

THE MARK OF PENTECOST

by Rene Nepomuceno

Introduction

Pentecost is one of the most important feast celebrated by Jews and Christians. The feast is known to the Jews as *Shavuot*. On this day, the Jews commemorate the actual giving of the Torah at Mt Sinai and the inauguration of Israel as a nation. In like manner, Pentecost marks the beginning of the Christian Church. On that day, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus Christ and the new covenant community of God was instituted. In Mt Sinai the people of Israel feared and trembled as the Law was given amidst thunder and billowing smoke. On Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus were filled with joy and praising as the Spirit descended upon them in forms of tongues of fire amidst rustling wind. This experience has been the subject of disagreements by different Christian tradition. On one hand it is a one time ordained event that signaled the formation of the Church and on the other hand a recurring available experience appropriated to the Church today. The debates have been intense and has created more division within the already splintered Church, which I believe to be contrary to the purpose of why the Spirit was given. The divine Spirit living in a community creates unity and love not discord and hatred.

The meaning and importance of Pentecost is essential for the church to live its mandate as God's new covenant community here on earth. The essence of Pentecost is crucial for the life and mission of the Church. In Acts 2, the promise of God written in Ezekiel 36:27 was fulfilled with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, "And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." The coming of the Holy Spirit is the day of redemption of the people of God as prophesied in Joel 2: 28 - 32. In the context of these two prophetic declaration redemption is not mere cleansing of sin but refers to being empowered to hear, walk and obey the statutes of the Lord, the Spirit of righteousness.

In Luke 3:16 - 17, John the Baptist referred to Christ as the Holy Spirit baptizer, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." But, John also pointed to Christ as the one who will purify his people as it was written in Isaiah 4:4, "His winnowing fan is in His hand and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." In this light, baptism with the Holy Spirit is the purification of the new covenant people of God. Purification also implies newness and transformation. The Spirit is the power of God that transformed¹ the earth that was void and empty into the marvelous creation of God. This was the same Spirit that descended upon the disciples in the upper room. The

¹ Clark Pinnock, "The spirit in Western tradition tends to be confined to the institutional church and to be seen as power of salvation, not of creation also." Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love, Theology of the Holy Spirit*, (Inter Varsity Press: Illinois) 1996, 11.

Church needs to live seriously the purification and transforming work of the divine Spirit. Human righteous transformation is a matter that cannot be fantasized. The power of any human resolution, philosophy, ideology or will is unable to initiate divine re ordering of life.

I suggest that the Church instead of arguing the validity of experiences with regard to baptism with, filling with and/or reception of the Holy Spirit, the Church should take seriously its walk and life of obedience with Holy Spirit, the reordering of life as God's community through the Holy Spirit and in living out the Spirit behind the Jubilee.

Why do we have to have Pentecost?

We can fashion out this question in a different way, "Why do we need winter?" The sight of snowfall is an exciting background for a photo 'selfie,' at least for people who have not experienced long and hard winter. Too many who live in countries with severe cold season it is not fun at all. But for farmers, a long and deep cold winter is a welcome sight. They are happy and expectant when long freezing spell comes. Prolong freezing temperature during winter guarantees that the farmland will be fertile ushering a beautiful spring and bountiful harvest. Tourist like the snow for their personal experience and fun but do not like the cold spell. Farmers like the cold spell (including the snow) because they know the reason for the snow and the cold spell.

Today there is a danger that we become 'spiritual tourist' when we seek experiences or 'encounter' with the Holy Spirit for sheer spiritual exploit. It is possible that we bask on the presence of the Spirit, but have no clue of the purpose why the Spirit was given to the Church. We may enjoy the snow but are not prepared for the cold spell that prepares the ground to bear lovely spring flowers and bumper crop production. Pentecost is not about the "manifestations" but about the re ordering the community of the people of God in order to fulfill the mission of God.

The Gift of Pentecost

Evidently the gift of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit, the *Paracletos*, the *Comforter* whom the Lord Jesus promised to send to the apostle as he return to the Father (John 14: 16 & 26). The Holy Spirit is the One who will empower the disciples to become fearless and wise witnesses to the Jews, the hostile Roman society and the unknown pagans scattered through the ends of the earth about the resurrection and Lordship of Jesus (Acts 1:8). Aside from the empowerment for witness the 'hovering' of the Holy Spirit on the disciples on Pentecost fulfilled four important Old Testament prophecies that needs serious consideration from us today. I believe that failure to take into account these four prophetic fulfillments may cause the church to misplaced the intent of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the church.

To walk and obey the LORD

“And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep mine ordinances, and do them.” - Ezekiel 36: 25 - 27.

The purpose for the ‘putting’ of the Spirit upon the changed people of God was to cause them to walk and obey the LORD. The experience of the Holy Spirit are not sporadic ritualistic encounters but a life long process of companionship and mentoring. The verb ‘to cause’ in this usage is not a passive idea whereby the Holy Spirit takes over the will and desire of the person to do things the Holy Spirit way. Instead the imagery depicted is that of “walking together in a journey” where sojourners share, discover and learn life together from their realizations, stories and experiences. Thus the Holy Spirit journey with us where we learn to walk or “follow after” and obey.

The Hebrew verb *halach* (to walk, to go) is a metaphoric word used to describe the manner of life of those who followed Yahweh (Gen. 17: 1 - Abraham), it also denote the idea of ‘following after’ the LORD (Gen. 5: 22 - 24 - Enoch), to walk with and learn from the one you are walking with is an imagery of discipleship (1 Kings 19 : 19 - 21 - Elijah and Elisha) which is carried in the New Testament. Thus, in this view we can say that Holy Spirit came to walk with us in our life or for us to be disciples.²

The idea of “to obey” in this passage is a reversal of the disobedience of Adam. To obey is not to repeat the same mistake of the first Adam. To obey is a call to go “back to the Garden” situation where there is a fellowship between Adam and the LORD. It is not about legalistic obedience of the Torah, but obedience because of trust in the words of the LORD.³ The Beatitudes taught by the Lord Jesus is the vivid picture of the purpose of Pentecost as prophesied in Ezekiel 36: 25 - 27. The Spirit came to make God’s people blessed because they trust to obey the words of the Lord.

Purification (Isaiah 4:3 - 4//Luke 3:16 -17)

“And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem; when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof, by the spirit of justice, and by the spirit of burning.” - Isaiah 4: 3 - 4

² Swanson, Dwight S. *Old Testament and Second Temple Antecedent to New Testament* from BS600 Readings on Christian Holiness in Biblical Perspective, Jan 2012.

³ Walter Bruggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience - From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living*, (Fortress Press:Minneapolis, 1991), 218.

According to Luke, John the Baptist affirmed the fulfillment of the purification of God's people through the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in Luke 3:16 - 17. The purging came to full realization on Pentecost. There are three important elements about purging or purification of God's people. First, the purification mentioned is not about individual cleansing of sin but about the separation of those 'that remained in Jerusalem' or the gathering of the 'wheat to his barn.' The purging represents the 'setting apart' of the new covenant community of the Lord, the people of the Messiah⁴. The filth referred to in Isaiah 4 are the people who refused to repent and believe in the Messiah. Secondly the community will be called 'holy' but not because they are holy in their own effort. They are holy because the *paracletos* has come in to guide and to teach God's holy people.⁵ Finally, the purging will continue through all the nations as revealed by the Lord Jesus in John 16: 8 - 10, "He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged."

Transformation (Isaiah 4:5 - 6//Acts 2:1 - 4)

"Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain."

Pentecost is not about re-enacting the manifestation of the coming of the Holy Spirit, but it about living and being transformed in the Presence of God. The "divided tongues of fire" resting above the disciples in Acts 2:2 reproduced the imagery of the pillar of clouds and fire that went with and guided Israel in their journey to the Promise Land. The Holy Spirit is the 'glory of the Lord' in the Church just as it covered the tent of meeting and filled the tabernacle through out the journeying of Israel (Exodus 40:34 - 38). The Holy Spirit is the "Presence of God" that seeks to guide and teach the Church to follow the way and life of Christ.

Another imagery of Pentecost is the precedence of the Holy Spirit in the creative work of God. The Pentecostal experience is not the end of the journey of the Church. It is the sign that God's recreative work is about to begin. To dwell on the experience is to miss the point of the coming re ordering and re making of God's covenant people⁶. The Spirit of God precedes all the wonderful creative works of God. In Old Testament understanding Shavuot is the beginning of the nation of Israel. Amidst the thundering light and fire, God has called a nomadic tribe to

⁴ James D.G. Dunn. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 3rd ed, (SCM Press, 2006), 171.

⁵ J. Wright, (Holiness, OT), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (London: Doubleday, 1992), 237 -248.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 294 -295.

become His unique people whose “statutes and righteous judgements” (Deuteronomy 4:6 - 8) are to be subject of envy by the nations. In the same manner when the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost God has called the remnant of Jesus’ disciples to become unique people. The Spirit has come to teach and guide the Church to live in the wisdom, understanding and righteousness of God.

The Spirit of Justice, Sharing and Equality (Isaiah 61:2a//Luke 4:19)

When the Lord Jesus inaugurated his ministry he read in his hometown synagogue in Isaiah 61: 1 - 2a and proclaimed that the prophecy has been fulfilled. This was a dramatic scene that confounded those who were present. Those who heard the proclamation of Jesus on that day possibly could have interpreted the meaning in different ways. The initial reaction was described by Luke as “all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth” (Luke 4: 22). But then Jesus announced that the Jews will reject their own prophet and the blessing due to them will be given to the enemies of Israel. The initial gracious mood digressed into “all in the synagogue were filled with wrath” (Luke 4: 28). What could have caused such wrath? Isaiah 61 is about the dawning of the Messianic Era. The hope of the Jewish people in the time of the Lord. It is also recognized as the realization of Jubilee,⁷ the return to equality and justice. Thus, for Jesus to say that the enemies of Israel will benefit the Messianic Era is a statement of sedition.

The Messianic Era ushers social reversal. The oppressed and the captives will be set free. The poor and the brokenhearted will be made whole. Those who mourn will have oil gladness and dressed with garments of praise. The scene of the church in Acts 4: 32 - 37, depicts the fulfillment of the Jubilee. The account in Luke 4: 34a, “There was not a needy person among them,” highlighted the communal mark of Pentecost.⁸ The fruit of the Spirit is love and love is socially expressed in the Spirit of Jubilee. The account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 validates the Jubilee Year the reign of God who loves justice and hates “robbery and iniquity” (Isaiah 61: 8).

Missional Community

Pentecost is an imagery of Zechariah 8:18 - 23, the day that God purposed to do good to Jerusalem and the house of Judah. In doing his good purpose God instructed the remnant of Jerusalem to speak truth and make peace to one another and to make judgements that are true.

⁷ Thomas Yoder Neufeld, *Recovering Jesus, The Witness of the New Testament*, (Brazos Press:MI, 2007). 223 -224.

⁸ Matthias Wenk, *Community – Forming Power, The Social Ethical Role of the Spirit in Luke and Acts*. (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 206 -205.

Peter when he stood to proclaim the truth and bring the judgement to the nations concerning Jesus the Messiah in Acts 2: 14 - 47 embodies the missional life of the church. The church is the missional community of God that represents truth and peace. God commanded the remnant to love truth and justice, this is the missional message of the Gospel entrusted to the church. This truth and justice is found in the life, the person, the works, the teachings and the words of Jesus. The response of the multitude of Jewish people of different tongue to Peter's Pentecostal message was a wonderful fulfillment of Zechariah 8: 23, "In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"

In proclaiming and in living the Gospel of truth and peace, the mourning and fasting of God's people will be turned into "seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts" (Zechariah 8:18). Truth and peace is the essence of life that brings of joy to the church. It is the missional driving force of the church. The power of Pentecost was not intended for a showcase but to bring about the missional task of the church "with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:33). The apostolic church did not have popular and best seller preachers, not it has the wealth to promote massively its message. But what they have and those who believed in their message is the joy and gladness to testify the truth about the Risen Christ and the invitation to a new life with Jesus the Lord. This was the deeply rooted Pentecostal character of the early church, a missional community willing even to die for their allegiance to Jesus Christ the Lord.

Summary

The message and the self awareness of the church has experienced many theological editing leading to many versions of Christianity. The Spirit of God that ushers the beginning of the new covenant community of God on Pentecost Day has been reduced to a 'medium' for experiences, a 'genie' for empowerment or a passive voice of conscience. We need to recover and live with the purpose and meaning of why the Spirit has come. We need to love and speak 'truth and peace' which is the word, the life, the message, the deeds, the mission, and the Lordship of Jesus, our missional task.

- We did not received the Spirit to make pompous claim of our Christianity, but that we may walk and obey the LORD.
- We have been purified, chosen as His people that we may reflect the Image of God as one community.
- We have received the Spirit of God so that we may have Shalom here on earth as we live in the Spirit of Jubilee.
- We have been empowered to partner with God in His Mission.