

Pentecostal Wind and Fire

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God loves visual aids! Although I have used them extensively in my preaching for very many years, especially, but not exclusively, with young people, I have only recently come to realize that the idea was not mine, not even just human, but is God's. When Jesus came to this world and tried to communicate spiritual truth, he frequently used objects to illustrate what would otherwise be quite difficult to understand. He did not speak, at least to the crowds, in the direct way that he did to his disciples, but spoke only in parables (Mark 4: 34). Taking things that were familiar to his hearers, he drew out spiritual truth in such a way that it was then highly memorable, so much so that many of his illustrations are still an integral part of modern western culture. Who is unaware of the idea of a 'Good Samaritan', or of a grain of mustard seed?

But we are not so aware that not only did Jesus use visual aids, but also in a sense he was himself a new visual aid. We are aware that he is the Son of God, but it does not take much thought to appreciate that he is a son in a way that does not correspond fully to what we understand by sonship. Indeed it was failing to realize that sonship must in a sense be a metaphor that led Arius astray in the fourth century. He wanted to apply every aspect of the figure to Jesus, and so naturally thought of him as having a temporal origin, and despite biblical indications to the contrary, such as John 5:18, believed that the second Person of the Trinity must be essentially less than the Father.

Analogy is essential

It is problems such as this which have led some, such as Carl Barth, to reject the use of analogy when speaking of God. His view is well known, that no form of natural

theology, deducted about God from nature, is valid, and so for him, scripture is the only valid source of theology. He even believes that mere illustration of revelation, in Augustine's *de Trinitate*, the classic attempt to suggest parallels to the Trinity in the world, the *vestigia Trinitatis*,¹ is wrong; all that is permissible is to interpret it.² His reason for this is that he believes that illustration is a short step from idolatry. Analogies are a hindrance which detract from revelation.³ He has nevertheless referred to creation as 'temporal analogue, taking place outside of God, of that event in God himself by which God is Father of the Son', so a 'created correspondence' to the Trinity.⁴

From a biblical perspective, 'his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made' (Rom. 1:20). Created things are not in any sense divine, but by their nature can indicate what God is like; smoke is not a fire, but shows what fire is like, as it is caused by fire.⁵ Similarly, by looking at the style of writing, it is possible for an expert to deduce a considerable amount of information about the writer. Signatures are used in this way; they are totally individual to the signatory.

The basic reason for the use of a phrase, such as *vestigia Trinitatis*, is, of course, to try to clarify what is very difficult to understand. It is a form of the model, or metaphor, but with more justification than simply an intellectual hypothesis. Such a phrase serves to illustrate the Trinity and perhaps also the incarnation,⁶ helping us to comprehend what are difficult concepts. But if useful here, it is also when speaking of the third Person of the Trinity that metaphor and the visual aid prove valuable.

He is the Holy Spirit, but what on earth, or even off it, do we understand by 'Spirit'? We are frequently driven to the use of negatives to try to say what we mean,

just as medieval theology, such as in Thomas Aquinas, tried to describe the essential being of God in terms such as 'incomprehensible', 'infinite', and so on. In the same way, we understand 'Spirit' as something that is essentially immaterial, and then struggle to understand what is meant by that, simply because all our experience is at least closely linked to the material. Even something as immaterial as thought can hardly be separated from the materials of the brain.

So particularly in the case of the Holy Spirit, we find that the Bible uses a multiplicity of metaphors to help us to understand what, or rather who, the Holy Spirit is. He is made visible by the dove who alighted on Jesus at his baptism. He is the 'paraclete', not that we are really helped that much by the use of the term! J. Moltmann is not alone when he uses a variety of imagery, mainly biblical, in reference to the Spirit.⁸

It is then not surprising that at Pentecost, just as at the baptism of Jesus, the descent of the Spirit was illustrated in a visual way. What is however perhaps initially surprising is that the illustration was not the same. We might well have expected that a dove would have come down and rested on the disciples. Of course this would have needed to be repeated several times, or possibly several doves might have descended. The illustration might well have been difficult, but would have been possible, but was not used. In this case, surely the fact that the imagery was different simply means that different truths were being communicated. In the case of Jesus' baptism, the dove would have communicated several aspects of what is meant for Jesus to be filled with the Spirit. It would perhaps have implied peace, as it does to us, but more probably it would have reminded the watchers of the story of Noah, and so of the imminence of salvation. It may well have implied an identification of Jesus with Israel; Knight⁹ has suggested that the dove was a common symbol for Israel in the Old Testament (e.g. Song of Songs 2:14). Little of this would have been really appropriate for the disciples on the day of Pentecost, so it is not surprising that a different illustration was used.

The point here is that the visualization of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost was not arbitrary, but that the choice of the pictures of wind and fire are deeply meaningful. There are not just embellishments invented by a later recounter of the events of the day; Luke did not invent the story¹⁰. Neither, at the opposite extreme, could anything else have been used to picture the descent of the Spirit; rather, the exact metaphors are intended to help us understand what happened on that day, and how the disciples were equipped for their later ministry by the Spirit. With Calvin, we can 'observe the analogy of the signs'.¹¹

The wind and fire are created things, pressed into service to communicate to us the nature of the Spirit; they are 'messengers' or angels, servants or ministers in this regard (Heb. 1:7, quoting Ps. 104:4). Indeed they commonly indicate the presence of God, such as Sinai, both at the giving of the Law (Ex. 19:16-8; 24:17), and

in the experience of Elijah (1 Ki. 19:9f). Arrington,¹² noting that the signs are comparable to those of Sinai, also draws the attention to the darkness and earthquake at Calvary. The dramatic vision of Ezekiel also incorporates both elements (Ezk. 1:4). What must be stressed is that they are analogies; the spirit is not either fire or wind, but is like them.¹³ The tongues were *like* fire, but not in fact fire.¹⁴

Both pictures are very appropriate as to some extent at least they reflect the immaterial nature of the Spirit. Both are of course gas, which is material, if diffuse, but neither can readily be captured, for as soon as the attempt is made, the wind stops being wind and becomes just air, and the fire will quickly lose its luminosity. As Calvin¹⁵ said, they well reflect the incomprehensible nature of the Spirit. Nevertheless, the 'resting' of the fire on the disciples indicates a permanent effect.¹⁶

At the same time, as Watson perceptively observes,¹⁷ the pictures are earthly. They speak of God's concern with this world, and with physical things, not only with the heavenly and spiritual. Both can then include the nuance of filling, which is frequently applied to the Spirit (e.g. Eph. 5:18). If they do get into a room, no part of it escapes for long; it is all affected. They can then overwhelm; Hull¹⁸ notes that the language of filling reminds the reader of Isaiah 6.

Thus both images can produce a sense of fear and awe, so also reflect the power of God. Certainly they inspire human response: cold can be a numbing experience, particularly in a biting cold wind, overcome by being beside a warm fire for a while, and a wind, especially a strong one, obviously also affects us; it is impossible to ignore, but demands our action. Every teacher knows that children become much more excitable on windy days.

At the very least, both light and wind draw attention to themselves. Especially when it is dark, even the smallest ray of light demands attention. A Christian will always be conspicuous, even if unwillingly. On the day of Pentecost, it was the sound of the wind that brought the crowds to see what was going on. Paul sees the same function in the Spirit-driven gift of tongues (1 Cor. 14:22).

Of course, as Barth was well aware, the danger is always of reading into the revelation, of adding ideas that were never intended. God has frequently taken that risk, and so perhaps it is justifiable for us to do the same as we seek to understand the events of the day of Pentecost more fully.

Wind

The illustration of the Spirit by wind, and to a lesser extent by breath, is very common and deeply meaningful, so much so that many languages, notably of course Hebrew and Greek, use one word for all three ideas.¹⁹ Indeed this is such a feature of the biblical nar-

rative that it is often hard to decide how the one word should be translated. Was it wind that was present at the creation (Gen. 1:2), was it spirit, or was it the Holy Spirit, giving an incipient trinitarianism right at the start of the Bible? Did Ezekiel prophesy to the wind, or to the Spirit (Ezk. 37:9)? Jesus even used the ambiguity when speaking with Nicodemus (Jn. 3:8). In both cases the theology of the translator is often the determinative factor. Then when Jesus breathed on the disciples (Jn. 20:22), was it another version of Pentecost, or perhaps better, a precursor of it, or just have to be understood to in terms of Genesis 2:7, with no necessary connection with the Spirit at all (though more probably a connection is intended, even if the word in Genesis is not the usual one for 'Spirit', *ruach*).

But why is there such a connection of ideas? Is it any more than that the wind is basically immaterial, largely unpredictable (even by modern meteorology!), and uncontrollable (more negatives)? On the contrary, wind or breath has several aspects that are deeply meaningful, not only for the disciples at Pentecost, but also for us.

a) Breathing is something that every one of us is doing all the time, and yet we are hardly aware of it; but if we stop, then we notice it very quickly. If we hold our breath, we can do so for only about a minute, and then we have to breathe again. If we are prevented from breathing, then very quickly we die. We cannot see our breath, except on cold days, but it is essential for life. So it is with the Holy Spirit; we cannot see him, but without him, we cannot be Christians, we cannot have a new life. The same is also true of wind to an extent. If a wind is blowing, we are perhaps unaware of it, but if it stops, we immediately notice its absence. If we work hard, walk fast or run, we find that we breathe faster. That helps us keep going. That is also what the Spirit does for us, aiding our effort, giving us the strength that we need.

b) It is always hard to walk against the wind, easy to go with it. The wind can even drive things along, like sailing ships, and we too can be driven and guided by the Spirit. Thus, like the wind, his power is beyond our control, but it is available to us.

c) If people do hold their breath, they are unable to speak, because speaking needs breath. The Spirit enables us to talk to God, and without his help, we are just making a noise. Of course, a dramatic aspect of the events of the day of Pentecost was the gift of languages,²³ enabling the language barrier to be overcome. It hardly needs to be noted that there is a play between the tongues of fire and the speaking in tongues.²⁴ It has often been observed that in a sense, Pentecost was a reversal of Babel.²⁵

d) We also need a lot of breath for something that we do a lot in church. We sing! In fact, without the movement of air, music is impossible, whether vocal or instrumental. Music can be an indication of the presence of God, like the trumpets at Sinai, or in the book of Revelation, or as a response to that presence. The

Spirit thus helps us to praise God; indeed without him, we cannot praise at all.

e) This highlights one thing that we like about music, and especially singing; the fact that we all do it together. That again is something that the spirit does, producing unity among Christians. Dunn²³ significantly observes that when the tongues sat on the disciples, the subject of 'sat' is singular, implying one fire. By ourselves we are so different, but with him we can be united. It is the presence of life, a gift of the Spirit, that holds an organism together. Once the spirit leaves, death occurs, and the organism disintegrates, losing its unity.

Fire

Fire is also an image sanctified by frequent biblical usage, although perhaps less definitely applied to the spirit. The revelation of God at the burning bush comes quickly to mind (Ex. 3:2), as does the pillar of fire in the Exodus wanderings, and even the appearance of Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:18).²⁴ This picture can also add meaning to the Pentecost event.

Flames have two related functions, both of which illustrate aspects of the work of the Spirit. On one hand, they provide light.

a) The most obvious use of light is for seeing, and closely related to this, understanding. It is only by the work of the Spirit that the full nature of the world can be seen (1 Cor. 2). He helps us to see what God is doing in the world. Likewise it is only by the illumination of the Spirit that the nature of righteousness, and so of sin and judgement (Jn. 16:8), are recognized. Closely related to this is that we use light to guide us. This can be actively, such as with a torch or car headlamps, or passively, as from a lighthouse. An example of the first is in Acts 13:2, and of the second in the inner moral guidance that the Spirit gives; he puts that law within us (Jer. 31:33).

b) Just as light can be used to warn us, like brake lights on a vehicle, so the Holy Spirit warns (e.g. Acts 21:11). For Christians, this is also one of the main functions of the Old Testament law.

On the other hand, flames also give heat, and again this aptly illustrates aspects of the work of the Spirit.

a) Heat softens and melts articles to which it is applied, enabling their shapes to be modified. It is a major function of the Spirit to act in the transformation of Christians, in his work of sanctification.

b) Melting has a particular function in welding, to join metal together. Augustine spoke of the Spirit as the *vinculum amoris*, the bond of love; he was particularly thinking of the bond between Father and Son in the Trinity, but the Spirit also bonds Christians to Jesus, as the common expression 'in Christ' shows. It is this bond to Jesus that enables our salvation, firstly so that we are united to him in his death and so are forgiven, and secondly as we are united to him in the resurrection and so

share his eternal life. Contrary to the generally accepted belief, originated in Greek anthropology, people are not immortal by nature (1 Tim. 6:16), but receive this only by union with Christ. It is also noteworthy that the widow's son was raised through Elijah by means of the close relationship he made with him (2 Ki. 4:34); of course all life, at least in higher organisms, is transmitted by means of an act of uniting.

c) Just as we use heat to cook our food so that it is more easily digested, so the Spirit helps us to understand and digest God's spiritual food, the Bible. Many testify to the way that the Bible becomes intelligible only through the illumination of the Spirit.

d) A particularly modern application of heat is in engines. Just as petrol burns to provide power for a vehicle to move, so the Spirit gives power for service.

Wind and fire

Finally, there are several aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit which are very well illustrated by aspects of both images, particularly as they are complementary. Fire is helped by wind, which gives it the oxygen that it needs; indeed, in a strong wind, a fire can be almost impossible to control. On the other hand, fire will generate wind, as it heats up the air, which then expands and rises. In a sense, fire is just a localised hot wind.

a) Together they readily reflect the lifegiving aspect of the Holy Spirit. If a person has a heart attack or drowns, and so is in imminent danger of death, the usual action is to make sure that oxygen enters his or her lungs, such as by mouth to mouth resuscitation. If the heart has stopped, that has to be restarted, either mechanically, somewhat like pushing a car to kick-start the system, or more relevantly here, because the heart is controlled electrically, by means of an electric shock, which is quite similar to a flame. Interestingly, in the practice of spiritual healing, the sensation of heat quite often accompanies the laying on of hands. Of course, the aspect of life giving is not only that of biological life, but pertains even more strongly to spiritual life. Hewitt²⁵ interestingly comments that the medieval representation of sanctity by a halo is not too farfetched.

b) Both also have a connotation of cleansing, which is a work of the Holy Spirit, both in the lives of Christians, and in a wider judgmental sense. It is not for nothing that he is called 'holy'. Many commentators (e.g. Blaiklock²⁶) refer to the picture of fire in this way, thinking of its use in metallurgy to burn up the dross, which is then blown off, freeing the metal from impurity. Thus Isaiah, in the Temple, had his lips touched with the burning coal (Is 6:7). In a vacuum cleaner it is the rush of air which sucks in the dirt. God used the wind in this way at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:8,10). Here perhaps the limitation of pictures is very apparent. As anyone who has cooked over an open fire will know; the pot becomes extremely dirty with soot! Wind also can do quite the opposite of cleansing, as

every gardener knows, seeing the leaves blown down onto the recently swept lawn! These examples illustrate the limitation of pictures, but do not negate their value.

c) Not only can wind and fire cleanse and purify, they can also destroy things completely.²⁷ Both can be completely devastating. The connotation is then of judgement, as in the words of John the Baptist (Lk. 3:16), who associated the Spirit with fire (also Heb. 12:29). Of course, things that are dry and lifeless are more readily burnt up than living material; for those with spiritual life, fire purifies, but does not consume (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12-5). Some of the severest words of Jesus were of the final punishment of the lost by fire.²⁸ The same is true also of wind, which is more likely to blow away things, such as leaves, than what is still alive.

Conclusion

How far are these pictures applicable to us? We do not expect to see the Spirit descending on us as a dove; the implications are not applicable to us as they were to Jesus. Neither do we expect the appearance of wind and fire, although the implications of those would certainly seem to be as necessary for the modern church as they were for the primitive. It does seem, however, that the presence of the Spirit is clear. Just as light, heat or wind are clear evidence of the power behind them, so the presence of the Spirit should be seen by its effects. It is perhaps a tragedy of much of the modern church that although the New Testament church was very much aware of the Spirit in an experiential sense, so much so that Paul could appeal to this as obvious (Gal. 3:2, cf. also Acts 19:2), so many today have to accept that he is present just by faith, with no other evidence.

But any necessary evidence that is claimed must then be subjected to the question of how applicable the implications of such phenomena are. If speaking in tongues is said to be a necessary accompaniment of the Spirit, it is valid to ask why. If the filling of the Spirit were always accompanied by collapsing on the floor, or by uncontrollable laughter, what would that say of the nature of the Spirit? Rather, the biblical evidence is seen in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), or perhaps, even better, in what is implied by wind and fire, things which should be immediately evident in the lives of God's people. The fire signified the coming of the Spirit on to the disciples, the wind their filling; what affected them was the Spirit himself, and he similarly affects other disciples. Aspects such as power were immediate in Peter's boldness, and are so today. The joy of the disciples was soon seen as was their sharing in unity (Acts 2:46). This should be true today. Visible elements of wind and fire may have been needed at Pentecost, at the birth of the church, but today, much of what they signified should be manifested through the action of Christians, in so far as they are Spirit-filled.²⁹

May the Spirit of wind and fire show more of himself in the modern church!

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Footnotes

1 Various examples of these have been suggested. For example, water emerges from a spring, flows through a river to a lake. One substance of water occurs in three ways. A tree is all wood, but is comprised of trunk, roots and branches. Perhaps less crudely, there are three states of matter in solid, liquid and gas, all having the same substance, and there are three dimensions of length, breadth and height. Such then serve to illustrate the nature of the Trinity.

2 Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics. vol 1(1): the doctrine of the word of God* (2nd ed. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), p. 345.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 347.

4 Barth, K., *Dogmatics in outline* (London: SCM, 1949), p. 52.

5 Merriell, in LaCugna, C. M. *God for us: the Trinity and Christian life*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 159.

6 Bozack, M. J., 'Physics in the theological seminary', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36(1) (1993), pp. 65-76.

7 The word is understood in such a multiplicity of ways, such as 'comforter' or 'advocate', that many translators are reduced to a simple transliteration of the word.

8 Moltmann, J., *The Spirit of life: a universal affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 268f.

9 Knight, G. A. F., *A Biblical approach to the doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953).

10 Witherington, B. III, *The Acts of the Apostles: a socio-rhetorical commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), p. 130.

11 Calvin, J., *The Acts of the Apostles. 1-13* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965), p. 50.

12 *The Acts of the Apostles: an introduction and commentary* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1988), p.21.

13 Witherington, *op.cit.*, p. 132.

14 Dunn, J. D. G., *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, Penn: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 25.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

16 Hull, J. H. E. *The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Lutterworth, 1967), pp. 58.

17 Watson, D. C. K., *One in the Spirit* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), p. 22.

18 Hull, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

19 The same is true in my local language, Xhosa, where *umoya* means both 'wind' and 'spirit'.

20 I deliberately avoid the use of the term 'tongues' here to distinguish it from the later experiences, such as at Corinth, which seem not to be quite the same (Blaiklock, E. M., *The Acts of the Apostles: an Historical Commentary* [London: Tyndale, 1959] p. 55). In partic-

ular, whereas at Corinth the utterances are not primarily for people, and need to be interpreted before they can be understood and so edify, those at Pentecost were immediately understood by the listeners in their own languages.

21 Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

22 Marshall (*op. cit.*, p. 366) notes the idea, but also such differences that he denies any influence.

23 Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

24 Although Pentecost was originally part of the feast of Weeks, commemorating the harvest, it soon became associated with the giving of the law at Sinai (Witherington, *op. cit.*, p. 131). Philo even describes the voice of God as a flaming fire (Decal 32-49. cf. Marshall, I. H., *The significance of Pentecost, Scottish Journal of Theology* 30(4) [1977], p. 354).

25 Hewitt, F. S., *The Genesis of the Christian Church: a study of Acts and the epistles* (London: Edward Arnold, 1964), p. 40.

26 Blaiklock, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

27 Conzelmann, H., *Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 13 draws attention to Isaiah 5:24, although he observes that the allusion is lost in the Septuagint, which Luke would probably have used.

28 It is not the place here to join the discussion as to whether the fire is that of torment, as in the traditional view of Hell, or, as is often held today (e.g. Judge*), the fire is rather one that consumes, so that the lost, not having eternal life, perish. Both carry the ideas of judgement and punishment.

29 Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 40 comments that whereas the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgement (Jn. 16:8), it is done by consecrated Christians.