

The Pentecostal Difference

On the Day of Pentecost, the fiftieth day after Passover, the Holy Spirit came upon the church in great power, as Jesus had promised (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5). The 120-plus disciples had obediently been praying and preparing for the coming of the Holy Spirit for some ten days in the upper room. The infilling by the Holy Spirit was the event that empowered and launched the church for its mission to take the message of Christ to the world.

Our New Testament reading is Acts 2:1-13:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

Acts is not just a history of the first church, but brings us face to face with the reality of how God is working and seeking to work in and through his church today. The outward phenomena were given uniquely in that first century event, but there are vitally important principles and experiences that God has for us today.

What can we, as followers of Jesus, expect from the Pentecostal difference from the coming of the Holy Spirit upon us with great power? We acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is within every true disciple, every follower of Jesus (Romans 8:9). Perhaps it's true, that we don't need to "get" more of the Holy Spirit, as though he were an impersonal entity that our bodies contain, such as a "ghost" or fluid. He's the third person of the Trinity, who dwells in our hearts by faith. We don't need more of him, as it were, but rather we need to *let him have more of us*. He's to rule in our lives. But there're degrees to which he can and will bless and use us, and our need is for his fullness of blessing, controlling and using us for his glory.

One thing that is clear from reading The Book of Acts is the centrality of the church in the purposes of God. By church I speak not primarily of the universal church of all believers everywhere but rather of a local entity, a body of believers under the Lordship of Christ. The believers were "all together in one place," which is the

meaning of church. The Greek word that translates into the English word “church” is the compound word ‘ecclesia,’ which literally means “called-out ones.” To receive God’s Pentecostal blessings it’s imperative that we relate to the fellowship of the church, where we can receive the wind of God, his power.

“And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting,” says our text. Some of you may be familiar with twisters/tornadoes, which sound like approaching freight trains. In the upper room there wasn’t the wind but there was a sound like the blowing of a violent wind. This was a sign to the believers that God’s Spirit was coming upon them in great power.

Just before his ascension back into heaven, Jesus promised that his disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them (Acts 1:8). Paul later spoke of this “incomparably great power for us who believe.” And, he says, “That power is like the working of his (God’s) mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 1:19-20).

Both the Hebrew word (ruach) and the Greek word (pneuma) used for the Spirit of God are also the words for wind, the powerful creative, not destructive, force of God. In the beginning of creation, “the Spirit/wind of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:1-2). The angel Gabriel explained to the young virgin, Mary, that when she would conceive of the Messiah “the Holy Spirit (pneuma) will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35). Thus in that upper room on the Day of Pentecost the believers began to realize that the mighty power of God, sounding like a mighty tornado, was coming upon them.

These disciples realized their need for the power of God upon their lives in view of the overwhelming task before them. Apart from God’s power they were totally unable to face the hostile world and fulfill the mandate of their Master. They had been well-meaning, but weak and wavering before Pentecost. They had covered before Jesus’ enemies and they themselves were fearful of an unknown future.

The older I get the more I realize my weakness and the utter futility of my best resolve and intentions apart from the power of God to keep on making me into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). I need God’s power to protect me from the evil one and to enable me to stand firm on the evil day (Ephesians 6:10-13). Only the Holy Spirit can produce in my life the much-needed graces of godliness Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f).

The disciples heard the wind of God’s power, but also they saw the fire of God. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.” When the Holy Spirit comes upon us in fullness he comes upon those made pure by the fire of God’s presence. The Prophet Isaiah met the holiness of God in the temple. He was made aware of his uncleanness and cried out for God’s cleansing. “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” Then the seraph flew to him and touched his lips with a live coal from the altar, in order to remove his guilt and sin (Isaiah 6:5-7).

When the Holy Spirit comes in fullness, the first thing he will do is cleanse our tongues and all of our lives with the fire of his presence. When Pentecost comes to our lives we will have a new way of speaking.

A member of our church in Kansas was converted while working in the oil fields. Oil field workers were noted for their profanity, and Bill Brunson was no exception. Bill told me that when he was converted to Christ he had to learn an entirely different vocabulary, one that was purged of his usual sprinkling of profanity. When the Spirit comes in great power on the church there will be a new way of speaking. No more will there be gossip and rumor mongering. Rather, there will be speech that will be “helpful for building others up.” (Eph. 4:29, NIV).

This speech “in other languages” wasn’t the glossalia of ecstatic speech. This was a unique phenomenon that enabled the church to miraculously speak “the wonders of God” in the languages and dialects of all of the Jews who were in Jerusalem during this Pentecost pilgrimage feast. The setting in Jerusalem was during the Passover Feast, when thousands of pilgrims “from every nation under heaven” (verse 5) had swelled the size of the city during the celebration of this major harvest festival. The people outside the upper room had heard the sound and came to hear the 120 disciples speaking “the wonders of God” (verse 11) in their own language (literally, dialect, 6). No wonder they were “bewildered” and “utterly amazed” (6&7). This was a mysterious and amazing phenomenon because the disciples were obviously, by their accent, identified as Galileans.

The good news of Jesus was being shared by ordinary people. The disciples were identified as somewhat less than sophisticated Galileans, who generally spoke only Aramaic, the language of the common people. At most they might also know Greek, but certainly not be able to speak the language of all the Jews gathered from around the entire civilized world where the Jews had been scattered during the Diaspora. But then as now, there’s an obvious difference in this church from anything else around us when the Holy Spirit comes in fullness.

The Book of Acts is the record of ordinary people that God uses, which is always his *modus operandi*, as we see later in Acts (4:13) and in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (1:18ff). God reveals his strength and greatness by using weak instruments who depend absolutely on him. Stronger and more capable people tend to forget to rely totally on God and also may tend to not give God all of the credit or glory for what he does through them.

But these believers on the Day of Pentecost were filled with the Spirit and thus compelled to communicate the wonders of God to every language present. There in the city of Jerusalem were thousands from every identifiable location in the world where the Jews had been scattered during the Diaspora. These pilgrims represented every significant settlement of Jews from what is modern day Iran to Italy, from northern Turkey to southern Saudi Arabia and across North Africa. The miracle of languages on the Day of Pentecost was a one-time phenomenon that expressed God’s plan to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to every culture, nation, tribe, language and people group (Mark 13:10; Revelation 7:9).

Any church and any individual who is filled with the Holy Spirit will do all he or she can to cross every barrier to reach the minds and hearts of those who need to know the good news and receive the love of Jesus. As Paul said, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). We don’t expect those we’re seeking to win to accommodate themselves to us; rather, we adjust in order to make them more comfortable with us.

An effective evangelism tool on mission fields around the world has been “The Jesus Film,” a depiction of the life of Jesus from Luke’s gospel, that’s “voiced over” in the language or dialect wherever it’s shown. A missionary friend was showing this film in a remote African village, and a lady became so excited she stood up, began dancing and singing, “He speaks my language! He speaks my language!”

These disciples spoke in the language of the people “God’s deeds of power.” This is what the good news is all about—the greatness of God as revealed in his word. The world doesn’t want to know our intricate theology about God, but rather they need to consider *what a mighty God we know*. They need to know what God, the Creator, has done for us in Jesus Christ, his Son. His great salvation for all who believe is his mightiest work and is a work that has the power to change the life of all who’ll believe.

Only as the gospel has changed and is changing your life do you have the authority to commend it to others. This doesn’t mean that you have to be perfect to share the good news about Jesus with others. It means you simply have to have a first-hand experience of his love, forgiveness and power in your life. In fact, you share out of your weakness, ordinariness, and even your suffering, to connect with others. They will relate to your weakness and failure more often than with your success and strength. What others long for is a relationship with God and others that will make a practical as well as an eternal difference in their lives and in the lives of others. They need to hear from a loving, caring friend about a God who is willing and able to help them, about a God of unconditional love.

Through your life and witness, occasionally there’ll be favorable responses, sometimes when you least expect it. When the Holy Spirit is present and working in great power, curiosity and even the interest will be aroused. This is due to the powerful working of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8) and not because we have acquired unusual eloquence, persuasiveness or argumentative powers. No one is brought into the kingdom through losing a debate or argument. In my experience of sharing the message of Jesus I’m always amazed how little my presentation or persuasion contributes to anyone’s conversion.

In our closing verse we see that even the most powerful witness failed to move the hearts of skeptical unbelievers. As with the witnesses of Lazarus’ resurrection, there’s even a heightening of opposition (John 11:45ff). Even though their reasoning was not plausible (as Peter would immediately point out in his sermon (15), it was a desperate if futile attempt to discredit the message they were unwilling to hear. The Spirit-empowered believer and church may be a threat to resistant unbelievers, and so they’ll *willfully* misunderstand us in order to keep the power of God at “an arm’s length.” Although we cannot control their response to us they

cannot keep us from praying for them. And we do all we can to keep a connection with them in the hope that in God's time Christ will lead them to himself.

Much is at stake when we think of the Pentecostal difference. I pray that we'll all meet the conditions for that difference in our lives and in our church. Dale Heights should be aware of our need for the Pentecostal difference. We realize that better marketing and slicker methods are futile in this environment, where people don't care about our "product" in the first place. What's needed is the power of God's Spirit to create a hunger for God and for involvement with people like you, who are making a difference in our community and world. You and I need the Pentecostal difference.