WILLIAM ARTHUR'S THE TONGUE OF FIRE: PRE-PENTECOSTAL OR PROTO SOCIAL GOSPEL?

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And now, adorable Spirit, proceeding from the Father and the Son, descend upon all the Churches, renew the Pentecost in this our age, and baptize thy people generally—O baptize them yet again with tongues of fire! Crown this nineteenth century with a revival of "pure and undefiled religion" greater than that of the last century, greater than that of the first, greater than any "demonstration of the Spirit" ever yet vouchsafed to men!

This inspiring prayer concludes William Arthur's 1856 work The Tongue of Fire. The Irish Methodist's book was widely reprinted and read on both sides of the Atlantic. With its references to "the Pentecost in this our age," "tongues of fire," and "a revival of 'pure and undefiled religion,'" it is understandable that Arthur's book is often cited as a precursor, if not a direct source, of the modern Pentecostal movement. Robert Longman's "Pre-Pentecostal History" timeline, for example, includes the following notation: "1856: William Arthur publishes The Tongue of Fire, a Holiness book which signaled the start of a shift among some Holiness people in the direction which would lead to Pentecostalism. His prayer at the end of the book asks God to send the greatest demonstration of the Spirit's power ever." 2

In The Wesleyan Origins of Pentecostalism Vinson Synan mentions this work under the category, "The Basic Premise of a Separate Holy Spirit Baptism," as emphasizing Holy Ghost power as a "power for service." 3 Elsewhere Synan lists, among things held in common by Pentecostals, "individual-oriented type of social uplift" and "the acceptance of motor phenomena as possible valid evidence of being sanctified (or Spirit Baptized) in addition to the already mentioned separate Holy Spirit Baptism." As we shall see, Arthur's works rejects all three of these characteristics. Similarly, in "Wesley versus Phoebe Palmer: An Extended Controversy," Ivan Howard says, "William Arthur in The Tongue of Fire strongly emphasized the Spirit-filled life. He held it was obtained through persevering prayer and he implicitly emphasized that the experience carried its own credentials." 4 Howard

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does not define these credentials, but points out that among "non-Methodist" proponents, with whom Arthur is included, "there are wide differences as to what the evidences are of its possession." While the latter statement is clearly true, there is little ambiguity as to what Arthur understood these credentials to be.

It may seem surprising, then, to discover that *The Tongue of Fire* was one of the books counted as influential by the young Walter Rauschenbusch and his companions Nathaniel Schmidt and Leighton Williams when they formed their little "Society of Jesus" which resulted in the development of Christian Socialism. In the August 1890 issue of *For the Right*, a monthly "people's paper" for the working classes published in New York City, Rauschenbusch wrote an essay on "Good Men and Good Government." In it he said,

...We differ from many Christian men and women in our insistence on good institutions. They believe that if only men are personally converted, wrong and injustice will gradually disappear from the construction of society. It does not appear so to us. Revivals in the South were not directly followed by a general freeing of slaves. Revivals in the North do not ease the pressure of competition in a community or stop speculation in land. Special work and hard work has to be done in pointing out a social wrong and thinking out its remedy....

In itself, this quotation is not surprising. What is notable is that it is bolstered by an excerpt from Arthur's work, which argues for the need to address social evils and spread practical holiness. Is it possible, as is sometimes suggested, that Arthur's language was co-opted seemingly to undergird a program with which he would have taken issue? Or perhaps it is possible, as Leon Hynson has suggested, that Arthur's work, among others, was used by some Holiness groups to support a certain understanding of perfection while, "the social reform component of their writings was quietly ignored, or rejected." A detailed examination of *The Tongue of Fire* reveals that it has far more in common with the slightly later Social Gospel movement than with the Pentecostalism with which it is so frequently linked.

In solid Wesleyan form, Arthur gave his main interest in the Author's Preface as, "a desire to lessen the distance painfully felt to exist between my own life and ministry and those of the primitive Christians." In his opening chapter he addressed the "Promise of a Baptism of Fire" by asking how Jesus' departure from the disciples could have been considered "expedient" as Jesus taught in John 14. Arthur concluded that by leaving them physically but supplying them with the Comforter to take his place, he would benefit them in three ways: (1) They would be led into "all truth" rather than

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7Arthur, 2.
left to misapprehend the teachings of Christ. Here, Arthur, like many before and since, combined the Johannine promise of the Comforter with the Synoptic theme of the slowness of the twelve. (2) Jesus would no longer be bound as “one teacher limited by a local personality,” but would be diffused around the world wherever the word was preached. (3) The Spirit would be present with believers for all time, rather than limited to the “little while” of Jesus’ earthly ministry. For Arthur, the promise of the Spirit, in other words, was absolutely bound to the comprehension and diffusion of the message of Jesus without regard to the limits of time or place.

Turning his attention to the ten days between the Ascension and the gift of the Spirit, Arthur pointed out that this period provided the extended group of disciples an opportunity for self-examination both as individuals and as an assembly. They would come to see that their need for the continued presence of Jesus was fundamental and not tied to specific personal shortcomings. “His promise was not made because they were a Church without spot or wrinkle; but because they were feeble, and, deprived of his own presence, would be orphans indeed, did no other power cover them.” Once again Arthur showed that the coming of the Spirit would empower the church for its basic mission of worldwide proclamation of the gospel. It would enable an effective evangelical faith.

Addressing the fulfillment of the promise, the beginning of a new dispensation of faith like that ushered in by Moses at Mt. Sinai, Arthur set the stage for the thesis to be developed in the remainder of his work. Just as the Hebrew people in later generations made no pilgrimage to Sinai, Christians cannot visit the Upper Room nor point to its site. This is due to what Arthur called “the mode of Christianity, which is in nothing a religion of circumstances, in everything a religion of principles.”

Arthur asserted that the fact that the tongue of fire represents this new dispensation, instead of symbols like the altar, ephod, or breastplate, underscore the fact that Christianity is “a religion of the understanding and the heart, wholly resting on the convictions and the principles, building nothing on sense, and permitting nothing to fancy.” That this teaching would be problematic for some later Pentecostal readers almost goes without saying. What then for Arthur will be the appropriate “demonstration of the Spirit”?

The symbol is a tongue, the only instrument of the grandest was ever waged: a tongue—man’s speech to his fellowman; a message in human words to human faculties, from the understanding to the understanding, from the heart to the heart. A tongue of fire—man’s voice, God’s truth; man’s speech, the Holy Spirit’s inspiration; a human organ, a superhuman power. Not one tongue, but cloven tongues. As the speech of men is various, here we see the Creator taking to himself the lan-

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8 Arthur, 19.
9 Arthur, 22.
10 Arthur, 24.
The Tongue of Fire

It is therefore not surprising that Arthur argued that the main spiritual effect of the Baptism of Fire was not, as many suppose, primarily miracle working. It was, rather, the endowment of the believer with a special moral strength by means of a guiding and comforting presence, a substitute for the presence of Jesus. Citing the example of the original deacons, Arthur argued that they were required neither to perform miracles nor speak in tongues, however defined, but to “promote the brotherhood and good feeling of the Church, by a better regulation of its daily relief to the poor—the qualification demanded was, that they should be “men full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.” 12

He went on to detail six points of his understanding of the significance of being “filled with the Holy Ghost.”

1. All Christians have received the Spirit in their conversion. The difference between receiving the spirit and being filled is one of degree and not kind. 13
2. A person may be filled with the Holy Ghost and have every aspect of their life changed without receiving any miraculous gift. 14
3. Being filled with the Holy Ghost is not the kind of perfectionism that claims to contain “all the fullness of God.” 15
4. Being filled with the Holy Ghost will result in “actual virtues and practical holiness,” by transforming, but not replacing, the personality of the individual. God is at work in us. 16
5. In language reminiscent of Irenaeus and other Eastern Fathers who spoke of the work of Christ as one of recapitulation, Arthur said that the human spirit is “restored to its original and highest fellowship.” 17
6. In more traditionally Wesleyan language, Arthur described regeneration as a reversal of the relationship of the human spirit and the flesh, so that our humanity becomes an instrument of the Spirit. 18

Clearly, for Arthur, the true miracle of being filled with the Holy Ghost was primarily a moral change, “being fully imbued with the Divine nature; bearing in all its manifestations some plain resemblance to its God; conveying to all on whom it acts some impression of him....” 19

It should not be surprising, then, that Arthur embarked on an extended exposition, in Section II of Chapter 4, insisting that the speech referred to in Acts 2 is the “other tongues” of xenolalia and not the “unknown tongues” of glossolalia. For Americans who have been taught that the modern phenome-
non of tongue speaking originated in Kansas or California, it is startling to read that, "That miracle first occurred in London some years ago." He continued, "On the day of Pentecost no man pretended to speak unknown tongues; but just as if we in London suddenly began to speak German, French, Spanish, Russian, Turkish, and other foreign languages, so it was with them." 20

Even as remarkable a miracle as xenolalia would be, it is merely the means of transmitting two higher, and already known, modes of revealing the truth of God, inspiration and prophecy. So, once again, Arthur maintained that the really significant miracle is the communication of the gospel in language that those from other lands could comprehend. "Speech is man's revelation of his own spirit to his fellowman; and when nothing is revealed, it becomes a mockery.... The lower gift, that of tongues, was more generally diffused than the higher, that of prophecy." 21 It is significant that for Arthur the Pentecostal experience was both egalitarian and communal—that they all began to speak to one another.

In the case of preachers, the contemporary effect of being filled with the Holy Ghost is the ability to challenge person to reflection and decision as Peter did on the first Pentecost. Arthur insisted that Peter was not given extraordinary eloquence, in an oratorical sense, because he was called "an unlearned and ignorant man," but that he was given effectiveness—the effectiveness of an ordinary man producing extraordinary results. In order for those results to be achieved, it was necessary for the crowds to understand the substance of all that was being communicated and not merely be awed by a group speaking in unknown tongues, a principle Arthur felt was reinforced in 1 Corinthians 14. "The crowning power of the messenger of God is power over the moral man ... and the result of its action is not to be surely distinguished from that of mere eloquence by instantaneous emotion, but by subsequent moral fruit." 22

At this point in his argument, Arthur began an extended discourse addressing the effects of the Baptism of Fire on the world. He strongly argued that Jesus' promise of the Spirit was inextricably linked to the evangelization of the world and, therefore, must always be understood as working toward that end, and never as confined to the church and the edification of believers. The main work of the miracle of xenolalia, therefore, was to authenticate the speakers as messengers of God. But it was vital for the message to be understood and acted upon. "Mere conviction never carries a point of practical moral conduct." 23

The importance of all this became obvious as Arthur outlined his understanding of the human predicament and its social context. Avoiding the

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20 Arthur, 40.
21 Arthur, 46.
22 Arthur, 60.
23 Arthur, 62.
ontological issue of the fundamental goodness of humankind, Arthur echoed the Pauline theme that in the aggregate, humankind finds itself in a fallen and sinful state. As Hynson notes, for Arthur human nature was anything but simply unitary, and institutional sins play a very key role in defining the human condition.24 The paradox, however, is that, "Man is the only being coming within our knowledge who has a nature that is plainly unnatural."25 One becomes aware of the paradox because of "a voice within" like a "friend from better days" reminding us that the fallen condition of this world is not that for which we are destined. The miracle of Pentecost is when the mind is not just changed by hearing the gospel, but when a moral transformation occurs that enables the believer to live "against and contrary to nature." This personal regeneration is so important because it addresses the fundamental human yearning to escape from sin, not in some abstract sense, but in terms of behaviors that diminish human life. Arthur once again underscored that the Pentecostal experience was a corporate one; a fact he fears is too often lost.

In the Church of Rome we still find it maintained that deep holiness finds its best place away from human life, in retreat and celibacy. Among Protestants this error is rejected, yet practical religion is looked upon as something not to be expected to gain thousands at a time, and to renew communities by its sacred power, but rather to be a select blessing for a few, scattered here and there, and everywhere little discerned.26

Using Acts 2:42 as his text, Arthur argued that the earliest Christian linking of "doctrine" (teaching) and "prayers" emphasizes the social and personal dimensions of the transformative experience. Just as corrupt institutions and governments may corrupt individuals, a transformed society may act as a social conscience and draw individuals to the gospel. Neither social evil nor social good should be underestimated.

The most dangerous perversion of the gospel, viewed as affecting individuals, is, when it is looked upon as a salvation for the soul after it leaves the body, but no salvation from sin while here. The most dangerous perversion of it, viewed as affecting the community, is, when it is looked upon as a means of forming a holy community in the world to come, but never in this. Nothing short of the general renewal of society ought to satisfy any soldier of Christ; and all who aim at that triumph should draw much inspiration from the King's own words: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." Much as Satan glories in his power over an individual, how much greater must be his glorying over a nation embodying, in its laws and usages, disobedience to God, wrong to man, and contamination to morals!27

Without citing Wesley's class structure per se, Arthur emphasized the importance of small home fellowship groups while acknowledging that the

24Hynson, 7.
25Arthur, 64.
26Arthur, 70.
27Arthur, 74.
ministry of the world is generally the primary source of Christian teaching. By serving as an intermediary between the personal transformation of the individual and the larger social context, this kind of fellowship group keeps the believer honest both with regard to personal piety and larger social responsibilities. Rauschenbusch and his peers discovered that.

In what way, then, are later generations to understand the gift of the Spirit as a permanent benefit to the church? It is clear that for Arthur neither the visible tongue of flame nor the gift of xenolalia were meant as permanent gifts since they were not invariably present in the church of Acts. Given his preceding arguments, it should be no surprise that the permanent important of this gift is neither some abstract understanding, mysteriously supporting the church’s teaching, nor a personal emotional experience, dependent on an individual’s impressions. It is, rather, to provide the continued possibility of the three-fold work already described: the spiritual and moral influence on the individual; the empowerment of the church; and the conversion of the world, not just individuals in the world. Because all three of these works require communication (both speaking and hearing), it is clear that the permanent significance of the spirit is to enable this communication to be effective in transforming the entire person.

Arthur gave three examples of the results of an inadequate appreciation of this ongoing work of the Spirit. First is an unfounded confidence that right belief saves, what might today be called prepositional Fundamentalism. If intellectual assent was sufficient for salvation, whole regions of the world would be saints.

That odious caricature of Christianity, which offers to the view of the world a man with all the doctrines of the gospel on his lips, but gloom on his brow, disquiet in his eye, and sourness in his bearing, has done infinite injustice to our benign religion, and infinite harm to those who never knew its worth. Now, as in the days of Solomon, “her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace”; now, as in the days of David, she “puts gladness into the heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased”; now, as in the days of Paul, she gives “joy and peace in believing.”

He then addressed the kind of Deistic approach to faith, which insists that God “creates and leaves,” so that the work of the Spirit is to enable humans to discover traces of the Divine in the world from which God has absconded. Finally, there is the error of imagining a “second blessing” which is a reward for special holiness and brings a kind of perfectionistic comfort to the individual mind. This, he said, is the result of misapprehending a “part of a process for the whole.” The ongoing witness of the Spirit is to provide the believer with the fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace) that empower personal and social transformation.

Each of these three trajectories not only presents dangers for individuals, but shapes understandings of the ministry of the church and approaches to

28 Arthur, 102.
preparing persons for that task. Arthur describes at length the diversity of gifts and talents that may be of value in the ministry of the church as well as the advantages of diversity in ministry. Indeed, "the fact is, that what would be the very best style for one man would perhaps be the worst possible for another." He reserves his most stinging criticism for clergy who are willing to "get along" by limiting their ministry to narrowly religious matters without really expecting change.

It was great to cast out devils from the body; it is greater to cast them out of souls and out of society. It was great to heal the sick or to feed the poor; it is greater to heal the sources of disease and want, by turning sinful hearts to purity.  

No idea of call, intellect or propriety can replace the transforming and empowering work of the Spirit.

A generation ago T. L. Smith coined the phrase, "The Great Reversal" to describe the manner in which the Holiness Movement, among other portions of evangelicalism, seemed to alter its focus from reforming society to a more individualistic concern in which personal salvation received most, if not all, of the emphasis. It is sometimes suggested that this was largely in reaction to the Social Gospel Movement and other "liberal" ideas which were congenial to Continental theology. Whether or not that is correct, one could agree with Hynson that the late Holiness and Pentecostal movements lacked a larger vision like that found in The Tongue of Fire. "Their vision was increasingly shaped in pre-millennialist terms, a view congenial to their separationist concerns, and to the conversion of individuals to Christ. They expressed little formal interest in social reconstruction."  

It can be pointed out that Arthur shared certain optimism in progress with his age and, perhaps, a certain triumphalism. We look back with a mixture of wonder and dismay at his vision of an England and America completely Christianized "in the next fifty years." We cannot doubt, however, that his vision was grounded in the belief that the "tongue of fire," the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit would make personal, ecclesial and societal transformations possible.

In this age of faith in the natural, and disinclination to the supernatural, we want especially to meet the whole world with this credo: "I believe in the Holy Ghost." I expect to see saints as lovely as any that are written of in the Scriptures—because I believe in the Holy Ghost. I expect to see preachers as powerful to set forth Christ evidently crucified before the eyes of men, as powerful to pierce the conscience, to persuade, to convince, to convert, as any that ever shook the multitudes of Jerusalem, or Corinth, or Rome—because I believe in the Holy Ghost. I expect to see Churches, the members of which shall be severally imbued with spiritual gifts, and every one moving in spiritual activity, animating and edifying one another, commending themselves to the conscience of the world by their good

29 Arthur, 142.
30 Hynson, 17.
31 Hynson, 19.
works, commending their Saviour to it by a heart-engaging testimony—because I believe in the Holy Ghost. I expect to see villages where all the respectable people are now opposed to religion, the proprietor ungodly, the nominal pastor worldly, all that take a lead set against living Christianity—to see such villages summoned, disturbed, divided, and then reunited, by the subduing of the whole population to Christ—because I believe in the Holy Ghost. I expect to see cities swept from end to end, their manners elevated, their commerce purified, their politics Christianized, their criminal population reformed, their poor made to feel that they dwell among brethren—righteousness in the streets, peace in the homes, an altar at every fireside—because I believe in the Holy Ghost. I expect the world to be overflowed with the knowledge of God; the day to come when no man shall need to say to his neighbor, "Know thou the Lord," but when all shall know him, "from the least unto the greatest"; east and west, north and south, uniting to praise the name of the one God and the one Mediator—because I believe in the Holy Ghost.  

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32 Arthur, 167.