

## THE REAL PENTECOSTALS

Acts 2:1–21

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Today is the fiftieth day after Passover—the day of Pentecost.

The word “Pentecost” means “fiftieth” in Hebrew. It is also sometimes called the “Feast of Weeks,” because it falls seven weeks after Passover. It can also be called the “Feast of First Fruits,” because Middle Eastern Jews celebrated the spring harvest on this day. Think of it as an early version of Thanksgiving.

The early Jews also celebrated Pentecost as the day—about fifty days after the beginning of the Exodus—when Moses received the Torah and the Ten Commandments from God.

Because it was customary in the first century for Jews who were able to travel to come to Jerusalem for the major festivals, the celebration often stretched a week on either side of the day itself. Pentecost was a big deal in Jerusalem. Imagine a combination of Mardi Gras and the Kentucky Derby.

The eleven disciples, along with others—wives, families, servants, and some early converts—went to Jerusalem, as hundreds of thousands did, to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost.

The book of Acts tells us that they were “all together in one place,” and that place was someone’s house. That, my brothers and sisters, is the first miracle of this story: they were all together in one place. We know how tough that is, don’t we? It’s hard for our families, and it’s even harder for our churches.

A couple of years ago, my brother Brian tried to organize a summer vacation for the entire Feldmeyer family—somewhere we could all go and be together for a week without having to be together at every moment of every day.

It was impossible. Should we go to the mountains or the ocean? Well, someone can’t go to the mountains because they get altitude sickness, and someone else can’t go to the ocean because they get seasick, or the salt air affects their asthma, or all that sand and tanning oil is just too messy.

Then there was cost. Do we split it evenly? Do we want a swimming pool? What about families with little kids, will that be safe? And on and on. When are we going? “Well, I can’t go then.” “Why didn’t you tell us you were thinking of that date?” “I did, but no one was listening.”

Finally, we gave up. There was no way we were all going to get together in one place at the same time anymore. So now we just send out an email that says something like: “Jean and I are going to Gatlinburg between dates X and Y. If you want to join us, we’d love to spend some time with you.”

Surprisingly, it worked! Scot and Marla happened to be vacationing in Gatlinburg for a couple of days that overlapped with ours, so we got together for a nice dinner out. It was wonderful.

We are rarely all together in one place, but we call or email each other all the time, and often some of us— not all, but some—get to see each other for a while. And we understand what a miracle it was when the early Christians managed to be all together in one place.

Now, from here on, as we continue with the Pentecost story, we enter the land of simile and metaphor.

Watch closely: “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.”

A simile, you may recall from high school English, is a comparison using “like” or “as”, and that’s what we have here. Whatever it was that came into that house that day, it wasn’t a violent wind, but it was “like” a violent wind. It shook the walls, rattled the doors, and scared the stuffing out of most of those who were there. Second miracle.

Then something “like” tongues of fire (simile again!) came in and settled on everyone’s heads, and the people in the house—probably the disciples—were filled with God’s Holy Spirit and began speaking in the languages of all the people standing around outside so they could be understood.

That’s the third miracle: they spoke, and they were understood.

And the last miracle: the people listened, they understood, and they believed. I don’t know about you, but when people listen to what I say, understand it, and are moved by it—well, that’s the mountaintop. It doesn’t last long, but when it does... oh my, what a feeling that is.

So those are the four miracles in this story:

1. They were all together in one place.
2. The Holy Spirit entered the space, and the people in ways so amazing they could only be described with similes and metaphors.
3. They communicated with the people around them in ways the people understood.
4. The people, with a few exceptions, heard them, understood them, and believed them.

When we celebrate Pentecost in the Christian church, this is what we celebrate. Whenever we are all together in one place, whenever the Holy Spirit alights upon us in such a way that we can communicate the truth of the gospel and people hear, understand, believe, and change—well, that’s Pentecost for us.

But not all Christians agree on this understanding of Pentecost. Some may or may not have received the gifts of Pentecost—the infilling of the Holy Spirit—but they have a different understanding of those gifts: what they are, how they’re used, and what ministry God intends for them. And many of those Christians believe that their interpretation of Pentecost is the only correct one.

These are the Pentecostals—what my parents always called “holy rollers,” and what much of the world called “nuts.” I do not believe they are nuts. But to understand them, we must go back to their beginnings about five centuries ago.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY LESSON**

Modern Pentecostalism has deep roots stretching back centuries, and to understand Pentecostals we must understand their ancestors.

The Middle Ages, roughly 475–1475 C.E., were marked by two powerful forces: intense religious devotion and unfathomable cruelty. The Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition stand as stark reminders that the church, like any human institution, became corrupt when given unchecked power. Kings ruled by divine right, sanctioned by the church. Wealth was seen as God’s favor. The vast majority of people lived as serfs—little more than slaves tied to the land. Science was tolerated only when it reinforced church teaching; any attempt to explain the natural world apart from miracle was branded heresy and punished by torture or death. Human rights and personal liberties simply did not exist.

Around 1450, subtle shifts began to take place. By 1550, Europe had entered the Renaissance rebirth of art, learning, and literacy. Gutenberg’s printing press allowed new ideas to spread widely. Cities grew. Artists and thinkers such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Galileo, and Copernicus reshaped culture. Theater reemerged, and music flourished.

Alongside this came the Scientific Revolution. People began asking questions and seeking answers outside the church. Discoveries cascaded: Copernicus proposed a sun-centered solar system; Galileo developed the microscope and the compass; Newton refined the telescope; Franklin invented bifocals. Yet science, like all human endeavors, produced both beauty and destruction. Da Vinci’s notebooks held designs for weapons as well as masterpieces.

As art and science ascended, the lives of ordinary people changed very little. The Protestant and English Reformations altered theology and church structure, but they did not free serfs from their grinding existence. Still, the intellectual freedom of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution eventually seeped into politics and social thought.

Historians generally date the shift from medieval to modern thinking—the Age of Enlightenment—to 1648, the end of the Thirty Years’ War. That conflict, really a series of wars from 1618–1648, began as a struggle between Roman Catholic Hapsburgs and Protestant princes but soon engulfed much of Europe. More than eight million people died. Cities and farms were destroyed. Hunger and disease followed.

In the aftermath, those with the luxury to reflect began asking hard questions. Why had so many died for causes they barely understood? Why had the church fueled and prolonged such devastation? What of the Inquisition, the torture chambers, the Crusades? How could the church justify centuries of violence?

Out of this reflection the Enlightenment was born, lasting roughly until 1950. It introduced a new way of seeing the world and the people in it. Ideas such as freedom, equality, human rights endowed by God, and the inherent worth of every individual took center stage. Thinkers argued that human beings could improve their world through reason and logic rather than relying solely on divine intervention.

For two centuries, artists, scientists, theologians, and philosophers explored the rise of the human person—from nameless serf to citizen. Enlightenment ideals included liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, separation of church and state, and constitutional government. Absolute monarchy and absolute religious authority were challenged. The American Declaration of Independence and Constitution reflect this thinking; Jefferson drew heavily from John Locke. Franklin, Adams, Madison, Hamilton, and Lincoln were steeped in Enlightenment writers such as Voltaire, Spinoza, Kant, Hume, Descartes, Darwin, and Wollstonecraft.

People began questioning slavery and advocating for civil society. The social contract theory emerged, asserting that legitimate government rests on the consent of the governed and that all people are naturally equal.

The Enlightenment era was one of the most significant shifts in human thought in all of history. Its gifts remain with us: the scientific method, mathematical laws describing the universe, representative government, universal literacy, and the recognition of human rights. Even the critical, historical study of scripture grew from Enlightenment soil.

Yet the Enlightenment also brought problems—often through human misunderstanding. Evolution, a profound scientific insight, was twisted into eugenics, which helped give rise to Nazism. The Industrial Revolution brought pollution and exploitation, including child labor. Inventions became tools of war. Revolutions proclaimed liberty and equality but were won through violence—the guillotine in France, the battlefield in America.

Ultimately, the belief that humanity could save itself died in the blood and mud of Antietam, Gettysburg, Belleau Wood, Verdun, and Gallipoli. It died in the breadlines of the Great Depression and in the ovens of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Human beings may be capable of great good, but we cannot rescue ourselves from the despair that separates us from God, from one another, and from our own deepest selves. We need someone to save us.

Martin Luther said it well:

“Did we in our own strength confide,  
 Were not the right man on our side,  
 The man of God’s own choosing.  
 Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he.”

### **THE RUSH BACKWARD**

Christians around the world responded to the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason in very different ways. Some—Teilhard de Chardin, Henry Ward Beecher, Ernest Fremont Tittle, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and others—saw the failures and excesses of

the Enlightenment and sought to correct them through the hard work of theology and philosophy, and through rigorous engagement with science and history.

Others decided to reject the Enlightenment altogether and attempted to return Christianity to what they imagined were its first-century roots. Some of these believers felt that a theological line had to be drawn, and they called themselves “Fundamentalists.” They insisted that certain doctrines must be accepted as true—even if doing so required a kind of mental gymnastics to make oneself believe what one did not naturally believe. Their list of “fundamentals” included:

1. The inerrancy of Scripture
2. The deity of Jesus Christ
3. The virgin birth
4. The substitutionary atonement for all sins by Christ’s death on the cross
5. The physical resurrection and bodily return of Christ

Still others took this impulse further. It wasn’t only about what one believed, they said; it was about how that belief was expressed in worship. They turned to the story of the first Pentecost as their model and called themselves “Pentecostals.”

Pentecostals are distinguished by the belief that after the Holy Spirit applies Christ’s salvation to the believer, there is a second experience in which the Spirit fills them, an experience many believe is evidenced by speaking in tongues. Most Pentecostals hold that this should be the norm for all Christians, regardless of denomination.

“Tongues,” however, is a questionable English translation of the Greek word “charisma”, one of nine gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11. Some believe “tongues” refers to speaking known languages unfamiliar to the speaker; others believe it refers to languages unknown to anyone; still others believe both are possible.

The first error here is the insistence by some that the gift of tongues must be glossolalia—unknown, angelic speech. That is **not** what is happening in the story of the Christian Pentecost. The second error is the belief that this gift must appear spontaneously in worship or prayer.

Nothing in the biblical story supports that conclusion. The Pentecost described in Acts is indeed a spontaneous event, but Scripture never suggests that every future encounter with the Holy Spirit must unfold in precisely the same way.

The story of Pentecost is not a template or a test. It is not given to us so we can measure the authenticity of our experiences against it. It is given so that we might remain open to the possibility of the Spirit’s presence in our lives. The true litmus test is not glossolalia, speaking in tongues, but communication—human beings connecting with one another through the power of God.

We know the Holy Spirit is present when three things happen:

- A. We feel its power in our lives.
- B. We find ourselves able to speak clearly about what God has done.
- C. Others hear us, understand us, and are moved by what we say.

That is the measure of a true Pentecostal experience.

That is the measure of a real Pentecostal Christian.

**AMEN**