

## 5. WHY PENTECOST?

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And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all together in one place ... and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability ... and the same day about three thousand persons were added (Acts 2: 1, 4, 41).

Having blown on the disciples in the upper room in a dramatised prophecy, Jesus gave the disciples an imperative: “Receive the holy Spirit” (John 20: 22). Jesus went on to tell the disciples they must now “stay in Jerusalem until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk. 24: 49). No work for Christ was to be undertaken until the power came.

The drama is about to unfold, the stage is set and --- the curtain rises. *The big day, the promised day, the long-anticipated day of Pentecost has dawned.* There are one hundred and twenty of Jesus’ disciples and closest followers **all together in one place**. *The day of Pentecost was fully come (Acts 2: 1).* And *this Pentecost was going to be like no previous Pentecost the Jews had ever experienced since Moses.*

### THIS PENTECOST WAS DIFFERENT

Coming exactly fifty days after the Passover lamb’s blood had been shed in Egypt, Pentecost had first been instituted under Moses as one of the three annual feasts Israel had celebrated for centuries. But what a contrast between that first Pentecost under Moses and this one in Acts 2. For, you recall, that first Pentecost celebrated the giving of the Law at Sinai and had resulted in the judicial death of three thousand Jews who broke the Law (Exodus 32: 28)!

However, on this Pentecost in Jerusalem in Acts 2 about three thousand Jews were “saved” because they believed on the Name of the Lord Jesus, repented of their sins, were baptized (Acts 2: 41, 47)! What a graphic difference we see between the giving of the Law and the receiving of the Spirit!

### THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING PENTECOST

The Jewish Day of Pentecost was the ceremony that marked the beginning of the offering of the firstfruits. It occurred fifty days after Passover. <sup>1</sup> It was, in effect, a promise of the full harvest to come. So, the three thousand souls “saved” in Jerusalem in Acts 2 were the firstfruits of multitudes who would enter the kingdom in the Name of Jesus for all generations to come.

From this Pentecost day onwards, Christianity’s place in the world was secured. Pentecost guaranteed the success of Jesus’ Gospel mission. The disciples did receive the promised power of God’s holy Spirit to carry out the Great Commission. They no longer huddled in secret **for fear of the Jews (John 20: 19)**. With holy boldness they preached the Gospel of Christ to the very city that only weeks before had crucified Jesus. The now-ascended and glorified Lord Jesus, as he promised, had **poured out this which you both see and hear (Acts 2: 33)**. A mighty harvest of precious lives for the kingdom of God was now inaugurated because the disciples received the power of the holy Spirit and were thus perfectly equipped for their mission.

### MISUNDERSTOOD PENTECOST

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<sup>1</sup> Pentecost is the Hellenised word meaning “fifty” (because it occurred exactly 50 days after Passover). The Jews call(ed) it The Feast of Weeks.

Failure to grasp this central significance of the Day of Pentecost --- power for effective witness before the world --- has led to various false teachings which have conspired to rob the church of her promised power to carry out Jesus' Great Commission.

Some have taught Pentecost was the "birthday", the origin of the church.

Some have taught Pentecost brought in a new dispensation, with Israel being replaced by the church.

Some have taught Pentecost shows the miraculous gift of "speaking in tongues" is the initial evidence of being filled with the Spirit.

Some have taught Pentecost means the disciples were fully "sanctified", that the sinful nature was eradicated so they could live victoriously.

None of these interpretations hits the target! They all misunderstand the main reason for that remarkable day. Please allow me to prove to you beyond any reasonable doubt that the true meaning of Pentecost is that we are to be filled with the Spirit for effective witness for Jesus Christ.

## WHAT JESUS PROMISED

Let's remind ourselves again of what Jesus actually promised the disciples. To use an expression the old-timers used to talk about, he promised them power for "soul-winning". That is, Jesus promised those first representatives of his church that when they went out to speak for him they would carry a winsomeness, an irresistible appeal, a holy boldness borne by unconquered love and grace that would convict the world of sin, and of righteousness and of judgment to come (Matt. 10: 19-20; John 16:8; Acts 17: 30-31). When he gave the Great Commission Jesus summed it up this way;

Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in Messiah's name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Lk. 24: 47-49).

Observe. The promised power to fall on the disciples at Pentecost was for taking the Gospel message to the nations of the world. They were going to be clothed with power from on high to witness for Christ.

You would think that Jesus only needed to say something once for it to sink in. But no. We read again how; He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father. "This", he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the holy Spirit not many days from now ... You will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1: 4-5, 8).

For the moment, forget whatever you may have been taught about the meaning of Pentecost. Just ask yourself, what does Jesus promise this Pentecost will mean for the disciples? Right! The fullness of the Spirit for powerful testimony to the truth of Jesus Christ --- power for "soul-winning", power to bring men and women of all colours and creeds to a saving faith in Christ and so to bring them into God's kingdom.

And this fulness of the Spirit's anointing to carry out Jesus' parting Commission is to last until the end of this Age (Matt. 28: 18-20)! To be perfectly blunt and frank then, the meaning of Pentecost must signify the same to us today as it did to those first disciples --- God's supernatural ability to make us useful to a lost and hurting world.

## THE TEST

Come to think of it, whether in the Old or New Testaments, anybody filled with the holy Spirit always spoke and acted with boldness as they carried out God's work. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> E.G. Ex. 35: 30-31; Lk. 1: 13-16, 67. Don't forget too that Jesus himself had to be filled with the power of the holy Spirit at his baptism before he started his Gospel work ... in all these cases to be filled with the Spirit resulted in effective

*Something* significant always happened whenever anybody was “filled with the Spirit”. Being filled with the Spirit is never an end in itself. Whenever so-and-so was filled with the Spirit of God, we always read an **“and”**. *Something* always followed! The wind blows and you hear its noise and you see its movement.

#### EVERY TIME IN ACTS THOSE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT HAD BOLD SPEECH.

If further confirmation that we are rightly interpreting the central meaning of Pentecost is needed, let’s take a quick survey of every time in the Book of Acts where the expressions **filled with the holy Spirit** or **full of the holy Spirit** occur. Let’s track the trend.

1. **At Pentecost** we are told, **And they were all filled with the holy Spirit, and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability (Acts 2: 4 NRSV).**

We won’t get side-tracked at the moment on the “tongues” question. We will come to that in good time! The important thing here to note is that no matter what the national language the various folk in the audience were listening to, they said, **“We hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2: 11).** The audience listened to the Spirit-empowered speech of the disciples (and particularly of Peter), and the result was great conviction with about three thousand people added to Christ that day (Acts 2; 41).

2. **After Pentecost, on another day, Peter** was once again **filled with the holy Spirit. Then he says, “Rulers of the people and elders ... let it be known to you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead ... ” (Acts 4: 8f).**

As at the first, on the day of Pentecost, the evidence that Peter is filled with the Spirit is that he is found witnessing to a crowd with boldness of speech about the name of Jesus the Messiah.

3. **After a church prayer meeting,** the place was shaken **and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4: 31).** Again, exactly the same experience as on the day of Pentecost! Filled with the holy Spirit was evidenced by bold speech for God. And note verse 33,

**With great power the apostles gave testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was the fruit of lives brought into the kingdom of God; Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women (Acts 5: 14).**

4. **Stephen** was **a man full of faith and of the holy Spirit** and with what power did he witness (Acts 6:5)! What a mighty sermon he delivered to the stubborn and pugnacious religious leaders. Under conviction they rushed upon him to stone him. But Stephen was **filled with the holy Spirit ... and said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God ... ” (Acts 7: 55f).**

What power for Christ in the face of martyrdom! The greatest evidence of Stephen’s being full of the Spirit and of his powerful dying testimony was the conviction it brought to Saul, who was watching this as he held Stephen’s clothes! Eventually it led to Paul’s conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. **Paul.** As he sat blind and confused, the disciple Ananias laid hands on Paul and announced, **‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the holy Spirit’ (Acts 9: 17).**

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witnessing and work in God’s service. It doesn’t have to be earth-shattering. It can be like Elizabeth’s hymn of praise to the glory of God’s grace in Christ in your own home (Lk. 1: 41f)!

Note the same phrase as for the disciples at Pentecost. And once filled with the Spirit, Paul the persecutor, immediately went out preaching with great conviction the Gospel of the Lord Jesus; **And immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God" (Acts 9: 20).**

Every time Paul was said to be subsequently filled with the holy Spirit, we are always told the result was "soul-winning" power; **Then Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness ... now listen --- the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord (Acts 13: 9f).**

6. **Barnabas, filled with the holy Spirit, is specifically also said to have brought many people to the Lord; Barnabas was a good man, full of the holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord (Acts 11: 24).**

The pattern is consistent. Being filled with the fullness of God's Spirit *always* resulted in powerful speech and effective work in expanding the reach of God's kingdom. These ten verses in Acts where the phrase, **filled with the holy Spirit** or, **full of the Spirit** occur, are always followed by the statement about bold testimony for Christ. No straight-forward reading of the text can fail to notice that whoever was filled with the power of the Spirit always enjoyed confident testimony when speaking up for Christ.

#### DON'T GET HUNG UP ON THE INCIDENTALS

Yes, some of the incidental manifestations surrounding each recorded time when they were filled with the Spirit varied. One time there is **the sound like the rush of a violent wind, with divided tongues, as of fire that rested on each head** and the ability to **speak in other languages**; another time after a prayer meeting **the place in which they were gathered together was shaken**; another time an opponent of the Gospel message was struck blind; another time there was a violent murder by stoning, and so forth.

However, the one consistent result of being filled with the Spirit of God is that the believers always faithfully and powerfully gave their testimony to the Lord Jesus as they carried out his Great Commission to make disciples of all nations.

To be perfectly clear, it matters not whether we may speak with "other tongues", or have any of the other gifts of healings or great faith, it doesn't count if we claim to be "sanctified" and living "the victorious Christian life", it doesn't matter whether we can recite the creeds and belong to an "orthodox" denomination, we are not filled with the holy Spirit if we are not telling others about Jesus and what it means to know him as opportunities arise.

Of course this does not mean that we will be obnoxious and pestering others every time we open our mouths in conversation with them. Sometimes it takes years to build the kind of respect and confidence necessary before the Lord gives us the liberty to openly witness for him. But it's our responsibility to be available, to be prepared, and when appropriately moved by his Spirit, to speak with gentle confidence, and sincere respect (**I Peter 3: 15**). A witness tells what he or she has experienced and knows!

**A CRAZY STORY** I remember reading a story decades ago which perfectly illustrates the failure of concentrating on minors rather than the one major blessing the disciples actually did receive ... <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John R. Rice tells this rather antiquated story in *The Power of Pentecost Or The Fullness of the Spirit*, SLP, Murfreesboro, TN, 1976, p78-79 (The story is probably not politically correct in today's society!).

There was a businessman who advertised for an office boy. A number of lads applied, so the employer sat down with the boys. He said, "Boys, I am going to tell you a story. When I am through, you can ask me any questions that you like. Then I will try to pick out one of you for my office boy. Okay?"

"Once a farmer had been greatly troubled by the loss of his chickens. Each night some wild creature got into his hen house, killed a chicken, and carried it away. The farmer resolved to catch the intruder. So, loading his shotgun and taking his lantern, he waited in the night for the first squawk of a chicken in fear.

"When the kerfuffle started, with lantern and gun, he rushed into the chicken house. But he had trouble. First the light in the lantern went out in the wind. He held it inside his coat, and finally got it lit again, after many attempts.

"His dog was barking furiously. Rushing toward the commotion at the chicken house, the farmer stumbled over the pig and sprawled headlong on the ground. Retrieving the lantern, he put his head in the door of the chicken house and held the lantern aloft. A frightened rooster squawked and leaped first to the farmer's bare head and then out into the night.

"But in the light of the lantern the farmer saw the nocturnal predator. A large wood owl held one of his hens with claw and beak. Setting down the lantern, the farmer blazed away with his shotgun. He accidentally pulled both triggers and both barrels of the gun went off at once. The recoil of the gun knocked him backwards. The heavy load of shot killed three hens and blew a hole in the side of the chicken house. The farmer's dog barked excitedly and neighbours from all sides began to arrive to see what the commotion was.

"That is the end of the story. Now boys, are there any questions you want to ask?"

One boy asked, "Were the chickens white leghorns?" Another lad asked, "Did the rooster ever come back home?" Another asked, "What was the name of the farmer's barking dog?" Other boys asked questions like what time of the night it was, what was the farmer's name, and what did the neighbours think?

As they all asked their questions, one little fellow got more and more agitated. Finally, he piped up with his question, "Say, Mister, did he hit the owl? That's what he started to do; did he really get the owl?"

Yes, I know, it's a crazy story, but I've never forgotten it for the point it makes. Sadly, when folks read the wonderful second chapter of Acts, their minds get all absorbed with "speaking in other tongues", with the origin of the church, with questions about dispensationalism, or with theories about sanctification and victorious Christian living, or any number of other incidentals.

But they never seem to notice whether the disciples got what they were promised, what they were told to wait for --- the power of God to carry out the Great Commission of proclaiming the Gospel. The businessman, naturally, hired the little fellow who could keep his mind on the main business at hand and not get distracted. Yet, how sad the church has been distracted and divided over all kinds of secondary questions and miss the main reason for Pentecost.

#### MY PRAYER

If there is one thing I crave for in my own life,  
if there is one thing I yearn for Christ's people,  
if there is one thing I pray for all of God's dear people, it is that we, each and every one, may be filled with His promised holy Spirit, so that through our combined and confident testimony men and women will come to the knowledge of Christ and be added to his everlasting kingdom!

That is the main thing about Pentecost that Jesus promised and that his first followers received. Everything else is incidental and secondary. To be filled with the Spirit *always* results in joyful and

winsome testimony. The man and the woman filled with the holy Spirit from on high creates a hunger and a thirst for Jesus Christ our living Lord.

## TWO CONDITIONS NEEDED TO BE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

There are two conditions necessary for us to receive the fullness of the holy Spirit.

**First**, the obedience of water baptism. We have already mentioned Jesus' own baptism when he presented himself to his Father to be Israel's Messiah. When John the Baptist immersed Jesus in the Jordan River, Jesus was saying, "I come to do Your will, O God" (Heb. 10:7). At that moment Jesus died to self and took up his cross. It was then that the Spirit of God descended in power upon Jesus.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Jews who were convicted of their sin cried out, "Brethren, what shall we do" (Acts 2: 37)? The inspired reply was they must, "Repent, and each of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the holy Spirit" (v. 38).

This was the invariable belief and practice of every conversion to Christ in the New Testament. This is why there really should be no argument over the essential place obedient baptism by immersion in water has for anybody who wants all God has for them in the Christian life.

**Second**, the prayer of faith. Yes, there was a waiting period for the first disciples. After Jesus had breathed on them telling them they were to receive the holy Spirit, Jesus ascended to the right hand of his Father in heaven. Then they prayed as they waited. And the Day of Pentecost came and they were all filled with the holy Spirit.

But there need be no period of waiting for us to receive the power of the Spirit today. The Day of Pentecost has *already* come. Jesus Christ has been glorified. God's promise has been poured out.

If you wish to be filled with the power of God's holy Spirit, then pray to your heavenly Father to make real in your life His promise through the risen and glorified Christ. Just as you have believed the promise of God for His gift of life and salvation in Christ, now tell God that you are believing Him for the promised power of His Spirit because you want to live and witness effectively for your Saviour! Ask, believing His word!

Don't worry about anything else incidental. Just believe you have received the power of God upon you for service according to the will of God and His promise. <sup>4</sup> If He gives you an ecstatic joy, great. If He gives you some mighty physical manifestation, great. But personally, I can take or leave that, just so long as I see His power operating in my life for the benefit and blessing of others coming to Christ and being built up in Him. Just so long as I can witness for my Lord and Saviour with telling effect in this lost and hurting world! That's the one invariable sign that always follows anybody filled with the Spirit of God!

**BUT WHAT ABOUT "TONGUES"?** In spite of all this, many still wish (for genuine reasons no doubt) to know about the gift of speaking in "tongues". To this matter we shall next turn.

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<sup>4</sup> Remember the prayer of faith in [Mark 11: 22-24](#) we talked about in the third article in this series? To refresh, just go back to ["But What About Paul's Thorn in the Flesh?"](#) page 4.