

“Pentecost Wonders”

Acts 2:1-13

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^[a] as the Spirit enabled them.

5Now they were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11(both Jews and converts to Judaism Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

13Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."^[b]

INTRODUCTION

Today we will welcome eight new members into the life of this congregation. Two will receive the sign of baptism. One other young person already “joined” with the Confirmation Class (Thursday) and we will welcome him and baptize him on another Sunday. We naturally rejoice when new folks join us. When people come to faith, when young people join the church, when babies are born, when folks who have been away for years return—we thank God for the ways He moves to increase our numbers and to enrich the fellowship.

Today is Pentecost Sunday and we are studying ACTS chapter 2 in which Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit and the first Christian sermon and the birth of the Church and the first new member class in church history.

After Peter’s sermon the people were convicted of sin and moved to turn in faith to Jesus. And Luke adds, almost matter-of-factly; *“and three thousand souls were added that day.”* If I had been writing the account I might have led with that fact.

News flash! Read all about it. Three thousand people join the church. And all by profession of faith. Wow! That’s quite a story. The biggest new member class I ever taught was 36 persons. I thought that was good. But the scene of 3000 people converting is neither the biggest nor the most striking part of the story. Luke leads with the **Holy Spirit** part of the story. Of course, he may be following the chronological sequence.

-first the Holy Spirit phenomena draws a crowd.

- then follows Peter's interpretation sermon.
- then the crowd's heartfelt response.
- and finally a description of the early church.

That appears to be the actual step-by-step process. Luke begins with a description of amazing and hard-to-describe details of Pentecost wonders. And maybe this is even more wondrous than the fact that 3000 people believed on the spot!

When you hear stories of hard-to-explain happenings what is your usual reaction? The *miraculous* and the *bizarre* challenge our rational sensibilities. Many of the stories in the NT qualify as miraculous. And I could show you a few accounts in the OT that might qualify as miraculous *and* bizarre--how about a talking donkey? The story of Pentecost in Acts 2 features several unusual phenomena.

1. *sound* like a violent wind (*pneuma*=wind=spirit)
2. *looks* like tongues of fire (seen)
3. they all (120) were filled with H.S. and spoke in other languages (*speech*)

What do you make of these strange happenings that Luke describes? How do you explain and interpret such phenomena? And what purpose or purposes do the so-called signs and wonders serve? Why did God act in such a way? Do we know for sure it was God acting and not Luke being carried away by—by what? Luke, the doctor and historian, actually seems to be a rather careful writer observing and recording what he witnessed or heard from reliable men and women. His gospel and this second volume (Acts) appear to this preacher to be sane and sober-minded narratives.

So back to our question. If this book and the rest of the NT is the Word of God—what is God saying through the Pentecost event? How are his purposes reflected in what was heard and seen and experienced by the 120 disciples and the crowd of pilgrims?

The clue lies in what Luke emphasizes after he describes the three phenomena. His emphasis is on the *glossalalia*—the speaking in tongues or in languages unknown to the speakers. Here are Luke's conclusions:

First, this speech is not a question of intoxication (Peter begins his sermon with this assertion). Secondly, it was not a mistake of hearing. Thirdly it was not incoherent speech (babbling). Do you remember how babies babble and imitate speech sounds before they remarkably learn how to shape sounds into meaningful words? The Pentecost speech event reflected a supernatural ability to speak in recognizable languages. This is seen in the astonishment of the crowd. They begin to hear stories about God's great deeds in their own languages—

spoken by these Galilean Jesus people. And fourthly, Luke attributes this work to the Holy Spirit.

Some of the crowd began jeering that these Christian speakers were intoxicated—filled with alcoholic spirits. Then Peter rose up to explain things to the crowd...

That's Luke's emphasis—the transmission of gospel truths through Spirit-enabled translated speech. Now let's add in three background scripture texts that help us make sense of this remarkable scene in Jerusalem.

1. Joel's prophecy about the Spirit (Peter mentions)
2. Acts 1 promise (Jesus' promise about the Spirit)
3. Babel-language confusing remedied at Pentecost (not reversed)

CONCLUSION

Do you see how God's purpose of blessing persons from the world's nations or people groups begins to reach a new level of fulfillment when the Holy Spirit transforms ordinary Christian believers into empowered Christian witnesses? The supernatural ability to speak other languages as witnesses may have been a one-time miracle. I know lots of missionaries who would want to have this gift and who would have liked to skip language school altogether! And I know lots of preachers who would be pleased if all their hearers came to faith after one sermon! But it seems that God uses language and culture learning, Bible translation, preaching, church planting, medical missions, micro-finance, relief & development etc.—plus Holy Spirit enabling to send forth witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

When new people enter into an assembly of Christ followers, what do they find? Will they be welcomed? Will they be accepted? Will folks who are "older in the faith" offer loving guidance and support? The evangelism & church growth experts refer to the process of newcomers finding their way in a new church setting as "*assimilation*."

Example: Swift Creek challenge (281 at first service with a core of 40 people). That was a 7:1 discipling ratio.

But in Jerusalem the base congregation numbered 120 and they faced the challenge of assimilating and discipling 3000 new folks. That's a 30:1 ratio. Of course some of these were visitors to the city and festival—I guess they returned home without much teaching and training. But let's suppose even half of the total stayed in the city and enrolled in basic Christianity classes—that is still a more than 10:1 ratio.

Our challenge is not so great numbers-wise. But we must not shirk our duties nor neglect our opportunities to help young Christians and new members assimilate into the faith and into this church family. Christianity is caught as well as taught. Mentors, models, examples all play roles as witnesses.

Luke tells us ever so briefly what the Picture of the Early Church looked like! You can read it in Acts 2:42-47—the end of the chapter. The Jerusalem church, according to Luke, had four primary features.

- a. It was a learning church
- b. It was a loving church
- c. It was a worshipping church
- d. It was an evangelistic church

Congregations today would be well served to continue to emphasize these marks!

And how do churches learn to excel in these areas? The Holy Spirit teaches and empowers Christians to be *fervent* in worship, *diligent* in learning, *unfailing* in loving and *zealous* in bearing witness as evangelists.

The same Spirit that was poured out at Pentecost produces fruit (Christian character) and bestows gifts. That's how we grow spiritually. People yielded to the Spirit of God grow more and more Christ-like. And the Spirit gives power to enable Christians to be witnesses. The Spirit. That's what grows churches and empowers disciples.

It is not necessarily due to gifted preachers or wise elders or servant deacons or generous parishioners. Although faithful people play important roles. And I commend faithfulness to you all. But growth and zeal and transformation are primarily the work of the Holy Spirit.

We've had a few sermons on prayer this year. Perhaps the most important prayer you can pray for your congregation is that the Holy Spirit gets a hold *on* us. Gets a hold *of* us. Gives us humble and contrite hearts. Gives us teachable spirits. Gives us servant attitudes. Gives us a bold witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Gives us zeal for the glory of God. And transforms us into loving people--loving God and loving neighbor.

And if someday the LORD again brings a sound like a violent wind and shows us tongues of fire and bestows on us supernatural ability to declare the mighty works of God—perhaps we will recognize the signs and the wonders as the gift of the Holy Spirit!

Let us pray.