

# *Pentecost and Missionary Preaching in North America*

Darrell L. Guder

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

In many traditions of Christianity, Pentecost Sunday is celebrated as the birthday of the church. The traditional decoration of the German church that Sunday is birch branches, whose green leaves bespeak the new life of the Spirit which calls the church into being. The liturgical themes that lead up to Pentecost emphasize that this event and its commemoration are an essential component of the Gospel. Following Easter, the Sundays progress from "Like those newly born" (*Quasimodogeniti*) and "The mercy of God" (*Misericordia Domini*) to the four "church Sundays": "Rejoice" (*Jubilate*), "Sing" (*Cantate*), "Pray" (*Rogate*), and "Expect" (*Exaudi*). On Thursday of the week of Rogate, the Ascension of Christ is celebrated.<sup>1</sup> This cycle reaches its climax then on Pentecost Sunday, when the Easter community proclaims that God's Easter Gospel now becomes good news for the world as the Holy Spirit creates and empowers the community to witness to the risen Lord "to the ends of the earth." The Easter story is, in a sense, not complete until its fullness is unfolded in the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ on Ascension Day and the celebration of the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost. Matthew's climax reiterates the same message: It is the Lord to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth who sends the church to disciple the nations, and whose promise to be present with her until the end of the age is fulfilled in the gift of the Spirit (Matt. 18-20). John's version is similar: Jesus sends the apostolic community as the Father has sent him, and he breathes the Holy Spirit on them to empower them for redemptive ministry (John 20:21-22).

Through the centuries of Christian worship in the west, the fundamental missionary thrust of this liturgical discipline has been largely lost. Wilbert Shenk reminds us that "The Christendom model of the church may be characterized as *church without mission*."<sup>2</sup> The birthday celebration became primarily an exercise in looking backwards, a self-affirmation of the institutional church as it maintained the Christendom legacy in all its confidence and established security. For a western culture already regarded as "Christianized" (the word itself betrays the problem!), the Spirit's empowering of the church at Pentecost was a reassuring warrant that its task was to "keep on keeping on." There was not much missionary preaching in the long centuries of Christendom, not even on Pentecost Sunday.

Yet, that liturgical tradition can be practiced and experienced today as a remarkable renewal of the fundamental confession that "the Church on earth is by its very nature missionary."<sup>3</sup> The much discussed paradigm shift in western culture, moving from Christendom to post-Christendom, has clearly made the once securely "Christianized" territories of the North Atlantic societies into mission fields again. That process is forcing us to rediscover the fundamental "sentness" (mission = sentness!) of the church, as it is expounded in all the New Testament literature. The challenge before the western church is to become a missionary church, living out its vocation of sentness in its own context.<sup>4</sup> The linked challenge for preachers is to discover what missionary preaching in the North American setting is all about.

Certainly the theology of Pentecost embedded in the Luke-Acts narrative defines the church as “missionary by its very nature.” Building on the remarkable exposition of Jesus’ mission in his gospel account, Luke now tells the rest of the story as a theology of the church in mission. That theology is summarized by Jesus in his parting words on the Mount of the Ascension: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NASB). “Witness” is the overarching term that defines and describes the Christian community’s purpose and function in Acts. At the center of that theology of witness, we find in the great speeches of Acts the practice of missionary preaching—with Peter’s Pentecost sermon serving both as the initiation and the model for such missionary proclamation.<sup>5</sup>

Our movement into a post-Christian and post-Christendom setting is, in fact, a liberating shift for us, especially as we exposit scripture. Our situation today is closer to that of the pre-Constantinian church, although certainly not identical. It makes it possible for us to read scripture in ways we have not done for a long time. And we are discovering that, in many ways, the centuries of Christendom have led us away from the original, missionary thrust of the biblical canon. If the church in which the Bible is proclaimed, and the preachers proclaiming it, have little sense of their essential calling to be a witnessing community, then the Bible can serve all kinds of other agenda. Such agenda may even be in some sense valid, but without centering biblical exposition in the missionary vocation of the church, they are easily distorted. The Christendom church learned how to use the biblical witness as a manual for its own maintenance and the warrant for its order. Interpreted in that way, the biblical word could be read with a sole focus on the savedness of the individual and the continuing tending of his or her savedness. It could be read as a collection of moral rules, defining the conduct that will guarantee entry into heaven or obstruct that entry. It could be read as a manual for a Christianized society, validating the divine right of kings, the special spiritual prerogatives of priests, and the divinely ordained stations of life into which people are born. It could be read to authorize the subordination of one race to another and of women to men. As we move out of Christendom, we recognize these distorted readings and struggle now with their consequences, both in our social and legal orders, and in our churches. We also recognize that this paradigm shift has enormous implications for the theology and practice of preaching!

In this time of transition, it is becoming rapidly clear to many of us that the primary key for opening up the scriptural testimony is best described as a “missional hermeneutic.”<sup>6</sup> This interpretive approach begins with the assumption that the church, and every particular community which constitutes it, is missionary by virtue of its vocation and equipping. The apostolic task was the formation of communities to continue their witness. The biblical witnesses were written to and for already confessing Christian communities, churches that were living out their missionary mandate. The scriptures, in all their variety of forms, were intended to continue the formation process, so that these communities could be faithful witnesses. The concern of the biblical texts is that these congregations should lead their lives “worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called” (Eph. 4:1). Rather than mandating permanent social structures, such as patriarchal or hierarchical systems, they instruct missionary churches on how to function redemptively and faithfully in sinful human orders that are already patriarchal and hierarchical. They form husbands and wives to

live in mutual submission, as an essential part of their witness to the world, even though their context prescribes that wives shall be submissive to their husbands.

The central event in the church for the exposition of the Scriptures is the preaching of the Word. The proclamation is located in the public act of corporate worship. When we understand the missionary nature of the congregation, and we grasp the purpose of the scriptural witness to be the formation of God's people for that mission, then the preaching of the Word becomes the central event of missional formation. Pentecost figures then as the event in which these foundational understandings of churchly purpose and preaching function merge. At Pentecost we encounter the formation of the church, empowered and equipped by the Holy Spirit to embark upon its missionary witness. Here, we see that the first evidence of that empowering is Peter's sermon. Immediately following upon that, we see the Spirit-empowered response of all those who become followers of Jesus. And we see, as a further evidence of the Spirit's missional formation, the development of a distinctive community whose public witness won "favor with all the people" (Acts 2:47, within 2:41-47).

Pentecost, then, places the missionary preaching of the church at the heart of the missionary vocation of the church. The exposition of this text has enormous significance for any theology and practice of preaching that claims to take the missionary nature of the church seriously. Thinking particularly of North America, the interpretation of Pentecost for missionary preaching will, it seems to me, have to emphasize these things:

*The calling and empowering of the church is the sovereign act of the Triune God.* God the Holy Spirit initiates this act of new creation just as it did the first creation in Genesis 1. God's wind blows, God's flames burn, and God's Spirit empowers the communication of the gospel in all the tongues gathered in Jerusalem for that festival. The church can and must joyfully confess, We are not our own idea. We are not the result of human planning. We are the response to God's calling, and it is God's presence and action that draws us together, forms us as we gather, and sends us out. God's Spirit enables us to proclaim this message—we did not invent it, we received it, and we pass it on. The church is not, then, so much the curator of a long and marvelous tradition but its steward. Through the tradition God has passed along the Pentecost initiative from generation to generation. It has been God's Spirit at work continually rekindling faith in each generation, as the church has moved through time. Missionary preaching is an act of God's Spirit at work in the church. It is in this sense that the Reformed preacher will continue to say (and to be humbled by saying it) with the words of the Second Helvetic Confession, "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."

*Pentecostal missionary preaching is multi-cultural.* When Jesus said that the church in the power of the Spirit would proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, he intended the expansion of the church into every culture, and the translation of the story into every language. This began to happen once the Spirit entered into the community on Pentecost day. Before Peter preached his sermon, all of the empowered witnesses were sharing their story of the great deeds of God in all of the languages gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. The geographical catalogue in Acts 2:9-11 simply describes the whole multi-cultural panorama of the then known world. All the world is gathered in Jerusalem, to make clear that the Holy Spirit empowers the church to tell the story in all the languages of the world. Every distinctive culture is to hear

the gospel communicated understandably so that each one can respond. The “speaking in tongues” at Pentecost is clearly not an ecstatic experience or a mystical encounter that edifies only the one who is speaking another tongue. The gift of language communication here is purposeful. It is functional to the missionary vocation of the Church. This is the witness God intends. God wants everyone to hear.

This implies, of course, that the gospel is infinitely translatable, that every culture may receive and respond to this good news in its own tongue, and that church can be authentically formed in every human culture.<sup>7</sup> No culture may regard itself as normatively Christian. Nor may any culture regard itself, or be regarded, as excluded as a possible recipient and vehicle of the proclamation. All cultures are relativized and at the same time dignified by the Spirit’s empowering gift of gospel communication.

For missionary preaching in North America, the powerful image of the many tongues is a critical mandate. It speaks first of all to the mono-linguality and mono-culturalism of much of our inherited Christian tradition. The Christendom legacy has left us, often, with the attitude that there is only one acceptable way to say the gospel and do church. We act as though there is, after all, a normative Christian culture that everyone who wants to follow Christ must needs adopt. That normative culture is represented, we assume, in our particular version of mainline tradition. The “worship wars” are evidence of the problems we face here. In a multi-cultural context like North America, the church is both empowered and obligated to practice the multi-cultural freedom of the Pentecostal church. Our task now is to discover what gospel communication must be in the ever-growing variety of American sub-cultures. They are enormously diverse, ranging from all the emigrant ethnicities that have so often brought their church with them, to the many sub-cultures in our society that have no ties or memory of Christendom of any kind. Missionary preaching must, therefore, entail translation, adaptation to various cultures, non-traditional communication forms next to traditional ones.

*The empowered proclamation of the church is the continuation of the one apostolic witness.* Right after the Spirit has empowered the sharing of the gospel of God’s mighty deeds in all the languages gathered there, Peter steps up to preach the first sermon, “taking his stand with the eleven” (Acts 2:14). He is the spokesman of the called and empowered apostolic community. There is, clearly, one message to be proclaimed, which can be communicated in every language and culture. The common gospel, the one story, underlies and transcends all its necessary cultural formations.

The reference to the eleven points to the disciples’ community that Jesus had gathered and taught for three years, to equip them to continue his mission. There is continuity from the earthly ministry of Jesus with the disciples to the post-Easter proclamation of the Pentecostal church. That earthly ministry is now recognized to be the crucial and formative passage for the missionary church. In his earthly ministry, Jesus forms his people to continue his mission, once the Holy Spirit has come upon them. That is the particular missional task of the four gospels in the life of the missional church: gathering the community as students of Jesus in order to be so shaped by him that he can send us out to be his witnesses. So, when Peter speaks, he represents the graduation of the disciples into apostles, students who are now sent ones.

This movement, which is basic to the missional church, is about the constant shift of the disciple community from its gathered life, centered on Jesus, to is scattered life, sent out by Jesus. Peter’s missionary sermon does not underline so much his

distinctive authority as Peter, but his calling as a disciplined apostle, surrounded by all the other disciplined apostles. What he is doing in this sermon is what all of them are trained and empowered to do. By implication, this is the function of all missionary preaching in every part of the multi-cultural church. At the heart of all that diversity there will always be the one story, the one message, the one person to name and proclaim.

*The missionary preaching of Pentecost is public proclamation before a non-believing audience.* This sermon is not given within the safe confines of a believing community, gathered to worship. Of course, the outcome of this public preaching is, by the end of the chapter, a missional church that gathers regularly, to devote itself to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42). In that setting, missionary preaching continues as the formation of this community for its missionary witness. The apostles' word serves that formation: that is what the missional hermeneutic of scripture both assumes and practices. But the Christendom legacy has left us with a one-sided understanding of missionary preaching. Ministry of Word and Sacrament implies actions taken in a sacral space. There is almost a sense in which, in our society, missionary proclamation that moves outside of those sacral spaces and special times is somehow inappropriate. We cannot imagine celebrating Pentecost outside a church, although the original event was an entirely public and secular affair. There is, we need to remember, nowhere in the New Testament a reference to a church building or a sacral space! It is secular modernity that assigns matters of faith to the private realm. Our unquestioning acquiescence to that relegation to private religious practice should cause us great concern.

To be sure, the proclamation of the Gospel is centered in corporate worship, and both its content and form are held accountable and verified by the entire worship discipline of the church. But there must always be two dimensions of missionary preaching, if we are to be faithful to scripture. It must also occur as unprotected public proclamation. Its intention, equally empowered by the Spirit, is to tell the story of Jesus as the way by which God will build the missionary church: "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Most of the sermons in Acts are events of missionary outreach, addressed to unbelievers and including the implied or explicit invitation to respond to God's call (Marion Soards calls them "speeches" rather than "sermons"! ). It was for this purpose that the promised Holy Spirit empowered communication in all the languages that Pentecost day. The multi-cultural missional church is the result of multi-cultural missional proclamation.

This external dimension of missionary preaching poses perhaps the greatest challenge to the North American church today. It is difficult enough to reclaim the missional vocation of the church—which must happen if we are to be faithful witnesses in this American mission field. It is a great challenge for the teaching eldership to learn and to implement the missional hermeneutic of scripture, so that congregations can be nurtured to live their lives worthy of their calling. But it is especially daunting to consider the clearly public character of Pentecostal proclamation. Part of the problem may be our encounters with mass evangelists and forms of public proclamation in the electronic church, and our conviction that most of that particular culture cannot be our model for missionary preaching. That is a legitimate

concern. It is not, however, legitimate to continue to restrict our ministry of proclamation to the interiors of our churches. That may serve the dominant culture well, which prefers to have its religion private, non-political, and unobtrusive. But it is not faithful to the essentially missionary nature of the church.

This means, I suspect, that much of our work now must focus on how public proclamation might happen. We no longer live in classical Greek homes with large courtyards open to the streets, inviting people to come in and experience what is going on. Most of us do not live in towns and villages with central squares where public communication used to happen as a matter of course. The “public square” in North America has become a complex and confusing system, and it will take new forms of Spirit-empowered communication to discover how to go about missionary proclamation in our context. Many congregations are experimenting with non-traditional forms of worship with the express intention of extending evangelical hospitality to unbelievers. Missionary proclamation is happening in these settings, and often very effectively. Such events in churches are usually still called “worship services,” as in “contemporary worship,” or “non-traditional worship.” I doubt that anyone in the early Christian community looked back upon Peter’s sermon on Pentecost Day as part of a worship service. We need to broaden our definition of missionary preaching so that it can take place in settings that don’t pretend to be worship, but are definitely apostolic witness. We need to envision and experiment with a diversity of events and public offerings in and around our congregations that do not pretend to be worship, but which are clearly and emphatically missionary proclamation. We need to work theologically on the misunderstanding of worship that implies that anytime Christians gather, it is service of worship! We might, in the process, discover that Pentecost is continuing in our midst as the Holy Spirit enables us to proclaim the gospel in places and ways that Christendom, with all its marvelous and valuable traditions, never envisioned.

So, we might still put birch branches in our churches on Pentecost Sunday. But at the same time, we will find ways to present the gospel message to all those people in our neighborhoods who are unlikely ever to walk in on Sunday and experience our celebration of the birthday of the church. Its most appropriate celebration is, of course, the empowered practice of its witness corporately and individually, on Sundays and on weekdays, in services of worship and in a great diversity of other communication forms that God will use to build his witnessing people.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Doberstein, in his classic *Minister's Prayer Book: An Order of Prayers and Readings* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), leads the preacher through these themes in the readings and prayers for the season from Easter to Pentecost, pp. 88-95.

<sup>2</sup>Wilbert R. Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995), 35; see pp. 30-52 for the full framing of the argument.

<sup>3</sup>Vatican II, *Ad gentes divinitus*, in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1975), par. 2, p. 814; see also David Bosch’s discussion of the ‘Missio Dei’ paradigm of mission, in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 389-393.

<sup>4</sup>Of the rapidly growing literature on this complex theme, I will cite: Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989); George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996); Darrell Guder,

ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>See in general Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), especially his discussion of “witness,” pp. 192-204. On witness in Acts, see also Darrell Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church’s Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), chap. 5-9, and —, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, pp. 49-70.

<sup>6</sup>See James Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic,” in Hunsberger and Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, pp. 228-259.

<sup>7</sup>See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), especially pp. 1-55.