

## DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF PENTECOST

The Church's liturgical use of Acts 2.1-41 has lodged firmly in the minds of most Christians the Lucan Pentecost. Indeed "Pentecost" has become synonymous with the account of an event presented by Luke in Acts. Some of the elements commonly incorporated in this mosaic depict the disciples and the Blessed Virgin huddled together in expectation fifty days after the Passover and the death of Jesus; the sudden howling of winds and descent of tongues of fire; Jewish pilgrims hearing God praised in their various native languages, some wondering what it all meant and others dismissing it as a drunken revelry; and (for those who are familiar with Acts beyond the liturgical reading on Pentecost Sunday) Peter's interpretation of the event which resulted in three thousand baptisms.

It is important that we note that these and similar associations with "Pentecost" draw only on the Lucan account. Although most of the New Testament writers agree in stressing that it is the risen and ascended Christ who sends the Spirit, a textual comparison makes it apparent that they do not offer us any standard account of the manner and time of the sending of the Spirit. The accounts of John (20.19-22) and of Luke of the original imparting of the Spirit differ in every particular except that the event took place in Jerusalem. The Johannine account seems to present the resurrection, the ascension and the sending of the Spirit as occurring on the same day. Undoubtedly this is what we would infer from John's Gospel were we not prejudiced by familiarity with the Lucan version and order of the events. Even Luke himself offers another account in Acts 4.31 of the sending of the Spirit.

Checking with other New Testament writers discloses that they at times contradict and certainly never corroborate the Lucan account of Pentecost. Clearly there is something "factually" arbitrary about the Lucan, or any other account of Pentecost. As in most other sections of Acts, Luke the theologian was not attempting to record "the way it happened". Rather, Luke concerned himself with expressing the profound religious message of the imparting and receiving of the Spirit within an imaginative and symbolic framework of happenings.

Luke in a real sense could not have done otherwise. The coming of the Spirit is not an historical event of the same order as, say, the coronation of Charlemagne on Christmas Day A.D. 800; it is not an event which can be related by eye-witness reports. The insight of the religious mind insists that human eyes cannot see a divine mystery of intervention. Only the effects of a divine mystery within human history can be studied, not the mystery itself. Stating this limitation is not to say there

is any questioning about whether the mystery *is*, for indeed the theologian deals with and hopes to convey the very truth and meaning of the mystery; we are only pointing out that the ways of God's mysteries are hidden from us. An event of the order we are discussing here is historical in that we truly affirm its reality, but not "historical" in the sense of "this is a matter-of-fact-eye-witness-report". Therefore, we must not expect always to find in the Bible accounts of such realities which may be read as wholly literal descriptions of "what happened"—for such an expectation would be inevitably frustrated by the noticeably differing accounts in the Bible of many such events. We will never discover the meaning of Pentecost if we insist on a literalist interpretation of the Lucan presentation of the theological truth of the Coming of the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

For, as we shall see, Luke has quite naturally set a theological reality into a historicist framework. We will begin to discover his meaning as we discover and clarify the framework.

Perhaps the first striking indication of the "historical arbitrariness" of any one of the various New Testament accounts of the sending of the Spirit is the occasion-setting of the event. The choice of the occasion-setting makes up a major part of the total story framework by which the writer intends to express his meaning; it should, therefore, upon examination of its elements reveal a great deal of the sacred writer's meaning.

The Jewish feast, on which Luke sets the sending of the Spirit, arose as an adaptation of a Canaanite agricultural festival into a Yahweh-feast: at the end of the harvest the ancient Israelites made the first fruit offerings not to false gods but to Yahweh, to the Holy One of Israel who had given them the land of Canaan (Deut. 16.9-11). The Israelites called the feast the Feast of Weeks and the Septuagint translation *pentekoste* since the Israelites celebrated it fifty days after the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. The feast appears in the old lists of feasts as one of the three major feasts.

What is of particular significance is that sometime in the second century before Christ, according to most scholars,<sup>2</sup> the feast was celebrated as the liturgical anniversary of the giving of the Law to Moses on Sinai which had been set as having taken place fifty days after the departure from Egypt (Exod. 19.1-16). The pentecostal theophanies presented by Luke not only have in terms of imagery an overall resem-

<sup>1</sup> Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, esp. pp. 116-118. See also E. Schillebeeckx's references in "Ascension and Pentecost," *Worship* XXXV (May 1961), 336-364.

<sup>2</sup> See E. Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*

## DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF PENTECOST

blance to many Old Testament theophanies, but they would seem to be intended to bring to mind quite particularly the Old Covenant events at Sinai.

Now at daybreak on the third day there were peals of thunder on the mountain and lightning flashes, a dense cloud, and a loud trumpet blast, and inside the camp all the people trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the bottom of the mountain. The mountain of Sinai was entirely wrapped in smoke, because Yahweh had descended on it in the form of fire. Like smoke from a furnace the smoke went up, and the whole mountain shook violently. Louder, and louder grew the sound of the trumpet. Moses spoke, and God answered him with peals of thunder. Yahweh came down on the mountain of Sinai, on the mountain top, . . . (Exodus 19.16-20)

. . . when suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting; and something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2.2-3)  
As they prayed, the house where they were assembled rocked; they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God boldly. (Acts 4.31)

There are other elements of the framework constructed by Luke which bring out this strong Old Covenant-New Covenant theme. Luke sets his account on the Fiftieth Day after "the exodus" (Luke 9.31) which Christ accomplished in Jerusalem. It was also on the Fiftieth Day that the Old Law was sealed through Moses and "the Church in the Wilderness" was established (Acts 7.38). Moses is the type of Christ; the Church in the Wilderness foreshadows the Church of Christ; and the Covenant with Israel is the prefiguring of the New Covenant with the New Israel. In the speech of Stephen in Acts 7.34-38 the prefiguring events are summarized. Moses heard the growing oppression of his people in Egypt and came down to deliver them. Israel, however, rejected Moses, whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer. Yet, having effected wonders and signs, Moses led the people forth through the Red Sea (Cf. Luke 9.31) and forty years' wanderings in the wilderness. This Moses prophesied that in an eschatological messianic event God would raise up a prophet to whom the people would listen (Deut. 18.15,18). This Moses established "the church in the wilderness". Luke portrays Christ's exodus-wonder as his resurrection from the dead, followed by forty days of manifestations of his living presence. According to rabbinic theology, when the forty years in the wilderness were accomplished, Moses was taken up into heaven; in Luke, after the forty days of manifestations of his living presence, Jesus is taken up into heaven (Luke 9.51). Luke's insistence on the Old Covenant typology clearly teaches that now with the risen Christ the New Covenant Age has set in.

Luke stresses this truth of the New Age with a phrase which, in a comparison between the Exodus theophany and those of Acts, stands

out as culminating and indicative of something new: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2.3).

Luke lived in the Jewish religious world which since the death of Malachi yearned for a prophet. The Jews looked forward to the days "when the prophet would come" (cf. 1 Macc. 4.46; 14.41; Isa. 14f.; Ezek. 36.25-27; Isa. 44.3f.; Job 2.28f.). The Messiah would be the Prophet (cf. Deut. 18.15-18 and *Sifre* on this text). In yearning for a new order, this coming of the Messiah was associated with the coming of the Spirit. After so many years of expectation John the Baptist stood as such a great prophet that hopes were aroused among the people that he was the Messiah (cf. Luke 3.15). What is to be noted in John's disclaimer is that he describes the outpouring of the Spirit as not merely associated with the coming of the Messiah but precisely as the gift of the Messiah ("I am baptizing you only in water, but someone is coming who . . . will baptize you in the Holy Spirit . . ." (Luke 3.16; compare Mark 1.8; Matt. 3.11; and Acts 2.33: "He has poured out what you see and hear!"). Through the speech of Peter, Luke gives witness to the realization of the early Christian community that the expectations of "all the prophets from Samuel onwards" were fulfilled in Jesus Christ: Yahweh had poured out his spirit on all men (cf. Acts 2.17) and "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2.3).

What we are discovering is that Luke is understanding the experience of the Spirit in the context of the prophetic messianic tradition: the Spirit definitively realizes the New Covenant, the New Law, the New Age. For David Stanley,<sup>3</sup> the real revolution realized in the Lucan account of the Pentecost is that the Messianic times are inaugurated not by the Second coming of Christ but by the coming of the Spirit—but this is a revolution fully in accord with the prophetic tradition which looked for the onset of the Messianic Age in the outpouring of the Spirit. This profound truth which was the experience of the first generation Christians is the burden of Luke's structuring of the Spirit experience on the covenant festival of Pentecost with all the associations with the Sinai narrative and the pouring out of the Spirit by Christ.

But, as there is more to Luke's framework, we can discover more of the truth of this New Age which Luke intended to express.

The Messianic Age is the Age of the Church, the experience of the efficacy of the Holy Spirit as Church-forming which Luke's Pentecostal presentation is structured to emphasize.

The Lucan Pentecost account does emphasize the community of disciples at Jerusalem—the remnant of Israel—as the matrix of the en-

<sup>3</sup> David Stanley, "Salvation in the Primitive Preaching," in *The Apostolic Church in the New Testament*.

## DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF PENTECOST

tire Church. But Luke's structuring joins this point with the Christian community's later deepened experience of the Spirit. Luke composes his Pentecost framework out of an awareness which would be clearly subsequent to the hypothetical story-event itself—the awareness of the universal mission of the church and its extension to the believers in all the nations upon whom the Spirit is poured out. Luke's presentation points to this projected awareness in two ways in particular.

First, Luke employed a standard catalogue of "all the nations" to describe the crowd who had converged in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Spirit; he thereby set up Jerusalem as the true eschatological Zion, the centre and goal of the salvation pilgrimage of all nations.

Secondly, a considerable emphasis in the Lucan account is given over to the wondrous "speaking with other tongues". This "gift" generally has been understood as the divinely bestowed, somewhat magical power of the apostles to speak instantaneously several foreign languages—a gift for which many a contemporary missionary in language training longs. Luke seems to have used "speaking with tongues" in the Pentecostal account in two somewhat different ways.

The first usage (understood in Acts 2.12–25) is in agreement with what several thorough studies<sup>4</sup> of glossolalia in the Bible have concluded: the phrase primarily signifies the phenomenon of ecstatic prayer before the mighty works of God. Such ecstatic prayer was a sign of the utter otherness of the early Christian's experience of the true Spirit poured out on things. The ecstatic prayer is intended in 2.12–15, for such non-rational utterances might well prompt some observers to laugh it off, saying: "They have been drinking too much new wine" (2.13). Acts 2.4–11 does not refer to mysterious ecstatic prayer but to speaking in foreign languages that were indeed understood. This Lucan construct definitely seems intended to express the universality of the Christian message and the "universality" of Christianity at the time of the final redaction of Acts. It had been the experience of the first generation of the Church that the Spirit willed and worked to bring into the community all men. Luke expresses the truth of the Spirit forming and informing the Church "among all peoples" through the discourse to the men of different nationalities being understood by all (2.7) and received by some (2.41). This usage of communicating in other tongues in the Lucan presentation can be interpreted as Babel in reverse. The writers of Genesis through a story vehicle expressed the

<sup>4</sup> S. Lyonnet, "De glossolalia Pentecostes eiusque significatione," *Verbum Domini* XXIV (1944), pp. 65–75, and L. Cerfaux, "Le symbolisme attache au miracle des langues," *Recueil*, II, 183–187.; J. G. Davies, "Pentecost and Glossolalia," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 3 (1952), pp. 229–231.

theological truth that on account of sinful pride men were cut off from one another; they had no mutually understandable language because they were not bound together in common obedience to God's will. The writer of Acts used this story vehicle to express the theological truth that the Holy Spirit wills and moves to create all individuals and peoples into one great assembly, united in the new covenant and speaking the one universal language in the Spirit. (Compare with Ezek. 11.17-21: "I will gather you together from among the nations, I will bring you all back from the countries where you have been scattered and I will give you the land of Israel. . . . I will give them a single heart and I will put a new Spirit in them. . . . so that they will keep my laws and respect my observances and put them into practice. Then they shall be my people and I will be their God.") Luke presents a true community (such as the early Christian community described in Acts 2.42-47) as a consequence of vital communion with God in Christ through the Spirit. The "speaking with tongues" primarily expresses the universal and ecclesial nature of the experience of the Spirit. Therefore we pray "through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit"—the unity of the Holy Spirit being the Church.

In summary, Luke's message is that the New Age has indeed begun with the Spirit sent by Christ and that the New Age is the Age of the Universal Church formed by the spirit. With this message, Luke presents not the divine mystery of the Spirit (for that he cannot) but the effects of the Spirit; his presentation condenses and sets into a single event the experience and fruits of the Spirit in the first generation of the Church.

In discovering much of Luke's framework we have discovered much of Luke's meaning. We have in a certain sense demythologized the Lucan Pentecost. Once we have thoroughly made our own the realization that Luke's intention was not to present "what happened" but rather a structured story which was to express the early Church's understanding of the experience of the Spirit, we are ready to bring out real meanings for us who must have a faith equal to the early Church's in the active presence of the Holy Spirit. Once we have "demythologized", we shall not be looking about and waiting for tongues of fire and magical gifts, or sighing that the Spirit gave special powers to the early Church now lacking to us. Freed from literalism, we will not be tied down by a conception of the sending of the Spirit as necessarily a past event on the fiftieth day after the Resurrection; in other words, when we speak of Pentecost we will have in mind not so much an historical incident as an enduring reality. Luke is telling us that now the Spirit is permanently upon all men. The Lucan Pentecost

DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF PENTECOST

“reveals that this communication of the Spirit is no longer a sporadic breathing, as it was for the prophets, but has happened definitively and irrevocably”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rahner and Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, p. 211.