

What does this mean?

Within weeks of my profession of faith I was exposed to Pentecostal teachings in some friends' churches, where many people broke out in spiritual languages, danced in the aisles and laid hands on me to impart the Spirit.



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All of this was explained to me as essential in the life of a true believer. Other churches I visited varied from spirited preaching and singing to different liturgies. At the same time, I began participating in Bible studies where different ideas and approaches to Christian growth and the life of a "true" church were taught. As a new believer I struggled with the varied teachings about the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost.

It took me two years of studying and questioning to find what made sense in the total balance of New Testament writings. But I cannot pretend to have all the answers or a perfectly structured theology of the Spirit. God is too great for that accomplishment! As we follow Christ, we never stop learning and growing.

The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost is a dramatic turning point in telling the world about God's grace in Jesus Christ. Pentecost was first a Jewish festival, its name derived from the Greek word for "fiftieth." It celebrates the fiftieth day after Passover, when the Jews commemorated the giving of the Torah (Law of Moses) on Mt. Sinai. In Hebrew, this holy day is called Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks. Our Christian Easter is built on the timing of Jewish Passover as our Pentecost roughly corresponds to Shavuot. Modern Pentecostalism identifies the outpouring of the Spirit 50 days after the resurrection as the key to true fullness of a spiritual life and experience of God's manifested power on earth.

Interpretations vary on what is called the fullness or outpouring of the Spirit. Some teach that without the "second blessing," a repeat of the experience of that first Pentecost, and speaking in "unknown tongues," a person's spiritual life is not complete. Others teach that without this "baptism of the Spirit" in believers' lives the church will not have the power and gifts to convert the world.

What is undisputed is that God manifested himself to our world in the person of Jesus, now ascended to heaven, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is God's ongoing presence in our lives in this world. Acts 2:2 describes the Spirit coming "from heaven."

God is now with us, not in a limited physical form, but in all the magnificence and power of the eternal God who is not limited by time or circumstances. Consider Jesus' reassuring words to his fearful disciples in John 14:16-17: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of Truth" (NAS). God's plan has always been to meet us in this world, from the beginning in the garden called Eden, through the wilderness wanderings of Israel, to the birth of Jesus and into the present with his Spirit.

Reading the seeming chaotic outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, with the sound of a rushing wind, tongues of fire and the gospel spoken in numerous languages of that world, there emerges a clear message. Christ is God's ultimate gift of hope for us all, and the Spirit has come to empower God's people to preach that message in words and deeds.

We should be careful not to mix the gift of preaching the gospel in the world's languages at Pentecost and Paul's confronting the abuse of "spiritual languages" in 1 Corinthians 14:1-25. This phenomenon of "speaking in unknown or spiritual languages" occurs in many different religions. The Corinthian church was in conflict over the place and importance of such a gift. The tongues of Pentecost were actual languages communicating the gospel clearly for a vast crowd of Jewish pilgrims from all over the empire. The good news of Jesus Christ is for the entire world! Peter answers some crude remarks from opponents, explaining that it is much too early in the day for anybody to be drunk because it is "only nine o'clock in the morning!" (Acts 2:15).

Peter clearly states that what the crowd witnesses is an outpouring of "God's Spirit on all people... sons and daughters will prophesy... young will see visions... elders will dream dreams... even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour out my spirit and

Formations

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Scripture: Acts 2:1-2, 12-21

they will prophesy" (2:17-18). Peter is quoting from Joel 2:28-32, once more connecting Jesus with the Old Testament prophets while pointing to the future of the church universal.

Pentecost is the formal coming out of the church, expressing its connection to Judaism and its life into the future. Acts is best read as the gospel overcoming barriers as it spreads across the world. Pentecost is not about a personal ecstatic prayer language, signs or miracles. The Spirit has come to fill us up with God, to transform our lives to be more like Jesus, to tell the world about God's gift of life, to continue Jesus' example of forgiveness and compassion for those in need.

Have you sensed the Spirit at work in your life? When have you had the opportunity to comfort someone, offer help or encouragement or shared how faith in Christ brought you through a troubling time? My experience has been that I don't have to look for an opportunity to share Christ because the Spirit leads me to cross the path of another person's life.

The fullness and gifts of the Spirit are not about our importance. Jesus warned about those who paraded their praying in public and announcing their gifts to God. Their actions won only shallow public praise. Jesus taught compassion, generosity and grace. The Apostle Paul's favorite title for himself was "bond servant" or slave of Jesus Christ. Pentecost shows us that in this challenging world God can use us to bring hope to others, not because we are worthy but because God is sufficient in all things.

Can you imagine what that Pentecost was like? Everyone remembered Jesus' crucifixion. The Roman and Jewish authorities were very concerned about political unrest. Suddenly there is a huge disturbance. There is jeering and noise. But in the midst of all the confusion and fear this band of insignificant Jesus followers are empowered to change the world. And that was just the beginning!

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