

## Pentecost

We can begin to understand Pentecost by looking not at the Pentecost narrative in Acts but at a passage prior to that narrative:

*While staying with them, he—that is, Jesus—ordered them—the disciples—not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."*

--the disciples then ask Jesus if the time had come that he'd restore the Kingdom to Israel, and Jesus answers:

*"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

The day of Pentecost arrives...

- Pentecost was the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover, known as "the day of the first fruits" when the Israelites were to offer the first of the wheat harvest to God
- Pentecost was one of three pilgrimage feasts when all Israel gathered in Jerusalem
- which meant that it was a day when many different peoples were present there people whose presence symbolized Jesus' words, "all Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth"
- and, indeed, as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit came
- came with a sound like the rush of a violent wind...divided tongues as of fire, a tongue resting on each of them
- they were filled with the Holy Spirit and, thanks to the Spirit, began speaking in other languages

There are several things to note here...

- for all the Scriptural evidence linking receiving the Holy Spirit with baptism, there is no baptism at Pentecost
  - as the Gospel of John reminds us, the Holy Spirit comes and goes as it will
  - there needn't be any human initiative for the Holy Spirit to act...no need for people to say certain words, submit to certain actions for the Holy Spirit to come upon them
- should also note that the passage does *not* say the Holy Spirit *is* a wind or a fire...the passage speaks metaphorically, comparing the movement of the Spirit to the sound made by a rushing wind, and its presence to fire-like flames

- the presence of the Holy Spirit was indicated first by the people speaking in languages other than their own
  - they *weren't*, in other words, speaking in tongues
  - they were speaking in foreign languages that native speakers of those languages who happened to be present could understand
  - and *what* they were speaking was not just random stuff
  - they were speaking, verse 11 tells us, of God's deeds of power
  - in other words, this was proclamation...it was testimony...
    - the Greek word is *apophthengesthai* which means "to speak out, declare boldly and loudly"
  - precisely what Jesus indicated they'd do in being his witnesses to all the world

Pentecost, therefore, is important because

- it marked an in-breaking of heaven into human affairs in a way and to a degree like never before
- the Holy Spirit, uniquely found in Jesus during his earthly ministry, came at Pentecost to reside in humanity in a new and powerful way
- it is the birthday of the church...the onset of the church's mission
  - consider: Jesus left...life went on...Jesus did not come back
  - Jesus was with his followers, teaching them, making promises about the future
  - he told them he had to die, but that he'd rise again and go to heaven
  - this made no sense to them until they saw it with their own eyes
    - Jesus crucified...Jesus dead and buried...Jesus resurrected...Jesus ascends to heaven
  - while his followers' understanding of all Jesus taught and promised was helped immensely by seeing these things, their understanding was still limited
  - and in that limited understanding, they thought Jesus' absence would be short-lived
  - they really believed he'd only be gone a short time and then come back
  - but day gave way to day, week to week, month to month and, eventually, year to year...life went on and Jesus *didn't* come back

The fact Jesus wasn't coming back as everyone expected is part of the reason for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

- the Holy Spirit, uniquely found in Jesus during his earthly ministry, became Jesus' presence in Jesus' absence...to help, to teach, to guide, to comfort
- but the fact Jesus wasn't coming back as expected is also much of the reason for the church
  - it's a basic but profoundly significant fact: the church did not exist until *after* Jesus left
- with Jesus gone, following Jesus could not just be matter of sitting and waiting where you were, one eye on your watch and one on the door, expecting Jesus to knock at any minute

- after all...Jesus' teaching, all those ethics...didn't they demand you get up out of your chair and go on with your life?
- that through how you live you witness to the Kingdom
- and wasn't that living to be done in and for the community?
  
- that meant people coming together and going forth...
- and that meant being led and being empowered...
- it meant church...church led by the Holy Spirit
- which is why the narrative thrust of the remainder of the Book of Acts after Pentecost is the growth of the church under the direction of the Holy Spirit...
- groups of people gathering together to worship and to witness, to be nurtured and to be nurturing

In fact, beginning with Pentecost, the church, understood rightly, does not exist apart from the Holy Spirit...

- because the church was always intended to be about what the Holy Spirit is about: creating disciples, caring for ourselves and one another, blessing others, and growing the Kingdom
- furthermore, Pentecost tells us that the church and its mission are not just for the few but are for *all* people
- the people of God will once again be unified as one people, and the vehicle by which that unity will occur is the church

One people and a church for all those people is not a demand for uniformity...

- it is not a mandate that says to any one denomination or expression of the body of Christ that you are *it*...you are the one, true church
- that your mission is to convert all people to your way of understanding Jesus and to judge or denounce or—worse—kill those who dare defy you
- one people and a church for all those people is, instead, a demand that we respect diversity
  - we must never forget: when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, it didn't once more give everyone a single, common language that all God's people will be the same
  - the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost gave people the ability to speak and understand *other* languages and other peoples
  - unity is *not* uniformity