

**“Experience as a Catalyst for Healing Ministry: Historical Evidence
and Implications From the Life of F. F. Bosworth”**

by Roscoe Barnes III

A Response by Kimberly Ervin Alexander

Roscoe Barnes has drawn our attention to the very important aspect of *experience* and its role in healing ministry. As a means of examining the role of experience Barnes uses the incidents from the life of early Pentecostal pioneer F. F. Bosworth.

First, Barnes is to be commended for lifting up the role of experience in the practice of healing ministry. Clearly, as is the case with any *practice*, it is from or through experience that the practitioner draws conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the means utilized, proves or disproves his/her theories, perfects the methodology and arrives at a preferred methodology. With regard to healing ministry, one immediately thinks of *practices* which have become associated with a particular healing evangelist: Oral Roberts use of the point of contact (be that his right hand or the television screen), William Branham’s use of the word of knowledge, or Benny Hinn’s unique use of his breath! One has to assume in analyzing these practices, no matter how peculiar or seemingly unwarranted in scripture, that the healing evangelist somehow happened upon this method and through his/her experience found it to be effective!

Barnes points out that there are varying dimensions to the catalytic experiences in Bosworth’s ministry: personal, corporate, theological and developmental. Indeed, as is the case with many healing ministers, it is his own personal experience of healing which became, in Barnes’ words, “a foundation on which to build his ministry.” (2) [Here I would like to point out that the

Evangelist who first was involved in both the initial healing of Bosworth and his call to a “work” for God was Mattie Perry, who later became a Pentecostal. [Perry was the sister of Sam Perry, pioneer Church of God minister who evangelized throughout the south, especially in Florida and eventually in Cuba. Perry would later administer an orphanage in North Carolina and was an associate of missionary Lillian Trasher] This same story can be told with little variation of Carrie Judd Montgomery, Charles Parham, Oneness healing evangelist Mattie Crawford, Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts. It would seem that healing experience as a catalyst for ministry would be a fruitful area of inquiry.

Secondly, Barnes is to be commended for lifting up the very important role Bosworth played in early Pentecostal history. The longevity of publication of his book, *Christ the Healer* testifies to his contribution. His list of acquaintances reads like a “Who’s Who” of proto—and early Pentecostalism: Dowie, Parham, and John G. Lake. As Barnes points out, Bosworth’s association with Maria Woodworth-Etter and the resulting revival in Dallas, Texas is historically significant. [See D. William Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel*] Most significantly I think, and a point worthy of further exploration, is Bosworth’s importance as a bridge between the early Pentecostal movement and the later post-WW2 healing revival. He worked with the likes of the notable (and notorious) healing evangelist William Branham, with Gordon Lindsay and T. L. Osborne. His influence is further extended into the Latter Rain, Charismatic and Shepherding Movements through his association in the 1950s with Ern Baxter.

I would highlight several points Barnes makes which are noteworthy in Bosworth’s development as a minister of healing. First, the link between healing

and evangelism is demonstrated in Bosworth's ministry. The corporate dimension of healing experience, Barnes contends, taught Bosworth the value of healing as a "tool of evangelism". This evangelistic methodology (healing as a "drawing card" for evangelism) became a prominent, if not the dominant method adopted by western Pentecostal ministers in missionary contexts. As pointed out by Barnes, this method is promoted by T. L. Osborne in his work *Healing En Masse*. While the Evangelistic Crusade has been utilized by Evangelicals, most notably Billy Graham, by adding prayer for healing to the event, Pentecostals such as Reinhard Bonnke have re-defined the form.

Secondly, Barnes' analysis is helpful in that he points out the shift in emphasis within Pentecostal healing theology and practice which can be observed in its evolution from the earlier movement to the post-WW2 movement's emphasis on faith. He writes, "Bosworth had often preached that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. But while working with Branham, he and his wife, Florence N. Bosworth, told the sick to pray for faith, something that was uncharacteristic for them." (6) Other scholars point out that he was influenced by E. W. Kenyon. (R. M. Riss, *International Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements*). This is an important theological turn which contributes to the later Word of Faith movement. I'm thinking here of the alteration one sees in Oral Roberts' approach. Roberts moves from a classical Pentecostal orientation to seeing healing in his hand, to a Word of Faith orientation, so that faith is more necessary on the part of the one receiving healing.

I'd like to offer suggestions which could move this study further along.

First, heretofore, in Pentecostal studies, what Bosworth has been most noted for is his departure from the cardinal doctrine of initial evidence, resulting in his separation from the Assemblies of God in 1918. This was the second major theological challenge that the AG faced within its first five years of organization. It would be helpful to examine whether or not Bosworth's departure from the "orthodoxy" of Pentecostalism is somehow linked to his later evolution of thought, specifically his shift with regard to faith. I suspect that this early move toward independence of thought and association made him more open to the emphases of later "heterodox" healing evangelists.

Secondly, I think what is not explored adequately is the *how* of experience. If experience is a catalyst, and I think it is, *how* does that happen? Wesley was, and Wesleyans have been, aware of (at least since Outler delineated experience as part of Wesley's hermeneutical approach) the value of experience as a teacher and aid in interpreting Scripture and doctrine. While they, like Pentecostals, would affirm Scripture as authoritative, they would also want to say that Scripture is read through the lens of experience (as well as culture). In fact, for Wesleyans (and actually all readers of Scripture....Wesleyans and Pentecostals will just admit it) there is a dynamic relationship between Scripture, tradition and experience. For instance, in Bosworth's story, one can imagine him reading a gospel narrative of healing and having a kind of mental assent to the truth found there. But his own healing of tuberculosis pushes him back to the text. Now he has more than mental assent to truth. He has an experiential knowledge. When he encounters the doctrinal statement "Divine healing is provided in the atonement", he is able to affirm the veracity of the tenet. Further along in his

ministry, the accumulation of experiences and his observation of other healing evangelists inform his reading of Scripture. Beyond this, special leadings by the Spirit, whether discernment or a word of knowledge, inform his practice and therefore shape his experience, which in turn shape his reading of Scripture, his theology and his practice.

In a period in which Pentecostalism, at least within the US, is in danger of losing its dynamic and distinctiveness, and thereby its viability, an affirmation of the significance of experience is an essential first step toward recovery and renewal. If we continue to downplay the importance of real experiences of regeneration, by settling for mere “decisions for Christ”; if we silence testimonies of healing and miracles, in the interest of time; if we diminish the importance of or even quench, experiences in and manifestations of the Spirit, in the name of “decency and order”; and if we fail to pray for the sick, for fear of being labeled a sensationalist or having to answer for those who are not healed, then we will betray the Movement shaped by Bosworth and hundreds of other named and unnamed men and women and their experiences.

Barnes’ focus on Bosworth has the potential of helping us to re-focus and re-establish our identity. I look forward to hearing about his future discoveries in this un-mined repository.