Pentecostal Experience:

An Example of Practical-Theological Rescripting

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Abstract
This article offers a reflection on the nature of Pentecostal experience. The practical-theological methodology is used to explore, analyse, reflect upon and theologically rescript an account of a person’s experience of Baptism in the Spirit. An interview with a person attending a New Church in the UK is used in order to demonstrate how disciplined attentiveness to a personal account can be an important step in appreciating the nature of spiritual experience for Christians. The analysis considers biographical, social and contextual information that enables the experience to be situated and understood via philosophical and sociological insights. The implicit or ‘ordinary’ theology contained in the account is rescripted in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian life and sacramental theology.

Key Words
Pentecostal, Baptism in the Spirit, Practical Theology

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1. Introduction

This article aims to explore aspects of Pentecostal experience by means of the discipline of practical theology. Practical theology is well placed to make a contribution to this theme because of its engagement with religious experiences and activities as part of its focus on contemporary enquiry. Whatever resources are used from Scripture, church history and Christian tradition, the discipline of practical theology has an orientation to the ‘now’ of ecclesial life that means it is attentive to the role of experience in Christian life and thought. The Pentecostal perspective will be brought to bear on this theme by considering the theology of ‘Baptism in the Spirit’ as mediated through an experiential account. Before I proceed it is necessary to define the key terms of ‘experience’ and ‘Baptism in the Spirit’.

‘Experience’ is a slippery term and however it is defined its use appears to be varied and sometimes inconsistent. The origin of the English word derives from the Latin ‘experientia’, often interpreted as ‘that which arises from travelling through life (ex-perientia)’. It is therefore assumed to refer to the accumulation of wisdom or knowledge that occurs as one proceeds through the life cycle. Yet, in contrast to this definition a more specific one has developed in which it is associated with the inner life of individuals, that may be shared as part of a group, but which is nevertheless inward and subjective. This definition is the one used by the philosopher Caroline Franks Davis when she writes: ‘An experience... is a roughly datable mental event which is undergone by a subject and of which the subject is to some extent aware’. This means that accumulated life experience is excluded (hence ‘roughly datable’). However, this does not mean that experiences are always isolated or that they always have sharply defined boundaries. On the contrary, Franks Davis maintains that experiences ‘do not take place in a vacuum, but are the product of interaction with other experiences, beliefs, the environment, and the subject’s “set”’. For the purposes of this paper, I shall use this definition as my working definition.

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2 See my Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).
'Baptism in the Spirit' (hereafter B/S) is the Pentecostal doctrine that emerged from the Wesleyan and Holiness traditions emphasising a post-conversion crisis experience of being overwhelmed by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit as a means of empowerment for Christian life and witness. In its earliest days it belonged to a three-stage schema of conversion, sanctification and B/S, but subsequently there emerged a two-stage approach with the loss of sanctification as a distinct post-conversion experience. The two or three stage schema continues to exist side by side in the USA to this day, but in the UK, the three-stage scheme was never dominant in established classical Pentecostalism. In most Pentecostal denominations this crisis experience was symbolised or evidenced by ‘speaking with other tongues’ (glossolalia), although differences of emphasis can be found from the earliest days as to whether it should be regarded as the only sign, the main sign or one among a number of possible signs. Early Charismatic Renewalists from the 1960s adopted the Pentecostal doctrine of subsequence and the evidential sign of tongues (and were dubbed ‘Neo-Pentecostals’), but this eventually gave way in the 1970s as Charismatic Renewal was further integrated into mainstream denominations. In the 1980s with the influence of John Wimber and the Vineyard movement the connection seems to have been lost entirely.

In what follows I intend to explore a personal account of B/S and to suggest ways in which this account might be analysed and rescripted in the light of theological reflection.

2. Exploration: An Experience of ‘Baptism in the Spirit’

In order to explore the concept of experience in a concrete manner, as befitting the methodology, I have chosen to focus on an interview that was conducted in 1997 as part of a case study of a church called ‘Sudley Christian Fellowship’ (hereafter: SCF). The church emerged out of two groups from

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8 A fuller description of the church can be found in my Charismatic Glossolalia: An empirical-theological study (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 32-37.
the British House Church Movement of the 1970s and was established as a single church in 1992. Since that time it has experienced fast growth, and evangelism has been allied to a serious programme of community outreach to the city of Liverpool. SCF at the time of the case study attracted a lot of young people who enjoyed its vitality and energy. The church had a vision that was committed to certain values: (1) devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, (2) mission to the lost in both words and deeds and (3) the releasing of the power of God through faith that is aggressive and victorious, influenced by the mission theology and strategy of Ed Silvoso from Argentina.9

The material that I shall use for the purpose of this study emerges from an interview conducted with a British female student, whom I named ‘Lesley’, aged 23 years old at the time and a fourth year nursing student in the local university. She was single and, apart from her parents, she had an elder brother (24) and a younger sister (20). Her church background was Anglican and Pentecostal, meaning that she had attended both kinds of churches. At the time of the interview she was a member of SCF and had been attending the church for almost four years.

Lesley’s parents were both charismatic Christians and she remembered them praying in tongues from her earliest age. She also remembered attempting to imitate them at the age of two years old. That mimicry is still significant because she regarded her own tongues speech as sounding fairly similar to her father’s, but not because this was intentional. Her B/S occurred while she was living in Brazil at the age of fifteen years old and she recalled that it was a ‘very very vivid experience’. She had prayed a prayer of Christian commitment at the age of nine years old and regarded that event as her conversion. So the experience at the age of fifteen was a definite subsequent experience to conversion. She described the event in the following way:

I wasn’t part of a [Pentecostal] youth group at the time and nobody spoke in tongues in our youth group, not that I can remember. And I went away to this weekend and there were a few other young people who’d also gone with their parents. And it was run by two American guys who’d come over from the States to run this little retreat for the weekend. On the Saturday we all had these meetings which we attended but with all the pastors and their wives and people. And we just started, like somebody had a guitar. One of the American guys had a guitar and he just

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started playing and we were mucking around talking. And then it got into really, you know, it was natural, we just went straight into worship and we were all outside. I never remember dancing so much and just being excited, you know, worshipping God. I had never been like that. I was very reserved if you know what I mean. And then we were all on our knees. It was just kind of following on and we were all repenting before God for our sins and everything. And this American guy was leading us in a way. While we were all on our knees he went round and said: ‘I’m just going to pray that the Holy Spirit will come in [to] each one of you.’ And he just went round and he was laying his hands on each one of us. And there was only, there must have been about eight of us there. As he laid his hand on each one of us we all began to speak in tongues. And then I would say that we were all very drunk in the Spirit. After that we went ballistic, ha, yea…. We were really dancing and just completely out of it. It was real. I’ve never been drunk in my life, but if anything that was what it was to be drunk, and we were really going for it. I’ve never obviously experienced anything quite like it.

After the event, one of the American men stayed with her parents for about two weeks. In addition, one of her best friends had received a similar experience around the same time while visiting the United States. They were able to share experiences and this was influential in the shaping of her understanding of what had happened. Subsequently, she was also able to share her experience with her youth group and reported that many of them were also baptised in the Spirit as a result of her testimony. She became a leader in the group because of her experience, even though she was one of the youngest people there. It was at this point in her life that she started to attend a Pentecostal church and this allowed her to use the gift of speaking in tongues more freely.

At the time of the interview Lesley believed that speaking in tongues was the primary sign of being ‘filled with the Spirit’, or ‘baptized in the Spirit’. In addition to tongues there were other signs, even if tongues appeared to be the most basic sign, although not exclusively. When asked which books had
influenced her understanding of these things she replied that books by Claudio Freidzon and Benny Hinn had been important.10

3. Analysis of the Experience

Caroline Franks Davis in her important book, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* offers philosophical insight into how to understand the nature of religious experience.11 She observes that there have been ‘non-cognitive’ and ‘cognitive’ views of religious experience. The ‘non-cognitive’ views have assumed that there is such a thing as ‘raw experience’ that lacks any form of interpretive content, which must be added at a later stage. By contrast the ‘cognitive’ view is a critical realist position that understands experience as being mediated via models and metaphors, which in themselves have essential cognitive functions.12 The strength of these models and metaphors as ‘reality-depicting’ is increased where they are grounded in communal histories and experiences over time.13 Indeed, she argues that there is a reciprocal interaction between concepts, beliefs, events, reflection, creative imagination and other cognitive and perceptual factors.14 In terms of strictly religious experience, she offers the following typology:15

1. Interpretive experiences are those which are viewed within a prior religious interpretive framework.
2. Quasi-Sensory experiences are ones in which the key element is a physical sensation, or associated with one or more of the senses, e.g. visions, voices, sounds or tastes.
3. Revelatory experiences are ones in which the person acquires sudden convictions, inspiration, revelation, enlightenment or flashes of insight.
4. Regenerative experiences renew the person’s faith and improve spiritual health.
5. Numinous experiences make the person aware of his/her ‘creature-consciousness’ and mortality before the

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11 See n.2.
'mysterium tremendum' carrying connotations of awe and dread, being over-powered yet having intense energy, viewing the numen as transcendent and sensing ‘rapture’ upon contact.

6. Mystical experiences give a sense of having apprehended an ultimate reality, offering an awareness of freedom from the limitations of time, space and the self, that is coordinate with a sense of ‘oneness’ (either with the divine or human other) and bliss or serenity.

Obviously, it can be seen from these very brief descriptions of the six types that there is a certain degree of overlap. Nevertheless, this typology seems a useful way of categorising experience in general terms in order to compare different kinds of data across a variety of religious traditions. It also has the advantage of allowing experiences to be shaped and expressed by implicit as well as explicit theological content, since how these experiences are articulated will inevitably reflect a particular theological/religious tradition. This does mean, however, that there is no dichotomy between concepts derived from experience and concepts brought to experience, or between ‘experience’ and ‘interpretation’, since these are intertwined. Nevertheless, the task of practical theology does not stop here, but seeks to move the account forward, in this case, by rescription or re-interpretation. So, how might the typology of religious experience assist in the analysis of the experience of Lesley?

First, there are clues in the interview to suggest that this experience has some relationship with an ‘interpretive framework’. As a young child Lesley mimicked her father speaking in tongues and both her parents were ‘charismatic Christians’, so she had a model of tongues-speaking from an early age which she hints may have influenced the phonetics of her own speech. She clearly understands the experience of B/S as subsequent to her conversion, with a period of six years between them. Where did she acquire this particular understanding? Did it come from her parents or from the ‘American guys’? Alternatively, it may have been mediated from her friend who had a similar kind of experience to her. This would give a role to her peer in the support of her theological understanding. In any case the combined roles of parents, American church leaders, peer and subsequent attendance at a Pentecostal church suggest a clear role for socialization in the

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establishment of her interpretation, which she articulated at the time of the interview.

Second, the categories of the numinous and the mystical appear to combine in this account. The mystical appears to be the envelop that contains a numinous centre. Thus dance and excitement in the worship of God (mystical marked by unusual freedom) precede an act of repentance (numinous marked by being overpowered in confession) to be followed by speaking in tongues, drunkenness in the Spirit and dance again (mystical marked by freedom and oneness). Of course, the mystical and the numinous move into each other and overlap, hence the energy of dance moves into the energy of confession and out into the energy of tongues, drunkenness and dance again. It is also important to observe the mediation of these activities through music, being led in confession and the laying on of hands. The outcome of the experience is a renewal of Lesley’s spiritual life, thus including another of Franks Davis’ categories (regenerative). Attending to the mediation of these events suggest that there might also be another component at work. The American guys who led the young people in worship through music also led them in confession, suggesting that in some sense there was an understanding of purity before power, perhaps reflecting the Wesleyan roots of the leaders’ theological tradition.

Margaret M. Poloma’s book on the Toronto Blessing and Pentecostal revivalism makes a significant contribution to the understanding of charismatic experience.  Although this book focuses on the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (hereafter: TACF) and the concept of revivalism, it considers these phenomena via the conceptual lenses of the ‘mystical self’ and the corporate ‘mystical body’. For our purposes, it is the mystical self which is in view and is pertinent for our analysis.

Poloma notes that at the TACF a number of different physical phenomena can be observed and these have some resonance with the experience of Lesley. They include laughing, rolling, falling, jerking, shaking and grunting, accompanied by the interpretation that ‘God is playing with his kids’. However, her observation also suggests that not all were laughing and that uncontrollable weeping and violent shaking were in evidence, providing support for the mixed metaphors of play and power. The testimonies arising from these experiences interpreted them in terms of the presence of God, or as a flash sign saying ‘Spirit at work… Spirit at work…

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18 Margaret M. Poloma, Main Street Mystics: The Toronto Blessing & Reviving Pentecostalism (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003).
19 Poloma, Main Street Mystics, 63-64.
Spirit at work’. In a survey conducted by Poloma the majority of respondents were already Pentecostal or Charismatic, having either spoken in tongues (87%) or experienced being ‘slain in the Spirit’ (70%). In the TACF meetings 34% experienced ‘dancing in the Spirit’ and 24% experienced being ‘drunk in the Spirit’.  

These experiences are interpreted by Poloma using the dynamic ritual theory of Victor Turner that sees societal groups moving between the relatively fixed structures of ‘normal’ routine and the spheres of action that can be described as ‘floating’, ‘antistructural’ or ‘liminal’. This liminality is part of the ritual process that operates on the edge of ‘normal’ society, a state of ‘betwixt and between’ that makes space for something else to occur. Poloma notes that in the TACF the ritual behaviour (phenomena) occurs in accompaniment to Christian rock music, which work together to produce a fluid antistructure ritual. It is in this context that the mystical self is revived via ‘prophetic mime’ (roaring, crowing/ clucking, and barking) and ‘spirit drunkenness’, and it is the later which is of most interest for our purposes. Spirit drunkenness, or being inebriated with the Divine, is associated with inward transformation or re-ordering as the outward behaviour displays chaos, although exact interpretations vary according to personal circumstances. It is this juxtaposition of the outward and the inward that resonates with the theory of Turner as the person negotiates change from the structure of the past and the structure of the future through an experiential ‘no-man’s land’. Open and emotional experiences are thus opportunities for catharsis that allow for changes in self-identity. It is in these personal revival experiences, according to Poloma, that fragmented selves and broken relationships are mended as ‘building blocks for communitas’.  

This sociological lens can also be applied to the experience of Lesley leading to a third point of analysis in addition to the two made above. At the time of her B/S, she is a young woman growing up in a foreign culture and is, to some extent, already living through a liminal cultural experience. She is now brought to a ‘neutral’ zone, away from her previous Christian and ecclesial mores to a ‘no-man’s land’, where there is freedom to express herself in new and unusual ways as a means of moving on and growing up. She moves from her past to her new future by means of a complex crisis experience. Music plays a significant part as does dance, for they often

20 Poloma, Main Street Mystics, 65  
21 Poloma, Main Street Mystics, 67.  
22 Poloma, Main Street Mystics, 68.  
23 Poloma, Main Street Mystics, 81.
accompany one another. For her it is not the amplified music band but the acoustic guitar, yet given the social context this works just as powerfully. For her the gateway appears to be a ritual of repentance and this antistructured worship ritual leads to spiritual drunkenness and glossolalia. As at the TACF the experience contains both an element of play (dance, drunkenness) and power (repentance, glossolalia). The move from her existing Anglican church to the new Pentecostal church suggests that for her the (past) structure of Anglicanism cannot promise sufficient reconfiguration to hold her, so she moves to a new structure that can accommodate her future. Once this critical move has been made, further new moves and alliances are now made more possible.

4. Theological Reflection

Frank Macchia, offers a Pentecostal theology centred around the metaphor of baptism in the Spirit, which he aims to use more broadly in order to overcome the criticisms of Pentecostal pneumatology. As part of this project he considers the way in which recent Pentecostal scholars, such as Steven Land, and commentators, such as Walter Hollenweger and Harvey Cox, have managed to give an account of Pentecostalism and its spirituality without recourse to this distinctive theological marker. In particular he notes how Hollenweger considers Pentecostalism to be fundamentally experiential and culturally constructed, and therefore how theology is conceived in that framework, thereby focusing on the oral and performative dimensions. Doctrinal statements are therefore considered to be very secondary to how Pentecostals do theology, and it is this experiential and inter-cultural approach which allows for the greater possibilities in terms of diversity and global ecumenism. But Macchia contends that this appreciation of the oral, narrative and dramatic features of Pentecostal theology need not leave the doctrine of baptism in the Spirit behind: it is not an either/or but a both/and. This is because ‘[t]he church has lived for centuries with both narrative and doctrinal expressions of the faith, and Spirit baptism as a biblical metaphor can function well as our chief distinctive on both levels’. Therefore he wishes to see the metaphor used

25 Macchia, Baptized in the Spirit, p.50.
26 Macchia, Baptized in the Spirit, p.56.
in both kinds of theology because such a disjunction is foreign to the biblical accounts and to Pentecostal preaching.

In this regard I agree with Macchia and believe that experiential categories of story, prophecy, poetry or song are saturated with theology, and this would include ‘ordinary’ variants of more dogmatic formulae as well as culturally determined expressions. Rather than there being two distinct spheres, I would suggest that there is an intersection that displays continuity and discontinuity, resonance and dissonance. Theology, if you like, is created, broken, reshaped and re-presented through experiential processes and this must be the case if it going to motivate, inspire and ultimately be relevant to the life of faith. The outcome of such a process is that accounts are rescripted as part of the ongoing task of theological construction. In the light of this approach, what kinds of reflections might be offered in relation to Lesley’s experience of her baptism in the Spirit? I note three points related to worship and the doctrine of God, the Christian life and ecclesial history, and the social, symbolic and sacramental mediation of experience.

First, it is clear that Lesley’s experience of B/S is a worshipful experience, that is, its ultimate theological context is worship. In other words it is fundamentally about being caught up in ‘wonder, love and praise’. This is implicit in the account and especially in the language used by Lesley. She only uses the word ‘God’ twice, ‘the Holy Spirit’ once and ‘the Spirit’ once. She lacks a Trinitarian framework to interpret her experience, and appears to have just a ‘binitarian’ (God and Spirit) or theistic (God = Spirit) understanding. Christ as the baptiser in the Spirit is not mentioned, therefore, she lacks the Pentecostal Christological framework of the four-fold or the five-fold gospel. Therefore, the participation in God demands to be rescripted if it is to be responsible to Scripture and Christian tradition. Its overarching theological meaning must be found in a participation in the worship of triune God, enabled by the Spirit, mediated through Christ and directed to the Father. Only such a theological account enables doctrinal continuity to be maintained within the experiential narrative: ordinary theology in this case must be supplemented and corrected by doctrinal theology for a richer, integrated and ultimately orthodox account.27

27 Arguably, this is precisely what Thomas A. Smail as the editor of Theological Renewal was aiming to do through his editorials of and contributions to that journal (1975-1983); his mature thinking comes to fruition in the book, The Giving Gift: The Holy Spirit in Person (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988).
Second, although this experience is a crisis experience of a kind, it must also be understood as located in a Christian life context. Lesley comes from a Christian home, with parents who pray for her and with her from infancy. She has a conversion experience at the age of nine and participated in church life up to her baptism in the Spirit. What she does not say is that she might have also been confirmed within the Anglican church at some point between the ages of nine and fifteen. If this is the case, she would have already participated in two church rites which have invoked the Spirit upon her. At the age of fifteen, she is already engaged and participating in the ecclesial community of faith as a believer, also being involved in a church youth group. If there is a theological disjunction it comes after not before her B/S. It is this crisis experience that enables her to share the experience of participating in God with others and, somehow, leads her to leave the Anglican church. Up to her B/S I suspect she did not entertain the idea of a two to three stage Christian life process, and it not clear from her account that she has a clear understanding at the time of the interview. Therefore there is an ongoing Christian life context that provides a shape for her direction and growth as a Christian. If anything, it appears to be an event in a ‘punctuated process’ rather than the second stage in a set of clearly defined stages.  

Surprisingly, Macchia concedes that there are problems with the classical Pentecostal expression of B/S: ‘A fragmented twofold or threefold initiation into the life of the Spirit is difficult to justify in Scripture’. If this is the case, and I guess this is where debate will ensue, then there might just be other possible accounts of Lesley’s B/S that rescript her theology. I suggest that ‘punctuated process’ is one such account that takes seriously both the continuity and discontinuity in the Christian life as a result of an encounter with the Spirit of God.

Third, there is social context of the event itself, which provides mediation of the divine via a cluster of actions and symbols. The action of worship is mediated through music and dance; the action of being led in repentance and response is mediated through the posture of kneeling; the event of B/S is mediated through the action and symbol of the laying on of hands accompanied by the invocation of the Spirit. This is subsequently symbolised by tongues speech, ‘drunkenness’ and dance. Theologically this

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29 Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*, p.27.
may be accounted for in a broad sacramental sense. Speaking in tongues has been interpreted sacramentally and this is now well-established. But are there not other kinds of ‘mediation’, which may also be interpreted in a sacramental sense? This account given by Lesley suggests that tongues is not an isolated symbol, but works in conjunction with other symbolic actions. Making an observation of this kind opens out the sacramental nature of the whole event and invites theological rescripting. Building on the above two points, it could be suggested that within an overarching worshipping and witnessing life in the Spirit, there are indeed symbolic transitions that ‘punctuate’ the process. These punctuations mediate transition. Thus baptism would symbolise the transition par excellence, while the eucharist symbolises steady growth within the community as one is gradually nurtured in the Spirit. It could be argued that baptism enables the person to be integrated within the community of faith, while the eucharist both sustains and propels the same person out with an energy for life in the world. This cluster of socially mediated symbolic actions acquires a sacramental quality by doing both things simultaneously: it enables both a transition into something new (power in the Spirit) and propulsion out into the ongoing and routine (life in the world).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to suggest that Lesley’s account requires some rescripting for the purposes of a practical theology. I want to suggest that the (theological) event of Lesley’s B/S functions symbolically as a transitional marker: a bridge to enable deeper worship and greater participation in the Christian life. This ‘punctuation’ in the process of the Christian life becomes in effect a ‘jump’ to a different level of engagement. It compares to a ‘teenage growth spurt’ in the Christian life and is centred on an encounter with the Spirit of God. Such an encounter can be illuminated via socialisation processes (negotiating the influence of parent and peers), philosophical typologies of religious experience (integrating the mystical and numinous) and sociological interpretations of liminality (old structure – anti-structure – new structure). The doctrine of the Trinity gives a specifically Christian shape and content to the broad philosophical category of the mystical and numinous, and without such a move, arguably, the

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experience is theologically deficient. The ecclesial context gives ongoing expression to the process of socialisation, which is vital to healthy expressions of the Christian life, providing support and mutual accountability. And the sacramental theology suggested above enables a theological framework for transition in the Christian life, as symbols and actions create space for the Spirit to do new things and enable believers to move forward in their Christian lives in the context of worship.

There are always dangers with rescripting experiential accounts, but the methodological process has at least allowed us to do it in a disciplined manner. David Martin suggests that the main problem with the social science rescripting of narratives is that the metaphors, concepts and language that are used are based on certain kinds of ontologies, which may in fact be entirely inappropriate or in deed reductionist. That may be more of a problem for the social sciences than for practical theology. Of course, this study has privileged theological discourse as the evaluative discipline, and therefore presupposes a particular theological ontology (Trinity, creation, church). Nevertheless, I have taken Martin’s advice and have interrogated Lesley’s own account first and attempted to stay close to the discourse she produced. I accept that an over-strong rescripting can do damage but would maintain that even the philosophical and sociological analyses have been used sensitively. It is, however, the role of others to discern just how useful this rescripting is for constructive Pentecostal-Charismatic theology.