

Protagonist Corner

Pentecostals and Advent Expectations in a Time of Social Disarray: Enough Is Enough!

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Not long ago, we Pentecostals were invited to the stage of the inauguration of the 45th President of the United States. No, we didn't sneak in the back. We holy rollers had prominent speaking roles, three of them. We stood shoulder to shoulder with the other speakers, the ones who belonged there, who were Catholic, Jewish, and Evangelical, and we outnumbered them all. One of us was black, one Latino, and the other a lady evangelist who has served as Trump's "spiritual advisor" for a decade. This is too ironic to even be called irony. It is tragedy, like the extinction of a species, the loss of a language. I felt glum for days after. During the ceremony I shot out a tweet:

If you want to observe what breaking the Third Commandment looks like, just listen to the denigration of the name of Jesus at the presidential inauguration today. For attempts to christianize a man who has no regard for the teachings of Jesus are truly "in vain."

Never mind that I am a registered Republican and that I tend to agree with the contention of Stanley Hauerwas that the day an American president doesn't need to be a Christian to win the election will be a good day for Christianity in America.¹ Yet as you might expect, my rather large network of Pentecostal readers pounced on me as if I had cursed their mother.

How did we Pentecostals get here? In short, somewhat like the 4th century Christians, we won. What started as a movement of "deplorables" in Appalachia and skid row now boasts glittery television networks, prestigious universities, and the world's largest churches. The preeminent Harvey Cox has written books about us, and our ranks have grown to almost a billion strong.² As Saint Francis was supposedly told by the pope, "No longer must we say 'Silver and gold have I not.'"³

Given our rise, I suppose it is only natural that we would look for a Constantine to crown, the ultimate sign that we have arrived. But I don't need to tell you that we Pentecostals aren't supposed to be natural (We think that's for all you Presbyterians!). It is precisely a failure of our rootedness in the supernatural that led to our anointing of the impenitent lecher that is Donald Trump. What is the way forward? It is simply the reclamation of our former commitments to the power of the Holy Spirit and a robust eschatology. There was a time when this was all that we needed, when these commitments were enough. I believe that returning to the texts of Advent can make them enough again.

Outsiders often assume that Pentecostals essentially begin reading the Bible in Acts 2. Certainly without Acts we would not exist. But our story starts in the prequel to Acts, where the birth of Christ is accompanied by an unexpected outbreak of Pentecost.

“He will be filled with the Holy Spirit,” we are told of John, in the very first narrated words of Luke’s gospel, spoken by the supernatural voice of the angel of the Lord (1:15). A few verses later, “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit,” upon hearing the humble voice of Mary (1:41). “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied” to boot (1:67). Jesus’ birth has not even occurred, and the Pentecostal infilling of all believers is already foreshadowed, Acts 2 now a foregone conclusion. This infilling, according to Luke Timothy Johnson, is “the essential mark of the prophet for Luke,” and what Spirit-empowered prophets they are!⁴ A bug-eating renegade, a peasant woman, and an unbelieving priest are those who first experience the promise of Pentecost. This same renegade will launch the gospel revolution after receiving the word of God in the wilderness, far from the inauguration stages of Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, and Caiaphas. The power of God in Luke-Acts is always found on the margins.

Luke chooses an odd term for “filled,” implying not just spatial fullness, but satisfaction, even satiation, “the removal of external wants.”⁵ This is especially striking against the backdrop of those living on the margins, where lack is the norm.⁶ In short, the power of the Spirit was enough for those who otherwise did not have enough.

Luke’s focus on the movement of the Spirit among the most unlikely people is also directly linked to eschatology. While Matthew’s fulfillment theme is framed in reference to the Scriptures, Luke’s is in reference to time. Luke’s word for “filled” refers also to the crescendo of time that peaks at Jesus’ birth and dedication, and later to Jesus’ dreadful prophecy about the fall of Jerusalem (2:21-22, 21:22). This time is intensely eschatological, as Simeon announces the new age for all the earth that the child will inaugurate (2:29-31). Such eschatology was a counter-narrative to the ideology of Rome, whose Golden Age, inaugurated by Augustus, was said to bring good news and freedom to the cosmos.⁷ Luke’s gospel announces that the time has expired for the imperial narrative, supplanted by the reign of Jesus. As John announces, “The ax is already at the root of the trees” (3:9). Enough is enough for Roman eschatology!

How might these texts speak freshly to the people of the Spirit today? First, they remind us of our own fullness. Because of Pentecost, we are satiated, overcome with God’s power! This is an assault on Trump’s worldview, where there is never enough. There is never enough economic growth, never enough security, never enough guns, never enough strength (We do, however, have quite enough marginalized immigrants!). The infilling of the Holy Spirit allows us to testify: We have enough, because Christ has sent his Spirit.

Secondly, these texts call us back to our eschatology. The political and economic systems championed by the governments of this world each have “a view of how human history ought to unfold.”⁸ Trump’s eschatology is clear—“Make America Great Again”—and also directly reminiscent of the propaganda of the *Pax Romana*. There is not enough greatness to go around, so we must manufacture a false eschatology! Whichever sort of governmental eschatology is preferred or envisioned, the results on the ground are the same: the consolidation of wealth, power, and influence into the hands of the few (and far from the marginalized) because they are unable to define “enough.” But when we live with a fresh expectation of the Lord’s imminent return, we are freed from these false eschatologies. We look forward to the day when “God may be all in all,” when God’s very self will be enough.

When we Pentecostals reclaim these former commitments, we will be able to meet this cultural moment with a prophetic utterance of the Spirit: “Enough is enough!”

Notes

1 See Stanley Hauerwas, “A Christian Critique of Christian America,” *The Cresset* 50, no. 1 (November 1986): 5-16.

2 Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995); *The Future of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2009).

3 See G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2015).

4 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 33.

5 Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume VI (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 130.

6 For a discussion of the economic implications of the marginalized Judeans depicted in Luke 1-2, see Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 67-77.

7 “This man, this is he whom you have often heard promised, Augustus Caesar, born of the god, he will bring the golden age again to Latium....” Virgil, *The Aenid*, 6.788-80. See Mark Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 28-29.

8 Philip Elliott, “Condoleezza Rice: The Former Secretary of State on Predicting Chaos, Dealing with Russia and How to Fix Soggy Bottom.” *TIME* (May 14, 2018): 64.