

PENTECOST SUNDAY: “The Two Miracles of Pentecost”

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“The birth of the church is described for us in the beginning of the second chapter of the book of Acts... Wind and fire¾ those were the manifestations when the holy Spirit established the church. Jesus was raised from the dead and had ascended to heaven before the Holy Spirit came. God is one. He is a Father. He is Jesus the Son and he is Holy Spirit here and now. The Spirit called the church into being and gathered and empowered those frightened and discouraged apostles. The symbols or signs of his presence were a powerful wind, blowing through the upper room, and tongues as of fire over their heads... Wind and fire, what appropriate symbols. Fire represents God’s presence, and wind, His power. The Holy Spirit is the present tense of God, and these are the symbols of His presence and power in our lives. When we believe that God is truly present and when we appropriate His power, which is what Pentecost is all about, then we are an apostolic church. And that means we continue to live out the Book of Acts¾ a book God is still writing¾ the acts of his apostolic people.

¾Bruce Larson, *Wind and Fire*

I. SOLVE FOR X IN THE FOLLOWING EQUATION: A is to B as C is to X

- A. Jesus, who is **not** Superman in disguise as Clark Kent, receives the Holy Spirit at his baptism. This baptism in the Spirit makes possible the extraordinary acts of his ministry.
- B. The miracles drew attention to that which was most important to Jesus: His proclamation that the Kingdom was with them, among them, etc.: that the Age to Come had already broken upon them in the present Age; that his followers would do even greater extraordinary acts.
- C. The disciples, who only recently grasp what God has done for them in the name of Jesus, receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, making possible extraordinary acts of ministry.
- D. Solve for X. What would be the purpose of empowering followers with a baptism of the Holy Spirit?

II SOME GRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE IMAGES OF THE TEXT.

- A. The event begins with an unnamed heavenly visitation that mysteriously passes from audible sound of violent, rushing wind to visible “forking” of tongues as lightening (“*glossa* as tongues of fire”) that strikes each individual present.
 1. Only when the effects are described is the event then described as an outpouring/filling of the Holy Spirit (See Matt. 3:11).
 2. The *glossa* of fire becomes the *glossa* of speaking—the image is one that unmistakably relates the act of empowerment with the language so empowered.
- B. A significant pun in the text is lost in translation. When the ecstatic preaching of the disciples draws the attention of the crowds the Jews are not “confounded” or “bewildered”—typical translations. They are “thunderstruck” (Haenchen).

III IT WAS THE DAY OF PENTECOST - Acts 2:1

- A. The full annual Cycle of Festivals of YHVH consist of 3 sets of Sacred Memorial Feasts at three set times of the year. Israelites were to “go up to Jerusalem” three times a year to celebrate these Feasts: at the start of the agricultural year (April/May), 50 days later, for Shavuot, and at the conclusion of the fruit season (Sept/Oct).
 1. These 'Jewish' Festivals follow the annual agricultural cycle in Israel and are dependent on the harvest for certain agricultural offerings of grains and fruits.
 2. Shavuot is the feast celebrating the offering of the first fruits of YHWH’s agricultural blessing; Lev. 23:15ff (to be celebrated “seven weeks, hence on the fiftieth day after the morrow, after the Sabbath of the Passover”)

Acts 2:1-21

{1}	A	When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.	FEAST OF PENTECOST
{2}		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.	FROM HEAVEN SOUND LIKE A WIND
{3}	B	Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.	PORTENT OF FIRE
{4}		All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.	HOLY SPIRIT FILLS PEOPLE
{5}	C	Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.	DEVOUT JEWS GATHER TO INQUIRE
{6}		And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.	
{7}	D	Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"	AMAZEMENT GALILEANS?
{8}	E	And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?	IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE WE HEAR
{9}	E'	Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs— in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."	
{10}			
{11}			IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE WE HEAR
{12}	D'	All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"	AMAZEMENT
{13}		But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."	
{14}	C'	But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.	DRUNKARDS PETER ADDRESSES THE DEVOUT INQUIRERS ARE ADDRESSED
{15}			
{16}	B'	No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:	
{17}		'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.	HOLY SPIRIT FILLS PEOPLE
{18}		Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.	
{19}	A'	And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.	PORTENTS IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH-- FIRE
{20}		The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.	
{21}		Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'	DAY OF SALVATION

- B. Shavuot, or the “Feast of Weeks or Sabbaths” is also known as “the Season of the Giving of the Law.” It originated during the time of the Exodus from Egypt and was first celebrated 50 days after their departure from Egypt. The tradition held that God’s people arrived at Mt Sinai on this day where they received the Law written by Moses on two tables of stone.
1. In depicting God’s appearance at Sinai Exodus 19 is filled with thunder and lightening. Philo describes angels (messengers) taking what God said to Moses to the people on “tongues of fire.”
 2. Through his imagery, Luke evokes a Christian Pentecost in Jerusalem as the renewal of God’s covenant original covenant, already the sacred reason for Shavuot.

IV VISUALIZING THE CONNECTIONS IN THE TEXT

- A. A and A’ draws reference to portents from HEAVEN as the day of salvation
- B. B and B’ clarify that these portents are the expression of the HOLY SPIRIT
- C. C and C’ shift attention to the DEVOUT INQUIRERS living in Jerusalem, NOT inquirers who came to seek God at Shavout; otherwise the converted would have left town on the morrow. Luke describes a very contemporary Jerusalem scene. This is a city of babel; divided communication even if these individuals are united in their faith in YHWH.
- D. D and D’ describes their AMAZEMENT: As residents of Jerusalem they know that Galileans could never have learned these many languages. Therefore, it must be drunken ramblings; potentially, the only Jews not impressed (“others”) would be those who only new the Aramaic and, therefore, heard no miracle.
- E. E and E’ focus on the proclamation of the hearing “IN OUR OWN VOICE” among all the resident Jews of the DIASPORA. The inclusive list of languages builds from east to west ending in Rome.

V THE FIRST MIRACLE OF PENTECOST

- A. The Baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost. For Luke, the Spirit
 1. is associated with baptism which it fails to accompany only in exceptional cases when some greater healing of division is needed (Cf. the baptism of the Samaritan believers which required the acceptance of the Jerusalem church before manifestations of the Spirit occurred.
 2. is associated with the laying on of hands and commissioning of individual believers for specific community sanctioned tasks.
 3. can relate a prophetic word, directive, or spiritual vision.
 4. is the embodiment of the New Covenant blessing poured out to empower God’s people to proclaim the good news of how “this Jesus,” son of God, has transformed their life. In this one sense (and only in this sense) is the spirit conceived as given to the individual. However, as the text from Joel makes clear, the spirit is given for dreams, visions, and prophecies intended for building up the community of faith.
- B. In Luke’s theology, it is very clear that the baptism in the Holy Spirit happens to individuals for the purposes of empowering them in the work of salvation, which is a work of building up a kingdom community and kingdom presence in the world.
 1. The gift of the Spirit is not an individual gift for an individual faith. Salvation is never privatistic. Though the NT may have a fully developed theology of gifts of the Spirit and fruit of the Spirit, it is very clear that Luke conceives of Christians as a people of the Spirit. That all gifts and fruit of the Spirit have one purpose, building up the community of faith; compare this to what we want the Holy Spirit to be for. Beware all efforts to reduce the Holy Spirit to the buddy who helps you feel close to God. This is not the Spirit. This is the domestication of the Spirit.

2. The Day of Pentecost story should remind us that the overwhelming effect of being baptized in the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:12-13) should be *fearlessness*. Throughout the book of Acts Spirit-filled Christians are known for their fearless commitment to the advance of the work of the Kingdom and their fearlessness in the face of challenge and persecution (Cf. Mark 13:11— When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.)
3. “It is noteworthy that the disciples who appear to have been hiding away from their enemies in the spirit of John 20:19, immediately became different people. They unlocked their door, and went down to the most public place they could find and there preached Jesus boldly. This change from cringing cowards to *fearless* preachers was permanent. We read of Christians making all sorts of mistakes afterwards, and they are far from perfect. But we do not again read of them hiding away in fear of others. The Spirit altered all that. From now on they became *fearless* vehicles of the Spirit in proclaiming to all people the message of the gospel” —Leon Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*.

VI. THE SECOND MIRACLE OF PENTECOST

What we learn from the Pentecost story is that our kingdoms are constantly being threatened by God’s kingdoms because God’s rule is constantly expanding into enemy territory. Those temple precincts where these disciples would come to teach, like our temple sanctuaries and classrooms, had been surrendered to the crass concerns of sustaining the status quo in the name of a domesticated piety. But what we call ‘evangelism’ on this day of Pentecost is heaven breaking out all over. God’s rule intrudes into homes where disciples are gathered as well as temple precincts, just as it can intrude in our homes, our congregations and classrooms, and through preached word recaptures lost territory. It commandeers lives. How else should we describe this moment when the language of heaven is heard as the language of men, turning what had been once unalterably divided into babble and making of it one language again. And it is this long forgotten, long hidden language that commandeers those gathered disciples who joined their voices with Peter to proclaim the language of heaven. But make no mistake. This language from heaven has a very clear purpose: it is a heaven-descended grace that provoked speech and continues to do so today. For, even though it may no longer be heard as one language, we need to realize that at least two miracles happened that day of Pentecost. The promised Holy Spirit descended with power. Yes. But equally miraculous was that Peter preached. Peter, who could find nothing to say in the courtyard when confronted by the maid just a few weeks before, stood up, raised his voice, and preached. Preaching is still sign and wonder, a gift, miracle, and an irrefutable evidence of a continuing sound from heaven. Whenever it is unshackled from its institutional domestication and from its fear of failure, preaching is still the language of heaven continuing its work of reclaiming enemy territory.

—A freely adapted development of reflections by Will Willimon tailored for use in this context.

VII. IMPLICATIONS OF PENTECOST MIRACLES FOR TODAY

- A. It is traditional to come to Acts to look for the blueprint on how to be, now, a 21st century church. What principles can we derive from the two miracles in this story?.
- B. How can we keep from taming Pentecost into cozy Christianity? How can we break out of the cocoons we will always try construct that simultaneously try to affirm our “rightness” with God and still maintain our “alright-ness” with the people in the world around us? Have we domesticated the promise of Pentecost in our congregations? *Can it be returned to the wild?*