

The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-13

Acts chapter 2 begins with the Greek word for “and,” and while only the 1971 New American Standard Bible preserves that word among modern English translations, its presence in the original language is quite significant. With reference to English grammar, we are generally discouraged from starting a sentence with “and” because of the propensity to create sentence fragments, which is why, no doubt, it is often left out of English translations. But here, with the Greek word at the beginning of the sentence, there is intentional reference to all that has gone before. So when we read in verse 1, “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come,” there is a direct connection to all that we have studied these past six weeks in chapter 1. We read,

Acts 1:4 “And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; 5 for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

We then studied Jesus’ ascension, his physical departure from the earth after 40 days of giving testimony and witness of his resurrection.

Acts 1:9 “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.”

And so, they waited for what Jesus had promised—the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:14 “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”

We read that there were about a hundred and twenty disciples present, and the twelfth apostle was chosen to replace Judas. And then, with Jesus’ now ascended into heaven,

I. GOD POURS OUT HIS HOLY SPIRIT UPON THE CHURCH.

I expect that these words will be familiar for many of you.
v.1-4

There is so much here, and I wrestled this week in my sermon preparation to figure out how best to present and proclaim all of this to you. It is worth emphasizing at the outset that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the trinity, fully God just as Jesus is fully God. Jesus, of course, became a man, he was incarnate, born of the godly woman named Mary, conceived not by a biological father but by the Holy Spirit himself. So now that Holy Spirit is being poured out upon all of God’s people identified as the church.

In the language of our theology, and our creeds, we speak of the Holy Spirit as one who “proceeds from the Father and the Son,” to quote the Nicene Creed. Jesus had promised that very thing with his personal words of encouragement,

John 14:15 “If you love Me, keep My commandments. 16 And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— 17 the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.”

In the next chapter we read,

John 15:26 “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. 27 And you also will bear witness,

because you have been with Me from the beginning.”

And John 16:7 “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.”

So here he is, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, another Helper, another Comforter, whom Jesus sends from the Father, the second Person of the Trinity. And he comes on,

A. The day of Pentecost.

Pentecost has literal reference to 50 days, referring in the Old Testament to the fifty days after the passover that would mark the beginning of the Feast of Weeks, celebrating the beginning of the harvest. It was sometimes called the Feast of Harvest. It was the Jewish Thanksgiving of the Old Testament.

Deut. 16:9 “You shall count seven weeks for yourself; begin to count the seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the grain. 10 Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you.”

Lev. 23:15 “And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. 16 Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD.”

So this was a major Old Testament festival, the day when the New Testament would be established, when the transition from the Old Covenant people of God to the New Covenant people of God would be completed. The period of waiting was over and a new era dawns. And note the emphasis of that OT fulfillment with the words of verse 1, “fully come.” “When the Day of Pentecost

had fully come.” And we read that it came “suddenly.” All at once. Don’t miss the striking emphasis of those words. And it came, first of all, with wind.

B. The sound of wind.

You may know that in both the Greek language the word for wind and spirit is the same word. Same with the Hebrew word, which can be translated either wind or spirit. So here at Pentecost, the Spirit came as a wind, and were told it was the sound of a wind. It was a dramatic sound, described this way,

v.2 “And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.”

A rushing, mighty wind. A violent wind. And sound that immediately filled the room. All at once, with a demonstration of power unlike anything else. We know that the sound of a great wind is terrifying, and we often hear the descriptions of tornado or hurricane strength winds being compared to the sound of a roaring train. The sound of the wind demonstrates heavenly power, and its suddenness reveals the obvious reality of a supernatural event.

That’s the spirit, entering the house where the disciples were waiting, as a tornado enters a place when it touches down. That’s what happened here, and for all the familiarity of this event, don’t miss just how startling and terrifying that must have been for those experiencing it.

R.C. Sproul adds this comment, “The Apostles had waited, and if ever expectations were exceeded, it was in this perfect storm. They had waited with no idea of what was going to happen, and suddenly, out of nowhere, the sound of a mighty, rushing wind came roaring into the room. In addition to the sound

it made, there was also a visual dimension to it.” Namely,

C. The presence of fire.

v.3 “And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.

Fire came as well, coming down upon each person as “a tongue of fire,” tongues not coming from their mouths but resting upon their heads. Fire coming down upon their heads! William Hendriksen puts it this way, “The Holy Spirit appears in this external sign and rests upon each of the believers. He is not illusory, because Luke clearly indicates that they saw tongues of fire. The coming of the Spirit fulfills John the Baptist’s prophecy that the disciples would be baptized with the Spirit and with fire.”

Do you remember that prophecy

Mat. 3:11 “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

So the connection between the Holy Spirit and fire is direct, and in the Old Testament, fire is also a frequent symbol of God’s presence, particularly with reference to his holiness and his judgment and grace. Again, Hendrickson, “For example, Moses heard the voice of God in the burning bush and was told to take off his sandals; fire destroyed the sacrifice of Elijah at Mount Carmel; and a chariot of fire took Elijah to heaven.”

The believers not only hear the coming of the Holy Spirit, but also see him appearing as fire coming down upon them. And in that way, with those descriptions, we read that they were,

D. Filled with the Holy Spirit.

v.4 “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...”

A couple things that ought to be said here. First, being filled with the Holy Spirit doesn’t mean that before this time that the Holy Spirit was not present. It is not the first time that the Holy Spirit was given to God’s people, as if they were previously without the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit is evident in the Old Testament, with numerous, personal examples. I’ll read just one of many,

Is. 63:7 "I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the LORD And the praises of the LORD, According to all that the LORD has bestowed on us, And the great goodness toward the house of Israel, Which He has bestowed on them according to His mercies, According to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses. 8 For He said, “Surely they are My people, Children who will not lie.” So He became their Savior. 9 In all their affliction He was afflicted, And the Angel of His Presence saved them; In His love and in His pity He redeemed them; And He bore them and carried them All the days of old. 10 But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; So He turned Himself against them as an enemy, And He fought against them. 11 Then he remembered the days of old, Moses and his people, saying: “Where is He who brought them up out of the sea With the shepherd of His flock? Where is He who put His Holy Spirit within them?”

So the presence of the Holy Spirit wasn’t new. But the fullness of the Holy Spirit was! We see this phrase often in the book of Acts and in Luke’s gospel, a reference to being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” So there is a special and unique sense that comes to pass, on occasion, beyond the mere presence of the Holy Spirit, to this spiritually spectacular sense of being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” With this day of Pentecost, we also see the language of the Holy Spirit being “poured out.” As Peter would preach later this day,

Acts 2:32 “This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. 33 Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.”

Let me emphasize the meaning of the Holy Spirit being “poured out” and the people “filled with the Holy Spirit” by explaining the great evidence of the Holy Spirit on this occasion, namely speaking in tongues.

v.4

This day of Pentecost was the great day of transition when the Old Covenant people of God became the New Covenant people of God. This was the day of transition when the church of the Old Covenant became the church of the New Covenant. And the outward evidence of that world-changing transformation was the presence of tongues. So, then, what is,

II. THE MEANING OF TONGUES?

The answer to that question will also explain the significance of this transformation from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, in terms of the church. And I will begin with this.

A. Tongues were an expression of special revelation.

I’m using that expression, special revelation, to speak of that revelation which comes directly from the mouth of God. God’s words put into the mouth of his prophets and his spokesmen. God speaks through a prophet “mouth to mouth,” as it is expressed in Hebrew. We read this in,

Deut. 18:18 “I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.”

That’s special revelation. In the New Testament, we have

another word to describe the same thing, inspiration.

2 Tim. 3:16 “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.”

You may know that word “inspiration” means God-breathed. “All Scripture is breathed out by God,” as the ESV puts it. Peter refers to the same thing when he writes,

2 Peter 1:20 “...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

Moved by the Holy Spirit, carried along by the Holy Spirit, such that what was written or spoken was the very word of God. That’s special revelation. And tongues belong to that category. You see, they “began to speak with other tongues” only when “they were filled with the Holy Spirit.” And if that isn’t clear enough, Luke adds at the end of verse 4, they “began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” This speaking in tongues was not simply some sort of human, ecstatic utterances, attributed to some sort of human experience or emotion. This was an example of the Holy Spirit speaking through the mouths of his human servants, inspired revelation, special revelation, God-breathed.

Now, having said that, let me say something else just as clearly and plainly as I can.

B. Tongues refer to the speaking of foreign languages.

There is nothing here about the sort of unintelligible gibberish that is so often considered the evidence of tongues. I am, of course, referring to the beliefs and convictions of those who would be identified as pentecostals or charismatics. I am not speaking in terms of condemnation regarding fellow believers in Christ, but I am speaking of a distinct difference and something

which I believe, for many, is a view held in error. Tongues refer to the speaking of foreign languages, not to unintelligible babble and mere noise that communicates no specific language at all.

To defend that, I would emphasize that is the primary meaning of the word “tongues.” A tongue is a language, and we still use that phrase today. Your native tongue is your native language. And we read in,

1 Cor. 13:1 “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.”

Tongues refer to the speaking of foreign languages, and I would also point out that the context here in Acts 2 makes that obvious.

Acts 2:5 “And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language.”

There the word rightly translated “language” is used as a synonym for “tongues.” And while some would say that the miracle was in the hearing—in other words the people speaking were just speaking unintelligible gibberish but, miraculously, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the people heard that gibberish in their own language, that isn’t what these words say. The work of the Holy Spirit was upon the speakers, not the hearers! The miraculous, supernatural power of the Holy Spirit was at work in those speaking, so that they spoke in foreign languages, the very languages of the people who were gathered in Jerusalem. So when the sound of tongues occurred, the confusion was that all those present heard God speaking to them in their own language.

The verses emphasize this miraculous revelation of God.

v.7-11

“We hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.” They heard their own language being spoken. And notice, then, what it was that they heard. They heard about “the wonderful works of God.” In other words, they heard the gospel! They heard the word of the gospel. And they understood it, because it was in their own language. And that is the purpose of these tongues. That is the significance of these tongues. No longer did the people of God have to come to the nation of Israel to be a member of the covenant community of God’s people. No longer did the Old Testament system of Jewish sacrifices and worship be required for the people of God. No longer could the nation of Israel claim the identity of the nation of God’s people. That identity now belongs to the church, and what is that stood out as this New Testament church was begun? What is it that so definitively expressed the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant? Simply this, that the gospel was for all the nations! For the Jew first, yes. But also for the Gentile.

Rom. 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”

In fact, now, in the New Covenant, that distinction between Jew and Gentile is gone. Removed.

Rom. 10:12 “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

Gal. 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Now, because of that, the gospel now has to go to every nation. Every language! And remember what the promise of Pentecost was,

Acts 1:8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

That, of course, goes right along with the Great Commission, Mat. 28:18 “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

So Pentecost is the first step of that process of going to “all the nations.” The gospel was preached to “all the nations” that were assembled in Jerusalem. And verses 9, 10, and 11 identify those nations. The point is this,

C. Tongues were a declaration of the gospel to all the nations of the world.

The people speaking in tongues weren't drunk, and some suggested in verse 13. They weren't speaking gibberish. Rather, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, now poured out upon the whole world, they were proclaiming the gospel, “the wonderful works of God”, to all the nations of the world. And God was with them, as he promised. And with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he remains with us to this day, and he will remain with us until the end of the age.

So that's what happened on the Day of Pentecost. The whole

world became the recipients of the promise of the gospel. Jesus would be the mediator for all the nations of the world, and his word would go to them, beginning with this supernatural revelation uttered by the first disciples on that great day 2000 years ago.

The work begun at Pentecost continues today. It continues in this very church in this very pulpit, where the gospel is preached to all. And for all who would believe, it is the power of God unto salvation.

Rom. 10:12 “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

May that great work of God on the day of Pentecost be continued through the work which he gives us to do as a church today, until the end of the age. And in that context, let me proclaim that gospel to you this morning. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation, that your sins might be forgiven. Trust in Jesus, not in yourself, in any attempt to make yourself acceptable to God. Repent and turn from your sins, that you might receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, that you might be saved.