



The Gift of the Holy Spirit

The miracle of Pentecost is not merely a past historical event. The Spirit's wondrous activity goes on in the Church today.

What is a Christian to do with Pentecost?

Traditionally, the Church has observed this day as one of the most important festivals of the year. But unlike Christmas or Easter, Pentecost doesn't have the cultural attachments that remind us of its significance. There are no ornamented trees, strings of lights, or wrapped presents to announce the season, no egg-filled baskets or Easter lilies to proclaim the day. Without cultural traditions behind it, we may wonder how to celebrate Pentecost. Is it really as important as the other days? Why do we observe Pentecost at all?

The Church celebrates the Festival of Pentecost as the fulfillment and conclusion of the Easter season. The name *Pentecost*, meaning “the fiftieth day,” originally referred to the Jewish Festival of Weeks, the time of thanksgiving for first-fruits and the ingathering of the harvest (cf. Ex. 34:22). The Christian Church retained the name to mark the completion of the 50-day period after Easter—and the first ingathering of believers into the Church.

On Pentecost, Christians commemorate the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We recall how a humble fisherman, filled with the Spirit, boldly proclaimed Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead. We give thanks that a multitude of hearers repented and believed. Three thousand people, from all over the world, were baptized and received the gift of the Spirit. Sent by God the Father, and by His Son, Jesus Christ, the Spirit came to continue the Father’s work on earth.

The Spirit’s activity continues today. That’s why the Christian celebration of Pentecost is such a joyful one—and so vital for the Church to remember. Through the preaching of the Gospel and Baptism, the Holy Spirit calls and gathers believers to Christ and His Church. This gracious work is ongoing; it is not yet completed in our lives. The Spirit works among people of every nation and language—among all to whom the Church is sent to proclaim the Gospel. For this reason, Christians pray for the continued outpouring of the Spirit and for the fulfillment of His sanctifying work.

The Promised Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit’s activity is creative and powerful. His working in this way has a history. In the Old Testament, the Spirit was present at the creation of the world, hovering over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2). The Spirit came in power upon Israel’s judges and kings, equipping and strengthening them to accomplish great feats and victories for God and His people (Judges 6:34; 14:6; 1 Sam. 16:13, 14). By the Spirit, the prophets became mouthpieces for the Lord, proclaiming both judgment and deliverance (Ezek. 2:2–3; Micah 3:8). In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit came upon Christ Himself, descending upon Him in the form of a dove at His Baptism (Matt. 3:16). On the evening before His crucifixion, Jesus promised His disciples that they would receive the *Paraclete*, the Spirit of Truth. This Comforter and Helper would live with them and be in them forever (John 14:16ff.). He would direct them in proclaiming Christ and His work of salvation for the world. After His resurrection, Jesus commissioned His disciples, sending them out to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20 NIV). Before His ascension into heaven, Jesus explained to the apostles that they, too, would be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). When the Spirit came upon them, He said, they would receive power, and they would be His “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Jesus’ promise of sending the Holy Spirit upon His followers was soon fulfilled in a marvelous and unprecedented way.

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The Day of Pentecost

The apostles had gathered themselves in Jerusalem to wait and pray. They were a bedraggled group—an odd assortment of unimpressive, unemployed out-of-towners. Suddenly, a sound like the rushing of a great wind filled the whole house where they were staying. Tongues of fire appeared on them. The Holy Spirit came upon them in power and strength, filling each of them, and they all began to speak in other languages.

What an amazing scene! With the wind, audible but unseen, came the Spirit's creative breath of life (cf. John 3:8). With the many tongues of fire was the one fire of the Spirit's presence—the presence that warms cold hearts and burns away the deadness of doubt and unbelief. The miraculous ability to speak in different tongues equipped the apostles for communicating with the visitors staying in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival.

When we struggle with fear and doubt, the Holy Spirit invites us to pray for comfort and hope. The Spirit—our Helper—does not give us over to discouragement, but strengthens us in our faith. He reminds us that Christ, our Savior from sin and death, holds us firmly in His undying grip, and helps us hold firmly to Him.

The strange events drew a crowd. The Spirit sent the apostles out preaching and witnessing—proclaiming the wonders of God. The audience was bewildered by the message and the messengers. How could simple Galileans speak such things? Some in the crowd scorned and ridiculed the apostles. Were they deluded? Drunk? But others were amazed at what they heard, wondering what all this meant.

On Pentecost, the apostles were human instruments of the Holy Spirit. Ordinary people, filled with no ordinary Spirit, they became extraordinary witnesses—courageous proclaimers of the Gospel. Under the Spirit's guidance, Galilean fishermen, a former tax collector, and the others—flawed instruments all—now announced the great saving work of God in Jesus Christ. And impetuous Peter—the one who had denied Jesus, who had forsaken Him and hid in fear—stepped forward as the bold spokesman of the Holy Spirit.

What did the Spirit accomplish on Pentecost? Through the apostles' preaching and Baptism, He called and gathered believers into the Church of Christ. He gave them the Christ-earned forgiveness of sins and salvation. He established Christ's kingdom, made manifest through the Gospel for all the world. As Luther proclaimed in his 1534 Pentecost sermon: "Thus Christianity begins with the poor fisherman, and with the despised work of God, which is called Christ, hanging on the cross" (WA 37.402).

The Present Work of the Spirit

The miracle of Pentecost is not merely a past, historical event. The Spirit's wondrous activity goes on in the Church today. To be sure, the special manifestation and dynamic outpouring of the Spirit on the apostles at the first Pentecost was a unique event in the history of the Church. However, there are some important things for Christians to remember about our own Pentecost celebrations.

The confidence of Christians in our world today easily can be shaken. We are bombarded with invitations to doubt the truthfulness of God and His Word. False teachers may tempt us to cast aside our faith in favor of the claims of other "truths." We have become accustomed to new assaults on the person of Jesus Christ, His message,

and His work. It may not surprise us that our beliefs are rejected and despised, but our confidence may soon weaken if we find ourselves rejected and despised because of our faith.

In his recent bestselling book, *The GOD Delusion*, biologist Richard Dawkins attacks belief in God, asserting that religious faith—especially the Christian faith—is not only utter foolishness but a threat to a stable and healthy society. He maintains that atheism and a rejection of all religions could be a force for peace in the world. Keeping faith and hope becomes ever more difficult as Christianity and Christians become the object of ridicule, mockery, and even suspicion.

When we struggle with fear and doubt, the Holy Spirit invites us to pray for comfort and hope. The Spirit—our Helper—does not give us over to discouragement, but strengthens us in our faith. He reminds us that Christ, our Savior from sin and death, holds us firmly in His undying grip, and helps us hold firmly to Him. The Spirit does not give us over to uncertainty, but consoles us, confirming in us the belief that God's Word is true and His promises sure. The Spirit gives us joy in the midst of grief, peace in the face of fear.

The Holy Spirit active in the apostles on Pentecost is the same Spirit who works in believers today. The dynamic Word proclaimed on Pentecost—the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead—is the same Word proclaimed among us today. The Spirit unites believers through the bond of peace. As the apostle Paul

testifies, the Spirit calls us to one hope, the hope of the glorious salvation life of Christ. Together with the apostles and the early Christians we have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5). The Spirit works surely and certainly in the Church, and in the hearts and lives of individual believers. Like the apostles on Pentecost, our courage and confidence in witnessing and telling others about Christ lie in the power of the Spirit and the Word.

The Holy Spirit has a history—a record—of working in the world through His means of grace and the forgiveness of sins. This history is also a personal one for each of us, because the Spirit works intimately in our lives. In his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed, Luther details the Spirit’s work, giving us a very personal confession of faith for Pentecost:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.

On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.

This is most certainly true.

Through the Gospel and the Sacraments, the Spirit nourishes, preserves, and increases the Church and its members. As believers in Jesus, we too have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and our Baptisms are wonderful reminders of the Spirit’s gracious activity of regeneration.

The Church belongs to the Holy Spirit, and His work in it goes on unceasingly until the Last Day. He continues to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to create faith, and to administer the forgiveness of sins to believers across the globe. At the same time, He gathers new people into His Church, using modern-day apostles as His instruments, sending them to all nations, baptizing and teaching.

Through the Holy Spirit, the Gospel is amazingly translatable, crossing languages, cultures, and ethnic borders. The Spirit speaks Arabic and Zulu, Spanish and Mandarin, American Sign Language and Braille, and He proclaims the divine Good News in all of these human languages. National divisions and prejudices are not barriers to the Spirit. He is no respecter of human boundaries. He is the Caller, Gatherer, and Unifier of God’s people in the Church.

Luther wrote a Pentecost hymn that may serve as a prayer to the Holy Spirit. In this beautiful hymn we pray for the Spirit to be active among us, to strengthen our faith, and to comfort us as we walk in His service:

*Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord,
With all Your graces now outpoured
On each believer's mind and heart;
Your fervent love to them impart.
Lord, by the brightness of Your light
In holy faith Your Church unite;
From ev'ry land and ev'ry tongue
This to Your praise, O Lord, our God, be sung:
Alleluia, alleluia!*

*Come, holy Light, guide divine,
Now cause the Word of life to shine.
Teach us to know our God aright
And call Him Father with delight.
From ev'ry error keep us free;
Let none but Christ our master be
That we in living faith abide,
In Him, our Lord, with all our might confide.
Alleluia, alleluia!*

*Come, holy Fire, comfort true,
Grant us the will Your work to do
And in Your service to abide;
Let trials turn us not aside.
Lord, by Your pow'r prepare each heart,
And to our weakness strength impart
That bravely here we may contend,
Through life and death to You, our Lord, ascend.
Alleluia, alleluia!*

—“Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord” *LSB* 497

On Pentecost Christians rejoice in the gift of the Spirit to God’s people from all times and all places. We celebrate and, as on Christmas and Easter, our Pentecost praises resound with joyful Alleluias to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Dr. Gerhard Bode is assistant professor of historical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

