

The Ins and Outs of Pentecost

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Pentecost comes around every year, and yet there are few texts that deal with it directly. So almost every year we must look again at Acts 2. Is there anything new we can discover in it? What may be new is the settings in which many of our congregations find themselves: grade schools filled with children who speak a dozen different languages; stores whose signs we cannot read because even the script is foreign; stores in which we hear people speaking a language we cannot understand. This is new to many of us, and we have a hard time trying to see how we can be the church in such a situation. Often we long for a church that is at least more familiar and comfortable than our own society is becoming.

Such a situation is not new to the church of Jesus Christ, however, no matter how new it is to us. The multicultural aspects of Acts 2 take on new dimensions for us because we are now faced with being the church in a similar setting.

Pentecost Is About Communication

What is it that we celebrate at Pentecost, and how are we to celebrate it? There are many Christians today who seem to think that what makes Pentecost so special is the noise, the mighty wind, the tongues of fire, and that therefore the best way to celebrate Pentecost is by similar events. Others of us, partly because we have been “educated” away from such emotional outbursts, and partly because we have reason to distrust noise and emotion that may have little substance, prefer more sedate responses. Significantly, however, no matter whether we belong to the party of noise and bluster or to the school of “decency and order,” most of us miss an important element about Pentecost: Pentecost is about communication. In chapter 2 of Acts, the sound like a mighty wind and the tongues of fire are preliminary signs to the great miracle of communication that is about to take place.

This miracle has two dimensions, and the text speaks first of one and then of the other. The first of these two dimensions has to do with communication with those outside the original community, and the second with communication within the community itself.

Outward Communication

If Pentecost is the birth of the church, as has been said so often, then from the very moment it is born the church is communicating its message to those outside its own community. The church did not even exist before it began communicating its message—and the corollary is also true, that a church that does not communicate its message is no longer a church!

In Acts 2, however, that communication takes on a surprising dimension. Perhaps what is most surprising in the Pentecost event is not simply that everyone understood what the disciples said, but that they understood each in their own tongue! Luke describes the people who were then dwelling in Jerusalem in terms that remind us of the multicultural mishmash of our modern cities: “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and

Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs..." Granted, all of these people were Jews, either by birth or by conversion, and therefore there was a measure of commonality among them. The text itself presents them speaking to each other, presumably in Aramaic, Greek or some other language they all understood. If they had come to Jerusalem, one may well surmise that they had tried to learn the language of the land, and that at least some of them must have been able to communicate in it. But still, even in the context of that commonality, they are different. They have different languages, cultures, and traditions. They may all be Jews, but some among them are also Cappadocians, while others are Phrygians or Elamites.

Again, this is not so different from the multicultural realities of our cities today. Right here in the United States, for instance in Atlanta, we have Pakistanis and Arabs and Chinese, and Hispanics and African-Americans, and Koreans and Euro-Americans, and many others. To a very high degree, we are able to communicate with each other through the common language of the land, English. Most of us are American citizens, and thus share laws, rights, and obligations across cultural lines. And yet, even though we are all American, we are also something else, and we value and cherish that something else as part of our identity, our culture, and our tradition.

Two Options in Communicating with Those Outside

What is so surprising in the situation in Acts 2 is that all of these people, with so many different cultures and traditions, are able to hear, each in his or her own tongue. This entails a particular type of communication. Indeed, if it were only a matter of making people understand what the disciples were saying, the Spirit had two options: one option would be to make all understand the language of the disciples; the other would be to make the apostles speak, and the hearers hear, in the various tongues represented among the crowd. The first would apparently have been easier, for all of these various peoples were accustomed to negotiating the affairs of their daily lives in the language of the disciples. And yet, the Spirit chooses the second, more difficult option: they are to hear in their various different tongues.

Two Sorts of Mission

These two options would have led to two different sorts of mission. The first option would have led to a mission where all are invited to become like the apostles, to speak the language of the apostles, to adopt the culture of the apostles, to join a church just like the original community. The second, however, leads to a mission where, by the very act of speaking in other tongues, the apostles are beginning to give up control over the nascent church. By making those present hear in their own tongues, the Spirit is telling them—and us—that the gospel is by its very nature translatable; that no one language—not even the language of the apostles and of Jesus—and no one culture—not even the culture of Jesus and the apostles—is normative. The first option would have led to all good Christians to this day speaking—or trying to speak—Aramaic, imitating the dress and the customs of the apostles, inviting the world to learn Aramaic so they could hear the very original words of Jesus. But the Spirit chose the second option, and because of that the church is what it is today. Even more, this second option has so shaped the life of the church that even the words of Jesus are available to us only in translation, for the Greek in which the New Testament was written is already a result

of translation, of the gospel moving from one culture to another. And ever since the church has lived and grown by translating the message: by translating it into the Greek and Latin of the Greco-Roman world, by translating it to the Germanic languages of the north, by translating it to the languages of an ever expanding world, by translating it from one generation to the context of another.

In this process, translation is not merely a matter of making ourselves understood. It is also a matter of affirming the identity of the other. At Pentecost, the Spirit told any Cappadocians who were present, not only that Jesus had died and was risen for them, but also that they were invited to follow Jesus as Cappadocians, with no need to become Galileans. Jesus came to Galilee and to its culture, but by his presence in that place and that culture he made it possible for every place and every culture to be sanctified. This is the first dimension of the miracle of communication that we celebrate at Pentecost.

A Fuller Understanding of Communication

This is of the very essence of communication, for originally to “communicate” did not mean, as it does for many today, simply transferring an idea from our mind into somebody else’s mind. *Communicare* means to share, to make *common*. What is common is no longer mine. To communicate the gospel is not simply to tell another; it is to tell another in such a way that the listener is able to appropriate the gospel and make it her or his own, in such a way that I no longer have absolute control over it, for it now belongs also to the other.

This means that of the two options mentioned above for proclaiming the gospel to the nations present in Jerusalem, only the second option is truly reflective of full communication. If the apostles had required that others hear the gospel only in the apostles’ own terms, in their language and in their culture, they would not have been truly sharing the gospel, for they would still be exclusively in control of it. A supposed communication that makes the other think exactly as I do, speak exactly as I do, and act exactly as I do is not real communication, but ideological conquest in the guise of communication. A communication of the gospel that would have made all hear in the language of the apostles and follow the customs and culture of the apostles would not have been the Good News of real communication.

So as we prepare to celebrate Pentecost once again, it should be clear to us that we, the church, are in the business of communicating the gospel. This is not an added task among many. It is the task that makes the church be what it is, for it was in communication that the church was born.

Yet what will be most difficult for us to understand and to practice will be the sort of Spirit-led communication that really makes the message *common*, and therefore no longer exclusively ours, no longer something we can control. This is difficult, for we may claim great evangelistic zeal, but the truth is that most of us are convinced that the manner in which the gospel has become incarnate in our particular culture and our particular way of being church is the best possible way. We even convince ourselves that we are guardians of the true faith and the best way of being church, which risk being corrupted as the message moves from culture to culture and from generation to generation.

This means that as we preach on this Pentecost we have to ask ourselves some very difficult questions: Are we really willing to *communicate* the gospel, to make it really

common to us and to others, and therefore no longer exclusively or even primarily ours? Is our church communicating the gospel to others in what could be termed their own tongues, that is, in ways that affirm those who hear? In our present multicultural society, do we relate to the variety of cultures around us in a “Pentecostal” way, that is, communicating the gospel to them while making it very clear that once they hear it, it is theirs, and therefore no longer just ours?

Communication Within

That is the first of the two dimensions of communication that mark the event of Pentecost in Acts 2. The second is like unto it. It is the inner communication of a church that truly lives by the Spirit.

There is another way of looking at the work of the Spirit at Pentecost in relation to the church’s mission. The end of Matthew’s Gospel, which does not mention Pentecost, emphasizes the sending of the disciples into all the world, carrying the message of Christ. It is tempting to read the Acts account of Pentecost with the same emphasis. Yet here it is the world that has come to Jerusalem and has heard the good news there. The presence of diaspora Judaism with all of its languages and cultures makes the preaching of Pentecost an outreach to the nations. Granted, the gift of the Spirit eventually does propel the first disciples out of Jerusalem, and the great expansion of the church begins. But we cannot think of Pentecost or of mission only in terms of sending or going to those outside. Both Pentecost and mission also involve being a community that by its life is a witness and invitation to others. It is no accident that Acts 2 not only speaks of the miracle of tongues but also includes the description of that early community, the community that was one in love and charity, eating and praying together, and sharing their lives in a drastically new fashion (Acts 2:42-46)—that is, *communicating*, making things common, within itself.

We might say that there is both a centrifugal and a centripetal force in mission, stemming from the work of the Holy Spirit. There is the joyous bearing of the message to those outside of the community of faith, a message that is told in every tongue and language. That is the centrifugal force that propels the church outward. But there is also a centering, a uniting in the community that is part of the mission. The life of the community itself is a witness to the life in the Spirit, to the new being, the new creation, the risen body of Christ. There can be no such witness if the community of faith does not actually spend time together, work and pray together, in such a way that those outside of the church can see that Christians are indeed living a new kind of life, a life that draws others to them.

There is nothing sadder than a congregation that has a strong emphasis on mission, calling others in distant places to be part of a church, and yet in its own life together is anything but a loving community. There may even be terrible fights about the mission in distant places! Yet the witness they give in their own community is hardly inviting. They assume mission is only “out there” and do not see that their own life is a part of their mission.

This centripetal, centering witness of the community of faith is not new in Acts. It is very much part of the Old Testament’s understanding of Israel’s calling. In Isaiah 2:2-4 we read:

In the days to come, the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established

as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Israel is to be a model of God's will for all peoples. All of the judgment that came upon Israel was for the sake of making Israel be that model, a model of righteousness and justice. It does little good for Israel to proclaim God to the world if its life as a people does not show what God's law really means in daily living. The life of the people is a kind of audio-visual, a "show and tell" of God's word. We find the same understanding for the life of the church in the New Testament:

You are the salt of the earth. . . .you are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. . . .Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:13-16)

In Acts 2, both of these elements are brought together. There is proclamation by words—and astonishingly in a variety of languages—and there is also the witness of the life of the community. There is integrity, congruence, between the message and the lived out witness. We are called as God's people to be a light to the world. That light not only is a beacon to others, it also shines on us very strongly, making all of our shortcomings very clear.

The same Holy Spirit who sends disciples to the ends of the earth with the message of the Gospel also knits together in a loving community those who believe in Christ. Where Christians form a congregation, their life together is a witness, it is part of their mission, just as the spreading of the Gospel in all the world is also part of their mission. Even in the midst of mission in a different land, part of the witness is how that missionary community, how the missionary family, lives out its Christian life. It is no different in the home church. A congregation is not an organization dispensing religious services; it is a community of the new creation, witnessing to the power of the Gospel.

Bringing the Two Together

There is no reason to assume that this centripetal work of the Spirit automatically leads to an ethnically homogeneous congregation. It certainly did not in Jerusalem. In chapter 6 of Acts we encounter the conflict between the Greek-speaking and the Aramaic-speaking widows. Both groups were part of the same congregation. But conflict is too strong a word. We are told there was "murmuring" about unequal distributions to the widows. The community was made up of diverse groups, brought together by the Spirit. The same Spirit led the community to find a way to do justice and bring harmony to the congregation.

In our own world, it is not hard to imagine immigrant groups settling in our communities. They may even be Christians who were originally evangelized by missionaries from our own church or denomination. Would not the work of the Spirit bring us together? There are problems in multiethnic congregations, especially when

there is a difference of language and few bilingual people. But as we can see from the early Jerusalem church, it is possible to have real, full communication among people of different backgrounds. When it really works, what a significant witness it is to the surrounding community!

Moving outward, sent by the Spirit, is part of the meaning of Pentecost. Moving inward, pulled by the Spirit, is also part of the meaning of Pentecost. Both are essential for mission. Indeed, both are so closely tied together that we can only experience the one as we are part of the other.