

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PENTECOST IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION*

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The subject of this paper is at once limited and extensive. The drama of redemption in Scripture focusses the reader's attention on certain great historical events and their meaning. Events like the call of Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, the cross and the resurrection, although belonging each to a particular period of history, are regarded by the Bible writers as shedding considerable light on God's dealings with men throughout history. They constantly look back to them and draw from them more and more light on the saving purposes of God. Pentecost is an event of the same order.

It is true that only one N.T. writer records the events of the day of Pentecost. G. W. H. Lampe, writing of Luke/Acts, calls Pentecost, 'the great turning-point in the story, the hinge, as it were, of the two-volume narrative'¹. Its importance for Luke is difficult to exaggerate. It is also true that if he had not recorded the event we should have had to presuppose something like it. The New Testament writers assume that the Holy Spirit has now been given in a way which differs qualitatively in important ways from his operations among men previously. The Christian era is distinctively the age of the Spirit.

The Element of Continuity

The obvious uniqueness of the day of Pentecost should not blind us to the fact that in many ways the experience of the Spirit which the disciples had then was continuous with what had been before.

Lines of connection can be drawn both with the Old Testament and perhaps with their own experience during the ministry of the Lord Jesus, although there is very little reference to the latter in the gospels².

Many of the terms used of Pentecost are employed also in the Old Testament. The Spirit's coming was a clothing with power (Luke 24:49; cf. Judges 6:34; 1 Chron. 12:18; 2 Chron. 24:20), a filling with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; cf. Exodus 28:3; Deut. 34:9; Micah 3:8). As Peter himself

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1. 'The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St. Luke', (G. W. Grogan) in D. E. Nineham, ed, *Studies in the Gospels*, Oxford, 1957, p 192.
2. Explicitly only John 14:17, although passages such as Matthew 10:20 and Luke 11:13 might be thought to apply during the ministry as well as beyond Pentecost.

points out, the experience of Cornelius and his friends at Caesarea has much in common with the day of Pentecost, and the Spirit was said to 'fall upon' these Gentiles (Acts 10:44; 11:15; cf. Judges 14:6,19; 1 Samuel 11:6; Ezek. 11:5). All this language can be paralleled in the Old Testament. Even the language of baptism (Acts 1:5; 11:16) is based on the analogy of water, so often employed in the Old Testament in promises of a future work of the Spirit of God (Isaiah 32:15; Ezek. 39:29; Joel 2:28,29).

At Pentecost the disciples received power for the service of God (Acts 1:8; cf. 4:31,33). The phenomenon of glossolalia has no exact parallel in the Old Testament but examples of supernatural phenomena resulting from his activity are not wanting³. The use of human channels for the communication of a divine message by the Spirit of God is extremely frequent in the Old Testament.

The Element of Reversal

It seems probable that Luke intends us to see Pentecost as a reversal of Babel. There does not appear to be any studied use of allusive language, but the comparisons and contrasts are too evident to be missed. At Babel men gathered together for a sinful purpose but were scattered by the act of God. At Pentecost, 'devout men' who, although largely Jews, were 'from every nation under heaven' were brought together by the act of God. At Babel God confused the language of men so that they did not understand each other. At Pentecost men were bewildered because they *did* understand each other! At Babel there was a dispersion of the nations which anticipated the dispersion of Israel. At Pentecost this judgement was reversed in an act of grace which brought men into unity in the Spirit. At Babel men determined to make a name for themselves. At Pentecost God exalted the name of Jesus. The whole history of man since Babel has been marked by the disunity brought by sin. Only in Christ by the Spirit is this disunity truly overcome.

The Element of Fulfilment

a) *The Old Testament Feast of Pentecost* This was the second of the three great pilgrim feasts. The regulations for all three connect them with the land and they present a kind of harvest festival in three stages. Pentecost took place at the close of the barley harvest and was called 'the feast of harvest' (Exodus 23:16), 'the day of the first fruits' (Numbers 28:26), and 'the feast of weeks' (Exodus 34:22). The regulations for its observance are given in Exodus 34; Lev. 23; Numbers 28; Deut. 16; Deut. 26.

The term 'feast of weeks' is of special significance. The date of Pentecost was reckoned by counting seven weeks from the offering of the

3. E.g. 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16.

first fruits of the barley harvest, which was itself bound closely to the observance of the Passover⁴.

Whatever be our approach to the problem of the chronology of the last week in the life of Jesus, it is clear that he was crucified at the Passover season. At least two of the New Testament writers saw great significance in this fact. He was the antitype of the passover lamb of the Old Testament (John 19:36; 1 Cor. 5:6-8). Luke's statement that the day of Pentecost had fully come (Acts 2:1) perhaps lays stress upon the interval of time from the Passover. The verb *συνπληρουσθαί* is used in the LXX and the New Testament for the completion of a specific period of time. The cross made possible the great harvest of souls which took place on the day of Pentecost. The Christian Pentecost could not have taken place apart from the Christian Passover. The feasts of Passover and Tabernacles also possessed historical significance, for they were connected with the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings respectively. The Old Testament does not relate Pentecost to the history of Israel. This was done, however, by the Jews of the intertestamental period, who commemorated the giving of the law at Sinai at this time⁵.

The passages employed in the Jewish lectionary system for synagogue reading are of considerable interest. The influence of the lectionary upon the N.T. is a matter of debate⁶, of course, but we are probably justified in making cautious use of it as a possible background to some of the language of the N.T. The passages for the day of Pentecost were as follows: Exodus 19, Psalm 29, Psalm 68, Ezekiel 1 and Habbakuk 3.⁷ The use of Exodus 19 stems from the connection between Pentecost and Sinai. It appears to have established the atmosphere for the whole series of passages. As N. H. Snaith points out, 'all . . . involve a display of the overwhelming power of God. All the phenomena of his coming are found also in Acts 2, except the earthquake, and that appears in Acts 4:31. The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is not gentle as a dove but tempestuous and all – powerful.'⁸ So the power and glory of God, which were so signally disclosed at Sinai and were illustrated in these other O.T. passages, found further historical expression at Pentecost.

C. S. C. Williams suggests that Psalm 29:7 finds an echo in Acts 2:3.⁹ Psalm 29:11 contains the promise of strength for the people of God, and Pentecost fulfilled our Lord's promise of power. Psalm 68:18 is expressly applied by Paul to the gift and gifts of the Spirit in Ephesians 4:7ff. In view

4. Leviticus 23:15,16.

5. Book of Jubilees 1:1; 6:17.

6. For an evangelical assessment, see L. Morris, *The New Testament and the Jewish Lectionaries*, London, 1964.

7. See N. H. Snaith, 'The Spirit of God in Jewish Thought', in *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Headingley Lectures), p 3.

8. *Op. cit.*, p 4.

9. C. S. C. Williams, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1957, *in loc.*

of this, the expression 'power from on high' (Luke 24:49) may well show the influence of the same verse. The reference to the prophesying of women in Joel 2 (Acts 2:17f) may be paralleled by the women who bear the tidings in Psalm 68:11. In this psalm also God is said to 'give power and strength to his people' (verse 35). Ezekiel 1 is a great vision granted to the prophet when 'the hand of the Lord' (which phrase for him is the equivalent of 'the Spirit of the Lord') was upon him. The Joel prophecy quoted by Peter declares that young men shall see visions and old men dream dreams as a result of the effusion of the Spirit, and so they will prophesy (Acts 2:17f). Habbakuk recognises that God the Lord is his strength (Habbakuk 3:19), and declares that although the harvest may be a failure (and so perhaps Pentecost would seem a time of sadness and not rejoicing) yet he would rejoice in the God of his salvation (Habbakuk 3:17,18). It may be possible also to see a fulfilment of Exodus 19 on the day of Pentecost, if the latter be regarded also as a fulfilment of Ezekiel 36:24ff, for in this passage God promises to put his spirit within the people and to write his statutes upon their hearts.

b) *Prophecies concerning the Spirit in the O.T.* The Old Testament prophets looked forward to a time when the Spirit would be manifested in a much fuller way than hitherto. The most characteristic expression they employ is 'to pour out' (Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 39:29; Joel 2:28f; Zechariah 12:10). This language, based on the symbolism of water, is never employed of the Spirit in the Old Testament except in eschatological passages. The same kind of analogy is employed in other passages which promise moral cleansing and regeneration by the Spirit (Ezekiel 36:24ff; cf. 11:18ff; 18:30f). In these prophecies of the future we find language suggesting a work of the Spirit which is now couched in external terms ('pour out upon'), now in internal ('put my spirit within'). An examination of the passages concerned reveals the use of a certain amount of agricultural language in the context. This is especially noticeable in the harvest language of Joel 2:18-27 which immediately precedes the passage quoted in Acts 2.

c) *John the Baptist's Predictions* John the Baptist represents the final expression of Old Covenant prophecy. He baptised with water but declared the coming of one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8) and with fire (Mt.3:11f,Lk.3:18f).

What is the significance of the words 'with fire' which the answers in Matthew and Luke add to the briefer statement in Mark? A number of theories have been put forward, most of them speculative, and the reader can find these noted in the commentaries. Perhaps the best suggestion, in the light of our findings so far, is that of Lampe (and others). Lampe says, 'The faithful remnant, according to Isaiah, will be cleansed of moral

defilement by “the Spirit of judgement and the Spirit of burning”, a prophecy which may well have been in the Baptist’s mind as he looked forward to a coming baptism of Spirit and of fire.¹⁰

The prediction as recorded in John 1:29-34 has three distinctive features. Here alone Jesus is referred to not only as the one baptising with the Spirit but also as the one who takes away the world’s sin. Perhaps the two facts are not unconnected. John is told to look for one upon whom the Spirit would descend and remain, which suggests that this one’s experience of the Spirit would be constant, not intermittent or temporary. Only here is the present tense (*ho baptizōn*) used of this baptism. Some have seen significance in this as pointing to an abiding quality of our Lord’s work rather than to the one historical act of Pentecost.¹¹ However, it is worth noting that the present is also used in verse 29 of his sin-bearing (*ho airōn*), which was in fact accomplished in the historic act of Calvary. Note the reference to John’s prediction in our Lord’s words in Acts 1:5 (implying fulfilment at Pentecost) and the further references in Acts 11:15ff and Acts 19:1-7.

d) *Christ’s teaching concerning the Holy Spirit* When we turn to the Synoptic accounts of the teaching of Jesus and study his sayings about the Holy Spirit we are immediately struck by the infrequency of the references and the fact that Luke has more than either Matthew or Mark. The latter is easily explained in terms of the special interests of Luke. He is to write a second volume in which the Holy Spirit will feature prominently. What should be more natural than that he should record more of the sayings of Jesus about the Spirit than do the other two Synoptists?

We will concentrate upon the Lukan passages, for the Matthaean and Markan passages are paralleled in substance in Luke. Luke 11:18, with its reference to the Holy Spirit as given to those who ask the heavenly Father, may perhaps point to the essential inwardness of the Christian faith, the good things of Matthew 7:11 (the Matthaean parallel) being seen as summed up in the Holy Spirit over against the outward gifts, such as fish and eggs, which men can give to their children but which are unable to satisfy their deepest needs.

Luke 18:11f seems to look to the future and it gives a most assuring promise but little glimpse of the great riches which were to be unfolded later concerning the work of the Spirit in the church of Christ. Only Lk. 24:49 clearly refers to come such event as Pentecost. The reader who has only the third gospel, however, might well wonder what this gift is to which reference is being made. Acts 1:4f, however, makes it clear that the promise of the Father is in fact the baptism of the Spirit.

10. *Op. cit.*, p 162.

11. See J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, London, 1970, p 171.

Our study of Luke enables us to appreciate the point made by W. F. Lofthouse¹² that the first half of Acts requires the Johannine tradition of teaching concerning the Spirit for its understanding. He maintains that the disciples would have been utterly unprepared for Pentecost had they possessed only the Synoptic teaching of Jesus and he argues cogently for the substantial veracity of the teaching of Jesus which has come to us in the Johannine tradition on this ground. The chief passages in John from the lips of Jesus which look to Pentecost and beyond are those in chapters 14-16. Most of the material here concerns the Spirit as a teacher of truth and a witness to Jesus. Indeed much that is given here may well apply to the Spirit as the source of apostolic inspiration as he was also of prophetic inspiration. He will be sent by the Father or by Christ from the Father. He is no stranger to them for already he is with them, but then he shall be in them (Jn, 14:17). It should be noted that *para* here does not denote a merely fluctuating or external relationship, for the same preposition is employed in 14:23 of the abiding of the Father and the Son in them. It is doubtful if our Lord intended a contrast at this point. It is more likely that he desired to assure them that the one of whom he spoke was no stranger to them. He was going to indwell them in a new way, but this does not mean that he had not been present with them in a real sense already.

However, the important thing to note is that our Lord does contemplate here some event which was of capital importance and which yet lay before the disciples. We will consider John 7:37-39 and John 20:22 a little later.

The Element of Uniqueness

It is clear enough from the New Testament that the incarnation, death and resurrection of our Lord were viewed as events of quite special significance. They were unique. This is true even though an event like the resurrection of Jesus also constituted him, as Paul says, 'the first fruits of them that sleep'. Was there such a uniqueness about Pentecost? The Johannine tradition clearly suggests this. It could perhaps be argued that the references to the Spirit in the Upper Room discourse need not imply that he would come in a special way in one historical event. This is not altogether true, however. The departure of Jesus was manifestly an historical event, and it is often spoken of here as an event parallel to the coming of the Spirit. For example, in John 16:7f Jesus says, 'It is to your advantage that I go away for if I go not away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgement.' John 7:39 suggests that the glorification of Jesus can be paralleled by the gift of the Spirit.

Was the insufflation (John 20:22) John's equivalent of Pentecost? This

12. W. F. Lofthouse, *The Father and the Son*, London, 1934, pp 175-178.

can be plausibly argued,¹³ but John and Luke can be brought into line if we see John 20 as an acted prophecy, after O.T. models, rather than an actual there-and-then endowment with the Spirit. Such an interpretation is consistent with the fact that the Gospel of John contains a great deal of symbolism. It is important in this connection to notice the link between Pentecost and the cross and exaltation of Jesus. The only place in the Synoptics where it can be found is Luke 24:49, where it is the *risen* Jesus who speaks of sending the promise of the Father upon his disciples. There is another statement of it in Galatians 3:13f, where the work of the Spirit is made dependent upon the work of Christ on the cross. Notice also the order of Galatians 4:4-7.

What is the significance of all this? It reveals the complete dependence of subjective upon objective Christianity. The special place of importance which Pentecost has is due in large measure to the fact that it was necessary to demonstrate on the plane of history that the Spirit's work – which is not confined to the post-Pentecostal period – is in fact dependent upon the work of Christ. Smeaton quotes Goodwin as saying, concerning the Holy Spirit, 'He must have a coming in state, in solemn and visible manner, accompanied with visible effects as well as Christ had, and whereof all the Jews should be, and were, witnesses.'¹⁴ This means that in some senses Pentecost was an unique event and could never be repeated. In view of this it is not surprising to note that some of the signs which marked it were not repeated — i.e., the rushing wind and the tongues of fire.

The Elements of Newness and of Normality

Although, as we have noted, there are important elements of continuity between the Spirit's work before and after Pentecost, there are also important ways in which something new began at Pentecost. In addition to this, although Pentecost was in some respects unique, it also set the pattern in some ways for all that was to come, for the church age as a whole.

a) *After Pentecost the Spirit's work was broader than before* The passage from Joel, quoted by Peter, speaks of the pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh, and this phrase usually means 'all mankind' without racial distinction. The Jews and proselytes at Pentecost were from many different countries, and so, although all Jews by religion, they symbolise the wide extension of the gospel. Peter's statement that the promise included those who were afar off (Acts 2:39) may well have been interpretative of Joel 2.

The breadth of the Spirit's work may be illustrated from the writings of

13. See, e.g., C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, London, 1955, *in loc.*
14. G. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, London, 1958, p 49, quoting Goodwin's *Works*, vi, p 8.

Luke. In his gospel, Luke shows clearly that he has a number of special interests. His interest in John the Baptist appears early, for it is he alone who gives the story of his birth and the background to it. There are a number of references to John in the gospel. A Gentile interest emerges early also, and the synagogue sermon recorded in Luke 4 sets a pattern for this interest. Luke was also interested in the Samaritans, giving the ministry of Jesus in Samaria and several incidents concerning Samaritans as well as the parable of the Good Samaritan. There is also a special interest in Jerusalem, for the name appears over 30 times in the gospel; in fact it occurs about as frequently in Luke as it does in the other three gospels combined. Jerusalem is presented as the great place of destiny and the whole story leads to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in that city.

In the Acts of Apostles each of these interests is taken up again. Jerusalem is not only the place of the Christian Passover, at which Christ died, but also the Christian Pentecost. The Holy Spirit given then takes up other groups representing Luke's special interests. At Pentecost Jews and proselytes were united by the Spirit to form the heart of the new body, the Christian church. In Acts 8, the Samaritans, who could easily have become a separate Church perpetuating the old enmities, were the objects of a special work of the Spirit. In Acts 10 it was the turn of the Gentiles, and in Acts 19 a group of disciples of John the Baptist, who was the one who gave the original promise that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit, were themselves baptised by that Spirit into the one body of Christ. All these groups would appear to have been representative, and they were bound together in the one body of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit.

b) *After Pentecost, the Spirit's work was also deeper than before* The full Christian facts had now been completed on the stage of history. The Holy Spirit indwelt the disciples as the Spirit, not of the Christ who was yet to come, but who had come and finished his work. The New Testament writers insist, not only that Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the church, but that the Spirit he gave has a special relationship to him. He is the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11), the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19), the Spirit of the Son of God (Gal. 4:6; cf. Mark 14:36). He is, of course, related to our Lord in a twofold manner: in the eternal mystery of the triune Godhead, and also as indwelling him perfectly in the days of his flesh. This latter aspect opens up the question of the relationship between his work in the incarnate one and in Christian believers. Luke shows special interest in this. It is noticeable that almost all the statements about Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the gospel can be paralleled in the Acts. This can hardly be less than deliberate on Luke's part, and is just one element, although an important one, in a pattern of similarities which runs through the gospel and the

Acts. We should note that when Peter, in the power of the Spirit, proclaimed the saving facts of Christ, he included the fact he was anointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:27; 10:38).

Without going into detail or dealing with some of the difficulties of exegesis and theology, we note the following points: Lampe says, 'The promise of the Spirit recorded in Luke 24:49 corresponds in some degree to the Annunciation. Like Mary, the apostles are to be endued with "power from on high". At Pentecost they actually received the power of the Spirit in which Jesus preached, healed and exorcised.'¹⁵ The baptism of Jesus in water and the baptism in the Spirit recorded in Acts 2 were both associated with an anointing of power for distinctive service, the one messianic, the other missionary. There is contrast, of course, for the symbolism of the dove on the one hand and of the wind and fire on the other point to the uniqueness and sinlessness of Jesus, which was verbally expressed in the divine utterance from heaven. Jesus was *full* of the Spirit (the adjective is used), and the disciples at Pentecost and on several occasions afterwards were *filled* with the Spirit. The power and joy of the Spirit also find explicit mention both in Luke and Acts. Note also that, like Jesus, as Lampe reminds us,¹⁶ the church awaited the coming of the Spirit in prayer.

This perhaps raises the question as to whether manifestations of the Spirit to which there is no real parallel in the gospel can be of crucial importance unless Luke is deliberately contrasting Christ and the church at this point. For instance, we read of Jesus healing and performing miracles, but we read nothing of a gift of tongues in his case.

So then, the Spirit's function, from Pentecost, is to bring Christians into an experience which has many suggestive parallels with the life of Christ. Through his agency the Christ-life is reproduced in Christian believers. No doubt the pattern of godly living which had always been in the Holy Spirit's mind in his work of sanctification, even in Old Testament days, was the pattern of Jesus Christ, but this pattern could now be in the minds of the godly also. Thus the possibilities of godliness of life and conduct, after the pattern of Christ, are now seen more clearly than ever before.

At Pentecost and with reference to particular occasions afterwards the disciples of Jesus are said to have been filled with the Spirit, especially when there were tasks of ministry to be accomplished (Acts 4:8,31, 13:9), so in such passages he is viewed as the Spirit of power for service, in fulfilment of the promise of Acts 1:8. However, there are other important passages where his fulness is connected with character (Acts 6:3,5 *cf.* v. 8;

15. *Op. cit.*, p 193.

16. *Op. cit.*, p 169.

17. Article, πνεῦμα, πνευματικός, in G. Kittel, G. Friedrich, ed, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vi, Grand Rapids, 1968, p 406.

7:55; 11:24). E. Schweitzer puts it thus: 'We find, besides the phrase "full of the Spirit" πλήρης πνεύματος (which emphasises the abiding association with the Spirit) the phrase "filled with the Spirit" (which preserves the conviction that every manifestation of the Spirit is always an act of God and proceeds from God).'¹⁷ The common idea behind the two types of passages is that the Christian life is intended to be a life in the fulness of the Spirit, that the abiding character of the life and the recurring opportunities of service both require his operation. As Eph. 5:18 expresses it, the believer is constantly to be filled with the Spirit. So the baptism of the Spirit although unique and unrepeatable, is the first moment in the life which is lived in the fulness of the Spirit when it maintains the norm set at its beginning.

c) *After Pentecost he constituted the Bond of Union between Believers and their Lord in the Unity of the Church.* Pauline teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:12f. brings out the union which the Spirit effects between believers and Christ and also between believers and believers. This means that, in the fullest sense, Pentecost can be spoken of as the birthday of the church. The Epistle to the Hebrews traces the line of faith right back to Abel. Moreover, God always dealt with people on the basis of a covenant, and there is a covenant community in the Old Testament. But it is clear that the true Israel was a remnant within the national entity. The church is, however, given a new and deeper unity by the relationship of its members to Christ and therefore to each other. It is this fellowship which was constituted on the day of Pentecost by the sovereign act of God the Holy Spirit.

The Element of Anticipation

The quotation from Joel given by Peter on the day of Pentecost reminds us that Pentecost is in a sense an eschatological event, for Joel speaks of the eschaton and Peter declares, 'this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel'. The fact is that all that is in the New Testament presented as fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy is, in a sense, realised eschatology. Calvary, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and the coming of the Spirit, all fall within this category. By his use of the term *arrabōn*, however ('earnest', 'pledge', 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14), Paul points us forward to a more complete fulfilment. The Spirit is in fact a guarantee and foretaste of the full inheritance which will belong to Christians in actual possession in the future.

The passage quoted by Peter from Joel speaks of the great and manifest day of the Lord. The gift of the Spirit assures us that we are living in the period of realised eschatology. For us the Christ has come, and yet he is still to come. The Holy Spirit's presence in our hearts is the result of the one coming, and the pledge and foretaste of the other. In Pentecost, the kingdom of God has come in power but has not yet been consummated.

SIGNIFICANCE OF PENTECOST/HISTORY OF SALVATION

So the life of the Christian in the present has reference both to the past and to the future, and it has an inner spiritual dynamic in which the Holy Spirit creates in us both gratitude for what Christ has done in the past, and eager anticipation of what he promises to do in the future.