

Pentecost did not begin as a Christian holiday. It was a Jewish holiday. In fact, to the Jews it was a double celebration. It was a celebration of God giving them the 10 Commandments. And it was an early harvest festival, giving thanks for the beginning of the wheat harvest.

If you were a good Jew, and you lived within a day’s travel of Jerusalem, you were required to be at the Temple in Jerusalem for Pentecost. If you lived further out, you were highly encouraged to come, if at all possible.

Even those Jews who lived really far away, in Greece, or in Italy, or in Libya, or in Spain, would often try to make their trips to the Temple at Pentecost. In fact, since travel on the Mediterranean was a bit dicey from September through March, Jews living throughout the Roman Empire usually couldn't make it to Jerusalem for the fall festivals nor for Passover. But Pentecost was the one holiday that fell during a convenient time for sea travel. Thus even though Pentecost was not the biggest Jewish holiday, it was the one that people from far away could easily attend. That made Pentecost something of an annual Jewish homecoming. That meant that there were always lots of Jewish pilgrims from around the Roman Empire in Jerusalem on that day.

Jesus’ disciples, being good Jews themselves, were also in Jerusalem for Pentecost. The story is found in Acts ch2 (bulletins). Remember the timeline. 50 days before Pentecost, Jesus rose from the dead. 10 days before Pentecost, Jesus ascended into heaven.

The last thing Jesus did was to tell his disciples to go out, to be his witnesses to the whole earth. And then, for 10 days, the disciples were in limbo. They’d been told that they have a job to do. They’d been told to take the Good News to all peoples and nations. But they’re really not sure how to do it.

And then, the miracle of Pentecost comes. Actually there were several miracles at Pentecost. There were some minor miracles. And there was one big huge miracle. And the big one may not be what you think it is.

The first miracle is a rather strange sound and light show. Acts ch2 v1. All of the disciples are together, apparently in one house in Jerusalem. v2 All of a sudden, there’s an enormous sound. It’s rather mysterious. It’s not wind. But it sounds like wind. v3 There are also mysterious lights. They’re not fire. But they’re like fire. And not only that, the light is described as being divided into “tongues.”

Now, in English, the word “tongue” can have 3 different meanings. By coincidence, in Greek, their word “glossa” has the same 3 meanings. It can mean your tongue in your mouth. It can mean something shaped like a tongue, like the tongue on your shoe. Or it can mean a language.

What Luke is telling us is that there were tongue-like shapes of fire-like light that rested on each of the disciples, accompanied by a loud wind-like sound. That’s a pretty nifty miracle. But that isn’t the big miracle of Pentecost.

In v4, we're told that the Holy Spirit came upon them. And they began to speak in other languages. Literally, we're told they're speaking in other tongues. Luke is being playful with his words here. In Greek, as in English, tongue shaped lights are resting on the disciples and causing the tongues in their mouths to speak in other tongues, other languages.

These are not mysterious languages. This is not, “speaking in tongues” as Paul talks about elsewhere. This is a gift of being able to speak in different earthly languages. This becomes apparent in the next section.

At some point, though Luke doesn't tell us when, the disciples apparently leave the house and go out into the street. v5, we're told that there were Jews from every nation under heaven in Jerusalem. That doesn't mean that there were people from China or Aztecs from Mexico. That means that there were Jews there from every nation within the Roman empire.

v6 At this sound, which is the sound of the disciples speaking in other languages, a crowd gathers. They are amazed because they hear all of the various languages of the Roman empire being spoken by this group of Galileans.

And we get the tongue twisting laundry list in v9. Parthians, Medes, Elamites; Mesopotamians and Cappadocians, and on and on it goes. All of them were able to hear the disciples speaking in their native languages. This is also a very nifty miracle. But it's still not the big miracle of Pentecost.

Now don't get me wrong. These other two miracles are great. The disciples are given a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit while they're in the house. That's great. Then they're given a really valuable tool for communicating with people from other nations. That's great too. The Holy Spirit is with them. The Holy Spirit has given them gifts for ministry. But the big miracle is what happens next.

v14 "Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them." Peter talks loud, and talks to the crowd. And the other 11 disciples are standing with him. That's the big miracle of Pentecost.

Don't forget who these guys were. 7 weeks earlier, what were Peter and the others doing? Well, all of them turned tail and scattered when Jesus was arrested. But now they're sticking together as a group. 7 weeks earlier they were hiding out in a room with locked doors because they were afraid of being arrested. Now they're boldly standing out in public.

And Peter. Don't forget about Peter. 7 weeks earlier he denied even knowing Jesus. Peter wouldn't even admit that he knew Jesus to a little servant girl in the middle of the night. But now, in broad daylight, in front of a large crowd, he's preaching all about Jesus. He's standing up publicly and delivering the first Christian Sermon. That's an enormous turn-around. That's an amazing miracle.

The content of Peter’s sermon is good. Luke gives us a summary of it. v15 He answers the scoffers who say that they all must be drunk by reminding them that it’s only 9 in the morning. Even rough Galilean fishermen don’t drink that early. No, it’s the Spirit of God. And v17, he quotes from the prophet Joel:

God says, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit.”

In other’s words, God’s Holy Spirit is a gift for everyone, young and old, male and female, slave and free, it doesn’t matter.

And then he goes on past our reading today. He talks about Jesus. Peter who had denied even know Jesus is now publicly proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah and Lord. And as a result of this sermon, we’re told that about 3,000 new Christians were baptized that day.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter and the other 11 disciples are no longer afraid. Now, on the day of Pentecost, they’re no longer lost. They know what they’re supposed to do, and they do it. They begin to live into Jesus’ last words to them: “You are my witnesses.”

The Disciples truly become Apostles. Disciples follow a teacher. Apostles go forth, carrying a message. The Holy Spirit has empowered them to take the Good News of Jesus Christ out into the city of Jerusalem, and then out into the world.

We also have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. What do we do with it?

We might be tempted to keep it all private. We might keep God in our hearts. Or we might like to confine God to the church. But that’s not the pattern in the 2nd chapter of Acts. The Spirit is poured upon the apostles in a house. But they spill into the streets. They carry the message out to the entire city, and later to the entire country, and later, to the entire world. That’s what we’re called to do as well.

And what about the gifts God gives us? We might be tempted to say, “Thank you very much,” but then not do anything with them. But that’s not the pattern of the 2nd chapter of Acts. Gifts are meant to be used. Equipping is done with the intent of the equippee using the equipment given by the equipper. If it’s not used, it doesn’t do any good.

You’ve probably all seen James Bond movies. Imagine how boring a James Bond movie would be if James Bond never paid a visit to Q. Q is the man who provides James Bond with all of those wonderful high tech gadgets that he’ll need to carry out his mission. Without the powerful equipment provided by Q, James Bond’s missions would have been killed off a long time ago.

But it's also a requirement that James Bond actually use the equipment. If he doesn't, it doesn't do him any good. In fact, everything that Q gives him at the beginning of the movie, James Bond uses by the end of the movie.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit equips us with gifts. But they're gifts with a purpose. We are called to use them for ministry. In Acts, chapter 2, the Holy Spirit gave the Disciples the power, and equipping, and boldness. But the book doesn't stop there. And the other 26 chapters of Acts tells us how as Apostles carried out that mission, how they carried the Good News to all the Roman empire.

In fact, the title of the book is a good reminder to us about the Holy Spirit. The book is called, “The Acts of the Apostles.” It's not called “The Warm Fuzzy Internal Feelings of the Apostles.” It's not called “The Book of the Gifts Given to the Apostles.” It's not called, “The Wonderful Theologically Correct Faith of the Apostles.” It's called ACTS. The Holy Spirit empowers. The Apostles act.

The Holy Spirit comes so that we may be equipped to carry on the mission for which our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to give up his life.

The Spirit has given us, the members of the church, the gifts and power we need to continue the mission for which the apostles were willing to give up their lives.

We are called to proclaim the good news of God in Christ. We are called to be agents of his power and love in the world. We are called to bring the whole world from the darkness of sin and death into eternal life and light. That was vitally important in Jerusalem in 29 a.d. It is just as important in Lubbock, Texas, in 2010 a.d.

The power of Pentecost, past and present, is power to carry out our orders, to be God's witnesses, to the ends of the earth.

Come Holy Spirit. Fill our hearts. Empower us with your gifts. And give us boldness, that we may share your love with all we meet. Come Holy Spirit, come.