

Tongues of Fire

“When the day of Pentecost came, 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. 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.” Acts 2:1-4

If Joseph Barsabbas was upset over not becoming the twelfth apostle, his disappointment would have turned to joy by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Preaching in Constantinople in 400, John Chrysostom observed that there was “no longer any occasion for that person to grieve, who was not elected as was Matthias” because they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They did not merely receive the grace the Spirit, Chrysostom emphasized, they were filled with the Spirit (Homily IV, 25).

What happens next in Luke’s account of the acts of the apostles defines the Church in ways that no human institution can imitate and no religious organization can perpetuate.

The Church is called into being by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, not unlike Creation itself. Even as the “wind” or Spirit of God hovered over the dark, formless void in the beginning, the Holy Spirit hovered over the confusion and diversity of this collection of humanity in the upper room. This was all about to change dramatically, not only for the upper room disciples but for all us who believe. In Christ, we have “access to the Father by one Spirit” so that we are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:18-20).

Michael Green speaks of **the three act drama of the Holy Spirit**. Act one lasts from the beginning of the world’s history until the coming of Jesus Christ. God chooses Abraham upon whom to send his Spirit and through whom to bless the nations. He chooses Moses to lead Israel, the descendants of Abraham, out of bondage into the Promised land. The driving force behind this Salvation history is the Spirit of God descending on key individuals at special times. “On the whole, you had to be someone rather special in the Old Testament days to have the Spirit of God. A prophet, a national leader, a king, perhaps some specially wise person (Prov 1:23) or artistic person (Ex 31:3). . . .But the Spirit of God was not for every one. . . .The gift of God’s Spirit was on the whole to special people for special tasks” (Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Hodder, 1975, 25-26). This why Moses said to Joshua, “I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” (Num 11:29). And on Pentecost that is exactly what happened.

Act two began in Bethlehem. “God comes in person to make himself known” (Green, 15) “The

Word became flesh and made his dwelling with us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The author of Hebrews sums it up this way: “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:1-3).

During this act, Jesus alone is the man of the Spirit, revealing in his very person the reality of God. However, he promised that his followers would be *better off* after he left because he would send the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, who would universalize his presence in the hearts and minds of the disciples (Green, 43). “*It is for your good that I am going away,*” Jesus said. “Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because people do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. . . . When he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth” (Jn 16:7-13).

Act three began at Pentecost and it has not ended, “nor will it end until the completion of God’s purposes for this world at the return of Christ” (Green, 17). Special mention of the presence of the Holy Spirit is made at the beginning of all three dramatic acts. Genesis 1:1 speaks of the superintending presence of the Spirit bringing light out of darkness, forming order out of chaos, creating life out of nothing. In the Gospel of Luke, act two begins with the angel saying to Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). Act three began at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on all the believers.

Organic Church Growth

The timing of this event was important and by no means accidental. Pentecost, known as the Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22; Lev 23:15; Deut 16:9-12) or the Feast of the Harvest and the Day of First Fruits (Ex 23; Num 28:26) took place on the fiftieth day after the day following the Passover Sabbath. Pentecost was the second of the three great annual festivals rooted in Israel’s history since the days of the Exodus. The most important being the Passover and the other, the Feast of Tabernacles. As we have already seen in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus fulfilled everything the Passover stood for. The apostle Paul summed it well, when he wrote to the church at Corinth, “Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8).

“The greatest number of pilgrims attended the Feast of Pentecost, as that time of the year was best suited to travel. This was no doubt a factor in the providential ordering of events” (Williams,

22). Even as the Passover pointed forward to the atoning sacrifice of Christ and signified the source of all salvation, Pentecost signified the harvest and the first fruits of God's salvation. Pentecost marked the beginning of the church. Before this date, the followers of Jesus were believers, but now they were part of the "body of Christ." The parallel between the natural order and the spiritual order should not be overlooked. By design, the imagery of an agricultural harvest symbolizes the inception and growth of the church. This is consistent with Jesus' use of images to depict the growth of the Kingdom of God.

If we look to Jesus on the subject of church growth we come away with a decidedly different message than the one we receive from modern church growth experts. Jesus' images of growth do not transpose well into today's fascination with modern marketing, powerful personalities, entertaining "worship" and a full range of felt-need programs. His images of growth point away from humanistic planning and engineering to God's hidden work of grace. Jesus never even came close to prescribing Ten Steps to Church Growth. Instead, he drew analogies that insisted on a natural, organic growth process that remained a mystery to the harvester. In the parable of the growing seed, the farmer scatters the seed on the ground and miraculously, it grows! Jesus seems to relish telling us that the growth process is out of the farmer's hands. "Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head" (Mark 4:27-28).

Jesus' organic models of growth clearly suggest that the expansion of the Kingdom cannot be manufactured by human strategies. The mustard seed reality of the Kingdom of God should be respected (Mark 4:30f). What the world deems small and insignificant has the potential of growing great, not because of anything we do, but because of what God will do. In the parable of the seed and soils, God is sovereign and the good seed reproduces abundantly (Mark 4:20). Entrepreneurial church growth replaces a vision of Christ with human ambition and seeks to explain the mystery of God by man-made methodologies.

Jesus' growth strategy must not be interpreted as an excuse for sloth. As planters and harvesters we are part of the process, but the real growth remains a divine mystery rather than a human endeavor. If anything, Jesus' models of growth cause us to pray. He commanded, "Ask the Lord of the harvest...to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:38). He also reminded us that the cost for such growth is high, but not in the cost-effective ways we are in the habit of measuring today. The truth of the matter is that "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Jesus said this not only to explain his death, but our ministry. "The person who loves his life in the world will lose it, while the person who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be" (John 12:24-26). If we look to Jesus, the founder and finisher of our faith, we will not be tempted to feel that the Kingdom lies in our initiatives, methodologies and budgets.

The imagery of Pentecost helps us to comprehend the supernatural nature of the growth of the

church and saves us from overstrategizing and depending on our own ingenuity and clever techniques. It is important to plan and work hard, but we do so, fully dependent on the providence and provision of God. *Acts* describes “the initiative of the Spirit in ever-expanding circles of evangelismMission did not originate. . . .in the leadership of the Church. It was not a matter of Peter and subsequently Paul say, ‘What about a bit of evangelism?’ Luke does not teach us that the apostles initiated mission. They sat quietly in Jerusalem until the Spirit came upon them at Pentecost; then they could not keep quiet about the mighty deeds of God” (Green, 64).

“Is it conceivable,” asked Richard Halverson, “that God’s plan for world mission is at the mercy of the economy? Is it possible that the God who spoke the universe into existence, who owns the land, the silver and the gold, the cattle on a thousand hills, the earth and all its fullness, could be the victim of the economy?” Halverson went on to contrast “the immense effort, organization, planning, programming, and implementing” of the today’s church with “the sheer effortlessness of this spontaneous expansion of the primitive church.” Instead of relying on ministry professionals and programming, the early church manifested the power of the Holy Spirit through every-member ministry. The believer was Spirit-filled and he or she spoke of Christ in a natural, spontaneous way through the influence of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to the Holy Spirit there is no secular/spiritual dichotomy and the ministry of the church is not left to “spiritual” professionals.

The Baptism of the Spirit

The baptism of the Holy Spirit was accompanying by three supernatural phenomena, which Luke likened to natural phenomena. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit began with what sounded like a violent, rushing wind that filled the whole house, but it was not the wind, it was the Spirit. Then they saw, what looked like wildfire, which separated into tongues of fire and came to rest on each one of them, but it was not fire, it was the Spirit. Then they spoke in languages, other than their own, but not known by them, by the enabling power of the Spirit. What do these three supernatural manifestations of the Spirit signify and how does the comparison to natural phenomena, wind, fire and speech, illustrate their significance? The comparison to a violent wind sweeping through the whole house signifies the *invading Spirit*. The comparison to tongues of fire resting on each disciple signifies the *convicting Spirit*. And the ability to speak in other languages signifies the *prophesying Spirit*.

The invasion of the Spirit is described first of all as a powerful wind sweeping through the house. Like the wind, the Spirit cannot be tamed or domesticated. There can be a wild, violent dimension to the presence and power of God. The Spirit of God cannot be controlled or manipulated by human or natural forces. The origins of the word “spirit” in both Hebrew (*ruah*) and Greek (*pneuma*) are associated with “breath” and “wind” and convey the “twin notions of power and mystery” (Green, 18). In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus likened the Spirit to the wind. He said: “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:7-8).

The baptism of the Spirit with fire underscores the penetrating, purifying, and judging presence of the Spirit. John the Baptist spoke of Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire. It was a fire of judgment and righteousness: “His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Lk 3:16-17). Fire signifies purification in Isaiah’s vision of the Lord, high and lifted up (Isa 6:6). His lips are touched by a live coal from off the altar. The apostle John refers to the purifying presence of God in his vision of Christ with his “eyes like blazing fire” (Rev 1:14).

The dramatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost fulfills God’s promise. No longer does the Spirit fill select individuals as it did in the Old Testament, but each and every believer is filled with the Spirit. In the days of Solomon, God limited his presence to the Temple, but now we are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in us (1 Cor 3:16). The Gift of the Spirit is received by the entire church and universalizes the presence of the risen Lord Jesus in the mission of the church to the entire world. “Having believed, [we] are marked in [Christ] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:13-14).

The church is the arena in which that ‘heavenly invasion’ plays itself out. Because the Spirit has ‘invaded’ and brought a new, forward-looking orientation to the empowered church, because its redemption is sealed and guaranteed, because God’s nature has ‘infected’ human hearts, and because the very power that raised Jesus from the dead is accessible, the church should live differently—as ‘a colony of heaven.’ We throw ourselves into the present, precisely because the future is already secured. Living righteously before one another, is not a matter of doing duties but of living the life of heaven now (Fee). **The Spirit’s ministry includes both fruit and gifts. Christ’s nature and ministry must be recreated in character (fruit) and in service (gifts) and both are intended for the benefit of the believing community and a needy and lost world.**

Babel Reversed

The third manifestation of the Spirit, following the sound which was like a violent rushing wind and the sight which seemed like tongues of fire, was the speech of all the disciples. We are told, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (2:4). Luke focuses on this third dimension of the Spirit’s outpouring in two ways: by emphasizing the multi-national character of the crowd that was drawn to hear the disciples and by explaining their reaction. It is estimated that over a hundred thousand Jewish pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. It was the most well attended of the three annual feasts because it was the easiest time of year to travel. They came from great distances and diverse cultures. Luke describes them as “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.”

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was perfectly timed to have the greatest impact on the world and to once again affirm the inclusiveness of the Gospel. Luke has been attuned to this theme from the beginning of this gospel. We see it in Simeon’s prophecy, when he dedicated the baby Jesus, “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:30-32). It is evident in the testimony of John the

Baptist, when he declares, “all mankind will see God’s salvation” (Lk 3:6) and noted in Jesus’ references to the widow of Sidon and to Naaman the Syrian (Lk 4:25-27). It is the truth behind Jesus’ commendation of the Roman soldier (Lk 7:9), his parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), and his recognition of the Samaritan leper who returned to give thanks for being healed (Lk 17:11-19).

Luke details the diversity of people represented in the crowd: Parthians (Iran), Medes (Armenia, Azerbaijan), Elamites (northern Iraq), Mesopotamians (Iraq), Judeans, Cappadocians (Turkey), people from Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia (western coast of Asia Minor), Egyptians, Libians, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs. Luke moves from East to West, identifying people living west of the Caspian Sea, then those living in Asia Minor or modern day Turkey, followed by Palestine and Syria. He includes North Africa, Egypt and Libya, visitors from Rome across the Mediterranean and finally people from the island of Crete and people from the kingdom of Nabatea (those Arabs living to the east and south of Palestine). Luke doesn’t see a mere crowd or a mass of humanity, but he observes an array of cultures. He sees the potential for God’s fulfillment of his covenant promise to Abraham, that stated, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3). It is true that Luke is speaking of God-fearing Jews, but the implication is that the Jews were meant to be the means through whom God would bless the world.

It is important to note that what gathered the crowd was speech that was both intelligible and indigenous. Luke says that they came together “in bewilderment because each one heard their own language being spoken.” The question running through the crowd was, “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?” The phenomenon was neither eccentric nor weird but rather meaningful and wonderful. They exclaimed, “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

[Perhaps it is best to think of “tongues” as having a range of meanings from the miraculous ability to speak in other languages (Acts 2:5-12) to unintelligible ecstatic speech (1 Cor 14:23), and from the rhythmic rhapsody of adoring worship to the inarticulate, inward groans of the suffering believer (Rom 8:22-27). All of these forms of communication could come under the activity of speaking in tongues.]

The first impact of the Holy Spirit on the world broke the language barrier. In that spontaneous moment, when the disciples moved out into the world, the curse of Babel was reversed. Down through the ages the Tower of Babel has stood as a symbol of every man-made attempt to build human solidarity and community independent of God (Gen 11). It was one of the earliest attempts to present a united front against God, with the result that God judged their pride and arrogance by confusing their language and scattering them over the face of the earth. The native etymology for Babylon is ‘Bab IL’ which means ‘the gate of God.’ The Hebrews interpreted Babel quite differently. For them it meant ‘confusion.’ Down through the ages we hear the Babylonians declare, “We are the gate to God” and the Bible counters, “No, you are confusion.” Throughout the Word of God, Babylon symbolizes a great and mighty civilization turned away from God. Pentecost, and the outpouring of the Spirit of God, was meant to reverse the curse of Babel. The Babel busting Galilean disciples declared the wonders of God in known languages so that people could understand in their native languages. They heard the wonders of God praised in their mother tongue. [there are 6,809 living languages today: 1,013 in the Americas; 2,058 in Africa; 230 in Europe; 2,197 in Asia; 1,311 in the Pacific (www.ethnologue.com)].

Behind our native languages is a common mother tongue that we were all meant to share. *God speaks*

our language so that we can learn to speak his language. Eugene Peterson writes:

“We are the only creatures in this incredible, vast creation, [dealing with language]. Language is unique to us human beings. Turnips complete a fairly complex and useful life cycle without the use of words. Roses grace the world with extraordinary beauty and fragrance without uttering a word...It is quite impressive really, what goes on around us without words: ocean tides, mountain heights, stormy weather, turning constellations, genetic codes, bird migrations—most, in fact, of what we see and hear around us, a great deal of it incredibly complex, but without language, wordless. And we, we human beings, have words. We can use language. We are the only ones in this stunning kaleidoscopic array of geology and biology and astronomy, to use words. We share a great deal with the rest of creation. We have much in common with everything around us, the dirt beneath our feet, the animals around us, the stars above us, and we recognize links in this family identity. But when it comes down to understanding our humanity, who we are in this vast scheme of things, we find ourselves attending to language, the fact that we speak words, and what happens to us when we do...”

The one who reveals God to us is named Word. This human nature of ours with its mysterious and unique capacity for language is paralleled in the nature of God. God speaks. In the term we use to refer to our interest in God, theology, the two words are set along side each other and then combined; theo meaning God and logos meaning word. Theos is capable of logos, logos is characteristic of theos. Then the significance of this parallel hits us: We are capable of speech; God reveals himself in speech. In the complete revelation of God, the Word became flesh” (Crux, 12/90, 3).

Years ago I met a missionary in one of my seminary classes who had just returned from a four year term in France with his wife and children. They had spent most of their first term trying to learn the language. The experience had become needlessly and regretfully traumatic. When they arrived in France, he vowed he would only use French and not speak a word of English to his wife and children. The effect of the vow was disastrous. His version of devotion and zeal created unnecessary strains in the marriage and a negative impact on his children. When they returned to Canada they all found it very difficult to speak in English. This missionary reminds me of our tendency to forget our one and only mother tongue. Many of us so much time speaking the language of the world that we forget the Word of God. It is as if we have vowed to speak only the language of Babel.

We don't know exactly what the disciples said, but we do know they declared the wonders of God. They declared the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9). If the heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands; if day after day they pour forth speech and night after night they display knowledge, so too, can these ordinary Galileans, filled with the Spirit, praise God. If there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard, then the Holy Spirit can use every language and dialect to

communicate the wonder of God. If nature's voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world, then the Spirit of Christ can bring God's message home to every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9).

Luke not only described where the people had come from but how they responded. There were two reactions. Some were amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Others however, "made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine.'" Wherever the real presence of the Holy Spirit is evident we can expect both reactions. Some will give the message serious consideration. They will take it in and try to understand it. They are the genuine seekers, who are open minded enough to be amazed and perplexed. They are honest enough to ask the searching questions. Others, however, will easily dismiss the real work of the Holy Spirit as if it was some aberration or something goofy. In *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has a senior devil instruct his apprentice, Wormwood, in the fine art of flippancy: ". . . Every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it. If prolonged, the habit of Flippancy builds up around a person the finest armor plating against the Enemy [God] that I know" (XI, 52). Thankfully, Luke indicated both reactions, lest believers begin to evaluate the work of the Holy Spirit on grounds that appeal to the world. Believers should keep in mind the words of the psalmist, "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them" (Ps 2:4). It is helpful to remember that even at Pentecost some in the world couldn't tell the difference between being intoxicated and being filled with the Spirit.

Before the Holy Spirit came, the disciples were not safe out in the real world. There is no telling how much damage they might have caused if they had been released upon the unsuspecting world *without the Holy Spirit!* But now that the Holy Spirit had come they couldn't remain locked up in the upper room afraid to go out and face the world.

These three dimensions of the Holy Spirit are evident wherever the Body of Christ is present. Like the wind, the Spirit moves into our lives suddenly and inexplicably. With mystery and power the Spirit of God invades. This is not something we can orchestrate or program. Like fire, the Spirit purifies and judges. The Spirit of righteousness and truth establishes the presence of God in the life of the Church. This is not something that we can create through indoctrination or legislation. And like our own native language, God speaks to us in unmistakable ways that we cannot ignore. God's invading, convicting, prophesying Spirit communicates the Gospel in amazing ways.

Earl Palmer, pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, describes the problem well.

"Since the organization of the Christian church as an institution is so physically real and apparently understandable, I begin to imagine that the most important task for me as a Christian is to manage this institution and to make it succeed for God's purposes. So I put my organizational mind to this task, only to find that this becomes a destructive error because my mind becomes focused almost exclusively on the procedures of governance and the preservation of the institution of the church. I soon become a church leader primarily concerned with making sure that my plans (or the plans of my group) prevail in the church. I am organizing the organization and when my own expectations for that

organization become too important to me, I have lost the vision of the mystery of God's presence in my own life and among these people who are God's people.

Organizations take on a dynamic life of their own, but that life does not have its source in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It springs instead from the organization itself. When this happens a Christian church or congregation of believers can become self-referential, self-justifying and in the end self-serving. The slogans may be gospel words but the focus is organizational and the motivation is power. This is the organizational captivity of the Christian. No one ever sets out to become an organization Christian, but it happens because it is easier to attend meetings than to pray and read the Bible" (Palmer, *Integrity in a World of Pretense*, IVP, 1992, p.41).