

The Meaning of Pentecost

by Mark Jarvinen

¹When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.... Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:1-4, 12).

It seems we can handle almost anything in life if we know why it happened, or what it means. For example, undiagnosed physical symptoms are far more difficult to handle than a physical problem for which we can find a name. As a pastor, how often I've heard the words, **“If I knew what to call it, I could deal with it. It's the not knowing that makes this so difficult.”**

Similarly, during my college days in the L.A. area, a friend and I worked Saturdays at the estate of a wealthy department store magnate. One day we came to work and found a note from the estate owner. **“Dig trenches 1 foot deep and six inches wide between the stakes posted on the lawn by the tennis court.”** The work went slow, until the owner appeared and showed us the diagram for the automatic sprinkler system he planned to install. Knowing the purpose for our digging speeded our work.

We humans have always asked the **“why”** question. On the fiftieth day after Easter, the promised Holy Spirit descended upon

believers in Jesus Christ, with **“a sound like the rush of a violent wind ... Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them ... devout Jews from every nation under heaven ... heard them speaking in the native language of each.”** Luke, the author of **ACTS**, tells us that they were utterly amazed and astonished. People from every nation under heaven were hearing God’s Word in their own language. As they got over their amazement, they asked each other, **“What does this mean?”** The church was given three things on Pentecost. Let’s consider them together so we can better understand the meaning of Pentecost.

I. THE CHURCH WAS GIVEN THE PASSION OF THE DISCIPLES.

The coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost signifies the beginning of the church age – the birthday of the church. Those who came to that birthday party were never the same.

Think of the first recipients of the promised Holy Spirit. This initial group of recipients was probably larger than just the twelve disciples. **Acts 1:15** mentions Peter standing up to address a group of 120 believers regarding a replacement for **Judas Iscariot**. It was probably this same group of 120 who first received the Holy Spirit. It would have taken a group of this size to create the impact among the masses that the Bible says took place on the day of Pentecost. Since the resurrection, these believers had maintained a relatively low profile, obeying Jesus’ command in **Acts 1:4** not to leave Jerusalem, **“but to wait for the gift my Father promised,”** i.e. the Holy Spirit. When the gift arrived, however, their profile became passionate. They hit the streets declaring the mighty works of God

The mission of the church, to reach the world with the gospel, received a real jump start that day as Jews from all over the region heard the message in their own language and then, upon coming to faith, returned to their homes to share their stories. One can only imagine the shock waves that ran through the communities to which these new believers returned, as people became aware of their changed lives. There was no apathy or indifference concerning Jesus Christ. Like the disciples who had preached to them, they too were passionate in their witness. Their lives were reoriented. A new reality had gripped their souls. Their world had been rocked. They were swept up in something larger than life. They were part of a new enterprise with global implications. Although they needed teaching to fill the gaps in their knowledge, they knew the risen Christ was at the center of their understanding.

The passion of these new believers at Pentecost, who were filled with the Spirit, is why people in our day and age, like a pastor from Indianapolis, can passionately share their faith with others. One day, several years ago, Pastor Russ Blowers took his turn to stand before his **Rotary Club** and share the following statement about his job:

“I’m with a global enterprise. We have branches in every country in the world. We have representatives in nearly every parliament and boardroom on earth. We’re into motivation and behavior alteration. We run hospitals, feeding stations, crisis pregnancy centers, universities, publishing houses, and nursing homes. We care for our clients from birth to death. We are into life insurance and fire insurance. We perform spiritual heart transplants. Our original Organizer owns all the real estate on earth plus an assortment of galaxies and constellations. He knows everything and lives everywhere. Our product is free for the asking. There’s not enough money in the world to buy it. Our CEO was born in a

hick town, worked as a carpenter, didn't own a home, was misunderstood by his family, hated by enemies, walked on water, was condemned to death without a trial, and arose from the dead – I talk with him everyday. THE CHURCH IS THE MOST AMAZING ORGANIZATION IN THE WORLD AND I'M HONORED TO A PART OF IT.” (Sermon Central)

This is the passion for Christ and His mission that's available because of Pentecost, not only to pastors like Russ Blowers, but to all who believe. The Holy Spirit still indwells all who come to a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, helping them to share the belief that the church is the most amazing organization in the world! When the nature and mission of the church are properly understood, neutrality is not an option.

II. THE CHURCH WAS GIVEN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Jesus predicted it in **Acts 1:8**, when He said, **“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses”** In **Acts 2:4** we read of the fulfillment: **“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”** There is a power at work here that goes beyond mere human capability. The obvious meaning here is that the Holy Spirit enabled them to speak in languages they had not previously learned. I studied **Latin** for two years in high school, **NT Greek** both in college and seminary, and **OT Hebrew** in seminary, and I'm here to tell you it doesn't come easy. Vocabulary and syntax are not learned by osmosis. I spent more time memorizing vocabulary flash cards and rules of grammar than I care to remember. Therefore, what happened at Pentecost is nothing

short of miraculous. Any time God's power flows through human channels in an extraordinary way to effect a change, you can be sure something miraculous has taken place.

Certainly God's power at Pentecost was demonstrated dramatically and extraordinarily. Yet, that's not always the case with God's power. Someone has pointed out how power can be used in at least **two ways**: it can be **unleashed**, or it can be **harnessed**. The energy in ten gallons of gasoline, for instance, can be released explosively by dropping a lighted match into the can. It can also be channeled through the engine of a small car in a controlled burn and used to transport a person 350 miles. Explosions are spectacular, but controlled burns have lasting effects – staying power.

The power of the Holy Spirit works both ways. At Pentecost, 50 days after the first Easter, the Spirit exploded on the scene; with a presence like **“tongues of fire.”** Thousands were affected by one burst of God's power. But the Holy Spirit is also harnessed by the church – the organization (or should I say organism) that God has tapped for the long haul. Through individual worship, prayer, Bible Study, fellowship, service, and witness, the church's staying power is in evidence. Although often less dramatic, God's power harnessed over the long haul is no less real.

We all love fireworks displays on the **4th of July**. Somehow amidst the ooh's and aah's of the captivated crowd, it's easier to recall **“the rockets red glare, and the bombs bursting in air,”** that speak to us of our freedom as Americans. But are we any less free on any other

day of the year? Are we any less proud of the stars and stripes in February than we are in July? In the same way, God's power is just as real and meaningful, whether it is unleashed in a sudden burst or harnessed over the long haul. Let's not be afraid of the Holy Spirit's power when it's unleashed, nor discouraged when its harnessed. In both ways, God is at work to accomplish His purposes.

III. THE CHURCH WAS GIVEN THE PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL.

Isn't it just like God to ensure that each one heard the disciples speaking in his or her own native language on the day of Pentecost? Greek was the universal language at that time. Why didn't one disciple simply speak in the one language every person gathered in Jerusalem would likely understand? The way Pentecost happened is a vivid reminder that God knows every language on earth and wants to communicate with every person on earth in the language they know best, their "**heart language.**" God took the initiative to make Himself known to us in the way we can best understand and appreciate. On the day of Pentecost, the gospel was tailor made for each person present – they heard it in their own language.

The God of the Bible is not a distant God who could care less about us. In fact, He couldn't care more. God the Father sent His Son, into the world to seek and to save those who were lost. "**God so loved the world that he gave his only son ...**" And of course we know He went on to live the sinless life that we could not live; and then died the shameful death that we deserved to die, by shedding his blood on Calvary's cross. That's how far God was willing to go for

us. After Jesus rose from the grave, but before He ascended back to the Father, He promised that the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, would be sent to indwell all who believed. That was God's way of saying, **"I'll never fail you nor forsake you. I won't abandon you."** On Pentecost, God kept that promise.

The gospel is God's personalized **"I love you,"** message to each of us. Pentecost tells us that God wants to extend that message of love through us to others. It's not ours to keep. It's ours to share. If we don't share it, who will?

Perhaps you have heard the story of the angel **Gabriel** meeting Jesus on the day of His ascension into heaven and asking :

"How did it go Master, how did it go on earth?"

"It went poorly," Jesus said. **"They nailed me to a cross. But I preached the love of God as long as I could."**

Then said Gabriel, **"What did you do to ensure that your mission would be carried out?"**

Jesus said, **"I chose 12 men and gave them the gospel of God's love for all mankind. I told them to go and tell others."**

Gabriel replied, **"But what if they don't go? What is your plan B?"**

The master replied, **"There is no plan B."**

Pentecost means that Jesus lives in the hearts of those who believe in Him, but it also means that it's our job to carry the gospel to others. **There is no plan B.** It's time for the church to recapture the purpose of the Gospel – the salvation of the world. This is no time for the church to be limping along like a crippled giant. Pentecost means its time to march like a conquering army. **"Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before."**

Pastor Rick Kirchoff, boldly addressed the annual conference of his denomination several years ago with the following words, which are still relevant today. He said, **“When the Gospel is put forth in the power of the Holy Spirit amazing things begin to happen:”**

**Barriers are broken, communities are formed,
Opposites are reconciled, unity is established,
Disease is cured, addiction is broken,
Cities are renewed, races are reconciled,
Hope is established, people are blessed,
And church happens.**

He closed with these words:

**So be ready, get ready ... God is up to something...
Discouraged folks cheer up, dishonest folks ‘fess up,
Sour folks sweeten up, closed folks open up,
Gossipers shut up, conflicted folks make up,
Sleeping folks wake up, lukewarm folks, fire up,
Dry bones shake up, and pew potatoes stand up ...
Cuz if Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world is lifted up,
He’ll draw all men to Himself (Sermon Central).**

On Pentecost the church was given **1)** the passion of the disciples; **2)** the power of the Holy Spirit; and **3)** the purpose of the gospel. That’s what Pentecost meant then, and that’s what it still means now. May we be renewed in this understanding today, so that God’s Kingdom work will continue to make strides until Jesus returns. **A-men.**