

Pentecost

Acts 2:1-13

It's often said that the book which we usually refer to as the 'Acts of the Apostles' should really be called the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit.' At the start of Acts 2 we find the disciples waiting behind closed doors. By the end of the chapter, following Peter's remarkable sermon and the conversion of three thousand new believers, we find a description of a church characterized by a commitment to the teaching of the apostles, unity and regular signs and wonders. 'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved' (2:47).

The coming of the Holy Spirit is not a low-key event. We are told here of the blowing of a violent wind and the descent of 'what seemed to be tongues of fire.' Tom Wright reminds us that these are 'wild, untameable forces,' an important point to bear in mind for those of us who might be tempted to think of the Spirit as a being we can take for granted or whose actions we can safely predict. Wright goes on to describe the transformative impact on the early church of what happened at Pentecost:

'Luke clearly intends to describe something new, something that launched a great movement, as a fleet of ships is launched by the strong wind that drives them out to sea or a forest fire is started by a few small flames. He intends to explain how it was that a small group of frightened, puzzled and largely uneducated men and women could so quickly become, as they undoubtedly did, a force to be reckoned with right across the known world.'¹

It's also telling that one of the first impacts of the coming of the Spirit is a greater understanding of each other on the part of the many 'God-fearing Jews' who had gathered in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Festival of Weeks. Comparisons have frequently been made between the way these people can now listen to one another in their own language and the confusion which came upon the builders of Babel who were punished by God because of their attempt to 'build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves' (Genesis 11:4). The curse of Babel, division and confusion between people who can no longer understand each other, is reversed at last on the day of the birth of the church, the new community centred on Jesus.

The significance of Pentecost in the saving purposes of God is described eloquently by the American theologian Clark Pinnock:

'After the resurrection, God's kingdom, which had begun to manifest itself in Jesus himself, would continue to transform the world through the community of empowered disciples. The church is an extension not so much of the incarnation as of the anointing of Jesus. Jesus is the prototype of the church, which now receives its own baptism in the Spirit. Spirit, who maintained Jesus' relationship with the Father and

¹ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone Part 1*, 2008, 23

empowered him for mission, now calls the church into that relationship, giving it the power to carry on the mission.²

For discussion

1. Clark Pinnock once complained that, 'At times the Spirit can sound like an appendage to the doctrine of God and a shadowy, ghostly, poor relation of the Trinity. In the church year the celebration of Pentecost hardly compares to the observance of Christmas and Easter.'³ Do you agree? If so, why do you think this is the case?
2. The powerful signs which accompanied the coming of the Spirit are probably unfamiliar to most of us. What do these remarkable events teach us about the way the Spirit can work through the church today?
3. How much significance should we attach to the fact that one of the first acts of the Spirit was to help different kinds of people to understand each other more? What can this teach us about the work the Spirit may want to do among us in SBC?
4. The signs and wonders of this first Pentecost day seem remarkable to us, but verse 13 reminds us that some of those looking on laughed. What are we to make of this reaction by some of the crowd and how does it help us make sense of how some people continue to react to how God is at work in his church today?
5. After this week's reading, the story continues in verse 14: 'Peter stood up... raised his voice and addressed the crowd.' What does this event teach us about the role of the Spirit in our witness?

² Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 1996, 114

³ Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 1996, 10