

“Pentecost’s Costly Gift”

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In discussions about the contemporary mission of the Church it is often said that the Church ought to address itself to the real questions which people are asking. That is to misunderstand the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Church. The world’s questions are not the questions which lead to life. What really needs to be said is that where the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer. And that, I suppose, is why the letters of St. Paul contain so many exhortations to faithfulness but no exhortations to be active in mission.

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*¹

I

Reflections on the Pentecostal nature of the church often begin and end with reflections on the phenomenon described in the opening verses of Acts 2. There we read of the rush of a mighty wind and the tongues of fire resting on the gathered apostles, filling them with Holy Spirit, and enabling them “to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability” (vs. 4). The “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” (vs. 5) and others who had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost express amazement that they are now able to hear the gospel in their own native tongue. Luke takes some pains to list the various language groups and regions, as if to underscore the reach of this “Pentecostal miracle.” However, if the story ends here, or even if this is considered to be the chief significance of Pentecost, then sermons preached on this theme will tend to become bromides celebrating the universality of the gospel’s story or the inclusive nature of the Spirit’s work. Like most bromides, these contain an element of truth: the gospel has no privileged language and always seeks to get itself translated into the language of its hearers. And like most bromides, these neither threaten nor scandalize us. To the contrary, they are very much in accord with the way North American Christians like to think of themselves: non-discriminatory, open-minded, and ready to embrace other cultures.

When interpreted in this way, Pentecost becomes merely a reaffirmation of our own commitment to tolerance and perhaps even an expression of a kind of limitless Christianity that believes in little more than its own open-mindedness. Were we to think that this is all that Pentecost has to say to us, we would do well not to read the rest of Acts 2, which describes the even more disturbing work of the Spirit and the costly way it interrupts our lives.

One of the initial responses to this Pentecostal movement of the Spirit was that it was nothing more than the filling of quite another kind of spirit, one much more mundane if also somewhat intoxicating. But what this first Pentecost calls forth is not inebriated speech but a sermon. Pentecost issues in the preaching of the gospel. Pentecost gives the church the confidence to speak to the world. In this case, it was a sermon by Peter, whose text was from the prophet Joel describing the eschatological

reality which, Peter claims, has now overtaken all of them, speaker and hearer alike. The “last days” are now. Something quite disorienting has taken place. The Spirit has fallen upon “all flesh,” and now “all flesh” finds itself defined not by its own virtues or its own language or culture or ethnicity but by Jesus Christ to whom no culture is alien and from whom no culture is safe.

Peter’s sermon is not filled with universal regard for the diverse nature of those whom the Spirit has gathered. Instead he talks about Jesus. He begins not with the sensibilities or shared experiences of his auditors but with “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power” (vs. 22), a man “handed over to you,” whom “you crucified and killed” (vs. 23). This one God raised, “having freed him from death because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (vs. 24). This is the one whose Spirit has been “poured out” on this day; this is the one who is Israel’s Messiah. And this is the one “whom you crucified.”

Those who heard this sermon, we read, were “cut to the heart,” and they asked, “What should we do? (vs. 37). Peter replies, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (vs. 38).

Reading this far into the chapter, we might be forgiven for thinking of Peter’s sermon as nothing more than a revivalist’s call to repentance. “You’ve got trouble, right here in River City!” To which the inevitable response will be, “What shall we do?” Repentance in such a context seems more like a strategy for getting saved than anything else, a kind of calculated response in the face of some frightening specter. Peter’s own words in vs. 40—“Save yourselves from this corrupt generation”²—seem to reinforce just such a view.

Yet I wonder if that is what is going on here. Peter has preached a sermon that has pivoted on what he regards as the center of the gospel, Jesus Christ. This sermon has acknowledged the deeds of power wrought in this man, the inability of death to hold this man in its grasp, the exaltation of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father, and the pouring out of his Spirit on all who are gathered. But this sermon has repeatedly and deliberately drawn the attention of its auditors not to themselves or to their experience, but to Jesus Christ and specifically to the one who was crucified, to the one whom “you crucified.” This was not done contrary to the “plan and foreknowledge of God” (vs. 23). Indeed the one whom God has made Lord and Messiah is none other than the Crucified. It is the Crucified who reigns in power, the Crucified whose Spirit has been poured out. To repent is not to achieve some sort of spiritually safe ground or receive some sort of invulnerable piety that will protect from the wrath to come, but it is to be drawn into the life of this one who was crucified. It is to be limited by his life, defined by his way, set free for his purposes. Repentance is the way the Crucified forms disciples and just so is the strange Pentecostal gift by which the Crucified pours out his Spirit. Far from being a self-chosen strategy for avoiding the wrath to come, repentance is that sharp edge the Crucified wields to cut the bonds of our hearts in order to draw us into his own life. To revert to an older term, it is what sanctification looks like.

The result of Peter’s sermon and the baptism of some three thousand souls (Luke seems to like numbers.) is the formation of a community. The Spirit of the Crucified does not just impose limits, but it also establishes fellowship. What did these early Christians do who were “cut to the heart”? “They devoted themselves to the apostles’

teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”(vs. 42). That is not all that they did, as we shall see, but we do well to pay close attention to this early description of the Pentecostal community.

The Spirit of the Crucified does not enlist this community in a cause or create an academy or even invite much reflection on the “spiritual life.” Rather the Spirit who gave Peter the confidence to preach the Gospel creates a body to hear that Gospel, shaping it in the narrow way of Christian discipleship, where the life together described by the “apostles’ teaching and fellowship” is accompanied by the sacramental “breaking of bread,” all of which sustains a community that is learning how to ask (prayer). There is little here to support language of “unlimited possibilities” in describing the Pentecostal church, little that would suggest a burgeoning freedom to be “me” as the goal of the Christian life. Rather, there is an embrace of the limits, the discipline of that one whose Spirit makes disciples, and who in giving himself to us comes in no other way than as the Crucified Lord.

Does this lead to a Pentecostal quietism, a community turned in on itself unwilling to engage with the world or its many needs? One might conclude just that if one did not go on to finish the chapter. But the chapter that began with the distribution of fiery tongues ends with an even mightier Pentecostal wind blowing on those it has gathered, and the cost of this distribution is even sharper and more threatening than what blew in at 9 a.m. Christians who might be happy to see in the Spirit’s diverse language skills a metaphor for the universal scope of the Gospel’s message have tended to seek shelter from the wind that occurs at the end of this chapter. The picture that Luke paints is one of fervent unity, a difficult thing for us to imagine today. Even more inconceivable is the un-capitalistic nature of this Spirit-filled life together. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need”(vs. 44). The chapter that began with tongues of fire being distributed ends with the distribution of goods to all who had need.

One of the ways the church has sought to avoid the sharp edges of the gospel is to romanticize the descriptions of the Spirit’s work. Just as it is easy to turn the first part of this story into a bromide about some sort of gospel Esperanto, so it is easy to dismiss the last part of this chapter as the initial fervor of naive converts who in their Spirit-filled passion had sought to become a utopian community rather than a congregation of forgiven sinners. But the gospel is never sentimental or naive. And as Luke notes, those who were seeking to live in unity with each other continued to worship in the temple, a strange thing to do if they were seeking some sort of utopia. I wonder if we ought to read the final part of this chapter not as some sort of naive, albeit Spirit-filled communism that later, wiser, and more experienced Christians quickly did away with but rather as the actual fulfillment of those tongues of fire that enabled believers of every nation under heaven to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in the first place.

What is impressive here is not the economic claims being made, though those claims are impressive enough. Of first concern, however, and what makes their having “all things in common” and their distributing “proceeds to all as any had need” so compelling is the Spirit’s gift of unity so palpably felt by all. It was this keenly felt sense of unity that caused the “awe” that fell upon them, an awareness that they were truly one in Christ, one not just in terms of some sort of linguistic or trans-ethnic

unity, but one in body, one that could now enable those who had resources to *see* the needs of others as if they were their own needs, one that could not live as if the needs of others were dismissable. It was not economic theory or a sense of *noblesse oblige* or some popular cause for the good of humanity that enabled what was both a radical self-limitation and at the same time a radical self-giving, but rather it was their unity in Christ which the Spirit so powerfully revealed to those who were gathered.

This is why the divisions and fractures within the church today are so un-Pentecostal and so productive of a peculiar kind of blindness. Splitting apart, we lose the ability to see our real unity and thus to feel the compelling “awe” that allows for that radical self-limitation and even more radical self-giving. We find it possible to dismiss the other. We find it enough to be ourselves. The “communism” described in Acts 2 is just too scary, not for economic reasons but for theological ones. Our fractures have produced a kind of asthmatic church, struggling to breathe and finding it easier simply to settle for a less difficult unity, one that is more private, more like “us,” more in alignment with the political or economic or virtual communities of which we are a part.

II

So what might a Pentecostal church look like today? Or if that is too simple a question, perhaps we should ask what this story in Acts 2 has to say to us about the church in our day, a time very different from that of the first century. What might we pray for when we ask for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a rush of mighty wind that would enable us to speak with confidence and even more important, become the church God is calling us to be? Whatever else might be said, the following themes seem to me to grow out of Luke’s telling of the Pentecost story and offer some guidance for our day.

1) The Pentecostal church of Acts 2 was not a utopian community. The body that the Spirit formed to hear the word that Peter preached and the apostles taught was not self-chosen but gathered by a mighty act of God from “every nation under heaven.” The spectacular drama of the fiery tongues and the rush of mighty wind is meant to signal the miraculous nature of the church’s own existence, underlining the fact that its life is not self-generated but owes its very breath to that Spirit that forms it to hear and speak the gospel’s word. That means that the church is unlike clubs, parties, movements, networking associations, societies, foundations, etc. The church’s life is not self-formed or an infinitely plastic thing but a received gift that brings with it a certain disposition, a posture of dependence, a sense of its own strangeness, even holiness. This sense has a shape and a name. It is called discipleship. And it is shaped by being drawn ever more deeply into the body of Christ. That is where hearts are cut and bodies are set free. The church does not imagine itself or re-imagine itself. It receives its life as a gift from the Spirit of the Crucified. And this gift is the life together where saints are made.

2) The chief characteristic of the Pentecostal church’s life is its unity. That is why the Nicene Creed exegetes Acts 2 correctly when it affirms its faith in the *one* holy catholic and apostolic church. The awe that came over those gathered on the first Pentecost because of the wonders and signs of the apostles’ ministry was an awe that manifested itself in a deeper unity. “All who believed were together....Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home...”

(vs. 44 and 46). Not love, not virtuous self-sacrifice, not depth of piety, not social awareness; none of these are mentioned here. The Spirit unites the gathered into one body, and it is on the basis of that oneness that the full extent of the gospel's claim is envisioned and enfleshed. This unity is catholic in its scope not as a result of the geographical spread or diversity of its members but rather as a witness to the extent of Christ's reign. He is the One who makes the church catholic. To quote another who understood this matter well, "He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church..." (Col. 1:17,18).

To bear witness to the Pentecostal nature of the church is, amidst all our brokenness, to confess that oneness that is ours in Christ and to pray that his Spirit would trouble our hearts and make us deeply ashamed of and uncomfortable with our disunity. The repentance of which Peter speaks in Acts 2 is for us just such a confession. It is also a call to voice that unity amidst the debris and wreckage we have made (always for the "best" reasons) so that we, like those gathered in Jerusalem, might actually see things to which our divisions had previously blinded us.

3) A Pentecostal church is a church of limits. This is another way of saying that the church is holy and receives its life as a gift from the Spirit of the risen Lord. The gift is not some vague spirituality that is only too happy to define itself, but rather it is the concrete form of Christ's body in the world. This gift limits our efforts to construct our own identity, which is why baptism is such a central part of the Pentecostal church. We receive our identity through the waters the Spirit bathes us in Christ. It is this Spirit that graciously but effectively excludes our attempts at self-worship. In drawing us into the body of Christ, the Spirit speaks a powerful "Yes!" to us and this "Yes" is the Spirit's first and last word to us. But this "Yes" includes within it a "No" which cannot be overlooked or dismissed. The "No" limits our efforts to seek a freedom apart from the freedom of Jesus Christ. And the church of Pentecost, the church that devotes itself to the apostle's teaching and fellowship and the breaking of bread, is shaped by this "No" even as it lives from the "Yes." The shape is cruciform.

W. H. Auden notes this aspect of the Pentecostal church when he suggests an answer that a Christian might well give if asked why he believes in Jesus. No more objective answer can be given, Auden writes, than that "I believe... because He is in every respect the opposite of what He would be if I could have made Him in my own image." "Thus," continues Auden, "if a Christian is asked, 'Why Jesus and not Socrates or Buddha or Confucius or Mahomet?' perhaps all he can say is: 'None of the others arouse all sides of my being to cry Crucify Him.'"³

To speak of limits in a North American context is almost to commit some sort of sin against the Holy Spirit. We pride ourselves on believing in a world without limits. But a world without limits is entirely destructive. It is destructive of marriages, families, neighborhoods, nations, and most especially, churches. In another context, Hannah Arendt made this very point. She argued that one of the defining characteristics of the "authentically totalitarian structure" is the belief that "everything is possible."⁴ In a fallen world, God knits clothing for his wayward children, providing a limit for them that protects them from themselves. Baptism is the garment God knits together for us so that we might be clothed in Christ and so protected from ourselves and each other. To desire to live without such clothing or to want clothes of our own is not an expression of freedom or honesty but enthrallment to an even deeper bondage.

Pentecost's limits are a sign of the church's true freedom (and holiness), a confession that we have not made ourselves, but that "we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3). Or as the catechism puts it, that we belong not to ourselves but to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

4) The Pentecostal church believes that its own life and particularly its life together is the witness which the Spirit of Christ forms in the world and which challenges most radically the principalities and powers that claim to be in charge. The Pentecostal church is not a cause. It is not established or enhanced by enlisting in some aspect of the culture's agenda. Rather its strangeness, or better, its holiness within the culture, creates the possibility of un-thought-of questions to be asked, more daring ventures to be considered, more faithful and more costly ways of sharing the life together that the Spirit has formed. "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people" (vs. 46).

Father Alexander Schmemmann begins his book on the sacraments by noting that the church is constituted by what it eats, both in word and bread.⁵ Luke's description of the church in Acts 2 talks more about eating than it does doing. It is the life together that is formed and sustained by this eucharistic sustenance that gives shape to the church and enables it to challenge the culture at its roots. Here is a kind of witness that is embodied, a witness that is not tempted to make idols out of causes in order to reassure itself of its own life, but eats "with glad and generous hearts," exhibiting a kind of joyful hope whose source would otherwise be inexplicable.

5) The Pentecostal church is not a capitalistic enterprise. Moreover, its life is a conscious rejection of the values of acquisitive consumerism. The having of all things in common, the selling of possessions, the distribution of the proceeds to all as had need may strike us as a primitive and best forgotten form of Marxism, but these actions also manifest that strange holiness of the church that serves, in its own life, to challenge the accepted presuppositions of the culture. The idolatry of success, the blessing of prosperity, whether economic or political, the righteous blindness toward the wretched of the earth, all of these are efforts to create a church without limits, to fashion something much more in our own image, a "successful" church. If we have trouble with the Pentecostal church Luke describes or even if we think it a bit of romantic hyperbole, we do well to be troubled and to live with our questions. That is precisely the way the gospel begins to transform the conversation.

6) The Pentecostal church is characterized not by adherence to the law (The primitive Marxism Luke describes does not contain a word about enforcement or terror or the taking over of the "commanding heights of the economy.") but by its rejoicing in the gospel. The Pentecostal church is a place of joy.

This does not mean that the Pentecostal church is a place of euphoria, constant praise music, or endless good cheer. What it does mean is that the life the Spirit gives to the church is a life that cannot despair, a hope that cannot be extinguished, a confidence that cannot be overwhelmed. Joy is that gift of the Spirit that knows Easter is true. Joy is the echoing response of those who have heard this word and eaten this bread and who refuse to look back. Joy is the soil in which hope grows.

Christopher Lasch, not a believer but an excellent critic of American culture, was struck with the unsinkable joy that characterized the African-American church during the struggle for Civil Rights. Lasch's biographer writes, "Their virtuous embrace of

what Niebuhr had called ‘the spiritual discipline against resentment’ was the starkest manifestation of the sensibility and stance Lasch had... been propounding. ‘Their experience in the South gave little support to a belief in progress,’ Lasch underscored, ‘yet they seemed to have unlimited supplies of hope.’ The movement had depended on ‘spiritual resources—courage, tenacity, forgiveness, and hope’—that had been nurtured in their own communities.”⁶ Nurtured, to be more specific, in their churches, whose joy contradicted each week the lethal realities they were experiencing in the world.

III

In a culture that has lifted resentment of others to a kind of art form, the gift of the Spirit of Jesus Christ contradicts the lust for a justice untethered to the cross by forming a community that is centered on Jesus Christ. The Spirit of the risen Lord creates a community of “glad and generous hearts,” making for a unity that can espy the needs of the least of these in our midst, inspiring a doxological joy that can praise God without irony or hidden agenda, and inviting all to eat word and sacrament as the limiting and liberating nourishment of those who hope in Christ. All of these works of the Pentecostal Spirit support “disciplines of non-resentment” which contradict our culture’s idols at their roots and give us strength to bear witness to the abundant life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Notes

1 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 119.

2 At least one commentator has suggested that a better translation of this verse might be “Let yourself be saved.” See William H. Willimon, *Acts: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 37.

3 As cited in Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), 117.

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 440.

5 Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 11-16.

6 Eric Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 340.