

The Holy Spirit's New World Order

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It is a commonplace observation about American political life that evangelicals and Pentecostals pushed Donald Trump into the White House. There would be no such thing as either evangelicals or Pentecostals were it not for the second chapter of Acts. And yet, I propose, Acts 2 is profoundly good news for those who seek liberation from empire, whether American or any other sort. How can that be?

First, a mathematical and religious marvel: before the year 1906 there were zero Pentecostals on the planet. Now we are well on our way to one billion Pentecostals. With the collapse of mainline and magisterial Protestant churches, there may be no Christians but Catholics, Orthodox, and Pentecostals within a few generations. Whether you think these are happy developments or cause for lament, we must notice first that they represent impressive growth and important shifts in the religious landscape of the globe.

In 1906 at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, a revival broke out which saw the sorts of miraculous signs and wonders emerge in the same way they first did at Pentecost in Jerusalem with the descent of the Holy Spirit: people spoke in tongues, healings occurred, multiple races melted together into one people, a form of life was born that would become a critical irritant in the greater body politic. That Pentecostals very quickly divided on race lines just as sharply as the rest of early 20th century America is not surprising, nor is it that those first Pentecostals' descendants lined up to shill and vote for Trump. The miracle is that something *different* occurred, however briefly. We can assume empire's crushing hegemony. When, since Adam and Eve fell and Cain murdered Abel, have human beings *not* sought to rule over and dominate one another? What is surprising is that there is *ever* an interruptive logic to that of empire.

Of course, modern-day Pentecostals were not totally without precedent in the church's history between the original Pentecost and 1906. Take, for example, the miracle of the African-American church. Make no mistake: Christianity was imposed on the daughters and sons of Africa as a slave-religion. Many an African American intellectual has rejected Christianity outright as an inherently and irredeemably racist faith, and who could blame them? Many of those denied access to education presumably did the same in their own ways. But enslaved and oppressed people heard *something* when they heard of Jesus—this one who was despised, rejected, beaten, and lynched. He is one of ours, they realized, and we are his. They saw his figure in the stories from Isaiah of one whose suffering brings redemption. They debated, and more often than not practiced, Jesus' command to love the enemy. And most importantly for our present purposes, they practiced Christianity in ways that made their white overseers nervous. There is still something in me, as a white southerner, that feels deeply uncomfortable in the midst of black worship. What are these Africans doing with their bodies, their voices? This is no accident. Their forebears always practiced Christianity in their own way, in ways that made my forebears nervous. They said, in effect, "We don't like this white Christianity, but we like this Jesus; he is one of us." My white discomfort shows that something more was being said:

“You do not control our bodies in worship. We will do with them what pleases us and frightens you.” I don’t want to overplay what we might describe as the political significance of black church worship. Generous estimates say that only some 10% of black churches participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Black churches can be just as given to quietism or even cooption by empire as white ones. Again, that is not surprising. What is surprising is that the logic of empire is ever interrupted, however episodically.

Pentecost is a windfall, an infusion, a deluge of language.¹ The original Pentecost is a miracle of communication. Jews from all over the world are in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost, celebrated 50 days after Passover. And though they come from all over the known world (including “from” some places listed in vv. 9-11 that no longer existed in the time of Acts!), they hear the disciples bearing witness *in their own languages*. Modern Pentecostalism more often expects adherents to speak in *glossolalia*, ecstatic utterance, a sort of private prayer language that sounds to others like babbling. Ancient Pentecostalism speaks of those who receive the Spirit as suddenly speaking intelligibly in a language they have never learned. There is a place for *glossolalia* in scripture and church practice, but it does not stem from Acts 2. The miracle here is suddenly hearing one’s heart language, learned at one’s mother’s breast, spoken by strangers far from home. It is a miracle of “intimacy,” according to Willie Jennings, whose commentary I draw on throughout here.² Language is an intimate thing learned with exacting difficulty, in a way that makes grown adults feel childlike, reaching out to children as their teachers and only learned finally with determination and love.

Pentecost signals something crucial about Christianity: ours is a translatable faith. Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, and others have pointed out the revolution here.³ Most faiths homogenize: read this language, speak this one, face this direction, eat these foods. Christianity has always been a faith that gives itself away in Holy Spirit-driven translation. This has often produced the worst version of ourselves as church, as in crusading or colonizing violence. But it has also produced the best of ourselves. For in translation, the giving culture’s power is relativized, and the receiving culture’s power is recognized. Those who receive the gospel anew do surprising things with it that the giving-away culture could not have guessed in advance. The “coming global Christianity,” in Philip Jenkins’s still apt phrase, will look very different than the European and North American Christianities that have preceded it.⁴ The results of this potent concoction cannot be guessed in advance. Evangelicals and fundamentalists suspect that heresies come from two academic fields: Old Testament and missions. Both come into contact with non-Christian cultures, whether ancient or contemporary, and realize goodness, truth, and beauty in those new friends. They come back out of the library or from the mission field shaken and asking impertinent and awkward questions of their previously more tidy faith. Maybe *we* don’t have all the answers; maybe *they* have some. They are not wrong to be shaken. The edges of faith are where Christianity has always renewed itself (Latin America, Asia, Africa). It seems to die in the middle (the Middle East, Europe, North America). Mainline liberals who don’t spend time with bible translators may be surprised to learn that this is a source of other-affirming generosity. Right now, in some remote village in Africa or Asia, some exquisitely determined translator is working feverishly to get the past participle of a verb in a local language just right so that her friends can hear

the word of God in their own mother's tongue. And right now, the same village is on some business executive's map as she tries to figure out how to get those people speaking English so a fast food chain can sell her hamburgers. I'm pulling for the translator personally.

The church has often forgotten this, of course. European enslavers and colonizers spoke as though only European languages could bear the freight of the hurricane, polyglot God. But those who receive the gospel know better. The God Who Speaks in Tongues speaks in their tongue also. How are those European-language speaking churches doing these days? How about in places to which they brought Christianity with them, sometimes intending it as a cudgel, horrified at times to see it become an illumination of a previously unseen way for newly dignified life among the colonized? Jennings writes that the Spirit always sends people where they do not want to go.⁵ Many of those in the mission field went as those who would impose a foreign language. But some blessed few got lost in the new culture. They learned new sounds, the intimacy of new cadences. They lost their old name and gained a new one. Derisive words were used by their former companions—they "went native," for example. For Jennings, no one can follow Jesus without betraying their own people, on the way to being forged into the Spirit's new humanity.⁶ You see this among these first 3,000 followers at Pentecost. They are all Jews already. Yet Peter asks them to repent, believe something new, join to a new people. This is no conversion from one religion to another. It is the birth of a new people from one religion, Judaism, that is soon to invite all people to join from whatever religion, to the ends of the earth. Most people are not eager to betray their own family, language, religion, nation. The surprise is not that this happens so rarely. The miracle is that it happens at all. And it still does.

Westerners are accustomed to assuming that freedom, democracy, the market are all good things that should be adopted by all peoples everywhere. If they have been misused, they should be properly applied next time, not abandoned. The church and the wider western culture used to think the same about Christianity. We have all been schooled now by centuries of counter-suggestion: missionary work is always vile, soul-crushing, other-annihilating cultural and often literal genocide. We have bit too hard on this. What human endeavor is *not* marked by Adam's sadness, Eve's sorrow? The miracle is that the Holy Spirit is birthing a new humanity right in the middle of the old. All people are invited into this new people who speak like other people. The church, especially in its Pentecostal expression, bears witness that the way things are is not the way things have to be. God is capable of doing a new thing. God is, in fact, doing a new thing right now. It's called "church." Ethnic and national identities dissolve in the waters of baptism. Demarcations of wealth and power are ground down and crushed in bread and wine. We in the church have no right to keep this good news to ourselves. If we want empires to quake as they once did in our presence, we should go and tell. And if we western Christians will not, someone else will. They already are.

Pentecost is also a miracle of property. The way that the Spirit-drenched disciples show their new identity is by sharing all things in common (2:43-45). Most English translations obscure this miracle. For example, the NRSV that I like to use ends a sentence with a period at the end of verse 43. But the Greek does not. The particle *hina* indicates the reason *why* signs and wonders were being done by the apostle. It

should read, “Awe came upon everyone . . . *for* all who believed were together and had all things in common.” Awe from the outside comes from common possessions on the inside. In fact, there is no wall between this “inside” and “outside,” for how else could “outsiders” see and stand amazed? The thousands in Jerusalem knew their Bibles enough to know that a sign of the promised land is that there is no needy people among the Jews (Deut. 15:4). All on the edges, the margins, the outs of society are those most cared for, catered to, loved. The church could stand to learn a thing or two here. The best proof of the truth of Christian faith is the quality of the discipleship of those who hold it; the best disproof is, alas, the same. The book of Acts shows the mutual sharing of property as a keystone that holds the arch of all other Christian practices together.

And how have we done practicing what the disciples practice in Acts 2? Not so well. There are some blessed counter-examples. Monks and nuns have held their property in common, often owned by their orders (which can become quite wealthy, unfortunately). Outbreaks of new monasticism have also taken place outside of Catholic or Orthodox communions in which believers read texts like Acts 2 and decide to put this revolution into practice. In the church, when we give our offerings, some portion of that goes to missions, doing good at home and far away in ways that I hope approximate Acts 2, however distantly. A pastor friend speaks of the church’s “ten-minute hippie phase” where we actually tried to hold all things in common. But then her congregation creatively steps into this part of Pentecost. They gather unwanted goods once a year at Pentecost and sell them online, raising money to help the neediest in their midst.⁷ Is it any wonder *more* needy people keep turning up at her church? Not because they get stuff or money, but because they have something to contribute, to sell, to turn into needed cash for others. These are partial, occasional examples that could be multiplied, but hardly add up to a scale that the author of Luke-Acts might have imagined. It’s hard enough for a biological or extended or ecclesial family to hold *some* things in common. No wonder we so quickly fall back into private property.

How well is it working out for us to assume that the point of life is acquisition? To buy into our culture’s claim that we will be judged on our accumulation of money and goods and by no judge other than that? Our rapacious economic practices brook no dissent and understand no one opting out, seeking to live by other rules. But what if there is a more humane way to be and to treat our neighbors? The sharing of possessions at Pentecost suggests there might be. C.S. Lewis imagines hell as a place where everyone gets what they want when they want it.⁸ This consumerist “success” means each person there needs neither God nor neighbor. Their only perceived need is to keep their accumulation of stuff safe from other people—so they keep moving to bigger and bigger palaces farther and farther away from others. Hell as suburbia. They could leave, but choose not to. There are no locks on the door of hell except on the inside. Heaven, by contrast, is marked by limitless, boundless, endless sharing, not only of food and other goods, but of delight, of God. Late capitalism’s insistence that we are only as good as our material acquisition is not only poor practice for eternity—it’s no way to be human now.

Luke tells us that about 3,000 people are baptized into this new humanity on the first Pentecost (2:41). Impressive. Though you do have to watch out for preacher numbers, especially when they’re nice and round—those of us who talk for God

for a living have a tendency to round up! This response to Peter's sermon contrasts markedly with some other sermons elsewhere in Acts, for example when Paul speaks at the Areopagus in Athens in Acts 17, and only two converts can be scrounged up. 3,000 is an impressive figure, meant to evoke the thousands to whom Jesus spoke and with whom he broke bread. But then something truly amazing happens—something I didn't see until reading Brandon O'Brien's book *The Strategically Small Church*.⁹ These thousands do not all stay in Jerusalem. They do not form the First Pentecostal Megachurch with thousands on the rolls. No. They go home. Back to every obscure corner of the Mediterranean from which they came. They start countless mini-churches. They scatter like seeds with little promise of taking root, though some do. This is a Pentecostal habit that our churches, especially in North America, would do well to notice: the biblical pattern is not one of hunkering down, growing giant megaliths, with oceanic parking lots and pyrotechnic entertainment. Pentecost's vision is lots of mini-churches rather than a mega-one.

The church has had a vexed relationship with empire ever since the penning of this text, the curling of tongues around these new sounds. We speak of a new sort of kingdom on the way, one that relativizes and displaces all existing kingdoms. Rulers of this world are like Pharaoh, like Caiaphas, like Caesar: murderers and fools. The rightful king of the world is the man on the cross, risen from the grave, and one day every knee will bow. In a remarkably short amount of time, the Roman empire went from sporadically persecuting Christianity to joining it. After the sort-of conversion of Constantine, the empire began showering largesse on the church, not just lifting persecution, but giving us money, buildings, favor, power. Folks flocked to join. It felt and looked like the kingdom—all people streaming to Zion to worship Israel's God. But it was not. It was an empire using Christianity to shore up its power. Many Christians objected, moving into the desert to practice Christianity with the rigor of the martyrs and confessors and apostles. That the empire was Christian made it no less an empire. Constantine himself murdered wives and children (his own!), and his conversion was seen then and has been since as rather too convenient. He figured the church would glue his fractious people together whether the content of our faith was true or not. We've often been pretty good at that.

We've been less good at being the community Peter envisions in Acts 2. We've done it by fits and starts, in certain places and at certain times. N.T. Wright compares God's elect people Israel to a firetruck racing off to fight a deadly fire. Unfortunately the truck itself falls into a ditch. Now it must be wrested free from its predicament in order to go and fight the fire—the rescuing people need rescue.¹⁰ So it is with Israel in scripture. It is the people through whom God means to repair the world, to make right what we have made wrong. But unfortunately, it has fallen into the very mess it has been sent to repair. We understand this as church because we have too! God must drag us from the mire, put us back on a right path, in order to accomplish the end God desires through Israel and the church: the repair and renewal of all things in heaven and on earth. God's purposes will not be thwarted or frustrated—they will be fulfilled—however pitifully we, God's people, enact God's purposes for us and all humanity.

But if we did enact God's Acts 2 intentions a little less pitifully, wouldn't the empire sweat a little? Ours is no longer an empire with Roman eagles on its shields. It is an empire of a global market, instantaneously moving trillions of dollars around

the planet, creating new wealth, new poverty, devouring everything in its maw. It is the beast of the book of Revelation—then Rome, now our market. Try to absent yourself from it. Go ahead: you can't do it. Friends tried to turn off their electricity for a season of penitence in Advent. They did well—burning candles, storing food only as long as you can without refrigeration, heating water over gas for bathing. But then they went out. And got a babysitter. And didn't feel they could let her sit in the dark, so they turned the switch back on. It is very, very hard to go back on the material comforts of empire. Just imagine turning in your shoes for some you make yourself.

But wouldn't it be fun, no, delightful, no, human, to try to make Caesar sweat a little? To have the church be the new humanity that scripture imagines? Sustained on nothing other than the bread and wine that is our Lord, surviving off nothing other than one another's and God's generosity, performing signs and wonders that others notice and request and join in performing, praying constantly in the temple and far beyond, with day by day the number of those being saved growing and growing?

Could it happen again? The surprise is not that it rarely happens—it is that it indeed *has* happened at all. We can be sure the Holy Spirit has done more with less promising material.

Notes

1 I am reliant throughout this essay on Willie James Jennings' remarkable book, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster, 2017), xv-40.

2 *Ibid.* 27-30.

3 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2009).

4 Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

5 Jennings 11.

6 *Ibid.* 9.

7 "Ancient liturgy for scruffy hipsters with smartphones: A profile of Nadia Bolz-Weber and House for All Sinners and Saints," *New Media Project* (Oct. 18, 2011): <http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/house-for-all-sinners-and-saints/article>.

8 C.S. Lewis *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015).

9 O'Brien *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, Effective* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2010).

10 Wright *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 38.