

The Church's Power

Acts 2:1-41

When I was in high school, probably 16 or 17, I was driving my 1986 Buick Skylark home from the grocery store (or someplace like that), when I pulled up to the one stoplight in town (which may have still been a stop sign at that point, I don't remember). What I do remember is that as I began to pull out and turn the corner, my car stalled. Which was really frustrating and had never happened before. But as I looked up, at that moment, another vehicle came flying through the intersection. Had the car not stalled, it would have gone right through me. It was pretty miraculous. And I remember thinking, and even discussing with some friends, what does this mean? Like, why did that happen? Why was my life spared in that moment? Is there some meaning behind it?

It's pretty common for people, whenever something strange or out of the ordinary happens, to look for meaning in that event. Sometimes it's merely superstitious. You knock the salt shaker over or see a black cat—otherwise ordinary occurrences on which some have imposed meaning. Or sometimes it's trying to make sense of coincidences. And sometimes it's truly something out of the ordinary. But when something strange, something seemingly miraculous happens, we want to know: what does it mean?

That's the very question the crowds gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost asked when their attention was drawn to a strange occurrence. "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. . . . And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" (2:5-6, 12).

What is the significance of Pentecost? What do we make of this strange yet foundational event in the history of the church? How does it relate to the church's purpose, the charter we looked at last week? What do we learn about the Holy Spirit here? *What does this mean?* That's what we're going to consider this morning as we continue our series on the book of Acts.

The Manifestation of the Spirit's Power at Pentecost (2:1-13)

In the opening passage that we looked at last week, one of the last things Jesus said to the apostles before he ascended to heaven was to "wait for the promise of the Father, which . . . 'you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'" (1:4-5). He gave them their charge, their mission, to bear witness to him before all nations. But he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem or get started on their work until they received "power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (1:8). In order to carry out their purpose, the church needs supernatural power—the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we get to chapter 2, we see that they didn't have to wait very long. In the meantime, they identified a replacement for Judas, rounding out the 12 apostles again (that's what happens in the rest of ch. 1). And then, just 10 days after Jesus ascended, the whole group of believers, about 120 people (1:15), are gathered in one place on the Day of Pentecost.

Now Pentecost is an old covenant feast. If you've grown up in the church, when you hear the word Pentecost, you think of this passage, this event. But in the Old Testament it was known as the Feast of Harvest (Exod. 23:16) or the Feast of Weeks (Lev. 23:15ff), "because it took place seven weeks or fifty days (*pentekostos* means 'fiftieth') after Passover, which was when the grain harvesting began."¹ It was one of the three annual feasts that God's people were required to travel to Jerusalem, to the temple, for (cf. Deut. 16:16). And it's here, during this feast, when Jews from every nation in the known world were gathered in Jerusalem, whether visiting or living there, that God chose to pour his Holy Spirit upon his church.

The event itself is described in just three verses (2:2-4). First they hear something—what sounds like a "mighty rushing wind." It's not a wind—these are not natural phenomena. It sounds like a great wind, and it's enough to get their attention. But then they see something—again, something that looks quite natural—little flames of fire—but appearing in a very supernatural way. Like little divided tongues, flickering right above each person's head. That'll get your attention too. Finally, they say something. And again, something quite natural—speaking in various languages—but occurring in the most supernatural of ways—these are languages that the speakers don't actually know. The summary, as v. 4 puts it, is that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now all of these things are quite remarkable, but it's what they say that draws the most attention. In vv. 5-13 we see a massive crowd gathering around, drawn to the scene by what they *heard*. "And at this sound the multitude came together, they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?'" (2:6-8). This is not a normal occurrence. And the hearers want to know, what does it mean? (v. 12). What does it mean?

And there's a sense in which we can join them in their question, not just in terms of the meaning of this event, but the meaning and significance of the Holy Spirit. Many consider the Holy Spirit to be the least understood member of the Trinity (one God, three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). In some Christian traditions, you might be tempted to question whether he even exists. Because you never hear about. No one seems to really need him. He is, as one author put it, the "forgotten God." But of course, in other traditions, one might conclude that the Holy Spirit is the star of the show. He gets all of the attention, such that Jesus ends up taking a functional backseat to the faith that carries his name.

Now, we're not going to do an exhaustive theology of the Holy Spirit this morning. The best resource I can point you to for that is J.I. Packer's *Keep in Step with the Spirit*. But I think we can get a pretty good window into the heart of the Spirit's ministry, and what that means for the church, when we understand *the heart of the Spirit's activity at Pentecost*. Because while this is not the first time we meet or hear about the Holy Spirit in the Bible—he was present and active

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (BST; Leicester, UK: IVP, 1990), 61-62.

in the Gospels, and even throughout the Old Testament, from the very first chapter of Genesis, where “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Gen. 1:2)—there is something new and unique and quite foundational happening here. This is the introduction of the Spirit’s new covenant ministry, and as Jesus himself said just before his ascension, it is essential to the purpose and life of the church.

So what does this miraculous event mean? We can say a few things based simply on some of the subtle ways Luke describes the event. For instance, we know it has something to do with God’s *power* for the church. That was clear back in ch. 1—“wait until you receive power from on high (cf. Lk. 24:49)” The strength they need to carry out their mission comes from the Holy Spirit.

Second, we know it has something to do with God’s *presence* in the church. They were “*filled with the Holy Spirit*,” he tells us. That’s language of God’s presence. In fact, the imagery of tongues of fire, and the language of being filled with the Spirit, brings us back to the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament. The temple was the place on earth where God dwelt with his people in a special way. He filled it with his glory, often marked by a pillar of cloud and of fire (cf. Exod. 13:21; 40:38; Num. 10:34). At Pentecost, the church becomes the new temple, the display of his glory and the place of his special presence (cf. Eph. 2:11-22; 1 Cor. 3:16-17).

We also know it has something to do with God making himself known to the nations. Now those who gathered around were all Jews—that’s what v. 5 tells us. But they weren’t native to Judea or Jerusalem; they came from “every nation under heaven.” There’s an international scope breaking into the picture. In fact, Pentecost has long been understood as the undoing of the tower of Babel. If you remember back to Genesis 10, what’s often called the Table of Nations, where all people groups were descended from Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. It’s people from all of those nations that gather in Genesis 11, when they try to build the tower of Babel and God comes down to confuse their languages, so they can’t understand each other. When Luke lists the nations hearing the mighty works of God in their own language here, he includes representatives from each section of that Table in Genesis 10.² As John Stott summarizes,

At Babel human languages were confused and the nations were scattered; in Jerusalem the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that the nations would now be gathered together in Christ, prefiguring the great day when the redeemed company will be drawn ‘from every nation, tribe, people and language.’³

So we can tell, just by the way that Luke has crafted his narrative, that the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church has something to do with God’s power, God’s presence, and God’s plan for the nations.

But we don’t just have Luke’s description of the event. We also have Peter’s answer to the question, ‘what does this mean?’ That’s what we find in vv. 14-41. And what’s interesting is that Peter answers that question not by giving us a lesson on the Holy Spirit, but by declaring Jesus’ authority. That’s the meaning of Pentecost—that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ.

² See Stephen Neill, *Call to Mission* (Fortress: 1970), 12.

³ Stott, 68.

The Purpose of the Spirit's Power at Pentecost: Witness to Christ (2:14-41)

Now, the fact that Peter stands up and says anything is evidence itself of the Spirit's power. Just days earlier he was puzzling over the significance of the resurrection, and just weeks earlier he was hiding for his life, pretending not to know Jesus. So again, the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost is the power of the church to bear witness to Jesus.

But it's not just Peter's words that bear witness. The very Pentecost event itself bears witness to the authority and glory of Jesus.

Like several of you, on occasion I end up having to travel for work, whether for a conference or for training. And it's not uncommon that when I finally get home, it's after our littlest kids are already in bed. But when they wake up in the morning and run out to the family room, before they even see me, they can tell I've arrived. They see my shoes by the door, or my backpack by the couch. There are signs that I'm finally home.

According to Peter, the Pentecost event works in a similar way—it's a sign that God's promised Messiah has arrived. Evidence that he's here, even if you don't see him. And that Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth.

In vv. 14-21, Peter explains the sign. After correcting the scoffers who accuse them of being drunk (vv. 14-15), Peter explains the *prophetic basis* for what they heard by citing the Old Testament. The Pentecost event is a fulfillment of prophecy. Citing Joel 2:28-32, Peter says:

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.” (2:17-18)

That's what they are witnessing through the declaration of God's majesty in multiple languages—the prophesying of God's people as a result of God pouring out his Holy Spirit. Then Peter continues from Joel:

“And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (2:19-21)

Now whether we are to understand this as literal cosmic disruptions “(which already began on Good Friday, and more of which Jesus foretold before the end), or metaphorically as convulsions of history”⁴ (which is a common way the Old Testament uses this kind of apocalyptic imagery), Peter's point is clear: the last days that Joel spoke about have begun. The future age when God promised to make all things new, to redeem his people and establish his kingdom—that age is here. The proof of which is the pouring out of the Spirit in fulfillment of Joel.

But if that's true—if these are signs that the last days have begun, have been inaugurated—then that means *someone is here*. Because according to the Old Testament, the pouring out of the

⁴ Stott, 74-45.

Spirit and the prophesying of God's people are the shoes by the door, the backpack by the couch, evidence that someone has arrived—that someone being God's promised anointed King (cf. Jer. 23; Ezek. 34-37). The pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost not only gives the church power to bear witness to Christ, it is itself a testimony that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ.

This is point Peter makes in vv. 22-36, as he explains what the sign of Pentecost points to. He starts by reviewing Jesus' life: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—" (v. 22). And then he reviews his death, v. 23: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." And then his resurrection, which he spends the most time on. Verse 24: "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." Peter again appeals to the Old Testament for the basis of what he's saying. In Psalm 16, David recounts God's promise to him, that his anointed one won't see decay. But Peter helps us understand that David was looking beyond himself in that psalm. Because David *did* see decay; his bones are still in the ground to this day. But death could not hold onto Jesus. It had no jurisdiction to keep him in the grave, because he was innocent of all sin. And so "this Jesus God raised up," Peter says, "and of that we all are witnesses" (v. 32).

But then in v. 33, Peter connects the dots between Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and the Pentecost event they all witnessed. Look at what he says in v. 33: "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, *he* [Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing." Jesus is the source of Pentecost. He's the one who sent the Spirit. The pouring out of the Spirit is evidence that the Messiah is here. The Messiah, Peter reminds them, that they all rejected and crucified. The king they were waiting for, they nailed to a cross. So Peter concludes in v. 36: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

What does Pentecost mean? That's what it means: *that Jesus is the true King and Savior of the whole world*. The king that this world rejected, the king all of us, through our sin and rebellion, are responsible for crucifying—he is the one worthy of worship and allegiance. The heart of the Spirit's activity at Pentecost is magnifying Jesus.

And that, I think, gives us a pretty good window into the ministry of the Holy Spirit. So often we're tempted to disconnect magnifying Jesus from the Spirit, or the Spirit from magnifying Jesus. For instance, we might recognize our call to bear witness to Christ, to declare his glory before others. But then we go about it in our own strength. We rely on our own cleverness, or our own boldness or resolve, our own creative tactics or intellectual arguments, forgetting that apart from the Spirit's indwelling power in us, and apart from his regenerating presence in our hearers, the word of his gospel will fall on deaf ears. You cannot disconnect gospel witness from the power of the Spirit without actually compromising our mission; we are utterly dependent on him. The same is true of following Christ, obeying Christ, enjoying Christ. Let me put it this way: if your pursuit of Jesus and passion for the gospel don't result in a deeper appreciation for and dependence on the Holy Spirit, you're doing it wrong.

On the other side, we might focus all our attention on spiritual curiosities, or miraculous manifestations, or pursuing a certain experience of the Spirit's power, forgetting that the Spirit's

primary ministry is magnifying Christ. That's what Jesus tells us in John 16: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. *He will glorify me*, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn. 16:13-14). So when we disconnect the Spirit's power from the magnification of Christ, we actually compromise the Spirit's mission. Again, think of it this way: if your passion for or pursuit of the Holy Spirit doesn't result in greater affection for and attention to Jesus, you're doing it wrong.

J.I. Packer summarizes it like this:

The distinctive, constant, basic ministry of the Holy Spirit under the new covenant is so to mediate Christ's presence to believers⁵ . . . the personal presence . . . of the risen, reigning Savior . . . in and with the Christian and the church. . . . Scripture shows . . . that since the Pentecost of Acts 2 this, essentially, is what the Spirit is doing all the time as he empowers, enables, purges, and leads generation after generation of sinners to face the reality of God. And he does it in order that Christ may be known, loved, trusted, honored and praised, which is the Spirit's aim and purpose throughout as it is the aim and purpose of God the Father, too. This is what, in the last analysis, the Spirit's new covenant ministry is all about."⁶

And we see that when we look at the result of Pentecost and Peter's sermon: repentance and faith in Jesus. Look at the reaction of the crowds in v. 37: "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" The same Spirit who makes the presence of Jesus real, who was poured out by Jesus on his church, who empowered Peter for witness—that Spirit brought conviction of sin to those hearing (cf. Jn. 16:8-11). They recognized their need for forgiveness.

And so Peter replies, here's what you do: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (2:38-39). Our proper response when we come to grips with our sin is to seek refuge in the one we sinned against—to trust Jesus Christ. And notice how the Spirit is both the means and the result of that faith. God is the one who call us to himself—by the Spirit. And everyone whom he calls receives the Holy Spirit—the indwelling presence of Christ and eternal life in him.

And that faith is marked by two things here: repentance and baptism. *Repentance* means turning away from sin. It's saying no to sin, to our rebellion against God, to writing our own rules and living the way we want to; and saying yes to Jesus. *Baptism* is the sign of our union with Christ. It's a public declaration that in Jesus we have died to sin, we've died to this world, we've been buried with Christ, born again, and raised with him to new life.

That is our response to the gospel—repentance and faith. And that invitation is for everyone. "The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." It doesn't matter how religious your background, or how dark your sin. You need God's grace, and God's grace in Jesus is enough.

⁵ J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1984), 49.

⁶ Packer, 47.

And I want us to hear that invitation this morning. If you do not know Jesus, hear his call. God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ; there is salvation in no other name. There is forgiveness and eternal life waiting for you. Freedom from guilt. Freedom from shame. God's unconditional love and acceptance in place of the judgment we deserve. That's what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. As Peter continued to preach to the crowd, with many other words, bearing witness and continuing to exhort them: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (2:40). Believe in Jesus and be saved.

And if you do know Christ—if you have repented of your sin and believed in him, then you should be baptized. (If you haven't been baptized we should talk about that). But if you're a Christian, then take hard that God is not calling you to do anything on your own. Our mission to bear witness, our invitation to worship, our obligation to obedience and spiritual growth—God is the one who supplies the power through the Holy Spirit who is within us. The Holy Spirit who equips us for ministry, who fills us with the presence of Christ, and who shines a spotlight on Jesus.

And this Spirit is powerful. In just one sermon, the church grew from 120 people at the end of ch. 1, to 3,000 at the end of ch. 2 (v. 41). Not because Peter was a great preacher, but because the Spirit of God was present in his preaching, and present among the hearers. He was present in Pentecost to magnify Jesus.

What can God do through us? Is there any limit? We have a purpose, to bear witness to Christ. We have power in the Holy Spirit. Next week we'll see how God gives us boldness, when we look at ch 4. God empowers his church by the Spirit in order to demonstrate to the world that Jesus is both Lord and Christ. May we believe it. May we proclaim it. May every day be different in light of that truth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. If you could ask one question about the Holy Spirit and get a straight answer, what would it be?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. How does the previous chapter provide context for what happens in this text?
3. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
4. What strikes you about the Pentecost event itself in vv. 1-13? What questions does it raise for you?
5. What are some of the themes Peter brings up as he explains the significance of the event to the crowds?

6. Why do you think Peter refers so much to the Old Testament? How does that help make his point?
7. How would you summarize the main point of Pentecost according to Peter?

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. What difference does Pentecost make for Christians today?
9. How does this passage help you understand the connection between Christ and the Holy Spirit?
10. What practical steps can you take as a home group in living in light of Acts 2?