‘A’, and so they are worthwhile pursuing. But one of my chief difficulties at this point (and what I take exception to in the original article and so wish to press further here) is the characterization of ‘B’, one that serves primarily as a way of creating conceptual and rhetorical space for ‘A’.

One can laud the value of ‘A’ without contrasting it to ‘B’; if the argumentative strategy is to make a case for ‘A’ at the expense of ‘B’, then one ought to worry about getting ‘B’ right. And frankly, very few scholars who employ this rhetorical strategy care to render the attentiveness that a supposed

³ ‘An Apologia for Divine Impassibility: Toward Pentecostal Prolegomena’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 19.1 (2010), pp. 118–126.

tradition like 'B' (again, what has been called 'classical theism') requires. Gabriel wrestles with defining and raising particular historical examples of 'classical theism' in his work.⁴ In this regard, his treatment is much more nuanced and attentive than most of those who simply affirm 'classical theism' as a self-evident reality. I am glad that Gabriel has joined the conversation, and I hope that his work helps perpetuate greater care when Pentecostals talk about God and divine attribution, care that is historically more informed and theologically more sophisticated.

In fact, precisely because of a historical and theological awareness garnered from reading many of its so-called exemplifications, I have come to conclude that 'classical theism' cannot be affirmed without sustained and repeated qualification; I would even go so far as to say that 'classical theism' is a category that should be put to rest⁵: It cannot do the work that most of its users wish it to perform. It is a linguistic cipher or straw-man usually employed to make a case (in terms of contrast) for something filling the role of 'A' in the rhetorical strategy above.⁶ Aristotle's Unmoved Mover is not the God revealed in the person and work of Christ. The point is quite obvious to Christians today. The assumption that Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, even Pseudo-Dionysius, and a host of others could not tell the difference between the two is indefensible and unsupportable given a careful, expansive, and charitable reading of these blessed saints' work; I would even venture to say that the move of using one category to describe all of this diversity is historically and theologically careless. Given how diverse theology has been simply within the last century, can one term or phrase realistically encapsulate all the theological currents and changes that took place from the time of the Apostolic Fathers on through to modernity? Can one term or phrase really be sufficient to account for the doctrine of God particularly and God-talk more generally across civilizations, cultures, languages, idioms, and philosophical habits that run the span of at least 1500 years?

⁴ See *The Lord is the Spirit*, Chapter 2.

⁵ I note the irony that I wish to cease using 'classical theism' whereas Gabriel desires to drop 'divine impassibility'. Nevertheless, I wish to qualify both but in different ways.

⁶ In contrast to Gabriel, I agree with Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen that "the term "classical theism" is a scholarly construction existing only in the minds of theologians, a generic concept drafted in hindsight to point out some dominant features in the development of the doctrine of God among Christian theologians" (*The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004], p. 121). In light of these considerations, I would recommend Kärkkäinen's short but helpful eighth chapter.

Admittedly, one can find a shared conceptual tradition, one that Heidegger exposed, namely the West's fixation on 'onto-theology' or 'being' more generally. Yes, it is true that a linguistic and conceptual apparatus is detectable across the variations mentioned above in which certain attributes of God are employed readily and often indiscriminately, such as immutability, impassibility, and the 'omni-' attributes. Nevertheless, those who espouse 'A' usually do so from a conceptually a-Heideggerian location; in other words, usually proponents of 'A' are still held unwittingly by the gaze of onto-theological concerns. In this light, the novelty of their proposals rests simply in terms of a turn or modification of an unqualifiedly assumed tradition already in place. Essentially, they are not that different from espousers of 'B'; in fact, 'A' and 'B' are usually mirror images of one another, one being said to be 'dynamic' and the other 'static', one being 'open' and the other, by implication, 'closed'.⁷

But proponents of 'A' often fail to distinguish material from formal differences within linguistic preferences and practices within God-talk. For instance, to take the divine attribute I have repeatedly raised, divine impassibility for Ignatius of Antioch is *not* the same thing as divine impassibility for Tertullian (and within these two choices, we are only talking about a span of less than a couple of centuries). Undeniably, they use terms that can be rendered similarly in translation as variants of 'impassibility' (although Ignatius would be employing the Greek *apatheia* and Tertullian the Latin *impassibilitas*), but the way these terms *function* within their proposals is different: For Ignatius the language of impassibility serves to point to the pre-existence and resurrection of the Son whereas for Tertullian such language helps re-orient divine attribution more generally.⁸ If such differentiation can be undertaken with divine impassibility, it can be further extended to divine immutability, divine simplicity, and the whole lock, stock, and barrel of attributes commonly circulated under the heading of 'classical theism'. Because of all these reservations, I suggest that

⁷ I am not suggesting that we move 'beyond metaphysics' since metaphysics has a conceptual role to play when discussions take place between faith and reason. But metaphysics is a highly contested realm of inquiry that has implications for philosophy and theology; therefore, Heidegger and others help show the limits or borders of the metaphysical task when they expose the incommensurability at the very heart of metaphysical musings; the tendency to skirt past this species of incommensurability is what I mean by operating from an 'a-Heideggerian location'. A dense and highly nuanced treatment of the matter is on offer in D. Stephen Long's *Speaking of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 1-20.

⁸ See *The Apathetic God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), Chapter 3 for my more sustained treatment of these and other figures.

'classical theism' is a vacuous concept; it cannot function as neatly and tidily as the anti-type of option 'A' that so many wish to make it. If the phrasing has to persist, it should proceed in terms of recognizing the material diversity within the formal similarity: 'classical theisms' would be a better phrasing but ultimately a case by case analysis of figures and movements would be best.

Why the qualification? Does it really matter? If the operative assumption is that our present-day concerns and formulations are ultimately important and worth seeking simply because they are ours, then, yes, the qualification matters because not only the reading of history but more vitally the faithful reception of Christian witness is at stake. One of the persistent difficulties that Pentecostal scholars have had to fight has been a historical chauvinism inherent to the Pentecostal ethos in which the assumption at play is that the first and twentieth century church and their respective outpourings of God's Spirit are all that matter. Part of what a Pentecostal doctrine of God makes pressing is the issue of God's character and constancy over time. Yes, God is about doing 'new things', but the 'new' is also consistent with the 'old' because the author and agent of both is the same. Simply put, God's presence and God's work are not proprietary to Pentecostals, but if that recognition is to do work within the theological task, then it requires evidences in its support; that may mean receiving the witness of Christian antiquity differently than it has traditionally been, but it would require a reception nonetheless.

Let me specify a bit more here. Repeatedly, both in Gabriel's response to me and in his book, Thomas Aquinas comes under fire as the 'zenith of classical theism'. In his response, Gabriel mentions how for Thomas God does love and loves all things but that this love is not a passion or feeling for God but rather an act of will.⁹ He goes on to refer to Thomas Weinandy,

⁹ Apparently, this framing of the affectional life is a limit in Gabriel's mind; however, when one looks at the logic of Aquinas's thought, one sees that for Thomas passion or feeling requires a body; since God has no body, then Aquinas locates divine affectivity within the divine will. My thanks to Nicholas Lombardo, O.P. for helping me see this point. The matter becomes clear in *ST*, I, q. 20, a. 1, ad. 1: "Therefore acts of the sensitive appetite, inasmuch as they have annexed to them some bodily change, are called passions; whereas acts of the will are not so called. Love, therefore, and joy and delight are passions, in so far as they denote acts of the intellectual appetite, they are not passions. It is in this latter sense that they are in God" (quote from the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province [Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948], vol.1, p. 114). Having made this distinction, Thomas still wishes to attribute appetite to God (a certain kind of appetite, the intellectual or rational appetite as distinguished from the natural and sense appetites). All of these

a charismatic Thomist, and how he makes a case for impassibility, one that can affirm delight and joy but one that finds difficulty accommodating suffering. What to do here?

First of all, and consistent with what I have been saying thus far, the ‘classical theism’ of Aquinas is different from the ‘classical theism’ of other figures and traditions. To say that his view of God is ‘static’ would be to misunderstand what is at play with the notion that the *Christian* God is *actus purus*. But more to the point: Evaluative judgments concerning Aquinas’s project require more than simply engagements of the *Summa theologiae* (and usually the preference here is for the *Prima pars*) and the *Summa contra Gentiles*. Thomas produced a number of other scholarly and devotional works, and these ought to play a role in evaluating how he negotiates and employs God-talk within *sacra doctrina*.¹⁰

Is Aquinas’s form of ‘classical theism’ the same as the Reformed kind that makes its way into a number of Protestant (specifically evangelical) tributaries today (and one that seems to be the chief rival envisioned by open theists)? When one takes into account differences in terms of the doctrines of creation, humanity, hamartiology, and soteriology, the expanse is wide indeed; these doctrines do, inevitably, alter one’s account of who God is and what God is like because these particular doctrines form the interpretive grid for making claims concerning what kind of world God created, what went wrong, and how Jesus is the answer. If we move ‘from below to above’ in the theological task, then competing accounts of what constitutes ‘below’ matter long-term for how ‘above’ is characterized.

And here is where one can register Weinandy’s comments. Earlier than Gabriel’s reference, Weinandy remarks, ‘Therefore, not only are joy, kindness, and generosity truly contained within the fully actualized love of

gestures point to a highly nuanced account of affectivity, both human and divine. In fact, Lombardo makes the claim that up to his day, Thomas wrote the most sustained account of the passions ever written when he finished his *Treatise on the Passions*, namely questions 22–48 of the *Prima secundae* of the *ST*; see Lombardo’s *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2011) for a very helpful introduction to Thomas on this topic.

¹⁰ Thankfully, and perhaps in no small measure due to the work of Albert Outler and his endeavors in terms of the viability of Wesley studies, the theological academy has grown to recognize more and more the importance of sermons, commentaries, catechisms, and other materials as theologically generative for the purposes of assessing a particular figure or movement in terms of theological legacy. The place of privilege has traditionally been given to the polemical and ‘systematic’ writings, but this move has growingly been recognized to suffer from a bias inherent to modernist sensibilities.

God, but also compassion, mercy, grief, and even anger are also truly subsumed within his perfect love.¹¹ Gabriel, open theists, and many others who are proponents of a relational and ‘dynamic’ view of God could affirm such a claim. But Weinandy draws a line with suffering. Why? Many critics of ‘classical theism’ would say that the matter is an all-or-nothing affair, that a capacity to love means a capacity to suffer. What one sees on display in this emergent tension are competing accounts of the affectional life generally and competing definitions of suffering particularly. Yes, divine affectivity is different from human affectivity, as Gabriel rightly points out. But if the affirmation is not just going to sit in isolation amidst a number of claims that sustain the continuity between divine and human affectivity, then the lingering question is: And *how* is divine affectivity different from human affectivity? Openness folks tend to say that the difference is that God has a more fully-orbed affectional life, that God is the ‘most moved mover’. Such a claim 1) marks the difference as one of degree rather than kind and 2) constitutes a wide, largely undifferentiated endorsement of affectivity generally in that it 3) fails to account for what is generally deemed as troublesome or sinful within human affectivity (lust, envy, and the like) and 4) collapses suffering within affectivity without venturing to define the former in any nuanced, at least partially hamartiological, kind of way (that as fallen creatures in a post-fall world, we often suffer involuntarily the mistakes and atrocities of others as well as ‘voluntarily’ the consequences resulting from the exercise of fleshly passions and desires).

In contrast to this undifferentiated endorsement, the testimony of Scripture and of the early church points to a category called ‘sinful passions’. Paul alludes to the topic in Rom. 1.26 (‘degrading passions [πάθη]’) and 7.5 (‘sinful passions [παθήματα]’), and he further makes the point in Gal. 5.24: ‘And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions [παθήματα] and desires’¹²; furthermore, Col. 3.5 states, ‘Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion [πάθος], evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)’. Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life of Moses* elaborates the matter in this way with an eye to the therapy of human affectivity:

But the people had not yet learned to keep in step with Moses’ greatness. They were still drawn down to the slavish passions and were inclined to the

¹¹ Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2000), p. 164.

¹² Translations are from the NRSV.

Egyptian pleasures. The history shows by this that human nature is especially drawn to this passion, being led to the disease along thousands of ways. As a physician by his treatment prevents a disease from prevailing, so Moses does not permit the disease to cause death. Their unruly desires produced serpents which injected deadly poison into those they bit. . . . There is one antidote for these evil passions: the purification of our souls which takes place through the mystery of godliness. The chief act of faith in the ‘mystery’ is to look to him who suffered the passion for us. The cross is the passion, so that whoever looks to it, as the text relates, is not harmed by the poison of desire.¹³

One wonders if in the current climate, marked as it is by the rise of the modern, therapeutic disciplines and fields, one can account for this biblically nuanced framing of human affectivity. Oftentimes, what is claimed as that feature of human life that is most genuine and pure is the affective dimension so that denying one’s passions or feelings is considered morally wrong. Given this reality, the claims in support of divine passibility, in the degree and shape they take today, are framed in a post-Freud world.¹⁴ Now, given the sophistication of the biblical testimony, the early church, and the Angelic Doctor himself, should not rival accounts of human affectivity take into consideration this complexity and in turn offer something at least comparably nuanced so that they in turn can be true rivals rather than formulations that skirt over a number of issues that were at stake in these original proposals?

II

Language is always utilized and employed ‘somewhere’; ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (Derrida). The interpretation of the meaningfulness of the gospel is going to be undertaken, extended, and negotiated within the conceptual and linguistic world of the context in which it is pursued. There is no escaping such embeddedness. The suggestion that the early church ‘capitulated’ or ‘gave in’ to Hellenization pivots off of the assumption that there is a ‘placeless place’ in which the gospel can be perceived in all of its unimpeded, a-cultural splendor for what it ‘truly’ is. Realistically, though,

¹³ *Life of Moses*, 271-73; quoted version is *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson; New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 124.

¹⁴ Of course, the transition is bigger than Freud; a work that documents the remarkable shift, one that involves the secularization of psychology, is Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

people have no other recourse but to use the concepts, terms, and conventions of thought available to them at a given time, for those are the only options available. Often concepts, terms, and conventions of thought fall out of favor, and when they do, people appeal to others. In appealing to others, they attempt to show the limits of past proposals and the feasibility of newer ones, although the newer ones are often already in the process of becoming embedded within the context in which this corrective is being pursued. And so the process begins anew and the cycle is perpetuated. The cycle is inherent to Western intellectual history; it is also inherent to biblical history.

One of the worries I sense when theories of Hellenization are perpetuated is that the charge of corruption of earlier eras has a way of privileging one's own location, as if the location of the critic is not also potentially (if not more so!) 'corrupt'. Again, a 'placeless place' does not exist, but oftentimes interpreters of history pursue their work as if their *Sitz im leben* is placeless, a tendency that I believe is inherent to modernist assumptions (particularly the assumption of omniscience) associated with certain ways of reading history. The explicit claim is "B" got it so wrong'; the tacit assumption is 'we can see that accurately and we are doing much better with "A"'. Now, 'wrong' and 'better' may be possible judgments within God-talk (I prefer the language of faithfulness, but I will pursue this matter in the third section), but before making this move, one ought to seek to particularize oneself in the theological task. One ought to take inventory of what is popularly conceived as rational, truthful, coherent, and the like in one's own particular context as one begins and continually pursues the theological task. Thankfully, these sensibilities have become more widespread in terms of prolegomenal features of explicitly self-conscious theological pursuit. Nevertheless, such a process of self-discovery and self-awareness is not easy: It requires the intentional disposition to problematize that which is deemed 'common sense' or 'conventional thinking' in one's own context. This process is unpleasant and at times painful; it is spurred by the question more so than the answer, by alterity more so than complementarity.

My strategy in proposing divine impassibility to Pentecostals is not to make them 'classical theists' (as problematic as this designation is). Contra the self-identification of Flannery O'Connor, we Pentecostals can never claim to have been 'hillbilly Thomists'; we have simply been hillbillies, although we are hillbillies of a sort who are now trying to speak to ourselves and others regarding who we are and what we are about. In doing so, language inevitably plays a role, and precisely at the level of language is

where I wish to register my concerns.¹⁵ *In proposing divine impassibility to Pentecostals, my aim is to create the question and alterity for gauging to what degree passibilist ways of thinking, evaluating, and speaking have become too embedded in Pentecostal God-talk.* In making such an apophatic claim,¹⁶ I assume that a point does exist that can be evaluated as ‘too far’, a point at which language is now not a contextually shaped instrument helpful for description but simply deemed as a window to see how things ‘really are’. In other words, I worry about the collapse of the analogical interval inherent to all theological discourse, and if such a collapse takes place unwittingly and unbeknownst to the speaker, then it becomes conflation, which is another word for projection. Under such arrangements, Feuerbach’s critique would apply.

Of course, Pentecostals are passionate people, and pathic or passibilist language will always be a part of their God-talk; in fact, such tendencies will probably always be privileged when possibilities present themselves, but again, that is part of my worry: The problem is not when something we do not like presents itself; what oftentimes becomes our burden and curse is when we like what we like *too much*, when this privileging becomes reified to the degree that it is unquestionable, unrevisable, and nonnegotiable, when caretakers of a tradition appeal to a definition or conceptuality rather than an embodied and practiced reality. Such are the perils of any tradition that is actively seeking to frame itself theologically, when it tries to register theological identity and coherence to itself and a wider public for apologetic and traditioning-oriented ends. Such is the snare of *dunamis* being framed in terms of *logos*.¹⁷ These are real risks that I find to be rarely explored in constructive Pentecostal theology, particularly in terms of a

¹⁵ I believe some of my reviewers have not managed to see this feature of my work; I am not simply wishing to retrieve the patristic testimony, but I wish to do *so for the purpose of* negotiating, chastening, and invigorating our contemporary speech practices, which in turn will influence our conceptual sensibilities within the theological task.

¹⁶ And, I should note, apophatic claims are content-constituting claims. The content in question, however, is simply much more difficult to gauge because of its implicative effects via denial rather than affirmation, but I think such a sensibility is crucial to foster if Pentecostalism is going to claim itself as a theological tradition that is marked thoroughly as a practiced spirituality.

¹⁷ What James K.A. Smith remarks about Pentecostal philosophy should qualify Pentecostal theology as well: ‘The moment that pentecostal phenomena are reified and abstracted from the “form of life” that is pentecostal spirituality, the resulting philosophy will fail to be pentecostal in a radical, integral sense – possessing a form of pentecostal spirituality but denying the power thereof’ (*Thinking in Tongues* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], p. 16).

doctrine of God. When does the linguistic and conceptual mechanism get in the way of, rather than facilitate the apprehension of, the reality in question? When does theology as a second-order discourse become an end in itself, drawing ever-increasingly away from the primary discourse of the church's worship and witness?

III

With such sensibilities, I do not wish to end with divine impassibility. So, in partial response to Gabriel, I have *not* tried to argue for the *necessity* of divine impassibility as a long-term staple of God-talk, either in Pentecostalism particularly or Christianity more generally. But as a linguistic option that is both on display within the history of Christian reflection¹⁸ and as the apparent antithesis to one of the most privileged features of Pentecostal God-talk, divine impassibility can serve the purpose of introducing conceptual boundaries and possibilities *precisely because* it counters linguistic convention within Pentecostal theological thought forms. Its admitted viability, if only short-term, can help create the possibilities for alterity, for calling into question a kind of privileging that in turn runs the risk of being reified and even idolatrized precisely if it remains unchecked.

But another matter is equally, if not more so, at stake in these considerations, and that issue is the way Pentecostals envision the theological task more generally. I have repeated my use of the term 'prolegomena' in this rejoinder's title because I think that a contribution that this present exchange can make to Pentecostal theology is one that invites more Pentecostals to worry and reflect about the doctrine of God (including the way transcendence and immanence are considered) as well as the role language plays in theology (especially with regard to divine attribution).

In this regard, Pentecostals have had an interesting relationship with language. The possibility of glossolalia can be understood as an indication

¹⁸ And admittedly, I agree with Gabriel that this history is checkered, that over time divine impassibility has meant different things to different people and that oftentimes its usage after the patristic period deviated from some of the intentions and uses from that time period; therefore, divine impassibility's introduction as a check to passibilist tendencies also has to be repeatedly negotiated. However, I do not think that dropping such a term as impassibility is the best solution, largely because such a move capitulates to the dominant patterns of the day, and if anything is clear about contemporary speech practices surrounding affectivity, it is that ambiguity, conceptual overlap, and incoherence run rampant, especially with the violently totalizing and secular category of 'emotion'.

of the passion of the Spirit in our lives (Gabriel's point), but it can also suggest the confounding and subversion of language as we know it. In other words, Pentecostal worship already calls language into question. Groans, shrieks, sighs, and tears are not simply indications of a passionate God who works to inspire our passions in a God-directed way, but they also hint at the specificity by which Pentecostals 'suffer' theology. Pentecostals 'do' theology with the implicit recognition that God is wondrously accessible, and yet encountering this God is inexplicably shattering. Gabriel wishes to pursue the former strategy, and doing so is obviously helpful. I wish to pursue the latter because of the 'routinization of charisma' that I worryingly see in so many established Pentecostal contexts today. I believe part of the Pentecostal experience implies this very real and pressing denial that constitutes a recognition that words, concepts, and descriptions of experiences can only go so far. In fact, I would argue that a good bit of dissension within the Pentecostal fold (one that was viewed by some in the early years as destined to bring about the union of God's people!) is related to the inability or refusal to recognize the limits of language as they relate to the theological task.

As Frank Macchia reminds us, Pentecostals pursue theology *coram Deo*, but this acknowledgment of being before or in the presence of God is not simply a gesture among others within theological system-building. This affirmation is theology's *conditio sine qua non*, the basis by which everything else is possible in the theological task. Theology generally, but Pentecostal theology particularly and especially, is only possible and takes place *coram Deo*. Pentecostals are especially aware of this point because it is from the encounter between God's Spirit and the human spirit that Pentecostal theology can exist and from which it takes its vitality and power. The possibilities are endless within the transformative interchanges of such an encounter.¹⁹ Pentecostal claims of power, presence, deliverance, and healing all rest on the reality of being before or in the presence of God.

For this reason, Pentecostals should be more worried about and attentive to their God-talk. The state of being *coram Deo* has to influence theological speech, in part by sustaining its healthy, necessary, and ongoing subversion. The Pentecostal experience, which is best framed as a way of living out a doxological existence, ought to shape Pentecostal theologizing.

¹⁹ Dale Coulter's emphases are important here; see "Delivered by the Power of God": Toward a Pentecostal Understanding of Salvation, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10.4 (2008), pp. 447–67.

Only from this kind of praxis can something be discerned as 'faithful' or 'unfaithful', terms which I find to be quite helpful in the activity of evaluating theological claims because their basis is the call of God rather than accuracy, exhaustiveness, or some other category that is more within the domain of *Wissenschaft* than *Nachfolge*. A deity who is indifferent, uncaring, unloving and, yes, apathetic (as the term is commonly used) is unfaithful to the reality of being *coram Deo* as Pentecostals have experienced and pursued it at the metaphorical altar, that place where God encounters us. And yet saying that God is only as vast as our experience, our understanding, and our linguistic and conceptual patterns – as privileged and as personally helpful and valuable as these are – can just as legitimately at some point in time be labeled as 'unfaithful' if they play a role in confounding and impeding that encounter. After all, part of the beauty of Pentecostal worship is the sense of expectancy that precedes and follows the Pentecostal experience of worship, yet expectancy, and so eschatological hope, imagines the possibility of alterity, the horizon of otherness, that things as they are need not be the way they have to be. Such expectancy is what I hope Pentecostals never lose, be it in the context of the church or the academy.