

## **“WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?”: A PENTECOSTAL HEARING OF ACTS 2**

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“PENTECOST HAS COME” was the front page headline for the inaugural issue of *The Apostolic Faith*, the newspaper published at the Azusa Street Mission by African American pastor William J. Seymour. The Azusa Street revival included extraordinary expressions of worship and witness, such as glossolalia, miracles, dreams, visions, healings, prophecies. Many people questioned the validity of these experiences—opponents labeled the revival as fanatical at best and demonic at worst. Sympathizers were curious, but they were also puzzled about the meaning and significance of the manifestations. Seymour’s paper was an attempt to defend the revival against its critics, to encourage the faithful, and to articulate for the inquisitive the meaning of the miraculous events. Seymour concluded on the basis of Acts 2 that Los Angeles was experiencing a last days’ outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was meant to restore Apostolic Christianity to the world.

Seymour and other Pentecostals observed in Acts 2 a parallel to their own experience. The disciples of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in all kinds of tongues. The Jewish pilgrims who were in Jerusalem for the annual feast of Pentecost were astonished at this unexpected behavior. It was not a part of the usual Pentecost ritual; rather, it was something new and different. Many in the crowd, made uncomfortable by the disciples’ vigorous praise of God, scoffed at them and accused them of debauchery. They said condemningly, “These people are drunk.” Others were curious and asked, “What does this mean?” Peter stood forth and offered an answer to the question. Citing the prophet Joel, he declared that the unusual events signaled God’s intent to pour out his Spirit upon all people. Furthermore, this Holy Spirit was flowing from Jesus Christ, whose crucifixion and resurrection ushered in the day of salvation.

Following the lead of Peter and of early Pentecostals, I would offer at least five answers to the question, “What does this mean?” First, the events of Pentecost mean that God is faithfully fulfilling his promises. Through the prophet Joel, God had promised that in the last days he would pour out his Spirit “upon all people” bringing charismatic gifts

and activities such as prophecy, dreams, and visions to “sons and daughters”, to young and old, and even to the poor and marginalized. The promises of Joel are echoed by John the Baptist who, in reference to Jesus, declares, “He shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 3:11). Jesus himself assures his disciples saying, “I will pray the Father, and he shall send you” the Holy Spirit (John 14:15). Then, just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus instructed them, “wait in the city of Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from heaven” (Luke 24:49). Therefore, in answer to the question, “What does this mean?”, Peter responds, “This is that which Joel predicted and which Jesus promised.” Peter insists further, “This promise is for all of you, for your children, and even to everyone who is far away” (Acts 2:39). Consequently, Pentecostals understand that we are living in the last days, that God is now faithfully fulfilling his purposes, and that Jesus Christ continues to pour out his Spirit upon believers everywhere.

Second, the events of Pentecost signify that Jesus Christ is alive, that he is active in the world, and that he has been exalted as Lord over all. Everyone in Jerusalem knew that Jesus had been crucified and buried, but only a few had knowledge of the resurrection. On the basis of the Spirit’s outpouring, Peter argues that Jesus is alive: “God has raised up Jesus, of which we are witnesses ... therefore being exalted by the right hand of God, he has poured forth this which you see and hear” (i.e., the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:32-33). According to Peter, the Holy Spirit has come on behalf of the Lord Jesus to empower and guide the Church’s witness to the world. The ministry of Jesus and the Kingdom of God would not cease, but it would continue through the Spirit empowered ministry of the Church.

Third, God’s outpouring of his Spirit means that he is offering his love and grace to all the world. Another section of Joel’s prophecy that Peter cited promises, “And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). Peter extended the offer of salvation to his listeners saying, “Repent and be baptised ... and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). This Pentecostal version of salvation declares that God’s power is available and sufficient to deliver from any power that binds or oppresses. In most cases, salvation is a spiritual work, and those who repent will be delivered from the power and corruption of sin. Salvation can also mean deliverance from the power of drugs, alcohol, and other life-controlling substances and addictions. In still other

contexts salvation might mean liberation from political and social oppression.

Fourth, the events of Pentecost mean that God continues to work in new, exciting, and surprising ways. The Church can at times appear to be fossilized, predictable, and powerless. In such times we may attempt to produce vitality and spectacle through our own ingenuity and creativity, but in Acts 2, the spectacle was of divine origin—"there came a noise from heaven like a rushing mighty wind" and "there appeared tongues like fire." These heavenly signs were demonstrations of God's visitation with inbreaking, transforming power. On the Day of Pentecost the onlookers were "amazed and perplexed" (Acts 2:12). Like those spectators, we do not enjoy uncertainty and ambiguity. It seems that the Church has now excluded any manifestations of God's presence that might result in amazement and perplexity. We are unsure how we should evaluate and respond to the signs that accompany God's visitation. God, however, desires to visit us in surprising ways; we must not attempt to confine him in our theological box. Only when we entertain him in new ways, will we be able to recognize his contemporary presence and relevance. We must overcome any overreliance upon the familiar, the traditional, the certain, the ritualistic, and the predictable. We must invite and welcome divine interventions, prophecies, healings, miracles, and other manifestations of God's presence. For Pentecostals, this means that we should expect to be filled with the Holy Spirit just as the Apostles were filled on the Day of Pentecost, and we should expect the same kinds of miraculous manifestations that occurred in the book of Acts. We pray for the sick with the expectation that God will heal them. We anticipate that our worship services will include utterances of tongues and prophecies from clergy and laity alike. We assume that, at any time, God may speak directly to us through a dream or a vision. As God pours out his Spirit, he continues to show himself to be the God of the present.

Fifth and finally, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit transforms Jesus' followers into a community of prophets that bears witness to the gospel. On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit filled believers "spoke in other tongues" (2:4) and proclaimed "the wonderful works of God" (2:11). The prophetic gift is not confined to select individuals; it is for "all people". It is not limited to certain categories of leaders or to particular classes of people. Joel foresaw the day when men and women of all ages and all social groups would prophesy (Acts 2:17-18).

It is Jesus' own prophetic ministry of "miracles, wonders, and signs" (Acts 2:22) that serves as the paradigm for his Spirit filled Church.

In sum, when Joel speaks of new voices and new visions, he anticipates neither the perpetual rote repetition of the old voices nor the nostalgic recitation of old visions; instead, he announces the eruption of new voices and new visions—sons and daughters will prophesy; new dreams and visions will break the old wineskins; and those on the margins will find themselves at the center of God's exploits, as he again brings salvation. The new voices and new visions seek to refresh and reshape the ancient theologies and usher them into new contexts. The universal and indispensable Pentecostal testimony is that God never ceases to be intensely active; that is, he continues to speak and work through and among his people for the sake of his kingdom in the world. From Azusa Street until now, Pentecostals everywhere have insisted upon the present reality of God's presence to save, sanctify, fill with the Holy Spirit, heal, and reign as coming king.