

2. The Day of Pentecost

2:1–47

Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead. ✎

Luke is well aware of this. Of the four evangelists it is he who lays the heaviest emphasis on the Spirit. Near the beginning of each part of his two-volume work he demonstrates the indispensability of the Holy Spirit's enabling. Just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus when John baptized him, so that he entered his public ministry 'full of the Holy Spirit', 'led by the Spirit'. 'in the power of the Spirit' and 'anointed' by the Spirit (Lk. 3:21–22; 4:1, 14, 18), so now the same Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus to equip them for their mission in the world (Acts 1:5, 8; 2:33 ✎). In the early chapters of the Acts Luke refers to the promise, the gift, the baptism, the power and the fullness of the Spirit in the experience of God's people ✎. The terms are many and interchangeable; the reality is one, and there is no substitute for it.

Yet this reality is multi-faceted, and there are at least four ways in which we may think of the Day of Pentecost. First, it was the final act of the saving ministry of Jesus before the Parousia. ✎ He who was born into our humanity, lived our life, died for our sins, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, now sent his Spirit to his people to constitute them his body and to work out in them what he had won for them ✎. In this sense the Day of Pentecost is unrepeatable. Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Day, Ascension Day and Whit Sunday are annual celebrations, but the birth, death, resurrection, ascension and Spirit-gift they commemorate happened once and for all. Secondly, Pentecost brought to the apostles the equipment they needed for their special role. ✎ Christ had appointed them to be his primary and authoritative witnesses, and had promised them the reminding and teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 14–16). Pentecost was the fulfilment of that promise. Thirdly, Pentecost was the inauguration of the new era of the Spirit. ✎ Although his coming was a unique and unrepeatable histori-

cal event, all the people of God can now always and everywhere benefit from his ministry. Although he equipped the apostles to be the primary witnesses, he also equips us to be secondary witnesses. Although the inspiration of the Spirit was given to the apostles alone, the fullness of the Spirit is for us all. Fourthly, Pentecost has been called—and rightly—the first ‘revival’, using this word to denote one of those altogether unusual visitations of God, in which a whole community becomes vividly aware of his immediate, overpowering presence. ¹ It may be, therefore, that not only the physical phenomena (2ff.), but the deep conviction of sin (37), the 3,000 conversions (41) and the widespread sense of awe (43) were signs of ‘revival’. We must be careful, however, not to use this possibility as an excuse to lower our expectations, or to relegate to the category of the exceptional what God may intend to be the church’s normal experience. The wind and the fire were abnormal, and probably the languages too; the new life and joy, fellowship and worship, freedom, boldness and power were not.¹

Acts 2 has three sections. It begins with Luke’s description of the Pentecost event itself (1–13), continues with the explanation of the event which Peter gives in his sermon (14–41), and ends with its effects in the life of the Jerusalem church (42–47).

1. Luke’s narrative: the event of Pentecost (2:1–13)

Luke’s narrative opens with a brief, matter-of-fact reference to the time and place of the Spirit’s coming. *They were all together in one place*, he writes, and is evidently not concerned to enlarge on this. We do not know, therefore, if the ‘house’ of verse 2 is still the upper room (Acts 1:13; 2:46b) or one of the many rooms or halls of the temple (Lk. 24:53; Acts 2:46a). The time is precise, however; it was *when the day of Pentecost came* (1). This feast had two meanings, one agricultural and the other historical. Originally, it was

¹ A failure to grasp, and distinguish between, these four meanings of the Pentecost event lies, I suspect, behind the continuing tensions between ‘charismatic’ and ‘non-charismatic’ Christians. For example, Roger Stronstad is surely right to emphasize the ‘vocational’ aspect of the gift of the Spirit, namely that he ‘anoints’ and ‘equips’ people for their ministry. This was particularly evident in the case of the apostles. Roger Stronstad seems to me to overstate his case, however, by arguing that according to Luke’s theology, the Spirit was given neither for salvation, nor for sanctification, but exclusively for service (Stronstad, pp. 1, 12, 83).

the middle of the three annual Jewish harvest festivals,² and was called either the Feast of Harvest,³ because it celebrated the completion of the grain harvest, or the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, because it took place seven weeks or fifty days (*pentēkostos* means ‘fiftieth’) after the Passover, which was when the grain harvesting began.⁴ Towards the end of the inter-testamental period, however, it began also to be observed as the anniversary of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, because this was reckoned as having happened fifty days after the Exodus.

It is tempting, therefore, to find the double symbolism of harvesting and law-giving in the Day of Pentecost. Certainly there was a great harvest of 3,000 souls that day, the first-fruits of the Christian mission. As Chrysostom put it, ‘the time was come to put in the sickle of the word; for here, as the sickle, keen-edged, came the Spirit down’.⁵ Certainly too the prophets regarded as almost identical Yahweh’s two New Covenant promises, ‘I will put my Spirit in you’⁶ and ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts’,⁷ since what the Spirit does when he enters our hearts is to write God’s law there, as Paul clearly taught. Nevertheless, Luke does not draw out this double symbolism. So we cannot be sure whether it was important to him, even though Jewish tradition associated wind, fire and voices with Mount Sinai,⁸ the three phenomena which he is about to describe.

a. The three phenomena

Suddenly, Luke says, the great event took place. The Spirit of God came upon them. And his coming was accompanied by three supernatural signs—a sound, a sight and strange speech. First, there came from heaven *a sound like the blowing of a violent wind*, and it (*i.e.* the noise) *filled the whole house where they were sitting* (2). Secondly, there appeared to them visibly *what seemed to be tongues of fire*, which *separated and came to rest on each*

² Dt. 16:16.

³ Ex. 23:16.

⁴ Ex. 34:22; Lv. 23:15ff.; Nu. 28:26.

⁵ Chrysostom, *Homily IV*, p. 25.

⁶ Ezk. 36:27.

⁷ Je. 31:33.

⁸ Cf. Heb. 12:18–19.

of them (3), becoming for each an individual possession. Thirdly, *all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues (i.e. languages of some kind) as the Spirit enabled them (4)*.

These three experiences seemed like natural phenomena (wind, fire and speech); yet they were supernatural both in origin and in character. The noise was not wind, but sounded like it; the sight was not fire but resembled it; and the speech was in languages which were not ordinary but in some way 'other'. Again, three of their higher senses were affected, in that they heard the wind-like sound, saw the fire-like apparition and spoke the 'other' languages. Yet what they experienced was more than sensory; it was significant. So they sought to understand it. 'What does this mean?' the people later asked (12). If we allow other parts of Scripture to guide our interpretation, it seems that these three signs at least represented the new era of the Spirit which had begun (John the Baptist had bracketed wind and fire⁹) and the new work which he had come to do. If so, the noise like wind may have symbolized *power* (such as Jesus had promised them for witness, [Lk. 24:49](#); [Acts 1:8](#)), the sight like fire *purity* (like the live coal which cleansed [Isaiah, 6:6–7](#)) and the speech in other languages the *universality* of the Christian church. In what follows nothing more is said about the phenomena like wind and fire; Luke concentrates on the third, the languages.

⁵*Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven,*
⁶*When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.* ⁷*Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?'* ⁸*Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?'*

Luke's emphasis is on the international nature of the crowd which collected. They were all *God-fearing Jews*, and they were all *staying* (that is, residing) *in Jerusalem (5)*. Yet they had not been born there; they came from the dispersion, *from every nation under heaven (5)*. That we must not press Luke's 'every nation' literally to include, for example, American Indians, Australian aboriginals and New Zealand Maoris, is plain from what follows. He was speaking, as the biblical writers normally did, from his own horizon not ours, and was referring to the Graeco-Roman world situated round the

⁹[Lk. 3:16](#).

Mediterranean basin, indeed to every nation in which there were Jews.

Luke's list comprises five groupings, as he moves with his mind's eye approximately from East to West. First, he mentions *Parthians, Medes and Elamites* and *residents of Mesopotamia* (9a), that is, peoples from the Caspian Sea westwards, many of whom will have been descended from the Jewish exiles who had been transported there in the eighth and sixth centuries BC. Secondly, in verses 9b–10a, Luke refers to five areas of what we call Asia Minor or Turkey, namely *Cappadocia* (east), *Pontus* (north), *Asia* (west), *Phrygia and Pamphylia* (south). Because *Judea* (9) comes oddly between Mesopotamia and Cappadocia, some commentators think Luke is using the word to refer to a wider area like the whole of Palestine and Syria, even including Armenia, while others follow an Old Latin version which reads *Joudaioi* ('Jews') instead of *Joudaian* ('Judea'), and so translate 'the Jews inhabiting Mesopotamia and Cappadocia etc.'. The third group (10b) is North African, namely *Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene* (its chief city), the fourth (10c–11a) is *visitors from Rome* across the Mediterranean (*both Jews and converts to Judaism*), and the fifth, which looks like an afterthought, is *Cretans and Arabs* (11b).¹⁰

The Near East in the first century AD

¹⁰ Because of the somewhat strange order in which Luke lists the nations, some scholars have suggested that he may have been following an ancient 'astrological geography' like that of the fourth-century Paul of Alexandria, who tabulated the nations according to the twelve signs of the zodiac. For a sober evaluation of this speculation see Bruce Metzger's essay in Gasque and Martin, pp. 123–133.



This was the international, multi-lingual crowd which gathered round the 120 believers. *We hear them declaring the wonders of God, they said, in our own tongues (11c), that is, each ... in his own native language (8).* Yet the speakers were known to be Galileans (7), who had a reputation for being uncultured.¹¹ They also ‘had difficulty pronouncing gutturals and had the habit of swallowing syllables when speaking; so they were looked down upon by the people of Jerusalem as being provincial’.¹² It is not surprising, therefore, that the crowd’s reaction was one of bewilderment (6). Indeed, *amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’ (12).* Some, however, a minority who for some reason understood none of the languages, *made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine’ (13).*

b. Glossolalia

What exactly was this third phenomenon which Luke stresses, and as a result of which people heard God’s wonders in their vernacular? How does Luke understand *glossolalia*?

¹¹ Cf. Jn. 1:46; 7:52.

¹² Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 272. See also Mt. 26:73 and Lk. 22:59 for references to the peculiar Galilean accent.

We begin our answer negatively.

First, it was not the result of intoxication, of drinking too much *gleukos*, ‘sweet new wine’ (13, BAGD). Peter is emphatic on this point: ‘These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning!’ (15). As early in the day as that, Haenchen comments, ‘even drunkards and wassailers have not yet begun to imbibe’.¹³ Besides, the Jews fasted during festivals until the morning services were over. Nor, we must add, did the believers’ experience of the Spirit’s fullness *seem* to them or *look* to others like intoxication, because they had lost control of their normal mental and physical functions. No, the fruit of the Spirit is ‘self-control’,¹⁴ not the loss of it. Besides, only ‘some’ (13) made this remark, and though they said it, they do not seem to have meant it. For, Luke says, they ‘made fun of them’. It was more a jest than a serious comment.

Secondly, it was not a mistake or a miracle of hearing, in contrast to speaking, so that the audience supposed that the believers spoke in other languages when they did not.¹⁵ Some of Luke’s statements seem to support this theory: ‘each one *heard* them speaking in his own language’ (6); ‘how is it that each of us *hears* them in his own native language?’ (8); and ‘we *hear* them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’ (11). When, however, Luke writes his own descriptive narrative, he puts the matter beyond dispute: they ‘began to *speak* in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them’, (4). *Glossolalia* was indeed a phenomenon of hearing, but only because it was first a phenomenon of speech.

Thirdly, it was not a case of incoherent utterance. Liberal commentators, who begin with a prejudice against miracles, suggest that the 120 believers broke into unintelligible, ecstatic speech, and that Luke (who had visited Corinth with Paul) mistakenly supposed that it was literal languages. Thus Luke got in a muddle and confused two quite different things. What he thought was languages was in reality ‘inarticulate ecstatic babbling’¹⁶ or ‘a flood of unintelligible sounds in no known language’.¹⁷ Those of us

¹³ Haenchen, p. 178.

¹⁴ Gal. 5:23.

¹⁵ E.g. ‘many present thought they recognized words of praise to God in other languages’ (Dunn, *Jesus*, pp. 151f.).

¹⁶ Neil, p. 71.

¹⁷ Barclay, p. 15.

who have confidence in Luke as a reliable historian, however, let alone as an inspired contributor to the New Testament, conclude that it is not he who is mistaken, but rather his rationalistic interpreters.

Fourthly, and positively, the *glossolalia* on the Day of Pentecost was a supernatural ability to speak in recognizable languages. Some think that these were Aramaic, Greek and Latin, which would all have been spoken in multi-lingual Galilee; that ‘other languages’ means ‘languages other than Hebrew’ (the sacred biblical language which would have seemed appropriate to the occasion); and that the crowd’s astonishment was aroused by God’s wonders not the languages, by the content not the medium of the communication. This is plausible, and could be said to do justice to Luke’s account. On the other hand, his emphasis is more on the linguistic media (4, 6, 8, 11) than on the message (12); it is natural to translate ‘other languages’ as ‘other than their mother tongue’ rather than ‘other than Hebrew’; the list of fifteen regions in verses 9–11 leads one to expect a wider range of languages than Aramaic, Greek and Latin; and the crowd’s astonishment seems due to the fact that the languages, which to the speakers were ‘other’ (4), *i.e.* foreign, were yet to the hearers their ‘own’ (6, 11), indeed their ‘own native language’ (8), in which they were born (see AV). I conclude, therefore, that the miracle of Pentecost, although it may have included the substance of what the one hundred and twenty spoke (*the wonders of God*), was primarily the medium of their speech (foreign languages they had never learned).

So far I have concentrated on Luke’s own understanding of *glossolalia* on the Day of Pentecost, which can be discovered only by the exegesis of Acts 2. Presumably, the *glossolalia* to which he refers in Acts 10:46 and 19:6 was the same speaking of foreign languages, since he uses the same vocabulary (though most manuscripts omit the adjective ‘other’). What, then, about the references to tongue-speaking in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14? Are the phenomena mentioned in Acts and 1 Corinthians the same or different? We must try to reach our answer with reference to the biblical text rather than to contemporary claims.

Some think the phenomena were in several ways different. First, they were different in *direction*, *glossolalia* in Acts being in some sense the public ‘declaring’ (11) of God’s wonders, sharing them with others, while in 1 Corinthians the tongue-speaker ‘does not speak to men but to God’.¹⁸ Secondly, they were different in *character*, *glossolalia* in Acts

being languages which were understood by groups of listeners, while in [1 Corinthians 14](#) the speech was unintelligible and an interpreter was necessary. Thirdly, they were different in *purpose*. In Acts *glossolalia* seems to be evidential, an initial ‘sign’ given to all, bearing witness to their reception of the Spirit, while in 1 Corinthians it is edificatory, a continuing ‘gift’ bestowed on some for the building up of the church.

Others, however, point out that the Greek words and expressions are the same throughout the New Testament. *Glōssa* (‘tongue’) has only two meanings (the organ in the mouth and a language) and *hermēneuō* (‘interpret’) usually means to translate a language. They therefore conclude that the Acts and 1 Corinthians passages refer to the same thing, namely languages. Even some who think the *purpose* is different, go on to affirm that the *character* is the same. For example, the Assemblies of God commentator Stanley M. Horton writes that ‘the tongues here (sc in [Acts 2](#)) and the tongues in 1 Corinthians chapters [12–14](#) are the same’.¹⁹ As the official *Statement* of the Assemblies of God puts it (para. 8), they are ‘the same in essence’, but ‘different in purpose and use’. To sum up, rejecting the liberal approach, which is to declare Corinthian *glossolalia* to be unintelligible utterance and to assimilate the Acts phenomenon to it, it is better to make the opposite proposal, namely that the Acts phenomenon was intelligible languages and that the 1 Corinthians experience must be assimilated to it. The main argument for this is that, although *glossolalia* is mentioned without explanation in several New Testament passages, [Acts 2](#) is the only passage in which it is described and explained; it seems more reasonable to interpret the unexplained in the light of the explained than vice versa.²⁰

¹⁸ [1 Cor. 14:2](#); cf. vv [14–17](#), [28](#).

¹⁹ Horton, p. 33, footnote 11.

²⁰ The debate continues as to whether the contemporary experience of *glossolalia* is, or sometimes includes, speaking in recognizable languages. Claims to this are put forward by e.g. Morton T. Kelsey in *Speaking with Tongues* (1964; Epworth, 1965) and John L. Sherrill in *They Speak with Other Tongues* (1964; Hodder, 1965). On the other hand, two fair, objective, socio-linguistic investigations have reached the conclusion that there have been no scientifically confirmed records of *glossolalia* being an unlearned foreign language. These are William J. Samarin’s *Tongues of Men and Angels* (MacMillan, 1972) and John P. Kildahl’s *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (Hodder and Stoughton, and Harper and Row, 1972).

Discussion about the nature of *glossolalia* must not distract our attention from Luke's understanding of its significance on the Day of Pentecost. It symbolized a new unity in the Spirit transcending racial, national and linguistic barriers. So Luke is at pains to emphasize the cosmopolitan character of the crowd, not least by the expression 'from every nation under heaven' (5). Although all the nations of the world were not present *literally*, they were *representatively*. For Luke includes in his list descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth, and gives us in [Acts 2](#) a 'Table of the Nations' comparable to the one in [Genesis 10](#). Bishop Stephen Neill has made this point: 'Most of the peoples mentioned by Luke fall under the heading of the Semites, Elam being the first of the Semitic nations mentioned in [Genesis 10](#); but Luke is careful also to add Egypt and Libya which come under the heading of the Hamites, and Cretans (Kittim) and dwellers in Rome who belong to the section under Japheth.... Luke does not draw attention to what he is doing; but in his own subtle way he is saying to us that on that Day of Pentecost the whole world was there in the representatives of the various nations.'²¹

Nothing could have demonstrated more clearly than this the multi-racial, multi-national, multi-lingual nature of the kingdom of Christ. Ever since the early church fathers, commentators have seen the blessing of Pentecost as a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel. 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'.²² Besides, at Babel earth proudly tried to ascend to heaven, whereas in Jerusalem heaven humbly descended to earth.

²¹ *Call to Mission* by Stephen C. Neill (Fortress, 1970, p. 12).

²² [Gn. 11:1–9](#); [Rev. 7:9](#).