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**Pentecost:
Living in the Power of the Holy Spirit
Acts 2:1-21**

I doubt if many of you have ever heard the name Octavius Winslow. He was a Baptist pastor in England in the 19th century (d. 1878), a contemporary of Charles Spurgeon, who late in life became an Anglican. But that's not important. What is important is that you hear and understand the truth of one thing he said about the Holy Spirit:

"All that we spiritually know of ourselves, all that we know of God, and of Jesus, and His Word, we owe to the teaching of the Holy Spirit; and all the real light, sanctification, strength and comfort we are made to possess on our way to glory, we must ascribe to Him. . . . Where He is honoured, and adoring thoughts of His person, and tender, loving views of His work are cherished, then are experienced, in an enlarged degree, His quickening, enlightening, sanctifying and comforting influence" (Octavius Winslow).

Why do I bring up the subject of the Holy Spirit today? For one simple reason: today is Pentecost Sunday.

Pentecost is the day in the church calendar that typically comes on the 50th day after the Sabbath of Passover. This year that day is celebrated today, June 4. As you probably know, it was on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the followers of Jesus. This was the event that fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus to his disciples in Luke 24:49 – “And behold,” said Jesus, “I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” Clearly, then, the focus of Pentecost is *the coming of the Holy Spirit*, his indwelling presence in our lives, and the power that he brings to enable us to do what we otherwise could never accomplish.

There isn't any way, even with the Spirit's supernatural assistance and help, that I could possibly tell you everything the Holy Spirit does for us, but I'm going to try! But before I do, let's look briefly at the account in Acts 2 of what happened on Pentecost in the first century a.d.

Several questions immediately come to mind. For example, *where* did this event occur? We know they were in Jerusalem. According to Acts 2:2, they were all gathered together in a “house” (cf. Acts 1:12-26).

What exactly happened? Let me respond to this question with two answers. First, the events of Pentecost were *a singular phenomenon in history*. In other words, *there is only one Day of Pentecost* when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the people of God. It was historically unique, which means that it is not correct to speak of people elsewhere throughout the world, down through the centuries, each experiencing their own Pentecost.

However, it is equally important to remember that *although the Day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit could only happen once, as a singular event in redemptive history, the effects or aftermath or fruit of the Spirit's coming are experienced at all times throughout the course of church history*. Let me try to explain this in simple terms.

We are told in vv. 2-3 that when the Spirit came there was “a sound like mighty rushing wind” that filled the house where they were gathered. This makes perfect sense given the fact that the Greek word for Spirit is also the Greek word for wind or breath. “Wind” is a recurring sign of or reference to the Spirit (cf. John 3:8; Ezek. 37:9-14). But we do not expect that this same sound of “rushing wind” will occur again and again every time someone receives the power of the Spirit.

Likewise, we are told in v. 3 that “tongues as of fire” appeared to everyone and “rested” on each one of them. A more literal translation of v. 3 would be that these tongues of fire were “divided” and “rested on each one of them” (v. 3). Why is that important? Because under the old covenant, before the coming of Jesus, the Spirit ministered corporately

and only came on selected individuals personally (kings, priests, prophets, etc.). ***In the new covenant the Spirit now comes upon and resides within each believer individually. This is the “democratization” of the Spirit!***

This point is reinforced in v. 17 where Peter quotes the prophecy of Joel to the effect that when the Spirit comes he will be poured out ***“on all flesh,”*** that is to say, not just kings and prophets and priests but on every child of God: every man and woman, every son and daughter, young and old (see Acts 2:17).

Look closely at the extent of the Spirit’s presence: “all flesh” (v. 17), i.e., irrespective of ***age*** (“old men” and “young men”), ***gender*** (“sons” and “daughters” and “male servants” and “female servants”), ***social rank*** (“servants”), or ***race*** (“all flesh”; cf. v. 39; i.e., both Jew and Gentile).

So it would appear that flames of “fire” in the shape of the human tongue rested on the heads of each person present. This was to serve both as a sign of God’s powerful presence and as a sign of the gift of speaking in tongues that was to follow.

These two sensory phenomena of both sound and sight were a one-time occurrence that marked the Spirit’s entrance into the life of all God’s people. Whereas I would never say that God couldn’t do this yet again, I don’t believe he will. I think these two sensory phenomena were uniquely tied to the one event of the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost.

Having said that, and this is my second response to the question I asked above, what the disciples of Jesus experienced as a result of the Spirit’s descent is something that we most assuredly should expect and pray for. ***The Spirit himself comes only once. He is now here. He doesn’t need to repeat his arrival as occurred on Pentecost. But what he did among the disciples at Pentecost in the first century he most certainly continues to do among all God’s people in every subsequent century.***

Look again at the opening words of v. 17. There Peter, quoting Joel, tells us that what is happening then on the Day of Pentecost is something that is to characterize “the last days.” Let me emphasize the word ***“characterize.”*** Some have tried to argue that the events that occurred on the Day of Pentecost back in the first century were designed solely to launch or inaugurate or jump-start the age of the New Covenant. Now, make no mistake, the coming of the Spirit in power on Pentecost most assuredly did launch or jump-start the New Covenant age in which we now live. But ***what the Spirit did on that day centuries ago is also designed by God to characterize the experience of God’s people throughout the course of this age until Jesus comes back.***

You have heard me say this before, but I want to say it again. The “last days” that Joel had in view when he uttered this prophecy back in the late 7th or early 6th century b.c. was the entire present age in which we now live. In other words, ***the “last days” began on the Day of Pentecost and extend all the way until Jesus returns.*** The “last days” or the era of the New Covenant have now extended for nearly 2,000 years. Most Christians make the mistake of thinking that when the NT speaks of the “last days” it has in view the final few years of human history immediately preceding the Second Coming of Christ. No. See 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:1-2; 9:26; James 5:3; 1 Peter 1:20; 1 John 2:18; cf. also 1 Cor. 10:11; 1 Tim. 4:1.

Thus what we are reading here in vv. 17-21 is a description of what the Holy Spirit does in and through and on behalf of God’s people throughout the entire course of this present age.

*Speaking in Tongues:
On the Day of Pentecost and Thereafter*

Were the “tongues” spoken on the Day of Pentecost real human languages? In my opinion, yes, they were. The variety of nations represented (vv. 8-11) would certainly confirm this. The word “tongue” = *glossa* = either the literal organ in our mouths or real human language. Observe also that the word “language” (vv. 6, 8) = *dialekto* = dialect (cf. Acts 1:19; 21:40; 22:2; 26:14).

Can this phenomenon still occur today? Absolutely, yes. But in my opinion it happens quite rarely. Don't be misled by what I just said. I said that speaking in tongues that are genuine human languages that the speaker had never studied is quite rare today. I've heard quite a few personal testimonies from missionaries that such has happened to them as they encountered people whose language they had never learned.

But I'm persuaded that the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues that continues throughout church history and is so widespread today is ***the Spirit-prompted ability to pray and praise God in a heavenly dialect, possibly even an angelic language that is not related to anything spoken on earth such as German or Swahili or Mandarin or English.*** In other words, I believe the vast majority of instances where speaking in tongues occurs today are best explained as the Holy Spirit personally crafting or creating a special and unique language that enables a Christian to speak to God in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. This gift is not a human language that one might encounter in some foreign country, but a Spirit-empowered capacity to speak meaningful words that are only understood by our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I don't have time to prove this to you, but I have done so elsewhere in my book, *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts* (pp. 179-182) where I provide at last ten reasons why the tongues speech in Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost, is not the same as the tongues speech in 1 Corinthians 12-14. The tongues speech here in Acts 2 was genuine, previously unlearned, human languages, whereas the tongues speech in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is either an angelic dialect or a heavenly language crafted by the Spirit for each individual believer to whom God chooses to supply this gift.

Let me say one more thing about speaking in tongues and then we must move on. ***Speaking in tongues is not the invariable sign of Spirit-baptism or Spirit-filling.*** There are numerous instances in Acts of true conversion and Spirit-baptism where no tongues are mentioned (2:37-42; 8:26-40; 9:1-19; 13:44-52; 16:11-15; 16:25-34; 17:1-10a; 17:10b-15; 17:16-33; 18:1-11; 18:24-28).

Finally, as far as Acts 2 and Pentecost are concerned, we are told by Peter, who is using the prophecy of Joel in the OT, that God's people will "***prophesy***" (vv. 17-18), "***see visions***" and "***dream dreams.***" It isn't the purpose of today's message to explain why, but I firmly believe that such spiritual experiences continue to occur in the life of the church today. We at Bridgeway are what some people call ***continuationists*** in that we believe all these gifts and activities of the Holy Spirit continue throughout the present church age and will continue to be operative right up until the time that Jesus returns to this earth.

What is the meaning of Pentecost?

In bringing this first part of my message to a close, I'll give five answers to the question: What is the meaning of Pentecost?

(1) This is *not* the first appearance of the Holy Spirit in human history. The Holy Spirit was extremely active throughout the time of the Old Testament. However, it is the first appearance of the ***fullness*** of the Spirit to empower and permanently indwell and encourage and enable ***all*** of God's people individually.

(2) The events of Pentecost are the fulfillment of ***three*** prophetic words: first, the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 (in accordance with the terms of the New Covenant); second, the prophecy of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11-12; third, the prophecy of Jesus in John 14-16 (concerning the "other Comforter").

(3) On the one hand, Pentecost is the pouring out of the Holy Spirit by the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to Peter's words in Acts 2:33-33,

"This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he [Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing" (Acts 2:32-33).

But Pentecost is not simply the Holy Spirit coming to the church but ***Christ himself*** coming to the church in the person of the Holy Spirit. See John 14:18; Rom. 8:9-10.

(4) ***Pentecost is the birthday of the Church***, the universal body of Christ. People often ask the question: When did the Church begin? What was its birthday? The simplest answer is: Today, the Day of Pentecost, when the risen Lord Jesus Christ poured out the Spirit and formed his people into a living, spiritual organism called the Body of Christ, the Church.

(5) ***Pentecost is the reversal of Babel***. We read in Genesis 11 that, at Babel, God confused human languages and “dispersed” the nations “over the face of the earth” (Gen. 11:8). We see precisely the reverse taking place at Pentecost, where the language barrier was overcome as a sign that God would now gather the nations together in Christ. At Babel, as someone has said, “earth proudly tried to ascend to heaven. At Pentecost, heaven humbly descended to earth.”

The Powerful Work of the Spirit who came at Pentecost

Now, in the time remaining I want to conduct a very quick overview of the book of Acts so that you may see what the Holy Spirit does. In other words, this is why the Holy Spirit was given.

First, the Holy Spirit fills and empowers God’s people to boldly proclaim the truth of the gospel. When Peter was asked by what power the man lame from birth had been healed, we read this:

“Then Peter, ***filled with the Holy Spirit***, said to them, . . .” (Acts 4:8).

This was in fulfillment of something Jesus himself had prophesied back in Matthew 10:20,

“When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt. 10:20).

The Holy Spirit was already indwelling Peter, but on this occasion ***an extraordinary impartation of power*** was needed. We read of much the same thing later in Acts 4.

“And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

Don’t miss the causal connection between being filled with the Spirit and speaking or proclaiming the gospel of God fearlessly or boldly (cf. Acts 5:32; 6:10; 9:17-19; 13:9-11; 18:25).

This was especially the case when Stephen was testifying to the religious leaders about Jesus. In the face of certain death, Stephen found courage and power and boldness to unashamedly proclaim the truth of the gospel. How did he do it? Here is what we read in Acts 7.

“Now when they [the religious leaders] heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’” (Acts 7:54-56).

In other words, we may be filled with the Spirit in a ***spiritual emergency***. This is an immediate and special endowment of power to fulfill an especially important and urgent task. Thus, someone who is already full of the Spirit may experience a further/additional filling. That is, no matter “how much” of the Holy Spirit one may have, there’s always room for “more” (see Acts 4:8,31; 13:9; Luke 1:41,67).

Second, the empowering indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit was essential for God’s people to carry out the wide varieties of ministry for which they were responsible. One example of this is seen in Acts 6 where one of the qualifications for serving as a deacon in the local church is that a person be “full of the Spirit” (Acts 6:3; 11:23-24;

13:52). Even Elders are identified, equipped, and appointed by the Holy Spirit. Paul said this to the Elders of the church in Ephesus:

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

Third, the ability to perform signs and wonders and miracles is explicitly said to be the work of the Holy Spirit in and through God’s people. For example,

“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8; cf. Acts 4:30; 10:38).

In the writings of Luke, the word “power” is almost always a synonym for the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, it is the Holy Spirit who speaks to God’s people and provides guidance to them regarding where, when, and to whom ministry should be extended. The explanation for why Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch is explicitly stated:

“And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot’” (Acts 8:29; see v. 39; see also Acts 10:19-20; 11:12).

The Spirit’s role in providing guidance for missionary and evangelistic outreach is clearly seen in Acts 13:2,

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’ . . . So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit . . .” (Acts 13:2, 4).

Likewise, we read in Acts 16 of how Paul was re-directed into Macedonia.

“And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:6-7; cf. 15:28; 19:21; 21:22-23).

Fifth, it was by means of the power of the Holy Spirit that God’s people would prophesy and speak in tongues. We read in Acts 11:27-30 of prophets who traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch:

“And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius)” (Acts 11:28; see also 21:4, 10-11).

“And when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying” (Acts 19:6).

This is but a small sampling of what we find in Acts that is the work of the Holy Spirit who came at Pentecost. And there is no reason to think that the Spirit who indwelt and empowered and filled these early disciples will not do the same for us today.

Other Ministries of the Holy Spirit

When we turn to the rest of the NT we see numerous descriptions of the Spirit and his activity among us and on our behalf.

(1) The Holy Spirit is portrayed as a **down payment** (2 Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). The term (*arrabon*) was used in commercial transactions to refer to the first installment of the total amount due. The down payment effectively guaranteed the fulfillment of whatever contractual obligations were assumed. “The Spirit, therefore,” says Gordon

Fee, “serves as God's down payment in our present lives, the certain evidence that the future has come into the present, the sure guarantee that the future will be realized in full measure” (807).

In giving the Holy Spirit to us “God is not simply promising us our final inheritance but actually providing us with a foretaste of it, even if it ‘is only a *small fraction* of the future endowment” (O’Brien, 121).

(2) The Holy Spirit is portrayed as the *first fruits* (Rom. 8:23). This metaphor is also used of Christ's resurrection as the guarantee of ours (1 Cor. 15:20,23). Similar to the idea behind *down payment*, the Holy Spirit as “the first sheaf is God's pledge to us of the final harvest. Thus . . . the Spirit plays the essential role in our present existence, as both evidence and guarantee that the future is now and yet to be” (Fee, 807).

(3) The Holy Spirit is portrayed as God's *seal* on us (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30). The sealing of the Spirit is designed to emphasize that *we are marked out as God's own possession*. The Spirit is the seal given to us to confirm as genuine and true the promise that we belong to God and will inherit everything that Jesus died to obtain (John 3:33; 6:27; 1 Cor. 9:2; see Rev. 7:3-8; 9:4; Eph. 4:30; Mt. 27:66; Rev. 20:3)

Perhaps the best way to bring this to a close is to look briefly at what Paul says about our experience of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

Paul is here using two vivid metaphors to describe our experience of the Holy Spirit at the time of conversion, at the time when we became members of the body of Christ, the Church:

Baptism, or immersion in the Holy Spirit, and
Drinking to the fill of the Holy Spirit . . .

the purpose or goal of which is to unite us all in one body.

Thus, our “saturation” with the Spirit, our experience of being “engulfed” in and “deluged” and “inundated” by the Holy Spirit results in our participation in the spiritual organism of the body of Christ, the Church.

Praying for More of the Spirit

I close with this exhortation and promise from Jesus himself:

“And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:9-13)