



# 1. Waiting for Pentecost

## 1:6–26

The major event of the early chapters of the Acts took place on the Day of Pentecost, when the now-exalted Lord Jesus performed the last work of his saving career (until his coming again) and ‘poured out’ the Holy Spirit on his waiting people. His life, death, resurrection and ascension all culminated in this great gift, which the prophets had foretold and which would be recognized as the chief evidence that God’s kingdom had been inaugurated. For this conclusion of Christ’s work on earth was also a fresh beginning. Just as the Spirit came upon Jesus to equip him for his public ministry,<sup>1</sup> so now the Spirit was to come upon his people to equip them for theirs. The Holy Spirit would not only apply to them the salvation which Jesus had achieved by his death and resurrection but would impel them to proclaim throughout the world the good news of this salvation. Salvation is given to be shared. 

Before the Day of Pentecost, however, there was to be a time of waiting, for forty days between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus (1:3), and for ten more between Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus’ instructions were quite clear, and Luke repeats them for emphasis, first at the end of his Gospel and then at the beginning of Acts. ‘Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’<sup>2</sup> ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about’ (1:4). During the fifty-day waiting period, however, they were not inactive. On the contrary, Luke singles out for comment four important events. First, they received their commission (1:6–8). Secondly, they saw Christ go into heaven (1:9–12). Thirdly, they persevered together in prayer, presumably for the Spirit to come (1:13–14). Fourthly, they replaced Judas with Matthias as the twelfth apostle (1:21–26). . Not that we are to think of these as human activities only. For it is Christ who commissioned them, ascended into heaven, promised them the Spirit they prayed for, and chose the new apostle. Dr Richard Longenecker goes further and sees these four factors as comprising what he calls ‘the constitutive elements of the Christian mission’, namely the mandate to wit-

<sup>1</sup>Lk. 3:21–22; 4:14, 18.

<sup>2</sup>Lk. 24:49.

ness, the ascended Lord who directs the mission from heaven, the centrality of the apostles in this task, and the coming of the Spirit to empower them.<sup>3</sup> Only when these four elements were in place could the mission begin.

### 1. They received their commission (1:6–8)

During the forty days in which the risen Lord ‘showed himself’ to the apostles, and ‘gave many convincing proofs that he was alive’ (3), Luke indicates what he taught them. First, he spoke to them ‘about the kingdom of God’ (3), which had been the burden of his message during his public ministry and indeed (judging from the present participle *legōn*, ‘speaking’) continued to be after his resurrection. Secondly, he told them to wait for the gift or baptism of the Spirit, which had been promised by him, the Father and the Baptist, and which they would now receive ‘in a few days’ (4–5).

It appears, then, that Jesus’ two main topics of conversation between his resurrection and his ascension were the kingdom of God and the Spirit of God. <sup>4</sup> It seems probable that he also related them to each other, for certainly the prophets had often associated them. When God establishes the kingdom of the Messiah, they said, he will pour out his Spirit; this generous effusion and universal enjoyment of the Spirit will be one of the major signs and blessings of his rule; and indeed the Spirit of God will make the rule of God a living and present reality to his people.<sup>4</sup>

So then the question which the apostles put to Jesus when they met together (*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*, 6) was not altogether the *non sequitur* it sounds. For if the Spirit was about to come, as he had said, did this not imply that the kingdom was about to come too? The mistake they made was to misunderstand both the nature of the kingdom and the relation between the kingdom and the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Their question must have filled Jesus with dismay. Were they still so lacking in perception? As Calvin commented, ‘there are as many errors in the question as words’.<sup>5</sup> The verb, the noun and the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom. For the verb *restore* shows that they were expecting a political and territorial

<sup>3</sup> Longenecker, *Acts*, pp. 253ff.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Is. 32:15ff.; 35:6ff.; 43:19ff.; 44:3; Ezk. 11:19; 36:26–27; 37:11ff.; 39:29; Joel 2:28–29.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, I, p. 29.

kingdom; the noun *Israel* that they were expecting a national kingdom; and the adverbial clause *at this time* that they were expecting its immediate establishment. In his reply (7–8) Jesus corrected their mistaken notions of the kingdom’s nature, extent and arrival.<sup>6</sup>

#### *a. The kingdom of God is spiritual in its character*

In the English language, of course, a ‘kingdom’ is usually a territorial sphere which can be located on a map, like the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan, the Hindu kingdom of Nepal, the Buddhist kingdom of Thailand, or the United Kingdom. But the kingdom of God is not a territorial concept. It does not—and cannot—figure on any map. Yet this is what the apostles were still envisaging by confusing the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Israel. They were like the members of Israel’s righteous remnant whom Luke mentions in his Gospel as ‘waiting for the kingdom of God’ or ‘the consolation of Israel’,<sup>7</sup> and like the Emmaus couple who ‘had hoped that he [Jesus] was the one who was going to redeem Israel’,<sup>8</sup> but had become disillusioned because of the cross. The

<sup>6</sup> In the exposition of these verses I am following what may justly be termed the ‘reformed’ perspective, namely that the New Testament authors understood the Old Testament prophecies concerning the seed of Abraham, the promised land and the kingdom as having been fulfilled in Christ. Although Paul does predict a widespread turning of Jews to Christ before the end ([Rom. 11:25ff.](#)), he does not link it with the land. Indeed, the New Testament contains no clear promise of a Jewish return to the land. I fully recognize that the ‘dispensational’ view is different. It holds that the Old Testament promises relating to the Jewish occupation of the land will be (in fact, are already being) fulfilled literally, and that in the New Testament this is indicated by [Mark 13:28ff.](#) (the blossoming of the fig tree, symbolizing Israel) and [Luke 21:24](#) (the trampling of Jerusalem by the Gentiles ‘until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled’, implying that after this period Jerusalem will be rebuilt). In the dispensational view, therefore, the apostles were correct to ask about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, for it will one day be fully restored to them (probably during a literal millennial reign of Christ on earth). In this case, what Jesus rebuked them for was not their expectation of a national kingdom but only their desire to know ‘times and dates’, together perhaps with their consequent lack of concern for world mission.

<sup>7</sup> [Lk. 23:51](#); cf. [2:25](#), [38](#).

apostles' hope, however, had evidently been rekindled by the resurrection. They were still dreaming of political dominion, of the re-establishment of the monarchy, of Israel's liberation from the colonial yoke of Rome <sup>8</sup>.

In his reply Jesus reverted to the topic of the Holy Spirit. He spoke of the Spirit coming upon them and giving them power to be his witnesses (8). In Charles Williams' notable words, he departed 'scattering promises of power'.<sup>9</sup> It is important to remember that his promise that they would receive power was part of his reply to their question about the kingdom. For the exercise of power is inherent in the concept of a kingdom. But power in God's kingdom is different from power in human kingdoms. The reference to the Holy Spirit defines its nature. The kingdom of God is his rule set up in the lives of his people by the Holy Spirit. It is spread by witness, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms, political intrigue or revolutionary violence. <sup>8</sup> At the same time, in rejecting the politicizing of the kingdom, we must beware of the opposite extreme of super-spiritualizing it, as if God's rule operates only in heaven and not on earth <sup>8</sup>. The fact is that, although it must not be identified with any political ideology or programme, it has radical political and social implications. Kingdom values come into collision with secular values. <sup>8</sup> And the citizens of God's kingdom steadfastly deny to Caesar the supreme loyalty for which he hungers, but which they insist on giving to Jesus alone.

### *b. The kingdom of God is international in its membership*

The apostles still cherished narrow, nationalistic aspirations. They asked Jesus if he was about to restore to Israel her national independence, which the Maccabees had regained in <sup>1</sup>the second century BC for a brief intoxicating period, only to lose it again.

In his reply Jesus broadened their horizons. He promised that the Holy Spirit would empower them to be his witnesses. They would begin indeed in Jerusalem, the national capital in which he had been condemned and crucified, and which they were not to leave before the Spirit came. They would continue in the immediate environs of Judea. But then the Christian mission would radiate out from that centre, in accordance with

<sup>8</sup> Lk. 24:21.

<sup>9</sup> *He Came Down From Heaven* by Charles Williams (1938; Eerdmans, 1984), p. 82.

the ancient prophecy that ‘the law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem’,<sup>10</sup> first to despised Samaria, and then far beyond Palestine to the Gentile nations, indeed *to the ends of the earth*. The thesis of Johannes Blauw in his book *The Missionary Nature of the Church* is that the Old Testament perspective was one of concern for the nations (God made them, and they will come and bow down to him), but not of mission to the nations (going out to win them). Even the Old Testament vision of the latter days is of a ‘pilgrimage of the nations’ to Mount Zion: ‘all nations will stream to it.’<sup>11</sup> Only in the New Testament, Blauw adds, is a ‘centripetal missionary consciousness’ replaced by a ‘centrifugal missionary activity’, and ‘the great turning-point is the Resurrection, after which Jesus receives universal authority and gives his people a universal commission to go and disciple the nations’.<sup>12</sup>

The risen Lord’s mandate to mission begins to be fulfilled in the Acts. Indeed, as many commentators have pointed out, Acts 1:8 is a kind of ‘Table of Contents’ for the book. Chapters 1–7 describe events in Jerusalem, chapter 8 mentions the scattering of the disciples ‘throughout Judea and Samaria’ (8:1), and goes on to record the evangelization of a Samaritan city by Philip (8:5–24) and of ‘many Samaritan villages’ by the apostles Peter and John (8:25), while the conversion of Saul in chapter 9 leads on in the rest of the book to his missionary expeditions, and finally to his journey to Rome. For Christ’s kingdom, while not incompatible with patriotism, tolerates no narrow nationalisms. He rules over an international community in which race, nation, rank and sex are no barriers to fellowship. And when his kingdom is consummated at the end, the countless redeemed company will be seen to be drawn ‘from every nation, tribe, people and language’.<sup>13</sup>

### *c. The kingdom of God is gradual in its expansion*

The apostles’ question included a specific reference to time: ‘Lord, are you *at this time*

<sup>10</sup> Is. 2:3 = Mi. 4:2.

<sup>11</sup> Is. 2:2–3.

<sup>12</sup> *The Missionary Nature of the Church* by Johannes Blauw (1962; Eerdmans 1974), especially pp. 34, 54, 66, 83–84.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. 7:9.

going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’ (1:6). Or (NEB) ‘is this the time when you are to establish once again the sovereignty of Israel?’ This had been the expectation of many during Jesus’ public ministry, as Luke makes clear in his Gospel. He records a parable which (he explains) Jesus told ‘because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once’.<sup>14</sup> So the apostles asked if Jesus would do now after his resurrection what they had hoped he would do in his lifetime; and would he do it immediately?

The Lord’s reply was twofold. First, *it is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority* (7). ‘Times’ (*chronoi*) or ‘dates’ (*kairoi*) together make up God’s plan, ‘the *times* or critical moments of its history and the *seasons* or epochs of its orderly development’.<sup>15</sup> The apostles’ question betrayed either curiosity or impatience or both. For the Father himself had fixed the times by his own authority, and the Son had confessed that he did not know the day and hour of his return (*parousia*).<sup>16</sup> So they must curb their inquisitiveness and be willing to be left in ignorance. It is not only in relation to the fulfilment of prophecy, but to many other undisclosed truths as well, that Jesus still says to us ‘it is not for you to know’. The ‘secret things’ belong to God, and we should not pry into them; it is the ‘revealed things’ which belong to us, and with these we should rest content.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, although they were not to know the times or dates, what they should know was that they would receive power so that, between the Spirit’s coming and the Son’s coming again, they were to be his witnesses in ever-widening circles . In fact, the whole interim period between Pentecost and the Parousia (however long or short) is to be filled with the world-wide mission of the church in the power of the Spirit. Christ’s followers were both to announce what he had achieved at his first coming and to summon people to repent and believe in preparation for his second coming. They were to be his witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth’ (1:8) and ‘to the very end of the age’.<sup>18</sup> This was a major theme of Bishop Lesslie New-bigin in his book *The Household of God*:

<sup>14</sup> Lk. 19:11.

<sup>15</sup> Rackham, p. 7. Cf. also Conzelmann’s *The Theology of St Luke*.

<sup>16</sup> Mk. 13:32.

<sup>17</sup> Dt. 29:29.

<sup>18</sup> Mt. 28:20.

The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move—hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one.... It cannot be understood rightly except in a perspective which is at once missionary and eschatological.<sup>19</sup>

We have no liberty to stop until both ends have been reached. Indeed the two ends, [Jesus](#) taught, would coincide, since only when the gospel of the kingdom has been preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, only then ‘will the end come’.<sup>20</sup>

So this was the substance of the Lord’s teaching (as we know also from the Gospels) during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension: when the spirit came in power, the long promised reign of God, which [Jesus](#) had himself inaugurated and proclaimed, would begin to spread. It would be spiritual in its character (transforming the lives and values of its citizens), international in its membership (including Gentiles as well as Jews) and gradual in its expansion (beginning at once in Jerusalem, and then growing until it reaches the end of both time and earthly space). This vision and commission must have given clear direction to the disciples’ prayers during their ten days of waiting for Pentecost. But before the Spirit could come, the Son must go. This is Luke’s next topic.

<sup>19</sup> *The Household of God* by Lesslie Newbigin (SCM, 1953), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> [Mt. 24:14](#); cf. [Mk. 13:10](#).