

Pentecost Now!

Acts 2:1-21

// The naming of church denominations can be a help and a hindrance. Their names can tell us something about their doctrinal views, but they can also create a kind of blanket stereotyping over the kinds of people who might choose that particular flavour of church tradition.

‘Baptists’ place a strong emphasis on adult believer’s baptism. ‘Methodists’ come from John and Charles Wesley’s pursuit of discipline and order. And ‘Pentecostals’ look for the visible, and often audible, evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work among us today.

But why ‘Pentecost’? What even was it? Luke tells us in Acts that “*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.*”

This was the 50th day after passover - when previously Jesus had gathered with His disciples to share the last supper, giving them a sign to remember Him by when He would be taken from them.

But the passover itself was traditionally an agricultural festival. It was a time when the first part of a crop would be offered to God. Not only this, but it stood as a reminder, a kind of placeholder, pointing back to the time of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, when they were rescued from slavery.

After Moses led them out of Egypt, he went *up* the mountain where he received the law from God, which he brought back *down* to the people. As an echo of that, Jesus went *up* into heaven to take His place beside the Father who sends His Spirit *down*.

The up and the down are connected; it’s evidence of how God is transforming creation, and it’s evidence of our direct access to His power and restorational energy.

This day we are told about here in Acts, this Pentecost festival is the sign - the outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit is the first offering, and it is a sign of the glorious harvest to come.

And this sign happened, we are told, when “*they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.*”

Take note, that they were all together in one place, a house. There are two key points we can take from this; the outpouring of the Spirit took place in the context of unity, not division, and it was in a house, not a temple.

“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

This is evidence of a creative God, who communicates in a rich variety of ways.

This is evidence of the Spirit at work; that’s not to say that we *need* all the noise and emotion that often accompanies a more Charismatic expression of praise to prove that He is here, nor is it that this first outpouring was the *exception*, something of an anomaly that has no use or value today.

However, we would do well to be prepared for the Spirit to move in whatever ways He sees necessary. Think of the time the disciples encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus, when, we are told, their hearts were “*strangely warmed.*”

Or, in 1 Kings 19, when Elijah was seeking God, and there was an earthquake, wind, and fire, but God was not speaking through those things, but rather, He spoke as a still, small voice.

There have been times where I have found, in my own experience, that often the presence of the Spirit seems to change the atmosphere. I might describe it as a heaviness - not in a negative way, but rather a ‘weightiness’.

Sometimes I find it’s necessary to spend some time in anticipation of the Spirit - to ‘wait for the weight’ of the Lord.

But that said, do be prepared for wind and fire! And be prepared for what one commentator calls “the drastic spring cleaning of the dusty and cold rooms of our lives.”

When the Spirit of God comes upon us, there is nowhere to hide. He shines His light into the deepest recesses of our beings. It can be at times deeply unsettling and uncomfortable, but He remains our comforter and He brings us peace.

His restoration work in us is for *our* transformation and discipleship, and it is for *His* Kingdom and glory.

When the Spirit came that Pentecost, all the people began to speak in other languages. Barriers were being broken down. It was a practical way of opening up communications, and reaching a huge variety of people from other places.

It was also a sign, evidence of a creative God who communicates in a rich variety of ways.

Language is a gift, it's how we are able to convey meaning, but our language here on earth is limited to our own capacity for communication. Do we realise, God doesn't speak English?

What I mean to say is, it isn't his first language. He was around long before humans ever first spoke. And yet, God is a communicative God.

The creation of the universe is *in and of itself* part of God's communication. It's His way of speaking, of saying “I Am Here.” It's His way of showing how vast and uncontainable He is, and yet He presents Himself to us through His Son, and His Spirit.

So as the believers are filled with the Spirit and begin to speak in other languages, this is God showing that He isn't making the things of earth suddenly irrelevant, but He is transforming earth with the power of heaven, and where does it start? It starts with us!

// The Spirit was poured out on *all people*. This included those who weren't expected to be included. We're told that there were "*God fearing Jews from every nation*" present.

There would most likely have been a common language - since Alexander the Great's conquests some 400 years earlier, everyone would have spoken at least some Greek.

But here, they were able to hear the wonders of God being declared in their own languages. Who needs Google Translate when you've got the Holy Spirit?

What happened on the day of Pentecost was the opposite of what had happened in Genesis 11, after the building of the tower of Babel. All the people became confused in their language and were scattered far and wide, divided and separated into many different language groups that could not understand each other.

But here, the Spirit brings all people together by transcending the boundaries and barriers of language. It isn't hard for him. He is beyond spoken language.

The communication of God is entirely other, and we are invited to get plugged in.

"Some," we are told, "made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine.'"

It's common throughout the book of Acts to see believers mocked and met with suspicion and cynicism. Even today, the Church is consistently accused of spouting irrelevant nonsense.

But far better be it that we are met with resistance as we serve God in the power of the Spirit, than to be ignored or overlooked entirely as an inoffensive self-help group.

// Peter responded to the crowd's accusation that they had been drinking by quoting the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”

Again, here’s that theme of unity, not division. The sign that God is drawing all people to Himself, that the time has come when *“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

This was the ‘road sign’ for God’s people to recognise that they were arriving at the last days.

The first century Jews were holding on to prophecies and promises that God would bring them out of exile and lead them into a new time in which He would bring renewal to His people.

This in turn points to a greater hope, the hope of the last *day*, the return of Jesus as He brings restoration to heaven and earth.

So, between the day of Pentecost and the day Jesus returns, we live in what we might call an ‘age of tension’. God *is* at work among us, but we still live in a broken, fallen world in which the enemy is still present, and who will continue to be against us as we seek God’s heart.

I have very little understanding of nuclear fusion, but from what I hear, it’s pretty incredible and very exciting. As a technology, it’s still highly unstable and unreliable, but work continues to be done towards perfecting it, so that eventually we may have a sustainable energy solution.

But right now, its success is erratic and unpredictable.

Joel’s prophecy as told by Peter tells us to expect a time of instability and uncertainty.

It means that while political unrest, economic meltdown, social injustice, and international warfare - while not to be ignored - are to be expected as ongoing signs of the age we live in.

The question for us is, how are we going to show evidence of the work of the Spirit in us as His Church today?

Tom Wright puts it like this:

“Part of the challenge of this passage is the question: have our churches today got enough energy, enough spirit-driven new life, to make onlookers pass any comment at all? Has anything happened which might make people think we were drunk? If not, is it because the spirit is simply at work in other ways, or because we have so successfully quenched the spirit that there is actually nothing happening at all?”

Chris Marsh // 8th June 2014