

What is Pentecost? based on Acts 2:1-21

Today Christians are celebrating Pentecost. Well, at least they know the church calendar says today is Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost is one of those Christian holidays.

We know that Christmas is about the birth of the Christ. Good Friday is about Christ's Crucifixion. Easter is about Christ's resurrection. But what exactly is Pentecost?

The answers vary. Some say that it's the birthday of the Church (but the Church didn't really form until much later). Others say that it's the arrival of the Holy Spirit (but wasn't the Holy Spirit present before Pentecost?) Still others say that Pentecost is Christ's second coming (well, at least in terms of the arrival of the Spirit of Christ).

All of these answers as to what Pentecost is, and I am sure there are others, have something theologically important to say about Pentecost. Because the explanations of Pentecost are so different, one could say that Pentecost is one of those complicated holidays that can't really be explained with one simple word or phrase.

Today, I plan to highlight one of the most important aspects of Pentecost. I don't intend to complicate things even more, but want you to consider what I believe is a central truth of the Pentecost message:

Pentecost is about overcoming prejudices in the Name of Christ.

The Book of Acts gives us an account of the history of the early Church. It starts with an account of the Ascension of Christ, a promise about the return of Christ's Spirit. Christ reportedly said to his disciples: ***"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*** Acts 1:8

In chapter 2 the narrative quickly moves into the realization of this promise of Christ's gift, the outpouring of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ. On the day of Pentecost the disciples were having a gathering and suddenly they had a strange, weird, unusual collective experience. It has been explained as it was like tongues of fire were coming out of the disciples' heads. It has been described as a new spirit of joy, enthusiasm, and fire

within the disciples. Whatever they experienced, it empowered them, gave them courage to step out of the confines of their gathering place into the streets of Jerusalem. And it gave them new and powerful communication skills. The metaphor of speaking in other tongues, certainly expresses that they found new and powerful ways in which to communicate the good news of Christ. So much so that suddenly people in the streets got it. So much so that many of them became instant followers of Christ.

So, what was so attractive about the disciples' enthusiastic message?

The extraordinary and unexpected momentum of the young Christian movement prompted the early disciples to recognize a connection between what they saw happening and the words of the prophet Joel...***"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all people, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."*** (Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2:17)

The phrase "in the last days" was clearly understood by the disciples to be a new and final era in which God's spiritual graces were available to all people. They were no longer limited to the priests or religious leaders. They were available to all people, men, women, young and old. This new move of the Spirit re-defined God's community. The religious system of first-century Judea was a top-down hierarchical and patriarchal system. Men were viewed as lords over women, children were considered property of their fathers, ethnic Jews had little opportunities. Mostly it was men residing in Judea who were able to become rabbis, leaders and priests.

Pentecost turned the understanding of this political and patriarchal organized system on its head and gave us a grassroots movement in which people of all colors, ethnicities, genders and ages have equal access to God's grace and power, and where all are included in the community of Christ. All are equal in the eyes of God regarding standing and opportunities.

The Pentecost message stands for the breaking down of conventional wisdom and prejudices. It was a message that empowered the people. It initiates the concept of the priesthood of all believers. It revealed the meaning of the torn temple veil that separated the sanctuary from the holy of holies. The Pentecost message was a continuing realization of Christ's

work toward eliminating prejudice among us-- of all the isms: racism, ethnicism, sexism, and ageism.

The story in Acts chapter 2 is just the beginning of the Pentecost spirit. The narrative that follows in chapters 3 and following chapters shows how more and more barriers were eliminated by the young church in the name of Christ. The young church learned to draw the circle of God's grace wider and wider to include more and more of God's beloved children.

Remember the setting of the original Pentecost as told in Acts 2: Jews from literally around the known world are gathered together to celebrate the Festival of Weeks, the harvest festival falling seven weeks after Passover. They spoke different languages, had different customs, brought varied experiences and expectations, yet they are brought together through the preaching of the crucified Messiah.

And that adjective – “crucified” – is important. Luke’s story of the expansion of the early Church tends at points to focus mainly on the strengths, even glory, of the early Christian movement. So much so, in fact, that it’s easy for us to miss that the Jesus to whom they and we are bearing witness, was the one criticized because he included everyone; he was ridiculed because he took sides with the vulnerable rather than powerful; he was rejected because he was not what people were expecting in a Messiah, and was crucified in weakness and shame. And yet, this is the One through whom God redeemed the world by communicating the life-giving news that God’s love is large enough to include everyone and powerful enough to defeat death. The apparent boldness of the Apostles witness, therefore, should never be separated from the apparent weakness of the God who comes to suffer rather than wage war, and who returns sin with mercy rather than judgment. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. We find our unity not in acts of strength but primarily in our shared humanity, vulnerability, and need.

Acts 6: Following the stoning of Stephen, the gospel started to spread to many nations as the persecution of the Jesus followers caused people to leave Jerusalem and the middle East. Those early missionaries went to Egypt, Asia Minor, Europe, and even the Far East. The message of Christ as the Gospel spread well beyond the borders of Judea.

In Acts 8:26-40, we read about the baptism of the Eunuch. Eunuchs were banned from entering the temple proper, they were only allowed to worship in the outer temple courts (according to Deuteronomy 23:1)

The evangelist Philip met this Jewish Eunuch who had worshiped at the temple in Jerusalem and was on his way back to Ethiopia. He was reading Isaiah 53, the Suffering Servant passage, and asked Philip to explain it to him. And Philip, I'm sure, shared with the Eunuch that this man of public humiliation, this suffering servant, is a prophetic word about Jesus, who lived and taught that all people are of sacred worth, that nobody is rejected by God, that God loves all God's children. He surely explained how Jesus healed the lepers, invited the outcasts and embraced the unloved. He must have shared details of his death and resurrection and this new movement Jesus started. God, through Jesus, was ushering in the reality of that hope and salvation was for all who are excluded, forsaken, forgotten, and marginalized.

Philip told him that through the waters of baptism, that he would be accepted and included for the person he was. He was going to become a full member of the body of Christ. No more exclusion, no more ridicule, no more discrimination. And Philip baptized the Eunuch and, it says in Verse 40, **"He [the Eunuch] went on his way rejoicing."** The young Church had eliminated another barrier in the name of Christ.

In Acts 10:9-23 we read about Peter's Vision and subsequent experience of Gentile Christians. There were two very distinctive cultural and spiritual features about Judaism: circumcision and the kosher food laws. These cultural and spiritual features set Jewish believers apart. God spoke to Peter in a vision challenging this very concept in Peter's thinking, a premise which must have gone against his understanding of what is holy and unholy. But the vision is not ultimately what changed Peter. It was seeing how the holy spirit had filled the Gentile Cornelius and his family that did it.

The result was that Peter goes back to Jerusalem, convenes a counsel and after much deliberation, the Gentile believers are accepted as fellow Christians and children of God, without circumcision and kosher food laws. Peter experienced a transformation and was able, along with Paul, to report to the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and to share their experiences among the Gentile Christians. Their witness was that God's spirit was manifest in Gentiles as much as it was in any Jewish-Christian community. And the Council decided to include Gentile believers in the Church without expecting

them to convert to Judaism. Another barrier was eliminated in the name of Christ.

And that gives hope to all of us. So, here you have it...

Pentecost is about overcoming prejudices in the Name of Christ.

Pentecost is about Breaking Down Walls in the Name of Christ.

There is a tremendous human tendency to want to know God. This is a good and wonderful thing, and it helps us improve our lives. It calls us into a relationship with God and helps us change. But the problem is, we want to define God our way. We become so sure we have the key, that we start pretending we are the gatekeepers, deciding who gets in and who does not.

"A man dies and goes to heaven. St. Peter greets him at the door, and to help him get adjusted, takes him on a tour. After showing him the golden streets, angelic hosts, and the tree of life, they come upon a closed off area. Singing and shouting can be heard coming from inside. "What's this?" asks the man. "Shhh. I'll show you," says Peter, "but you have to keep quiet." Peter cracks the door and the new arrival peeks inside. A large group of people are singing hymns and praising God to their hearts content. They're having a wonderful time. "Who are they?" asks the man. "Those are the (you pick a denomination)," says Peter. "They think they're the only ones up here."

Let's take a minute to review some of the basic things we know about God:

God created the world. Somehow we blew it, and wound up with a world with a lot of problems – you can take the Adam and Eve story literally if you like, or see it as a metaphor for something we don't quite understand. But somehow, we blew it.

God worked through prophets for thousands of years, trying to get through to us. And in some ways, he did. We understood the ten commandments and tried to live them. But we would fail again and again.

Finally, God joined us here on earth. Jesus came and taught us two main things: to love God and to love our neighbor. He preached parables and healed people. And he did the unthinkable: he allowed himself to be killed,

somehow wiping out the power of our sinfulness, and getting us right with God. This was a courageous act, and only a loving God could have done it.

Then, does it make sense that the same God who became human in the form of Jesus would say to us: "Oops, you don't quite get the incarnation – you're out?" I don't think so. Or maybe – "You're understanding of evil in the world is incomplete – you're out." Maybe – "You don't get salvation history, so there is no saving for you." This just doesn't sound much like God.

Now the tough question: what about people who can't quite wrap their minds around God or can't quite make the leap of faith to see Jesus as God. Are they out? Jesus said, "blessed are the poor in spirit." If they are blessed, are they kicked out of heaven? I doubt it. The whole sentence goes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I am asking all these questions, even though I am not sure of the answers. I can't conceive of a loving God kicking out our loved ones or anybody.

This surprising movement of the Holy Spirit continues to this very day. All of us are given a measure of the Spirit. I believe all of us are welcomed into the kingdom regardless of age, nationality, language, gender, ability, economic status, educational achievement, or any criteria, other than our willingness to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Our task, then, is to accept that gift of the Spirit that is given to us. It is not our job to decide who else is "worthy" of receiving the same gift. God will pour out God's Spirit on whomever God chooses. And I for one don't dare to stand in the way of the movement of that Spirit.

The spirit of Pentecost wants us to tear down the walls that society has built, the political, social, economic, religious, racial, ethnic, and sexist walls.

Christ has broken down the walls to include all God's beloved children. All are welcome, all are accepted, all are included. Happy Pentecost!

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