

Sacramentally Sent: A Pentecostal Theological Reading of John 9

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Introduction: A Distinctly Pentecostal Reading of Scripture

While the field of Pentecostal hermeneutics continues to develop voices toward greater clarity (along with choruses of divided tongues, at times), there is much that remains to be discerned toward interpreting Scripture within the streams flowing from the Spirit of Pentecost.¹ The divergences within hermeneutical interpretive approaches have been noted

¹ A number of texts have sought to address Pentecostal (or Renewalist) interpretations via monographs and edited volumes: Roger Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture and Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Baguio City: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 1995); Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (JPTSup 28; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004); Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006); B.T. Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics: Comparisons and Contemporary Impact* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2010); Jacqueline Grey, *Three's a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011); L.William Oliverio, *Theological Hermeneutics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition: A Typological Account* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Lee Roy Martin, ed., *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright, eds., *Spirit and Scripture: Exploring a Pneumatic Hermeneutic* (London: T&T Clark, 2013); Chris E.W. Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness, and Scripture* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2015); Kenneth J. Archer and L.William Oliverio, Jr, eds., *Constructive Pneumatological Hermeneutics in Pentecostal Christianity* (Christianity and Renewal – Interdisciplinary Studies; Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Amos Yong, *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Eugene: Cascade, 2017); Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017); and L. Philemon, *Pneumatic Hermeneutics: The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2019). Other texts have been written to offer some manner of a Pentecostal hermeneutic toward understanding of various texts and topics, such as the following: Larry R. McQueen, *Joel and the Spirit: The Cry of a Prophetic Hermeneutic* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995; Cleveland: CPT Press, 2009); Robby Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation* (JPTSup 30; Blandford Forum: Deo Pub, 2005); Lee Roy Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God: A Pentecostal Hearing of the Book of Judges* (JPTSup 32; Blandford Forum: Deo, 2008); 2015); Green, Chris E.W., *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2012); Melissa L. Archer, *'I Was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day': A Pentecostal Engagement with Worship in the Apocalypse* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2015); Rick Wadholm, Jr., *A Theology of the Spirit in the Former Prophets: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2018); and David R. Johnson, *Pneumatic Discernment in the Apocalypse: An Intertextual and Pentecostal Exploration* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2018).

by numerous Pentecostal scholars.² One of the difficulties pertains to clarifying what may or may not sufficiently constitute the adjectival use of “Pentecostal.” Amos Yong proposes three broad categories as exemplars of current trends in “Pentecostal” readings of Scripture.³ He argues that some claiming “Pentecostal” are only implicitly reading Scripture in light of Pentecost/alism and only because they happen to self-identify as “Pentecostal.” He contends that others follow a “particularist” approach which tends to draw upon the Pentecostal tradition/s and only secondarily speaks to the broader church. The third category he calls a “hybridic perspective” that seems to carry forms of the Pentecostal traditioning, but also at times sets such aside for broader ecumenical concerns. Yong’s own (fourth) proposal is for a “pneumatological interpretation of Scripture” that is decidedly post-Pentecost. For Yong, this amounts more to a reading post-Pentecost (as eventedness and vantage from which both broadly ecumenical and specifically Pentecostal appropriations might occur) rather than from Pentecostal ecclesiastical traditioning, which he noted, as either implicit, explicit, or hybridized. This approach allows for both a broadly and narrowly “Pentecost/al” hearing of Scripture as always only those infilled with the Spirit to hear the Word in the Spirit. It is in this trajectory (with deference to the manner in which Yong may himself read such a text), that the following hearing of John 9 seeks to be entuned to the Spirit of the Scripture in light of Pentecost. Such a “Pentecost/al” hearing of the text may be considered (1) narratological, (2) experiential, and (3) theological.⁴ It is this three-fold movement from Pentecost that is offered in this essay.

From the onset, it is important to note that this reading strategy is a form of “interested exegesis.”⁵ Therefore, the reading approach underscores the “potentially mutual influence of Scripture and doctrine in theological discourse and then, the role of Scripture in the self-understanding of the church and critical reflection on the church’s practices.”⁶ Further, as

² For several such evaluative examples see, Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, Oliverio, *Theological Hermeneutics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition*, and the more current comparative analysis by Amos Yong, “Unveiling Interpretation after Pentecost: Revelation, Pentecostal Reading, and Christian Hermeneutics of Scripture: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 11.1 (2017): 139-155.

³ Yong, “Unveiling Interpretation after Pentecost”, 139-155.

⁴ Scott Ellington, “Locating Pentecostals at the Hermeneutical Table,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 22.2 (2013), 206-225, specifically notes (among other accents or characteristics) the narrativity and experiential elements of Pentecostal hermeneutics. Focusing on the specifics of the intentionally theological hearing of Scripture within the Pentecostal theological traditions, is the proposal of Chris Green, *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Lord’s Supper*, 182-183.

⁵ Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 44. As Brad East has stated, ‘What has come to be called “theological interpretation of Scripture” is a woolly and somewhat indefinable thing, hardly a movement, more a loose collection of trends and shared interests and practices grouped under the same name. It is characterized by increased focus on, among other things, hermeneutical questions: the nature and authority of Scripture; the interpretive roles of biblical scholars, theologians, and ordinary believers; the relationship between Scripture and history; the function of doctrine and dogma in reading the Bible; and much more’. Brad East, ‘The Hermeneutics of Theological Interpretation: Holy Scripture, Biblical Scholarship and Historical Criticism’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19.1 (2017), 30-31.

⁶ Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 44.

Pentecostals, we admittedly bring our Pentecostal experience with us as we approach the text.⁷

Our reading, then, is intended as an immersive call-and-response hermeneutic that is a playful interchange of Spirit-Word-Community toward the fullness of all things being caught up into God's own shared life and love.⁸ As such, the engagement with water baptism via John 9 is experienced in the Full Gospel testimonies of Jesus the Savior, Healer, Baptizer in the Spirit, and Soon Coming King.⁹ Therefore, our claim is this: A Pentecostal-theological reading of John 9 beckons the reading community to behold and experience Jesus who saves, heals, imparts life, and demonstrates his kingship over darkness.

1. On a Pentecostal Reading of John 9

The Pentecostal congregation hears such texts *narratologically* rather than as principlizing. This narratological approach is part of the storied nature of Pentecost/al hermeneutics and praxis. However, in this storied engagement, Pentecostals are intentionally *participatory* where the expectation of the text of Scripture is that it has at some level already been experienced and intends for the community to continue to experience such. This means such texts are commonly heard as "this is that" wherein the hearer does not simply encounter the text, but finds themselves encountered by the text through a shared experience of sorts (with the text bearing an asymmetrically weighted orientation for the reader).¹⁰ For Pentecostals who find themselves caught up in John 9, the movements of the narrative demonstrating Jesus saving and healing offer judgment against sin, sickness and death, and declare the coming of righteousness, healing, and life. Pentecostals witness the confrontation with sin (and the false charges of such in John 9:16) and offer the good news of welcoming whosoever will come. Pentecostals witness the blind man anointed and healed, and turn to lay hands on the sick, anointing with oil, and offering prayers for healing of those in their own midst. Pentecostals witness the baptism for cleansing and sending and entreat others to join in baptisms of water and Spirit as those sent also by the baptized Baptizer. One might even say that "Baptism is the gospel of the divine embrace in action and the participation of the believer in that embrace."¹¹ Pentecostals cannot but find themselves in such living embrace as those finding themselves caught up in the text by the Spirit.

⁷ As Brad East notes, 'theological interpretation presupposes the biblical texts' social and religious location in the life and worship of the church ... Christians read Christian Scripture best when they read it as the Christians they are'. See East, 'The Hermeneutics of Theological Interpretation', 35, 38.

⁸ See Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

⁹ It would be recognizable to certain of the Pentecostal streams (those of the Wesleyan-Holiness fellowships) that Jesus as Sanctifier is not mentioned here. This is not accidental as both authors belong to what is known as the Finished Work fellowships of Pentecostalism/s. While it is an intentional choice of the authors, it is not intended as dismissive of Jesus as Sanctifier, but this is taken up within the four-fold framework for the authors via Jesus the Savior, Healer, Baptizer in the Spirit, and Soon Coming King

¹⁰ Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 16.

¹¹ Frank D. Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 288.

In response, such a narratological participatory/experiential reading, directs this study to seek to provide a literary and theological reading of John 9 that pays attention to the implicit sacramentality embedded within the narrative. The literary element entails careful attention to the details and movements within the text itself as a manner of hearing the indwelling and illuminating Spirit. The theological element offers itself as decidedly Christo-centric/telic within the Full Gospel message of Pentecostal confession: Jesus saves, heals, baptizes in the Spirit, and is soon coming king. Indeed, this Christo-centric/telic aim is precisely the Johannine expression of the aim of the Spirit to point to the Son (who himself points to the Father; John 16:12-15). Through this engagement, we aim to show how Pentecostal readings of Scripture have great potential in opening fresh means for “reclaiming and reappropriating the sacraments for a tradition that has been a bit uncertain about them and their place in the community’s worship.”¹² Thus, we will now move to read John 9 literarily and theologically and concluding with reflections on the Christian rite of baptism and Pentecostal sacramentality.

2. A Literary Reading of John 9

2.1 Summary of Passage

The dramatic account in John 9 recounts a man who not only receives sight but who then undergoes “various stages of insight.”¹³ As Jesus first stumbles upon the man blind from birth (9:1), his disciples begin theologizing about the man’s sickness (9:2). Against the grain of the rabbinical theology and common Jewish thought of the time,¹⁴ Jesus says that his sickness has nothing to do with his or his parents’ sin. From a literary standpoint, Jesus’ statement to the lame man healed a few chapters earlier (5:14) is quite different. In John 9, Jesus answers his disciples by pointing to a sign he is about to enact (9:3). He remarks that he is looking to do the works of his Father as long as he is in the world, pointing to himself as “the light of the world” (9:5). This proclamation picks up the “Prologue’s image of the *logos* as ‘the true light’ (1:9; cf. 3:19–21; 8:12).”¹⁵ Jesus’ use of “light” is fitting here also because of the playful way in which he makes “mud with the saliva and spread(s) the mud on the man’s eyes” (9.6) to bring about the light of healing sight.¹⁶ Jesus’ anointing of the man’s eyes using mud and His subsequent command to wash in the pool of Siloam cures the blind man. Jesus’ miraculous

¹² John Christopher Thomas, “Pentecostal Theology in the Twenty-First Century” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 20.1 (1998): 18. As Macchia has noted, ‘Much theological work is still needed in this area of the sacraments.’ See Frank D. Macchia, “Is Footwashing the Neglected Sacrament? A Theological Response to John Christopher Thomas” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 19.2 (1997): 249.

¹³ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 343.

¹⁴ e.g., Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9; James 5:15–16.

¹⁵ Ruth Edwards, *Discovering John* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 57-58.

¹⁶ Significantly, the Gospels record two other examples of Jesus’ use of saliva (Mark 7:33; 8:23).

healing of the man's sight displays Jesus' role in bringing "light" into the world, which includes both physical sight and spiritual insight.¹⁷

The reaction to the cure (vv. 8-41) is, as Charles Talbert has argued, "expanded by dialogue in four parts (vv. 9-12; vv. 13-34; vv. 35-38; vv. 39-41)."¹⁸ The first dialogue takes place between the healed man and his neighbors. The neighbors are unsure how a man they had known to be blind all his life is suddenly healed. The neighbors, then, question whether the healed man and the man born blind are indeed the same person. The healed man responds by affirming his identity. The follow up question, "Then how were your eyes opened?" is answered by the man telling his neighbors about what Jesus had instructed him to do (v. 11).¹⁹

The second dialogue is an exchange between the Pharisees, the man, and the man's parents (vv. 13-34).²⁰ This second dialogue includes an "examination of the man (vv. 15-17), and examination of the man's parents (vv. 18-23), and a second examination of the man (vv. 24-34)," while verses 13-14 "set the stage for examinations."²¹ The emphasis in the first examination is again on how the man received his sight.²² The healed man tells the Pharisees how Jesus put mud on his eyes, he washed, and then was able to see. In response, the Pharisees are divided, and thus ask the man what he says about Jesus who had opened his eyes. The man replies, "He is a prophet." The Pharisees then move to examine the man's parents by asking, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" Fearful of the repercussions in answering such questions, the parents reply, "He is of age, ask him." As Talbert has pointed out, "it is not until their conference with the parents that the Pharisees really believe the man is healed."²³ The Pharisees come back for a second examination of the man (vv. 24-34), claiming that Jesus is a sinner. The healed man replies in saying that whether he is a sinner or not is something he cannot speak to. By appealing to his own experience, the healed man states that all he knows is that he was once blind but is now able to see.

The Pharisees reply by asking, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" The man replies by stating that he had already told them (v. 15b) and asks them why they continue to probe. He wonders out loud: "Do you too want to become his disciples?" Significantly, the man's Christology is evolving throughout the conversation. As Talbert has put it: "In the 'you too' is an implied declaration of discipleship by the man who has by now moved from

¹⁷ Edwards, *Discovering John*, 57-58.

¹⁸ Charles Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary of the Fourth Gospel and Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 159.

¹⁹ Talbert, *Reading John*, 159.

²⁰ Talbert, *Reading John*, 159.

²¹ Talbert, *Reading John*, 160.

²² Talbert, *Reading John*, 160.

²³ Talbert, *Reading John*, 160.

regarding Jesus as a man, to speaking of Jesus as a prophet, to implying that Jesus is his Master."²⁴ In response, the Pharisees condemn him. The man claims that Jesus' works are evidence that he is from God. Jesus' identity is becoming clearer for the healed man. However, "the result of the man's confession fulfills the fears of his parents (v. 22): 'And they cast him out' (v. 34b)."²⁵

The episode concludes with two final sections of dialogue. First, in the dialogue between the healed man and Jesus (vv. 35-38), the man confesses his belief in Christ and worships him. Therefore, "his conversion is complete."²⁶ Finally, the last dialogue (vv. 39-41) is between Jesus and the Pharisees in which Jesus again utilizes the images of light and darkness. While the blind man moves from darkness to light by acknowledging Jesus first as "a prophet" (9:17), then as sent from God (9:33), and finally as "Son of Man" (9:35-8), the Jewish leaders move from apparent enlightenment to darkness and ultimately demonstrate their spiritual blindness.²⁷ The man born blind's identity (as unnamed) is, at the last, tied up in the identity of Jesus—man and Son of Man—in whom he now places absolute trust and claims as master.²⁸ As Jesus is the Christ, that is, the anointed one, so also is this man anointed. As Jesus has been sent, so is this man. As Jesus is the light, so is this man enlightened. As Jesus was rejected and would be cast out, so now is this man, for the sake of Christ.

2.2 Sacramental Reception

A few commentators of John 9—both contemporary and ancient—have understood this text to speak of the sacrament of water baptism. In contemporary studies, particularly due to the work of J.L. Martyn,²⁹ there is "wide agreement" that John 9 "has more than one level" of meaning (the same could be said of this entire Gospel tradition).³⁰ In particular, Martyn has suggested that the man born blind is an archetypal figure. Thomas Brodie has further suggested that in the account there is a "persistent evoking of the complex process whereby a person is created, comes to birth, grows up, and matures."³¹ Thus, on one level, John 9 might be understood to speak of various elements that encompass Christian initiation, including water baptism.

Against the backdrop of John 3 and 5, there are several continuities that might suggest such a reading. The picture of someone emerging from darkness, attempting to understand the meaning of signs and to fight against a "narrow Jewish background," the text of the man born

²⁴ Talbert, *Reading John*, 160.

²⁵ Talbert, *Reading John*, 160.

²⁶ Talbert, *Reading John*, 161.

²⁷ Edwards, *Discovering John*, 57-58.

²⁸ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 353.

²⁹ See J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 1-200.

³⁰ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 343.

³¹ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 343.

blind recalls the story of Nicodemus.³² In fact, “the background of night (3:1; 9:1-4); the Jewish claim to know (“we know”) and the countering of the claim by others (by Jesus, 3:2, 10; by the man, 9:24, 29-31); the discerning of signs and of the fact that Jesus is from God (3:2; 9:16, 33); and the role of Jesus as light, bringing judgment into the world (3:19-21; 9:5, 39),” all demonstrate the connectedness of these two narratives.³³ Significantly, Jesus’s statement about the necessity to be born of water and Spirit (3:5) has much similarity to Jesus’s command to the blind man to be washed in the pool of Siloam (9:7).

The story of the blind man also has remarkable continuity with the story of the man by the pool in chapter 5.³⁴ According to Brodie, in both stories:

There was a passive man who had been sick for a long time (thirty-eight years—5:5,7; from birth—9:1); Jesus sees the man and takes the initiative to heal him (5:6; 9:1, 6). In both texts Jesus is seen as working in accordance with the Father (5:17) or the one who sent him (9:4); in diverse ways the setting and story involve a pool which, in some way, is associated with healing (5:2, Bethzatha; 9:7, Siloam). The first man does not enter the pool. The other does; in diverse ways the sickness is related to sin. It is seen as associated with it (5:14) and, curiously, as not being associated with it (9:2-3); at a rather late stage the narrative mentions that the healing occurred on the sabbath and that this led to objections—by the Jews (5:9-10) and by the Pharisees and Jews (9:14, 16, 18); the man is asked about Jesus and does not know—does not know who he is (5:12-13); does not know where he is (9:12); in diverse ways the man is associated with the Jews—he seems to blend back into them (5:15-16); and he is cast out by them (9:34); Jesus finds the man and issues diverse invitations—not to sin further and become worse (5:14); to believe, in contrast to the sinful Pharisees (9:35, 41).³⁵

Clearly, what emerges are several striking similarities between John 3, 5, and 9.

For our purposes, chapters 3, 5, and 9 all mention a man’s relationship to water—“to being born of water (3:5), to not entering the water because ‘another’ goes down first (5:7)”³⁶ and to entering water to be washed and healed (9:7). The connection between Nicodemus being born of water and Spirit, and the blind man washing in the pool seems to have apparent connections to both one another and to baptism.³⁷ And since the man at the pool did *not* go down into the water in chapter 5, one might question its correlation to the two other narratives. However, it has been suggested that the failure of the man to descend into the

³² Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 354.

³³ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 354.

³⁴ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 354.

³⁵ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 354. The reference to John 5:2 follows the textual reading of the NA27 for “Bethzatha” against the numerous other variant readings.

³⁶ R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (AYB vol. 29; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 380-382; Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 355; Rodney A. Whitacre, *John* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 252.

³⁷ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 356.

water—a man who is representative of the Jews—might have something to do with the failure of many Jews to submit to the waters of baptism.³⁸ In this way, it is a negative allusion. Perhaps the “other” who goes down before him signals the coming fact that Gentiles accepted baptism more enthusiastically?³⁹ Might John be echoing the Pauline idea found in Romans 11:25-26?⁴⁰ While such questions are beyond the scope of our inquiry here, we want to suggest that despite the varied details surrounding each man’s relationship to the water, it is certainly plausible to hold these three stories together as an overall strand of baptismal narrative based on literary features contained within the Fourth Gospel.

Further evidence from early Christianity also advances this claim. The art of the catacombs, the use of this text in preparing baptismal candidates, and comments of various early church writers suggests that the story of the blind man was interpreted as referring to baptism, all seem to point this direction.⁴¹ Speaking of John 9 specifically, Oscar Cullmann notes that “in the history of exegesis, the association of this story with Baptism is very old.”⁴² Cullmann believes the connections between baptism and the story of the man born blind are apparent. First, from the beginning, the blindness of man healed is seen as “belonging to the category of sin.”⁴³ Second, early church history shows that the act of water baptism was associated with the laying on of hands. Thus, “in the double act of the laying on of hands ... the laying on of the clay and the washing in Siloam constitutes an analogy.”⁴⁴ Therefore, for Cullmann, it is highly unlikely that the author of John’s Gospel was not thinking of baptism in this story.⁴⁵

We might suggest, then, that “the water imagery of the Fourth Gospel alludes to baptism without referring [directly] to it” and evokes “the liturgical act without being exhausted in it.”⁴⁶ This is not surprising, though, since the evangelist often seems to discuss the sacraments “at an implicit rather than explicit level.”⁴⁷ As Cullmann puts it, the evangelist has a deliberate “veiled manner of speech.”⁴⁸ John’s Gospel often moves from the symbolic to the

³⁸ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 356.

³⁹ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 356.

⁴⁰ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 356.

⁴¹ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 355.

⁴² Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (Longbank Works: Robert Cunningham and Sons Ltd, 1953), 102. See Ambrose, *The Sacraments* 3.15, and Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 44.9.2

⁴³ Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 104.

⁴⁴ Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 104.

⁴⁵ Cullmann argues that baptism is early designated by the Greek word for enlightenment and already in Hebrews the verb “to be enlightened” is a synonym for “to be baptized”. Thus, Cullmann concludes that “it is more probable that this terminology was also familiar to the author of John’s Gospel. If that is so, then the possibility that he was not thinking of Baptism is almost excluded.” See Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 103.

⁴⁶ D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (NTT; Cambridge University Press, 1995), 156.

⁴⁷ Colin J. Kruse, *John* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 48

⁴⁸ Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 105

sacramental.⁴⁹ According Stephen Smalley, “it is hard to imagine that baptism is not somehow in view” when water or being washed is mentioned.⁵⁰

Perhaps, then, the primary question for us to wrestle within the proceeding sections is *not* “Does this passage refer to baptism?” but “How does this text teach us to respond rightly to water baptism?” Further, what might a distinctly Pentecostal theological reading of John 9 look like in response to this reading? It is at this point that we turn to these questions.

3. A Pentecostal Theological Reading of John 9

3.1 *Jesus Saves and Baptizes in His Spirit*

With regard to Jesus as Savior, Pentecostals would agree that water baptism is a proper sign of and witness to salvation.⁵¹ Significantly, our reading of John 9 has indicated that salvation is a progressive process more than a single, crisis experience. As noted, following his anointing and baptism, the man born blind moves from spiritual darkness to light by acknowledging Jesus first as “a prophet” (9:17), then as sent from God (9:33), and finally as “Son of Man” (9:35–8).⁵² As Simon Chan notes, understanding salvation as a process rather than a crisis event enables Pentecostals to appreciate that salvation is multilayered and entails the life of discipleship.⁵³ When salvation is understood to be a one-time event, baptism becomes disconnected from salvation altogether, and even redundant. Instead, salvation needs to be understood as a series of encounters along the *via salutis*. As a result, water baptism becomes a substantial salvific encounter with Christ through the Spirit.⁵⁴ Within this context, salvation is viewed as a holistic, multidimensional, and dynamic process of transformation, which includes faith and baptism.⁵⁵

John 9 also challenges the typical Pentecostal understanding of baptism following a confession of faith since in this instance, the man’s baptism appears to proceed his verbal profession of faith.⁵⁶ Picking up on this theme, Augustine notes that while “the sacrament had already taken place ... the benefit of grace had not yet been achieved in his heart.”⁵⁷ What

⁴⁹ Stephen S. Smalley, *Thunder and Love: John’s Revelation and John’s Commentary* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 160.

⁵⁰ Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, 156.

⁵¹ Thomas, “Pentecostal Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” 19; Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit*, 287.

⁵² Edwards, *Discovering John*, 57-58.

⁵³ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 124.

⁵⁴ Daniel Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments: Encountering God at the Altar* (Cleveland: Cherohala Press, 2019), 138.

⁵⁵ Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 117-118.

⁵⁶ R. Wade Paschal, Jr., “Sacramental Symbolism and Physical Imagery in the Gospel of John,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 (1981): 158.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Sermon 136.2*.

might Pentecostals make of this? Following Daniel Tomberlin, this suggests that Pentecostals should understand the transmission of baptismal grace as an act of unmerited grace. In this way, baptism can be recognized to be “proleptic, even prophetic.”⁵⁸ This does not suggest professed faith is insignificant as the man’s eventual confession demonstrates (v. 38). But instead, it indicates that Pentecostals must negotiate “the objective reality of baptismal grace and the subjective necessity for personal surrender and decision.”⁵⁹

In response, perhaps Pentecostals should consider the legitimacy of both believer’s baptism and infant baptism. One might consider that while believer’s baptism better expresses the relationship between repentance and baptism, the practice of infant baptism better expresses God’s gracious initiative preceding personal faith and repentance.⁶⁰ Through the lens of John 9, infant baptism can be understood as prevenient grace, and done in hope of future, personal profession of faith.⁶¹ Within this framework, the salvific rite of baptism points to a lifetime of following Jesus, “however performed and whoever the candidates,”⁶² with the effectiveness unfolding gradually over time. Because salvation is a past, present, and future reality, holding multiple forms together can bear witness to a community’s ongoing, salvific journey in Christ.

3.2 Jesus Heals and Reigns

As John Christopher Thomas has noted, “with regard to healing, anointing the sick with oil, a practice based on Jesus’ implicit command in Mark 6.13 and the practice of the church in James 5, has long functioned sacramentally for Pentecostals.”⁶³ A Pentecostal theological reading of John 9, then, discerns Jesus’ anointing of the man born blind with mud, as a parallel act of anointing with oil for physical and spiritual healing. Interestingly, this healing happens within the context of the man’s baptismal washing. Commenting on John 9:6, Origen asserts that through the act of making mud with saliva and putting it on the blind man’s eyes, Jesus was anointing the man in preparation of the pool.⁶⁴ This connection is verified by Christ’s command following this man’s anointing: Christ told the man to “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” and as a response of doing so the man “came home seeing” (9:7). In this way, the man was anointed, baptized, and then healed. What might this tell us about the relationship between healing and baptism?

⁵⁸ Daniel Tomberlin, “Believers’ Baptism in the Pentecostal Tradition,” *The Ecumenical Review* 67.3 (Oct. 2015): 431.

⁵⁹ Donald Bloesch, *The Reform of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 42.

⁶⁰ As Donald Bloesch puts it, “Pedobaptism is a more credible symbolism for the mystery that God’s election is prior to human decision. Believer’s baptism calls our attention to the biblical truth that God’s election is realized through the human decision.” See Donald Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 158.

⁶¹ Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit*, 289.

⁶² Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 126.

⁶³ Thomas, “Pentecostal Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” 19.

⁶⁴ Origen, Fragment 63 on the Gospel of John.

First, Origen is instructive in his exhortation to understand baptism into Jesus as an act of healing spiritual blindness.⁶⁵ Consequently, baptism not only pardons, but restores. Jesus's healing of the man's eyesight through anointing and baptism indicates that God is active in baptism. Baptism, then, is not merely emblematic, but is spiritually transformative because it is bound up with the Spirit's presence pointing to Jesus as God's plan as healer of all.⁶⁶ Thus, as one witnesses in John 9, there is a significant relationship between anointing, baptism, and healing. Discerning Jesus as healer in John 9, then, should beckon Pentecostals back to understanding baptism as a divine encounter of Jesus the healer.

As Killian McDonnell has shown elsewhere, there is not only a historical connection between water baptism and anointing the head of baptismal candidates, but also a Scriptural one.⁶⁷ John 9 also suggests that anointing with oil should be liturgically paired with baptism. The anointing with oil signifies the Spirit's presence in and through the rite,⁶⁸ thus informing Pentecostalism's theology and liturgy of baptism. The anointing with oil also makes way for the expectation of charismatic gifts including healing to take place in baptism.⁶⁹ Certainly many of the Pentecostal fathers and mothers of the tradition witnessed such instances. As one early writer put it: "Upon some the power of the Holy Spirit so fell while in the water, that we could scarce get them out of the water."⁷⁰

Finally, John 9 reminds the reader that healing is linked to witness to the healer. It is no coincidence that the pool that the man washed in means "sent." As Augustine states, after the man born blind was washed and endowed with sight "he becomes a witness."⁷¹ This is no surprise, for in baptism there is the "acceptance of the call to become a holy witness in the power of the Holy Spirit."⁷² It is through the anointing and washing in the sacrament of baptism that propels the believer into the world for the sake of "the blind" who have been bound in darkness. In this way, Jesus heals the baptized so that they may become healed healers and witnesses of Jesus as all in all.

4. A Full Gospel Conclusion: Sacramental Experience/s of Jesus

⁶⁵ Origen, Fragment 63 on the Gospel of John.

⁶⁶ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 166.

⁶⁷ Kilian McDonnell, "Does the Theology and Practice of the Early Church Confirm the Classical Pentecostal Understanding of Baptism in the Holy Spirit?" *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 21.1 (1999): 128.

⁶⁸ Yong, *Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 100.

⁶⁹ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 167.

⁷⁰ *Bridal Call* 7.1 (1923), 15.

⁷¹ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 44.8.

⁷² Steven Jack Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010), 110.

Due to the Christological nature of Pentecostalism and Pentecostal confession of the Full Gospel message, Jesus should be at the center of all beliefs and practices.⁷³ This paired with the insight that Pentecostals suppose that faith is grasped in terms of an encounter with God as experienced by the Spirit,⁷⁴ leads us to assert that one's journey of faith should be made up of sacramental experiences with Jesus. As our reading of John 9 has made clear, the rites of anointing and baptism should be understood as "Christo-Pneumatic encounters" that mediate the presence of Jesus in the midst of his community and as witnesses to the world.⁷⁵ The encounter of the man born blind in John 9 beckons to the reading community to behold and experience Jesus who is saving, healing, imparting life (by his Spirit-baptizing), and demonstrating his kingship over the darkness. Water baptism and anointing become testimonial experiences that bear (in a measure to) the presence of Jesus sharing his life as readers hear and experience John 9's Son of Man.

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⁷³ Archer, "Nourishment for our Journey," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 13.1 (2004): 82.

⁷⁴ Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments*, 1.

⁷⁵ Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments*, 2.

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