

OPERATION TEACHING TOOLS

Notes on Pentecost

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As we prepare to commemorate and celebrate Pentecost, many are seeking to understand the Biblical and historical context of Acts 2 even as we anticipate a present outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our own contexts. In this overview, we will examine some of the key elements of Luke's record of the event. As we seek to better understand the Scriptures, we will be better equipped to proclaim the message.

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The Jewish Festival of Pentecost

Pentecost was a Jewish festival celebrated in Jerusalem 50 days after Passover (Deuteronomy 16:9). It was also known as the Festival of Weeks or the Day of First Fruits. This was a time for Israel to offer to God the first fruits of the wheat harvest (Exodus 34:22; Numbers 28:26-31). It was considered one of the three great festivals of Israel along with Passover and the Festival of Tabernacles (2 Chronicles 8:13). Originally, all Jewish men were expected to attend the Festival of Weeks (Deuteronomy 16:16) but by the time of the Apostles, this requirement was more for Jews living in Israel. Jews living in the diaspora far away from Jerusalem made pilgrimages to the city during the festivals but few attended annually. Many who had traveled to Jerusalem from great distances to celebrate Passover remained until Pentecost. This explains why there were people in Jerusalem interacting with the disciples from 14 nations or ethnic groups (Acts 2:5-11, see map on page 13).

Though the original purpose for the Festival of Weeks was to give thanks to God for the wheat harvest through a first fruits offering, the festival also became a time to celebrate the covenant renewal that took place between God and Israel at Sinai. After the original Passover in Egypt, the descendants of Jacob left their slavery and walked to freedom as they departed Egypt (Exodus 12-13). Moses led them to Mt Sinai where God affirmed and renewed the covenant he first established with Abraham (Exodus 19:1-6). Some Jews saw Pentecost as a time to remember and celebrate God's faithfulness through their special covenant relationship.

A. T. Lincoln observes that “The outpouring of the Spirit was appropriate at Pentecost because for many Jews this festival was a celebration not simply of the offering of the first fruits of the wheat harvest but of the renewal of the covenant made by God with Israel, particularly the covenant at Sinai.”¹ Richard Longenecker also notes “whereas Pentecost was for Judaism the day of the giving of the law, for Christians it is the day of the coming of the Holy Spirit.” Longenecker sees this as significant since it is “suggesting that the Spirit’s coming is in continuity with God’s purposes in giving the law, and yet that the Spirit’s coming signals the essential difference between the Jewish faith and the commitment to Jesus, for whereas the former is Torah-centered and Torah-directed, the latter is Christ-centered and Spirit-directed.”²

The Unity of the Believers

Luke, the writer of Acts, was not present on the day of Pentecost. Most likely, he did not become an eyewitness to the events of Acts until Acts 16:9. Yet Luke determined to carefully investigate everything he had been taught from the beginning (Luke 1:3). From his interviews and research, he noted that the early church was characterized by unity. He wrote about the unity of the believers in Acts 2:1 but also in 2:44-46 and 5:21. It was surely a blessing to hear of this unity in light of what he saw in some of the later churches like Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 3) where divisions abounded.

The early church was united not only in physical location. They were united in faith, prayer, and obedience. They believed the words of Jesus, they prayed for the fulfillment of God’s promises, and they waited in obedience as Jesus instructed. From the beginning of Acts 1, the disciples were told to wait for the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. Even though some had been with Jesus for years as disciples and apostles, they were not yet fully released to undertake the great commission until they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit. None refused or left for a rogue mission or abandoned the group. This is a notable change from the behavior of the disciples a mere 7 weeks earlier. In Luke 22, the disciples were seen disputing among themselves about who was the best. When Jesus asked them to pray, they slept. When Jesus was arrested, the disciples scattered and Peter even denied being a follower of Jesus. The resurrection and the ascension of Jesus, however, strengthened their faith so that they were marked by unity rather than infighting, faithful prayer rather than sleepy commitment, and determined obedience even in the midst of mundane waiting.

A Sound like a Mighty Wind from Heaven

Luke and his primary sources most likely found it difficult to describe exactly what happened on the Pentecost day. It was an unusual and overwhelming experience to be sure. They compared what they felt and heard to a mighty wind coming from heaven. The Greek phrase (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἦχος ὡς περ φερομένης πνοῆς βιαίας) has been translated into various dramatic phrases:

- a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind (KJV)
- a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven (NIV)
- a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind (CEB)

¹A. T. Lincoln, “Pentecost,” in *Dictionary of the Latter New Testament & Its Development*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 906.

² Richard N. Longenecker, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 386-387.

It is apparent that the manifestation of the Holy Spirit at this event was both heard (a sound) and felt (a strong wind). Later we will also note how the event was seen (as tongues of fire). This was a sensory event, an undeniable encounter with the Holy Spirit. Although the Holy Spirit did not come in flesh as Jesus did, he definitely came in a tangible way. They could hear, see, and feel him. It was as real as the wind storms they experienced on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35-39; Matthew 14:22-31). In fact, stormy scenes often accompanied appearances of God. For examples, see Exodus 19:16-19, Job 38:1, and Isaiah 29:6.

It is notable that both the Greek and Hebrew word for “spirit” can also be translated as wind or breath. In Greek the word for “spirit” is πνευμα (pneuma) but Luke does not use that word for the wind he reports in Luke 2:2. Instead he uses the word πνοη (pnoe) which only appears here and in Acts 17:25. The word refers to a “relatively rapid movement of air.”³ Perhaps Luke intentionally used a different word for this wind in Acts 2 in order to avoid any confusion regarding the nature of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a mere wind. He is a divine person who came like a mighty wind in Acts 2 but he is certainly more than wind and fire and power. To reduce the Holy Spirit to a holy force rather than a divine person is to misrepresent and diminish the third person of the Trinity. Thus, it is important to note Luke’s use of “like” or “as” to indicate comparisons are being made in regards to strong wind and tongues of fire to the Holy Spirit and his activity. The Holy Spirit is not merely fire or wind and he does much more than simply cause fire to burn and wind to blow.

Nevertheless, the concepts of wind and breath are often connected to the Holy Spirit in Scripture. In Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones, the vision concludes with a declaration from God: “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live” (Ezekiel 37:14a, NIV). While some fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision is found in the return of Jews to Israel from Babylonian exile, the vision also anticipates a time when the Spirit of God will enter into people. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit sometimes came upon or filled people at certain times for particular tasks (for examples, see Exodus 31:1-5, Number 11:16-17; Judges 3:10; 1 Samuel 10:10). However, there is no widespread outpouring of the Holy Spirit until Acts 2 after the sacrificial death of Christ. Thus, Ezekiel seems to be alluding to a time beyond the return from exile when God will send the Holy Spirit to multitudes. In Ezekiel’s vision, this coming of the Holy Spirit is accompanied by a noise (Ezekiel 37:7) and four winds breathing into the slain (Ezekiel 37:9-10). Craig Keener notes that through this scripture, “Jewish people expected an eschatological ‘wind’ of the Spirit to bring the breath of life.”⁴ The wind and breath brought life to the lifeless in Ezekiel’s vision and the accompanying sound was that of audible redemption and restoration. Likewise, when the Spirit was sent to fill the people of God, the sound and force of wind was there. Keener summarizes that “wind would have convinced the gathered believers that the coming age had arrived, for it symbolizes the breath of resurrection life in Ezekiel 37.”⁵

In the New Testament, Jesus compares the Holy Spirit to wind in John 3:5-8. The unseen wind is heard, felt, and known wherever it blows. Of course, John’s emphasis was the Spirit’s work in salvation (specifically regeneration). Jesus teaches that to be born again is to be born of the Spirit. This spiritual birth, like the Spirit himself, is known even if it is not seen, just as wind is felt as it blows unseen.

Regarding the presence of wind (and fire) at Pentecost, Craig Keener makes an interesting comparison between Acts 2 and 2 Kings 2.⁶ In 2 Kings 2, Elijah, the great prophet of Israel, is walking with his disciple, Elisha. Elijah is about to be taken to heaven and Elisha will be left behind to carry on the ministry. The

³ *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition, revised and edited by Fredrick William Danker

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 802.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The Spirit in the Gospels and Acts: Divine Purity and Power* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 193.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 801.

ascension of Elijah is accompanied by a chariot of fire, a whirlwind, and a cloak falling from the sky with which Elisha would receive a “double portion” of the spirit that Elijah had. Thus, out of the fire and wind that fell from heaven, Elisha received an empowering spirit after he saw his beloved master taken into heaven. In the same way, the disciples of Jesus watched their master ascend into heaven but shortly after received from heaven the Holy Spirit who came through wind and fire. As Elijah went up, his mantle fell down to Elisha. In the same way, as Jesus went up, the Holy Spirit came down to his disciples to encourage them in his absence and to empower them to move forward in his mission.

SIDE NOTE ON THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES: Before we move on to the next section, it is remarkable how the sound of redemption in Ezekiel 37 was that of rattling bones. That morbid sound was caused by the move of the Holy Spirit over a valley filled with dry bones. We would not normally care to hear the music produced by such instruments yet the Spirit of God was not merely disturbing a graveyard, he was resurrecting a people. The wind of God still blows over miserable valleys. God still breathes in places where we hesitate to go. The Spirit of God visits graves because the mission of redemption and restoration is for those who may have lost a battle but never lost the faith. As we await the Spirit’s work in future resurrection, let us be mindful of his present work in redemption. It is the Holy Spirit who applies the work of Christ to our dry bones so that we can be born again, born of the Spirit. He moves as the wind blows; he is not rigid like us. If we have been delivered from our own valley of despair, let us not forget those who remain. If we are in the valley, let us not give up hope that the Spirit of God still moves to redeem and restore. As we come close to Pentecost, let us stand in the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit so that he may blow over us, bringing life to the defeated and carrying the victorious on to new places where our witness is needed.

Tongues of Fire

In the midst of a noise like the blowing of a mighty wind, something that the witnesses compared to tongues of fire fell from heaven and rested on each one. John and James once asked Jesus to call down fire from heaven (Luke 9:54). Their desire, however was the see their enemies burn, perhaps inspired by Genesis 19:24. They wanted fire to fall on a Samaritan town which rejected Jesus. When they finally experienced a fire falling from heaven in Acts 2, it was falling on them; not to burn them to ashes but to ignite the disciples with power. Fire is often seen accompanying the presence of God in the Old Testament. For examples we can look to the burning bush in Exodus 3, the pillar of fire which led Israel in Exodus 13, and the scene from Mount Sinai in Exodus 24.

Although Acts 2 is the only place where we see fire falling from heaven in the early church, we see such activity in several places in the Old Testament (though it was not at all common). Both the prophet Elijah and the king David experienced fire coming down from heaven (Exodus 13:21; 1 Kings 18; 2 Kings 1; 1 Chronicles 21:26; also see Genesis 19:22). However, the two Old Testament cases that apply the most to Acts 2 is Leviticus 9:24 and 2 Chronicles 7:1. We will examine these below.

In Leviticus 9, we read the report of all Israel gathering together to witness the opening of the Tabernacle for worship and the initiation of priestly service in the newly built Tabernacle. Once Moses and Aaron had prepared everything for the burnt offering, Leviticus 9:24 reports that fire miraculously came from the presence of the Lord and consumed the offerings. This fire of divine origin “was a sign, not only of the

acceptance of the offerings and of the establishment of Aaron's authority, but of God's actual residence in that chosen dwelling-place."⁷ This even confirmed that God's presence was with the Tabernacle.

Once Solomon built a permanent temple for Israel in Jerusalem, he followed the pattern set in Leviticus 9. The sacrifices were prepared but no fire was kindled. Rather, once everything for the dedication of the temple had been completed, 2 Chronicles 7:1 reports that "fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple" (NIV). As with the tabernacle, "divine approval of the new temple is shown by the fire which came down from heaven."⁸ The fire fell from God not only to consume the sacrifices but to demonstrate that God approved of the temple and his presence would dwell there. In both of these Old Testament passages (Leviticus 9:24 and 2 Chronicles 7:1) fire was the symbol God used to both demonstrate approval of the building and confirm his presence therein.

In the New Testament, however, God has chosen to dwell in a different kind of temple. Even in Solomon's dedicatory prayer, Solomon recognized that God could not be contained in one building (2 Chronicles 6:18). In Acts 7:49-50, Stephen preaches from Isaiah 66:1-2 to show God's discontentment to live in a house made by men. Indeed, Jesus' own encounters with the temple were not usually pleasant. Jesus condemned some of the activity which took place in the temple on several occasions (Matthew 21:12-13; 24:1-2; Mark 11:12-17; 13:1-2; Luke 19:45-46; 21:5-6; John 2:13-16). When Jesus died on the cross a remarkable event occurred in the temple, a curtain was divinely torn. In both the tabernacle and the temple, two primary curtains hung in the house of God; one separated the Holy Place from the courtyard and was visible to many while the other separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (or the Holy of Holies) and was only visible to the priests (Exodus 26-27). The curtains were commanded by God to physically demonstrate the spiritual separation that existed between God and man since the original sin in the Garden of Eden. The temple itself indicated that God still desired to extend his presence towards humanity but, until atonement was made, mankind was still unworthy to enter the presence of God because of sin. Sin prevented mankind from entering fully into God's presence and thus the access to God's presence even in the Temple was extremely limited. The closer one moved towards the presence of God, the more limited the access. The curtain-barriers were the physical representation of this spiritual reality of separation. Even the animal sacrifices were not enough to permanently bring down the curtains.

On Good Friday, when the curtain was ripped open by God, it announced the reconciliation made possible by the atoning work of Jesus with his sacrificial death on the cross. The curtain was torn from top to bottom to clearly indicate that this was not the work of man but the work of God. The open curtain represents a change in the way God interacts with humanity. As the writer of Hebrews states, we can now "approach God's throne of grace with confidence" (Hebrews 4:16). We were previously unable to access the presence of God because of sin but now we are invited into his presence because of the gracious work of Jesus (see also Romans 5:2 and Hebrews 10:19-22)

Now, with mankind redeemed by the atoning blood of Jesus, we are made worthy to enter and remain in the presence of God and God's presence can dwell in us. Richard Longenecker writes, "though under the old covenant the divine presence rested on Israel as a corporate entity and upon many of its leaders for special purposes, under the new covenant, established by Jesus and inaugurated at Pentecost, the Spirit now rests on

⁷Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, 1871, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 1996), paragraph 1386.

⁸Charles M. Laymon, *The Interpreter's Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 215.

each believer individually.”⁹ This is why Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:16, “We are the temple of the living God” (NIV, see also 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22; and 1 Peter 2:5). Believers are now equipped to be the ones in whom the world might find the presence of God. No longer does anyone need to travel to Jerusalem and look behind a curtain to find God’s presence. Rather, the presence of God fills the faithful. God dramatically demonstrated this on Pentecost.

In Acts 2, God did not send fire down onto a building like he did in Leviticus with the Tabernacle or in 2 Chronicles with the Temple. Rather, God sent fire down to a people. The fire divided and rested on each individual to indicate that the Holy Spirit is now found in all believers, not merely one building. Just as the fire fell in the Old Testament to confirm God’s presence among the community and his approval of the building, so the fire fell at Pentecost to confirm that God approves of those he has redeemed by the blood of his Son and confirms them as worthy to enter in and be filled with the presence of God.

Holy Spirit Filled

Luke explains that all who were gathered among the believers on Pentecost were filled with the Holy Spirit. The word he used to describe this filling is *πίμπλημι* (pimplemi). This word is used rarely outside of Luke and Acts (Matthew uses it twice and John once). There are more common words used elsewhere in the New Testament for “fill.” Luke uses this less common word 21 times in total and 8 times in connection to the Holy Spirit filling someone (Luke 1:15; 1:41; 1:67; Acts 2:4; 4:8; 4:31; 9:17; 13:9). According to Bill Mounce, this word can mean “be under full influence”¹⁰ which is possibly what Luke is conveying with his usage here. Being Spirit “filled” is most likely not a reference to quantity but to influence. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is more about being fully influenced by the Spirit rather than filled to some measure with the Spirit.

This event had been foretold by both Jesus and John the Baptist as both looked forward to a Spirit baptism that would flow from the ministry of Christ (see Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5). It is interesting that in Luke’s Gospel the Spirit Baptism is prophesied to come with fire (Matthew also mentions this). This fire indeed accompanies this event in Acts 2. It is also significant that each Gospel encounter looks forward to Spirit Baptism often from the beginning of the Gospel message. Though only Luke recorded the historical event, each Gospel writer acknowledged this event with anticipation. John’s Gospel emphasizes the coming of the Holy Spirit as a topic of discussion at the Last Supper and even foreshadows Pentecost in John 20:22. Thus, Spirit Baptism is certainly a key element of the Gospel message. Its not only for “Pentecostals” but an experience that all believers should want and expect. Even Jesus’ ministry began with water baptism being followed by the Spirit descending on him from heaven. It appears that even Jesus did not launch his ministry until the Spirit descended upon him. In the same day, the Gospel of Luke opens with several other key characters being Spirit filled such as John the Baptist and his father. Likewise, the church waited for the Spirit to descend on them before they went out, just as Jesus instructed in Luke 1:4-8. Thus, seeking for Spirit Baptism follows a well-established Biblical pattern.

Spirit Baptism is directly connected to having power for Christian life, witness, and ministry. Indeed, this is an empowering event for the early church and subsequent believers. Being filled with the Spirit, however, is not only about receiving power but also about maintaining a close connection to God. Jesus spoke

⁹ Richard Longenecker, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 270.

¹⁰William D. Mounce, *Mounce Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, “πίμπλημι,” paragraph 11844.

about the coming of the Spirit when his disciples were distressed about his departure (John 14-15). The coming of the Spirit was seen as a great encouragement to believers and another form of Immanuel - God with us. Ajith Fernando writes, "At its heart, the power of Pentecost is an experience of the immediacy of God. God is indeed with us, and we can experience his nearness and power enabling us to minister in the Spirit."¹¹ God is never far from us and that is confirmed by the ongoing presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The purpose of Spirit Baptism is not explicitly recorded in Acts 2 but is certainly demonstrated in the events following this initial outpouring. The Apostles were able to undertake their ministry with exceeding power after being filled. The believers would find greater power for doing ministry after being filled with the Holy Spirit. This must be why Jesus instructed them to wait for the Holy Spirit and Luke makes that clear in Acts 1:8. Other purposes for Spirit Baptism and walking in the Spirit are scattered throughout the letters of Paul and even in the Gospels (see John 14-15 for an example). Paul often focuses on the Spirit's help in the area of personal holiness and behavior as well as spiritual gifts (see Galatians 5:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 12-14 for examples). However, Luke's emphasis is to show how New Testament believers individually and the New Testament church as a body received greater power for witness and ministry through Spirit baptism.

Speaking in Other Tongues

Although the long-term results of Spirit baptism were borne out over time and in various ways, the immediate result of being filled with the Spirit in Acts 2 was speaking in other tongues. The issue of speaking in tongues is addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In these chapters Paul indicates that the tongues spoken publicly in the power of the Holy Spirit in the early church needed Spirit given interpretation to be fully understood by the congregation. Paul also seems to indicate that certain people have ongoing gifts of either speaking in tongues or interpreting tongues. Luke must have been aware of this spiritual practice yet in Acts he indicates that the tongues spoken as the Spirit gave utterance on the day of Pentecost did not need any translation because they were immediately understood by those in the crowds in Jerusalem who heard their own languages being spoken. Thus, while the Spirit can and does give certain people the beautiful ability to worship in unknown languages, the believers who spoke in tongues in Acts 2 did so for the expressed purpose of witnessing to diverse people through dramatic, cross-cultural ministry.

In Acts 1:8, Luke both gives an outline for his book and a foreshadowing of the unfolding ministry that will take place after the ascension of Jesus. The Gospel will be powerfully declared by the church first in Jerusalem, then in the greater region of Judea, then in the neighboring region of Samaria, then to the rest of the world. This is the progression of Acts as a narrative and the mandate of the church as a body. The power to do this, says Jesus, will come from the Holy Spirit. A foretaste of the worldwide impact of the church as it spills out of Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria is provided immediately after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. As mentioned earlier, people from 14 different ethnic groups or regions were gathered in Jerusalem for the festival and heard these Galileans speaking in their native languages. Galileans were known to be farmers and fishermen but not linguists. This sudden and unusual ability must have arisen from divine origins and not from human effort. This initial burst of Spirit-led tongue talking helped to launch the church and make it an international body from the very beginning. This was not a by-product of the tongues but the purpose for which the Spirit gave them these utterances. This was the miraculous method God used to both show his desire for multi-ethnic ministry and prepare the church for multi-ethnic ministry. God certainly planned for this outpouring of the Holy Spirit to take place at Pentecost so that this diverse congregation might

¹¹ Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 95.

hear the Word of God and come into God's Kingdom. Ajith Fernando observes, "It is appropriate that the event that was going to propel the gospel to the ends of the earth took place at a time when people from the ends of the earth were in Jerusalem."¹²

Those who heard these Galileans speaking in other languages were amazed. It is even more remarkable, however, that these believers were so much under the influence of the Holy Spirit that even their tongues were even yielded to the Spirit. As we all know from personal experience, the tongue is one of the most difficult parts of the body to bring into submission. James wrote about the difficulty of the tongues in James 3:5-10 (NIV):

"The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."

If God has our tongue, this must be the result of being totally yielded to him. Speaking in tongues after Spirit Baptism, whether it's the language of man or angels, if it is brought about by the Spirit, is a strong indication that the one is genuinely filled with the Holy Spirit. Of course, tongues can be faked so we still examine the long-term fruit but Spirit enabled tongues demonstrate that one is greatly, if not fully, influenced by the Holy Spirit. The cross-cultural, supernatural ministry of the church in Acts 2 was possible because the believers were fully yielded to the Holy Spirit in Spirit baptism and subsequent activity. The Holy Spirit came in power and was received by faith with full submission resulting in powerful ministry. Even their tongues were under the control of the Holy Spirit. The results speak for themselves.

The cross-cultural nature of Acts 2 is also seen in its very close connection to Genesis 11. The parallels are so significant that we must turn our attention to the Tower of Babel when we study Pentecost (see chart on page 10). The story of Babel follows the flood. Noah's descendants were commissioned by God to "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1, NIV). Rather than filling the earth in obedience, it seems that many of Noah's descendants determined to stay together and build a city for themselves on the plain of Shinar. Though we do not know how many generations these people were from Noah, they surely would have known of God's great and gracious salvation from their forefathers. Yet they chose to exalt themselves rather than honor God. They wanted to "make a name for [them]selves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4, NIV). They wanted to go up in glory rather than out in obedience. They desired to "reach heaven" but not through faith in God. Rather, they openly defied him by trusting in and exalting themselves. God knew that if this were allowed to persist, the extent of their sin would be great (Genesis 11:6). Thus, he determined to come down into their midst with judgement. Their sin brought about confusion and division which was particularly characterized by diverse languages. When God confused their language, it was an act of divine judgement. The divisions which arose from these languages are certainly felt in many places today. Humanity remains divided by language, culture, color, tribe, nation, and class. Racism and ethnocentrism are still arising from the sin of humanity as man determines to exalt self rather the God.

¹² Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 87.

At Pentecost, however, we see a divine reversal of Babel's curse. As the recipients of God's salvation and grace, the believers gathered together before they scattered themselves in obedience to God to await the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. They sought to glorify God (Acts 2:11) and build his Kingdom rather than their own. Again, God came down into their midst and gave them diverse languages but this time the languages did not divide them. The languages united them in praise and worship to God. They overcame the barriers of language, culture, tribe, race, and color which sin had created by the power of the Holy Spirit. Their tongue talking was the initial evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit but the use of their divine gifts to undertake effective cross-cultural ministry was an ongoing evidence that the Holy Spirit had indeed filled them. Although racial and ethnic problems persisted in the early church (see Acts 6:1; 11:1-3; and 15:1-5) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit brought about the power to break the barriers and tear down the walls of separation so that racial and ethnic unity might be possible and racism and tribalism may be eliminated from the believers and the church. As Craig Keener writes, "Luke's particular emphasis regarding the Spirit is empowerment for cross-cultural prophetic witness, and nothing could better symbolize empowerment to cross such barriers than the ability to speak, by the Spirit's inspiration, in languages one has not learned."¹³ While the Spirit rarely gives us the ability to preach in foreign languages today, his call to cross-cultural witness and outreach is still for us and his power to accomplish this calling remains available to all who believe. Let us take up this call and receive this power once more. Wherever the Spirit is truly at work, racism is destroyed and unity is fostered.

Finally, it is important to note that the Holy Spirit did not only provide the believers with tongues but also with an empowered voice with which to proclaim "the wonders of God." The powerful message that Peter delivered at Pentecost was certainly drenched in the Spirit's power and anointing regardless of the language he used. Tongues can be faked but the voice of one genuinely empowered by the Holy Spirit is able to accomplish much. It is interesting to consider that Luke is the only writer that tells the story of Zachariah. Luke's gospel opens with a story of this priest receiving word that he and his wife will bear a son (who turns out to be John the Baptist). This priest, Zachariah, does not believe the message. As a result, he loses his ability to speak at all in Luke 1:19. Only when he demonstrates faith in God's word does he regain the ability to speak. In Acts, however, Luke begins the story with a group of people who trusted the word of God. The result was that God divinely empowered their speech and anointed their voices. A priest in Jerusalem doubted the word of God and lost his voice. The believers at Pentecost trusted the word of God and found their voices to be divinely enabled. As we continue to read Acts we see how people use their Spirit-empowered voices to effectively witness and proclaim the Word of God. May the Holy Spirit take control of our tongue and enable our voices to speak with the power and love of God to world that desperately needs to hear God's message in our voice.

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 804-805.

A comparison of Pentecost and Babel

Acts 2:1-12	Genesis 11:1-9	Notes
All together in one place (2:1)	All together in one place (11:2)	
Joined together in one effort (1:14) – obedience	Joined together in one effort (11:3-4) – disobedience	The believers at Pentecost were united in obedience to God while the residents in Babel were united in defiance to God.
Seeking to glorify and obey God	Seeking to glorify themselves (11:4)	From the time of Noah’s flood, Noah’s descendants were to scatter across the earth and fill it. At Babel, they determined to stay together.
God came down (2:2-4)	God came down (11:5-7)	At Pentecost, God came down in glory. At Babel, God came down in judgement.
God gave them diverse, previously unknown languages (2:4-12)	God gave them diverse, previously unknown languages (11:7)	The giving of languages at Pentecost was a blessing. The giving of languages at Babel was a curse.
The diverse languages brought about unity (2:6)	The diverse languages brought about disunity (11:7)	The sin of man created division. The Spirit of God created unity.
Sent to the nations to proclaim the Gospel	Scattered among the nations as an act of judgement.	At Pentecost, we see the reversal of the curse of Babel.
Unity in the midst of diversity as a work of the Spirit.	Disunity as a result of man’s sin.	
Unity and power were the result of submitting to the Holy Spirit	Division and confusion were the result of man following after sin.	

The Fulfillment of Joel

Peter is the one who preached the first message after the Holy Spirit filled the believers, including Peter, on the day of Pentecost. His message was drawn, in part, from Joel 2:28-32. Joel is a bit of a mysterious prophet from the Old Testament. Very little is known of either him or his ministry. His short prophetic message focuses on judgement, repentance, and redemption. By using the tragedy of a locust invasion and subsequent events, he explains how God exhibits both justice and grace in the world. The goal of Joel's prophecy seems to be to motivate his hearers to true repentance in anticipation of God's mercy and a future, eternal redemption. Part of God's ultimate plan for redemption, according to Joel, is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh. This is a remarkable statement considering how the Holy Spirit operated in the Old Testament. We have already seen how the Holy Spirit only came upon certain people occasionally and was usually unapproachable by most people. God's presence was only consistently found behind the curtains in the tabernacle or temple. That "all flesh" might be able to receive the Spirit of God was only a dream to Moses (Numbers 11:29), foreseen by Joel, and finally realized by Peter and the New Covenant believers beginning on the day of Pentecost. As F. F. Bruce reminds us, "Certainly the outpouring of the Spirit on 120 Jews could not itself fulfill the prediction of such an outpouring 'upon all flesh;' but it was the beginning of the fulfillment."¹⁴ We will see the outpouring extend to Samaritans (Acts 8), God-fearing Greeks (Acts 10), and numerous communities outside of Israel through the missionary endeavors of Paul and his colleagues.

Peter declared that Joel's long-awaited prophecy was being fulfilled both in terms of the outpouring of the Spirit and the salvation of people by the grace of God. The redemption that Joel longs for in the coming Day of the Lord has arrived through Jesus. As Ajith Fernando summarizes, "Peter is telling the people that the age of fulfillment for which they have been eagerly waiting has dawned."¹⁵ Thus, the church and the New Covenant are not in competition with Israel and the Old Covenant but rather the fulfillment of Old Covenant promises. To be faithful to the Old Covenant is to recognize and enter into the New Covenant.

The New Covenant is also the setting for the fulfillment of Genesis 12:3 where God promises Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (NIV). God called Israel for the purpose of being a light to the nations (Isaiah 60:1-3). As the fire of Pentecost fell on believing Jews, it ignited this light once again and caused it to shine brighter for this purpose. Peter and Joel both affirm that God's desire is that all peoples would enter into God's presence and receive the Holy Spirit, regardless of age, gender, or status. God raised up one ethnic group in order to reach them all. That God both wants all people to believe and that he shows no favoritism among those who have faith is implied by Joel and Peter's use of Joel's prophecy. The explicit teaching of this was further developed by Paul in passages such as Romans 3:22-24, Romans 10:10-13, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, and Galatians 3:26-29. While Paul teaches this point theologically Luke describes the reality through the retelling of the early church's story.

It is important to note that Peter's message does not linger on the issue of tongues (which was the initial question of the onlookers in Acts 2:12). Rather, Peter pivots quickly to the issue of Jesus and salvation. Howard Marshal observes, "Peter's sermon begins with a text that not only very conveniently provides the scriptural explanation of the strange behavior of the believers, but also offers a golden opportunity to develop the theme of Jesus Christ thanks to its linking of the outpouring of the Spirit with the theme of salvation for those who call on the name of the Lord."¹⁶ The Holy Spirit does not merely intend to draw attention to himself

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 68.

¹⁵ Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 102.

¹⁶ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 532.

or the believers but he wants to create opportunities where people are prepared to hear the Gospel and be pointed towards Christ. The conclusion to Peter's message indicates that the primary purpose of his message and the Pentecost event was to encourage others to "repent and be baptized" and then "receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38, NIV).

Powerful Ministry

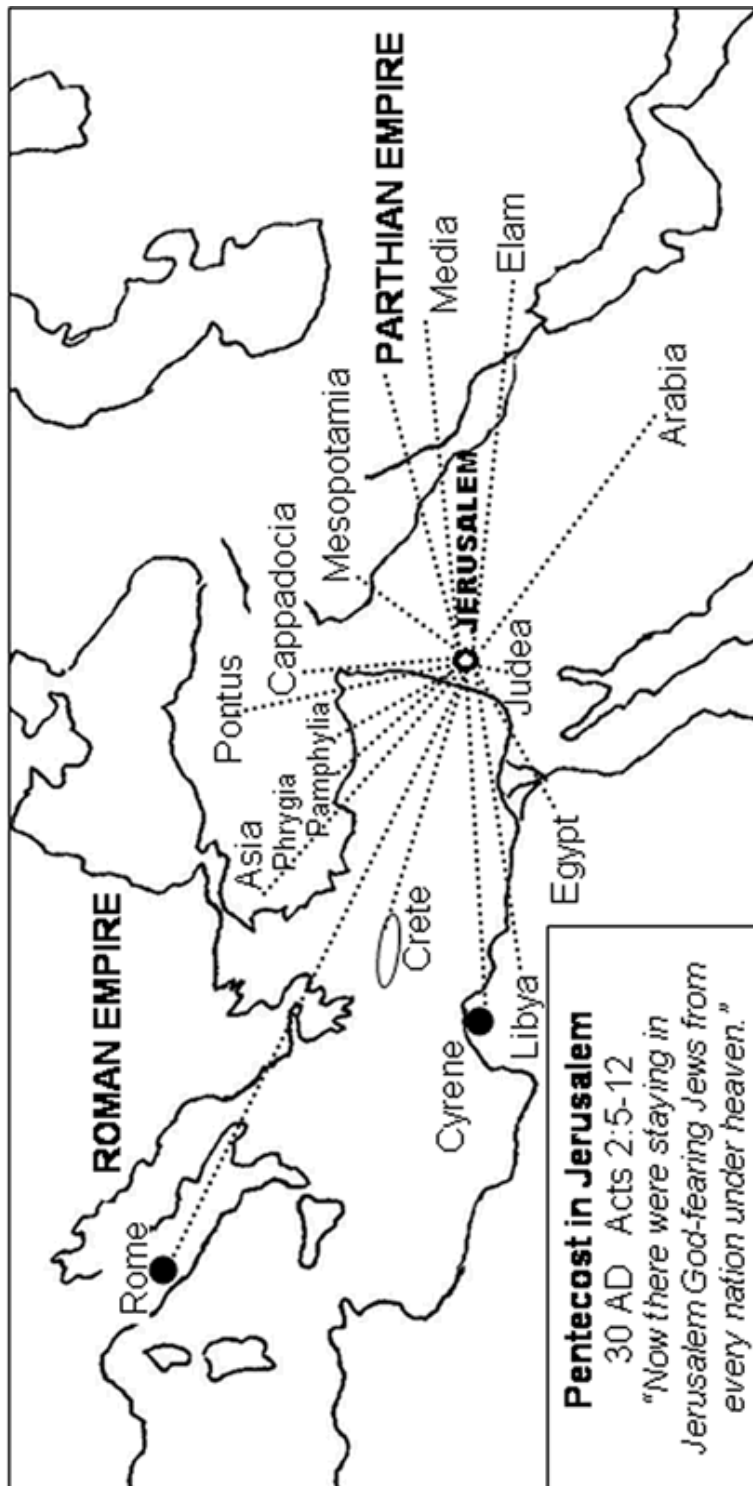
Acts 2:42-47 explains the result of both the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the faithful ministry of the Spirit filled believers: many more faithful disciples were created and the church grew both in quantity and quality. As John Polhill observes, Luke's "major emphasis doubtless was that the church has now been empowered for its mission."¹⁷ Howard Marshall agrees: "There is, of course, no doubt whatever that the Spirit in Acts is primarily associated with guidance and empowerment for Christian mission and proclamation."¹⁸ As far back as 700 AD, the English monk Bede observed, "The Holy Spirit appeared in fire and in tongues because all those whom he fills he makes simultaneously to burn and to speak – to burn because of him and to speak about him. And at the same time he indicated that the holy church, when it had spread to the ends of the earth, was to speak in the language of all nations."¹⁹

The product of a faithful, Spirit filled community was powerful ministry, effective witness, and a growing church. May our study of Pentecost encourage us to seek after the things of God wholeheartedly, respond to the Spirit faithfully, and use the power that the Holy Spirit gives us consistently. Let us be less concerned with "stirring up the Spirit" and more concerned with responding to the Spirit's stirring in our lives and in our community.

¹⁷ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1992), 106.

¹⁸ I Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 177.

¹⁹ Quotes by Francis Martin in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 22.



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