



# Pentecost: Witnessing to the Holy Spirit Then and Now

*In a time when modern church people struggle to understand the meaning of the church and its ministry, an understanding of Pentecost and its call to be witnesses can enlighten and clarify the church's sense of identity and mission.*

## Introduction

Three congregations that share the building owned by the Arlington Church of the Brethren celebrate Pentecost in a shared worship. As English-speaking Brethren join in songs and prayers with the members of the Spanish-speaking Iglesia de Restauracion Pacto Eterno and the congregants of the Cambodian Alliance Evangelical Church, their voices evoke the sounds of the first Pentecost Sunday. These modern Christians transform the boundaries of culture and language and witness the meaning of one Lord, one church.

Along with Christmas and Easter, Pentecost recognizes a major milestone in the Christian story. It was on that day, fifty days after the resurrection of Christ, that the church was born through the fire of the Holy Spirit. Although Pentecost does not enjoy the popular embellishments of Santa and the Easter Bunny so loved by florists and candy makers everywhere, it does deserve the energy and attention of believers. In a time when modern church people struggle to understand the meaning of the church and its ministry, an understanding of Pentecost and its call to be witnesses can enlighten and clarify the church's sense of identity and mission.

## Hebrew Celebration

Long before Pentecost (which means "fiftieth day") was a Christian celebration, it was observed by the Israelites as a harvest festival. The feast began on the fiftieth day after the first day of Passover. Originally called Feast of Weeks or Shavuot, it was the occasion to give thanks for the first fruits of the harvest. Over the centuries the



The power of God descended on Pentecost to equip the church; it was not the talents, skills, or experiences of the men and women of the upper room that birthed the church.

meaning evolved from its agrarian focus and became a celebration of God's gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

The Jewish Shavuot lasts two days and involves several distinct practices. It is common on the first night to stay up all night reading the Torah and to gather early in the morning to pray. As on the Sabbath, there is to be no work on Shavuot. At least one dairy meal is eaten, and the biblical readings are from the book of Ruth. David the king is said to have died on Shavuot and was the ancestor of Ruth, leading to this tradition.<sup>1</sup>

On that first Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus, Jewish believers from all the lands around the Mediterranean had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of this important Jewish festival. The men and women who had followed Jesus were gathered still in the upper room. Since they were worshipping Jews, it is probably safe to assume that they had been up all night reading the Torah and had gathered early to pray.

These men and women were first of all Jews. They still practiced the traditions of their faith, observed its holy days, and obeyed the torah. Second, they had been dis-

ciples of the man called Jesus and believed him to be the Messiah. During the last fifty days, their lives had been turned upside down. Now they were unsure what they were to do. They were both confused and expectant.

After the resurrection, we are told that Jesus spent forty days appearing occasionally and instructed the apostles not to leave Jerusalem. God will send you the baptism of the Holy Spirit, he told them. Confused, they wanted to know when he would restore the earthly kingdom of Israel. This, he said, is not something you need to know (Acts 1:1–8).

He rose into the heavens after he spoke his final words to them: “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” (Acts 1:8). Still confused, they went back to Jerusalem to wait. They had no idea when the Spirit would come, how it would come, or what it would mean to have power to witness.

Now it was Pentecost. Suddenly the upper room was filled with a rush of sound and motion, wind, fire, tongues. The men and women burst from the house into the street, full of stories about Jesus. Those who were gathered from all over the world—and across time—were stunned and amazed. Most understood the words the men and women were saying; many wondered what had happened; some figured they were drunk.

In such a cacophony, the church of Jesus Christ was born!

## Luke and Acts

It is not possible to fully understand the account of the first Christian Pentecost and to ask what it means for the church today without putting the story into the context of both Luke’s Gospel and the book of Acts. These books together constitute a single narrative bound together by a common purpose. Each addressed to “most excellent Theophilus,” they are the story of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the emergence of his church.

Luke announces in the beginning of his Gospel his desire to write “an orderly account” of what has happened (Luke 1:1–4). What he writes is a mixture of history, story, and theology. Since Luke’s goal is not history but a theological story, we must read with our eyes open to what Luke has to say about God and God’s actions through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Luke and Acts are firmly rooted in the salvation history of Israel. The author deeply believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promise to redeem Israel through the coming of a messiah. He makes clear in Acts that the purpose of the church is to declare that reality to all the peoples of the earth.

Luke’s theological perspective is consistent through both Luke and Acts. First of all, God is a maker and keeper of promises. God promised Israel that a messiah would come and would bring them salvation. Luke maintains that in Jesus Christ this promise of God was fulfilled and completed. As we look through Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14–36) we see this affirmation again and again. He begins with words of promise from the prophet Joel and goes on to quote from Psalms. God made a promise, and in Jesus that promise was fulfilled.

The second thing Luke wants us to know about God is that God is the central player in this story of Pentecost. Nothing that the men and women of the upper room did brought about the coming of the Spirit. It was God’s time and God’s way. In every way God was the initiator, the planner, the starring actor. The power of God descended on Pentecost to equip the church; it was not the talents, skills, or experiences of the men and women of the upper room that birthed the church.

Theologians often refer to this combination of story, history, and theology found in Luke’s writing and in other books of the Bible as kerygma. Kerygma is the inspired telling of the story that reaches beyond words on the page to become the living Word of God. It is this, says William Willimon, that “unleashes the power of the resurrected Christ so that the gap between the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Lord is bridged by the Spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

## Pentecost Today

Twenty-first-century Christians may find it a challenge to celebrate Pentecost year after year. For many it is one Sunday when red is seen both on the pulpit and on the preacher, the Scripture is taken from Acts, and there is conversation about the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church. It may not seem like a really big deal.

Modern conversation often focuses on the particulars of the story and whether the story is an analogy or metaphor. Certainly loud winds don’t enter buildings. Certainly tongues of fire do not fly around and land on people. Certainly a group of Hebrew speakers



Is the Holy Spirit still able to fill a room with fire and wind?

don't suddenly become multilingual. The unbelievable becomes such a stumbling block that we may question the whole event.

Others feel they must accept the account of the event as accurate. The Holy Spirit did come and was manifest as fire and tongues and wind. The people did all understand each other. But it was a one-time occurrence and not something that the church in the following centuries can expect to happen again. The church needed a jolt to get started and to get the people fired up. However, the Holy Spirit has been domesticated over the years and no longer makes such dramatic appearances.

A suggestion is to read this story as if it happened yesterday and ask what it has to say to today's church. Such a choice requires that we ask ourselves some difficult questions. Where is the Holy Spirit today? Is the Holy Spirit still able to fill a room with fire and wind? How are we like the men and women in the upper room? How can the fire of the Holy Spirit change us? What does it mean to witness to the good news that God is both a promise maker and promise keeper?

## Today's Church

Most of us describe the church today in different ways. It is an institution; it is the local congregation; it is the worldwide body of believers. As an institution it is often characterized by boards and agencies, national and local staff, shrinking budgets, reorganization, and a general attempt to be effective without enough money or people. Many local congregations face shrinking budgets and memberships and a never-ending struggle to get new members and to find new directions. As a worldwide body of believers we see divisions and differences, struggles over doctrine, and competition for members.

Today's American church often reflects the individualism of our culture. We live in a society of "me" with little

understanding of the meaning of "we." This is reflected in an intense focus on individual salvation and the question "What can the church do for me?" While there has been an increased interest in the person of Jesus and in the nature of spirituality in society in general, "the theology and life of the community of faith have been largely neglected."<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis throughout both the Old and New Testaments is on the community of God's people. When God called the people of Israel into a covenant relationship, God's promises were intended for a whole people, not individuals. Peter did not preach a word of individual salvation as much as issue an invitation to be part of a body of people who believed that Jesus was God's Messiah.

The second chapter of Acts describes the new community that formed at Pentecost. In many ways it stands in stark contrast to many churches today. Not only did the community gather for meals and prayer and not only did they listen to the teaching of the apostles, but they also shared what they owned with one another, even selling possessions to provide for others. They ate with glad and generous hearts, and "the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b).

## You Are My Witnesses

More than two thousand years ago Christ called those men and women to be witnesses. Christ still calls us to be witnesses and to tell what we know is true. The television personality Oprah Winfrey often asks guests what they know for sure. That is also a question today's Christians must answer. It is impossible to be a witness if we do not know for sure.

A witness is someone who tells what he or she knows is true. We often associate witnesses with crimes and with court trials. Witnesses are called to take an oath about the truth of what they will say and then to explain what they know about the case before the court. What did you see? What did you hear? What happened?

The modern church can ask what is still true as it celebrates Pentecost today and struggles to rediscover the meaning of being a witness. It is still true that our God is a God who makes and keeps promises. It is still true that our God acted in history through the person of Jesus Christ to redeem God's people. It is still true that the

church is the child of the Holy Spirit and not the talents, skills, or experiences of its members.

The second chapter of Acts presents a challenge to today's church. It shows us a version of the church that met together for meals and worship, listened together to the teaching of the apostles, shared possessions with one another in such a way that no one was in need, and celebrated with glad and generous hearts. People wanted to join this church! What did they have that many churches today are missing?

Pentecost is just the beginning of the church. Just as we would not assume to know a person by hearing only about the day she was born, we should not assume we know all there is to know about the early church by reading about Pentecost. To fully understand the challenge the new church presents to the contemporary church, we must read the rest of Acts.

The church did not stop with one dramatic event; it became a community of people who could not be stopped. They did what Jesus commanded them on the mountain. They told the story of God's Redeemer in Jerusalem, and then they started to tell people in Samaria and beyond. Acts ends with Paul's witness from Rome, which was the center of that part of the world.

Along the way they were challenged to do difficult things. In chapter 10, Peter had to overcome his preoccupation with Jewish dietary laws so that he could eat with Gentiles. In chapter 9, Paul had to see the world in a new way so that he could become a witness for the Christ. In chapter 8, Phillip had to put aside his preju-

dice about foreigners so that he could baptize a stranger. At no time did any of them ask what the church was going to do for them.

Again and again and again throughout Acts, the Holy Spirit gave men and women the power to do things they never imagined they could do. The Holy Spirit gave birth to witnesses who told the truth of what they knew about God's Messiah. For two thousand years witnesses have continued to do the same thing. If this were not true, then none of us would have heard this good news.

Perhaps the message of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit is still giving birth to the church and inspiring witnesses despite worries and appearances to the contrary. Listen and you will hear English and Hispanic and Cambodian voices raised in song celebrating their one Lord and their membership in the church of Jesus Christ.

## About the Writer

*Nancy Ferguson is a certified educator and a retired Presbyterian minister. She lives on the eastern shore of Virginia near Chincoteague Island, where she writes study resources for camps and congregations.*

## Endnotes

1. Tracey R. Rich, "Welcome to Judaism 1001!" at, <http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday0.htm> and Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center, "Jewish Holidays," Chabad.org, <http://www.chabad.org/holidays>.
2. William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 13.
3. Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called to Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 2.