A Critique of Charles Nienkirchen's Book, A.B. Simpson and the Pentecostal Movement

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Charles Nienkirchen's book *A. B. Simpson and the Pentecostal Movement* has stirred a great deal of controversy both within and outside The Christian and Missionary Alliance. Some, particularly from a charismatic viewpoint, give glowing reports. Others want to discount his work altogether. An objective scholarly critique, however, is neither totally accepting, nor totally rejecting. A proper review will contain both positive and negative elements.

With this in mind, Nienkirchen has done both a service and a disservice to The Christian and Missionary Alliance. As a service to the Alliance, he has brought to the fore a number of previously unknown primary sources of early Alliance belief and practice regarding the supernatural, in particular, speaking in tongues, and the early Pentecostal movement. The primary data cited by Nienkirchen does suggest a broader “charismatic” history than some Alliance people would care to admit. The term “charismatic” is often considered pejorative by many in the C&MA due to excesses and errors of belief and practice in the modern charismatic movement, hence, most Alliance people do not like to be identified with the term “charismatic.” For that matter, many Pentecostals also do not like to be identified with charismatics. Nevertheless, non-charismatic scholars like Harold Lindsell and Donald Dayton have considered some of the practices and teachings of Simpson and the early C&MA to be charismatic in nature. For the purposes of this article the term “charismatic” will not be used with reference to the modern charismatic movement, but will be defined as more in line with its etymological meaning simply as “believing in and exercising ‘charismata,’ that is, supernatural manifestations and gifts of the Spirit.”

While some today might downplay this “charismatic” dimension of the C&MA, Nienkirchen has documented through these early writings that the Alliance was actively involved in supernatural manifestations of the Spirit. He has verified the reality of a “charismatic” history in the C&MA. This “charismatic” past, though far from comprehensive, has substantiated the positive contributions of Simpson and the Alliance to the Pentecostal movement.

With all his data, however, Nienkirchen has still missed some vital information. For instance, Nienkirchen mentions only in passing Dr. T.J. McCrossan. Though McCrossan came on the Alliance scene after Simpson’s death, his views were remarkably similar to those of Simpson. His book *Speaking in Tongues: Sign or Gift —Which?*, published by the C&MA, became de facto the Alliance position on tongues in 1927. Much more work needs to be done to thoroughly document C&MA teaching and practice regarding supernatural manifestations.

In spite of the positive contributions of Nienkirchen’s research into the history and theology of the early Alliance, he has also done a grave disservice to the denomination. Where Nienkirchen goes wrong is not in the documenting of C&MA charismatic history, but in his interpretation of the data and the resulting conclusions which he has drawn. Rather than objectively and inductively observing all the data and drawing conclusions, he appears to be attempting to build a case against the “seek not, forbid not” stance of the C&MA. His interpretations of the data and his conclusions regarding Simpson and Tozer actually falsely malign two of the great leaders of the C&MA.

Six criticisms of Nienkirchen include:

1. He makes inadequate and selective use of data. This may be intentional or unintentional. He makes scant reference to T.J. McCrossan, who wrote the official position of the C&MA in 1927, and little more reference to F.F. Bosworth, a friend of McCrossan who played significantly in the C&MA position. Either he is not familiar with other statements and teachings of Simpson and other early Alliance leaders, or else he ignores those sources which downplay or contradict his claims.

2. He attempts to substantiate his claims by portraying Simpson as a seeker of
tongues, based mainly on his interpretation of Simpson's diary and outside Pentecostal sources. Regarding Simpson's diary, Nienkirchen has misused it and drawn improper conclusions as a result. Simpson's real beliefs on tongues and gifts cannot be determined from his diary alone, as Nienkirchen has surmised. It is true that a person may record things privately that he does not say publicly. However, it cannot be deduced that Simpson's private thoughts contradict his public pronouncements. To assert that Simpson believed one thing in his private life and spoke another in his public life is to make him either disingenuous or schizophrenic. Rather than dichotomizing Simpson as Nienkirchen has done, we should view Simpson's teachings and beliefs as a whole, harmonizing apparent incongruities. For instance, as noted in an earlier article by this writer, if one takes Simpson’s statement on medicine in The Gospel of Healing by itself, one could get the impression that Simpson was totally against doctors and medicine. However, other statements made by Simpson make it clear that he was not. Further analysis of Simpson's diary needs to be done, taking into consideration the context of events, Simpson's public statements, and the state of his emotional, physical and mental health during that time frame (1907-1918). Dr. Richard Bailey makes a significant statement which undermines Nienkirchen's conclusions:

Dr. Simpson cannot be fairly represented by the unpublished confidences of his diary in his declining days. He should rather be remembered for his teaching and writing at the zenith of his power. Dr. Simpson responded to the Azusa Street manifestations by preaching and teaching about the cross (The Cross of Christ). For its part, the Christian and Missionary Alliance responded to Azusa Street by issuing The Crisis of the Deeper Life. Neinkirchen fails to deal with these historical realities and as a result unfairly skews A. B. Simpson's views of the Pentecostal movement, particularly the glossolalic manifestations. His view is a revisionist view of A.B. Simpson.

Bailey is correct in pointing out that Nienkirchen draws his conclusions from Simpson's diary without considering Simpson's physical, emotional and mental health throughout this period of time. He is also right that Nienkirchen fails to take into consideration objectively the writings of Simpson and the Alliance as a whole. Nienkirchen's conclusions are not based on proper, unbiased scholarship. There are some, on the other hand, who might be inclined to dismiss Simpson's diary altogether, claiming that Simpson was in his dotage during the entire time when his diary was written. Certainly, if his mental and emotional capabilities were affected during this period of time, that needs to be taken in account. However, at what point was Simpson in his senility? Was it in 1907 at the age of 63 or in 1912 at the age of 70? Evidence would indicate that at neither of those points was his mental and emotional state affected negatively by the aging process. It was reported in 1913 after he spoke in Toronto at the age of 70, “Dr. Simpson possesses a clearness of enunciation, a dramatic delivery, and an enthusiasm founded on a strength of character and firmness of belief that gives the fullest effect to every word he utters, and none but the most hardened and depraved could have listened to the speaker’s earnest appeal and have remained unmoved.” C&MA historian Lindsay Reynolds concludes of Simpson at this age, “Obviously he had not yet lost any of his powers of persuasion.” He was still clear of mind and powerful of speech. His dear friend and colleague Kenneth MacKenzie indicated that it was not until 1917, about two years before his death, that his mind and body were experiencing the effects of old age. Emotionally during that time he suffered depression. So Nienkirchen's conclusions regarding Simpson during this later period of time are invalidated, as Richard Bailey has suggested. Yet this evidence would also invalidate any attempt to disregard Simpson’s diary altogether. Objective scholarship does not ignore, but weighs, all the available, pertinent data. What should we conclude regarding the earlier journal writing? We acknowledge that Simpson's earlier writings and speech express himself with clarity of mind, thus he was not in his dotage. Does that then vindicate Nienkirchen's conclusions? Not at all. In response to Nienkirchen's contention that Simpson was a seeker of tongues, there is nothing in Simpson’s language that indicates that he was a "seeker." A seeker of truth, yes; a seeker of more of God, yes; but not a seeker of tongues. Simpson is clear in his other writings that we are to seek the Giver, not the gifts. One could legitimately conclude from Simpson’s diary that he desired the gift of tongues, but it is far too much for Nienkirchen to contend that he was a seeker of tongues.
Simpson himself declared, “The erroneous teaching referred to [the evidence doctrine] is sure to lead people to seek for manifestations [and] any peculiar experience rather than for God Himself. . . . When we seek anything less than God, we are sure to miss His highest blessing and likely to fall into side issues and serious errors.”18 Thirty years later, in 1938, Alliance Weekly editor John A. MacMillan continued to echo Simpson, warning against “seeking manifestations.”19 Nienkirchen ignores Simpson’s plain assertions against seeking and labels Simpson a seeker even though it is clearly contradictory to Simpson’s public statements. Nienkirchen concludes from McDowell’s alleged quote from Simpson that Simpson was admitting that he was wrong about not seeking tongues.20 The statement does not warrant that conclusion. In fact, Nienkirchen plainly shows his bias when he prefaces McDowell’s quote with the remark, “Presumably in the context of discussing Simpson’s response to Pentecostalism . . .” [italics mine].21 Obviously, by Nienkirchen’s own words, his conclusion is based upon presumption.

What was it that Simpson felt he had missed—teaching tongues as the evidence? No, he never suggests he is retracting his position. That he was wrong about seeking tongues? There is still no evidence, only speculation. It is most likely that he was questioning either his handling of those who were pushing tongues or the issue of division of property of those who were separating. For all we know, this may not be exactly what Simpson said, but rather Pentecostals viewing Simpson’s statement through colored lenses and putting a certain spin or interpretation on Simpson’s statement.

3. The third criticism of Nienkirchen is that he claims the “seek not, forbid not” position is a recent invention of Tozer, and that Tozer is a revisionist of Alliance history.22 Nienkirchen is correct in saying that Simpson did not coin the phrase “seek not, forbid not,”23 though he fails to acknowledge that it succinctly summarizes Simpson’s belief. It is very possible that Tozer, with his incisive way with words, may have originated the motto. However, Nienkirchen is decidedly wrong when he claims that Tozer originated the idea. The concept of not seeking tongues was not the revisionist invention of Tozer, but was even taught by some in the early Pentecostal movement as well as by Simpson and the early C&MA. By 1914 Azusa Street leader William J. Seymour had abandoned the doctrine of tongues as the initial evidence.24 By 1918 he was declaring: “Don’t you ever go looking for tongues. Seek Jesus for himself.”25 Seymour’s beliefs were compatible with the Alliance, for in 1921, the year before he died, he preached a series of meetings for two weeks in the Alliance church in Columbus, Ohio.26 But Seymour was not alone. T. J. McCrossan wrote, “Satan often enters Christian assemblies and causes genuine saints to speak with tongues, whenever they are seeking tongues rather than the Holy Ghost Himself.”27 Later in the same book McCrossan writes, “Friend, we had better obey Paul’s word and ‘Forbid not to speak with tongues.’ Let us take the middle of the road attitude on this subject.”28 So we see that the “seek not, forbid not” concept is undeniably found in a 1927 C&MA document by McCrossan, though not stated so concisely as the 1963 document. Independent Pentecostal evangelist Charles Price, who was a friend of McCrossan and F.F. Bosworth, and who had a close and positive relationship with the Alliance, wrote similarly in 1940, “Seek the Healer, not healing.”29 Even some Pentecostals who believe in tongues as the initial evidence adopt something of a “seek not” stance. Duffield and Van Cleve, for example, admonish, “Do not seek to speak with tongues as if it were the baptism with the Holy Spirit—seek more of God and yield to Him. He will take care of the rest.”30 They also admit, “It may well be true that some have apparently spoken in tongues who have not received the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. . . . The Devil has a counterfeit for this gift as he does for all others.”31 Finally, Billy Graham recounts in his book The Holy Spirit, “Many years ago in a class discussion at the Florida Bible Institute [C&MA affiliated school where Graham attended in the 1930s] a teacher said something on the subject of tongues that has stayed with me. He advised his students to ‘seek not, forbid not.’ ”32 This is the coup de grace that reveals that Nienkirchen is clearly in error about his contention that Tozer originated the “seek not, forbid not” concept.

Was Tozer biased against Pentecostals, as Nienkirchen contends? If Tozer’s statement, cited by Nienkirchen, is taken in isolation, that conclusion could be reached.33 Yet again, as with Simpson, Nienkirchen has made the same error of taking one quote from Tozer to the exclusion of all of Tozer’s other writings. Tozer also expressed of Pentecostals:
I have known and studied these dear brethren, and have preached to them for a long, long time. I have studied them, and I know them very well, and I am very sympathetic with them. There are some churches that are very sane and beautiful and godly. . . . The movement itself has magnified one single gift above all others, and that one gift is the one Paul said was the least. An unscriptural exhibition of that gift results, and there is a tendency to place personal feeling above the Scriptures, and we must never, never do that!34

Tozer, who was known not to mince words, nonetheless shows a warm affection here for Pentecostals, even while strongly disagreeing with them. The record shows that Tozer was not opposed to tongues, but only the insistence that tongues is the evidence of the filling of the Spirit. He even asserted that the gifts of the Spirit are a "necessity in the church" and that missing gifts are a "tragedy in the church."35 Nienkirchen further implies that Tozer watered down the baptism in the Spirit as a subsequent experience to conversion.36 On the contrary, other writings of Tozer make it clear he believed in a subsequent baptism or filling of the Spirit.37 Ironically, one-time C&MA president Harry L. Turner, himself a tongues-speaker and former Pentecostal missionary, appears to be really the one who replaced the earlier terminology of "baptism in the Spirit" with "filling of the Spirit." At St. Paul's Bible Institute in 1949 Turner taught that the baptism in the Spirit was received at conversion, with a filling of the Spirit occurring later.38

There does appear to be a discrepancy between Tozer's second-hand version of Wilson's evaluation of the Pentecostal renewal in the Alliance in 1907 and the primary sources which Nienkirchen cites.39 However, Nienkirchen impugns the motives of Tozer in order to build his case. While it is possible that Tozer was being selective, it is just as possible, and more likely that he did not have all the facts, or had facts that presented a different angle. Tozer certainly was not infallible, but his integrity and godly character are recognized throughout the evangelical world. It is better to accept both statements as true, even though they cannot clearly be reconciled. Just as some statements in the the Bible may appear contradictory on the surface, but can be harmonized, this may be the case here as well. Wilson may have made both positive and negative assessments of the early Pentecostal movement. Nienkirchen, however, unjustly makes Tozer out to be the bad guy. To charge him with intentional revisionism is to malign a great Christian leader. Just as Richard Bailey characterized Nienkirchen as a revisionist for his remarks about Simpson, so is Nienkirchen also a revisionist for branding Tozer as a revisionist.

What we can conclude is that Simpson and the early Alliance were open to desiring and experiencing all the gifts and manifestations of the Spirit, yet without seeking after any gift.40 They exercised caution and discernment, recognizing there could be and were counterfeits. Yet that did not keep them from maintaining a favorable view of gifts and generally positive relationships with moderate Pentecostals. The C&MA has always maintained balance and cautious openness.

4. A fourth criticism of Nienkirchen is his claim that C&MA has moved away from and continues to move away from Simpson's position as a tongues-seeker.41 The above documentation demonstrates the fallacy of his argument. Nienkirchen is correct, however, that Simpson and the early Alliance continued to maintain close ties with some who flowed in Pentecostal circles.42 In addition to the sources Nienkirchen cited, this writer has discovered additional confirmation. C&MA churches accepted moderate Pentecostal leaders such as Maria Woodworth-Etter and Azusa Street leader William Seymour as speakers.43 Carrie Judd Montgomery was one who was prominent. Her husband continued to be recognized as an honorary vice-president of the C&MA as late as 1920, even though they also maintained Assemblies of God ties.44 The Alliance Weekly continued to publish articles by the Montogmerys into the 1940's.45 Other Alliance leaders such as Paul Rader, F. F. Bosworth, and T. J. McCrossan also circulated in Pentecostal circles.46 Independent Pentecostal evangelist Charles Price was a friend of both Bosworth and McCrossan. Alliance churches were even organized out of some of Price's meetings.47 The singing Humbard family, who had Pentecostal ties as well as connections with McCrossan, ministered in music at the 1944 General Council.48 The C&MA described itself as "Full Gospel," a term often used of Pentecostal churches, up through the 1950s.49 One other significant misjudgment Nienkirchen makes in this regard is a cursory statement in a footnote, claiming that Dr. Keith Bailey's paper to the District Superintendents in 1977 was intended to produce further distance from the modern
charismatic movement.50 On the contrary, although Keith Bailey, who himself speaks in tongues, does maintain some distance, he actually appears to be acknowledging historical drift and trying to exhort Alliance District Superintendents to bring a corrective to the neglect of the gifts. In particular, Keith Bailey advocated allowing tongues and interpretation in Alliance meetings. This is something he avows that to his knowledge had not occurred in his thirty-plus years of ministry in the Alliance.51

In other words, Keith Bailey seems to be implying that the Alliance had been emphasizing the “seek not” to the neglect of the “forbid not.” That tongues and interpretation had been allowed and practiced earlier in Alliance meetings is demonstrated by the primary sources Nienkirchen has unearthed.52 Also, statements by Rader speaking affirmatively of tongues53 and by McCrossan encouraging tongues and interpretation in Alliance meetings confirm Keith Bailey’s intimation that the Alliance, at least in practice, had strayed from its earlier days.54 Ernest Wilson has also cited indication of “historical drift” to indicate that one time the C&MA has been closer, not so much in its beliefs, as in its practices, to the Pentecostal camp.55

5. In pointing out the friendship between early Alliance leaders such as Simpson and Rader and Pentecostal movement, Nienkirchen fails to discern the differences between the Pentecostals of Simpson’s day and today’s Pentecostals and charismatics. The early Pentecostals were much more concerned about maintaining the integrity of the authority of Scripture and orthodoxy of belief. Many of today’s charismatics care little for the rightness of doctrinal issues. For instance, “oneness” Pentecostals and tongue-speaking Catholics who adore Mary are embraced openly among many in the charismatic movement, but would not have been accepted unconditionally among early Pentecostals. Early Pentecostals also emphasized the importance of holy living, just as Simpson and the early Alliance, but today’s charismatics, for the most part, downplay holiness. Hence, today’s C&MA finds itself having less in common with, and thus at a greater distance from, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement than in earlier days—with the one exception that most charismatics today do not insist on tongues as the evidence of the baptism in the Spirit.

6. A final area Nienkirchen fails to address is the early C&MA’s belief that charismata could also be fleshly or counterfeit manifestations, and thus may need to be tested. While the early C&MA was open to genuine manifestations of tongues, prophecy and the like, they did not automatically or indiscriminately accept those manifestations as from God. “Try the spirits” was the watchword Scripture of the early Alliance and at least some Pentecostals. Today such manifestations are most often accepted as from God without a second thought among the majority of charismatics. Thus many in the Alliance today have become wary of accepting the charismatic movement in their churches.

As a result, there has been a tendency in some circles of the C&MA today to render supernatural manifestations guilty and suspect until proven innocent. This was not the position of the early C&MA, as is evident from the documentation. In actual practice, there have been instances in which the “seek not, forbid not” position has not been maintained. A professor’s wife who had been a student at the Alliance missionary school in Africa in the 1960s recalled tongues routinely being regarded as demonic and Kathryn Kuhlman’s books being burned. At the same time, I recall that when I was a teenager, some of the people from my home Alliance church in Western Pennsylvania (which was not involved in the charismatic movement) attended Kathryn Kuhlman meetings without reproach.

Today there exists in the C&MA a paradoxical tension which is a part of the inclusiveness of the Alliance. The Alliance continues to maintain that all gifts of the Spirit are available and operative today, and has even at General Council in recent years invited speakers from the Pentecostal/charismatic movement, such as Jack Hayford and John Guest. On the other hand, some in the denomination maintain that most tongues are of Satan. In some circles in the Alliance the motto has been “seek not, forbid not, and hope not.” Others in the Alliance camp, like Nienkirchen, may believe that the vast majority of manifestations are from God, but fail to acknowledge the reality of many counterfeits and the dangers of seeking after supernatural manifestations indiscriminately. Both positions are divergent from the early Alliance position.

It is Keith Bailey’s intention, as well as this author’s, to correct that imbalance. The “seek not, forbid not” stance of the Alliance is as discerning for today as in the early part of the century. Nienkirchen has furnished a beneficial service to the Alliance by reminding us of the “forbid not” openness of our forefathers; nevertheless, he has
done a serious disservice to the Alliance by attempting to negate the “seek not” wisdom of our past.

ENDNOTES

3 Nienkirchen, 84-100, 122-130.
4 Ibid., 26-72.
5 Ibid., 41.
7 Nienkirchen, 131-140.
8 Ibid., 131, 135.
9 Ibid., 41, 110.
10 Ibid., 105-106.
12 King, 11-12.
14 Lindsay Reynolds, Footprints (Beaverlodge, Alberta, Canada: Buena Book Services, 1981), 363-364.
15 Ibid., 363.
18 A.B. Simpson, May 1908, C&MA Annual Report; see also A.B. Simpson, “Spiritual Sanctity,” as recorded in Richard Gilbertson, The Baptism of the Holy Spirit: The Views of A.B. Simpson and His Contemporaries (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1993), 322, where Simpson writes, “Our warning is against the danger of exaggerating [tongues], of seeking it for its own sake rather than seeking the Spirit Himself, and of exercising it in an extravagant and unscriptural way to the dishonor of Christ, the disorder of His work and the division of His people.”
20 “Presumably in the context of discussing Simpson’s response to Pentecostalism, McDowell recollected him as having said: ‘David, I did what I thought was best, but I am afraid I missed it.’ ”
21 Nienkirchen, 106.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 135-140.
25 Ibid., 266.
26 Ibid., 269.
27 McCrossan, 32.
28 Ibid., 42.
31 Ibid., 322-323.
33 Nienkirchen, 136, 138.
36 Nienkirchen, 138-139.
37 The Tozer Pulpit, 1:2:99.
39 Nienkirchen, 136-137.
41 Nienkirchen, 131, 139-140.
42 Ibid., 116-120.
44 The Alliance Weekly, Nov. 27, 1920, 359.
46 On Rader: “I don’t care whether you were sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost at a Holiness


48 The Alliance Weekly, June 17, 1944, 275.


50 Nienkirchen, 140.

51 Dr. Keith Bailey, “Dealing with the Charismatic in Today’s Church,” a paper presented to the C&MA District Superintendents’ Conference, February 28-March 2, 1977, Nyack, New York. Dr. Bailey was serving as Vice President of North American Ministries of the C&MA at that time.


53 Rader spoke positively about speaking in tongues out of his own experience:

Get alone in your room and wait on the Lord until you are filled. You say, “I might speak in tongues.” Well if you do, Hallelujah. I am afraid of you if you are afraid of something the Holy Spirit gives from above. . . . Why not be willing, if the Lord sends it, to speak in tongues? When I was filled with the Holy Spirit, I did not know whether I was on earth or in heaven. . . .

I would like to know what any Bible teacher has a right to say against Scriptural tongues. Paul said, “I speak in tongues more than you all”—again, “I would that ye all spake with tongues” and “Forbid not to speak with tongues.” How will you get away from that? Paul tells us how to regulate the gifts, not to eliminate them. (Paul Rader, Harnessing God [New York, NY: George H. Doran, 1926], 95-96, 99)

He went on further to say that some tongues can come from demons and the scriptural test is First John 4:1-3, if there is any doubt of the source (Ibid., 100-101). However, he concludes, “Most Christians who have spoken in tongues feel like they are special targets to be hit at by many Bible teachers—yet they are saints who walk orderly and believe in the Blood, the Book and the Blessed Hope” (Ibid., 101).

54 McCrossan’s counsel, as published and endorsed by the C&MA was:

Friend, we had better obey Paul’s word and “Forbid not to speak with tongues.” Let us take “the middle of the road attitude” on this subjects. Let us realize that this gift has come back to the church, and if God should give some saint a message in tongues in your congregation—and He might—let him deliver it without interruption, but pray God to give the interpretation to some one. (McCrossan, 42)

His advice on dealing with demonic manifestations was:

Sometime some one may speak with tongues in your meeting, and you will feel at once that it is not of God. It will be harsh and repelling; your spiritual nature will revolt. Then just quietly place your hand upon such an one and ask to rebuke the evil spirit, and you will have very little trouble. (Ibid., 42-43)

It should be noted that McCrossan himself, like Simpson, never spoke in tongues.


Pentecostalism took “Spirit Baptism” and the restoration of New Testament gifts one step further. In January, 1901, holiness minister Charles Fox Parham asked the students at his Topeka Bible school to study the scriptures and determine what evidence might be given of Spirit baptism. Using the pentecost account in Acts chapter two, they concluded that speaking in tongues was the confirmation of Holy
Spirit baptism. The initial historical works on Pentecostalism came from within the movement. Pentecostal historians wrote within a “providential” framework and focused on the role of God rather than human and natural causation. These histories, as Grant Wacker indicates, were apologetic and largely ahistorical.