

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

22 What Could This Mean?

Scripture Reading

Acts 2:14 – 39

But What Does It Mean?

In our study this evening our aim is to understand the meaning of the events described in Acts 2 that took place on the Day of Pentecost for what they mean is another matter of controversy in today's church. Some of the confusion there is arises because we tend to view it from only one angle when, in fact, there are at least five ways to see it.

It would be an understatement to say that what happened that day was unusual and in asking the question, "What could this mean?" we are only following those who were present. They asked the same question (verse 12), Peter answered them and Luke has recorded that answer (verses 14 – 41).

The Beginning Of A New Era

First, the Day of Pentecost marked the beginning of the new era of the Spirit: the era predicted by Joel and other Old Testament prophets. That is where Peter began his answer.

"This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above And signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapour of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.'

Acts 2:16 – 21

What happened that day was the fulfilment of Joel's prediction that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh. Peter interpreted the Joel passage by changing Joel's "afterwards" to "in the last days," emphasising that with the coming of the Spirit the last days had come.

Peter did not apply the Joel passage as if he was still waiting for its fulfilment or even as if its fulfilment had only been partial and there would be more to wait for. The whole age spanning the two comings of Christ, from that point forward, would be the age of the Spirit in which His ministry would be one of continuous abundance (He has been poured out) reaching to all mankind (all flesh) irrespective of social distinctions (your sons and your daughters), age (your young men...your old men) or rank: reaching to all who are servants of God.

But how are we to understand the specific manifestations of the Spirit's activity that Joel said would characterise the age of the Spirit?

Joel said, "they shall prophesy" and it is clear that Peter understood that to have been fulfilled when "they began to speak with other tongues."

The tongue-speaking of the Day of Pentecost was a supernatural ability to speak in recognizable languages¹ and it is evident that the crowd's astonishment was aroused by "God's wonders" — the content of what was spoken — not by the phenomenon itself. The languages spoken were understood by those who were present (and the point is emphasised by the inclusion of a lengthy list of nations) from every part of the known world. Symbolically God's word was made freely available to all.

For the Jews, to have the Spirit was to be a prophet (see, for example, Hosea 9:7). Under the old covenant the typical effect of the Spirit's coming was prophecy and prophecy was communicated through dreams and visions. That was how the knowledge of God came and generally it came through a few who were mostly

¹ Some would argue that the tongue-speaking of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 is different — an unintelligible utterance — but this cannot be proven from 1 Corinthians and it seems more reasonable to interpret these passages in the light of Acts 2, the only passage in which tongue-speaking is described and explained.

men, but the Old Testament expectation was that in the days of the new covenant the knowledge of God would be universal.

"No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD.

Jeremiah 31:34

Against this background the tongue-speaking of Pentecost was a powerful indication that something new had begun. No longer would an anointed human mediator be needed to teach the Lord's people to know Him. All God's people are prophets and the reality is that all have knowledge of God granted by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures and all have the ability to understand the Scriptures by the help of the Spirit who dwells within them.

"But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things... But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him."

1 John 2:20 & 27

Some see in all this a parallel with the giving of the law on Sinai with which the Day of Pentecost had come to be associated by the time of the first century. From another point of view the tongue-speaking of Acts 2 could be seen as a symbol of the reversal of the judgement of Babel (Genesis 10:1 – 32)

On another occasion we will have to consider the relevance of the phenomenon of tongue-speaking for today. All we will say at this stage is that viewed in this light, as a symbol of what began on the Day of Pentecost, its ongoing repetition is not necessary, though of course the reality to which it points will continue throughout the age.

The wonders described in verses 18 – 20 may be seen as upheavals in nature but are more likely to be images depicting the convulsions of history for that is what the language used would have suggested to a Jewish mind. It is hard to see here, as some do, a reference to ongoing miraculous feats performed by the Lord's followers.

Proof Of Jesus' Authority

Second, Peter portrayed the events of the Day of Pentecost as proof of Jesus power, authority and Messiahship. Having spoken to the curious crowds of Jesus life, death and resurrection he declared:

"This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear... Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Acts 2:32 – 36

That Jesus sent the Holy Spirit as He had promised He would (Luke 24:49) was visible proof that He had been exalted to the right hand of God and asked the Father to fulfil His promise.

"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever."

John 14:16

The words of Psalm 110 had come to pass.

'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."

Psalm 110:34 – 35

Jesus' Final Act Of Salvation

Third, and going beyond Peter's words on the day, we can learn more of the significance of the Day of Pentecost if we view it as the fulfilment of Jesus' promise recorded in John 16.

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment... when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth"

John 16:7 – 13

When He sent the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost the Lord Jesus completed the final act of His saving ministry. Having lived, died, risen and ascended on behalf of His church He now sent His Spirit to work out in them what He had already won for them.

“Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.”

John Stott

In all these ways Pentecost was, like the crucifixion and the resurrection a once for all event, never to be repeated. Never again would the age of the Spirit begin. Never again would Jesus be exalted to the right hand of the Father. Never again would the Spirit be sent into the world — He is here and His ministry is ongoing.

However, the effects of the Spirit’s outpouring will continue throughout the present age.

Disciples Equipped For The Mission

Fourth, on the Day of Pentecost Jesus’ disciples were supplied with what they needed to fulfil the task He had assigned to them (John 20:21 – 22). It was what He had commanded them to wait for.

“Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.”

Luke 24:49

Pentecost was the day when the disciples who were present were baptised with the Spirit. Since that time, as we have seen previously, Jesus’ disciples are baptised with His Spirit when they are born again. It is not necessary for them to wait for a “Pentecost experience,” but if the same Spirit has baptised and equipped them for the task, in common with those who were present in Jerusalem that day, they will see the fruit of the Pentecost experience in their lives.

The First Revival?

Fifth, the Day of Pentecost could be said to be the first revival: its effects among the believers in Jerusalem resemble one of those visitations of God in which whole communities become aware of His overpowering presence. Such times are often marked by phenomena we consider to be unusual and are always marked by a deep sense of awe and widespread conviction of sin. But we must not allow this idea to lower our expectations and label as exceptional what God intends to be the church’s normal experience. The question is, to what extent can we expect the effects of the Day of Pentecost to be our ongoing normal experience?

The Outcome

The experience of the Day of Pentecost was not just a passing buzz. Luke is careful to describe the effect it had. Three thousand new believers were baptised and added to the church, they became committed learners, a strong bond of fellowship formed between them and the growth continued. Actually we could say that not only the remainder of Acts 2 but the remainder of the book describes the effects of Pentecost.

The book of Acts is a narrative — it tells a story — and should be read as such. It is an account of what the Holy Spirit did do and as such it is an example of what the Holy Spirit can do. It sets before us what is possible but we must be careful in applying it beyond that. It does not tell us how things must be. For that we have to look to the teaching parts of the Bible. It does not tell us how things will be at all times throughout the present age. For that we must look to the prophetic parts of the Bible.

So why has the Holy Spirit given us this record of the effects of the Day of Pentecost? Surely it is so we can give glory to God for His mighty works in the accomplishment of the ongoing mission of His Son but I believe He has also set it before us both to encourage us as we carry on that mission and as an example of what we should long for and pray for.

Next Week

We have thought about what it means to be baptised with the Holy Spirit and what it means to be filled with the Spirit. Next week we will look at some other terms the Bible uses to describe the influence of God’s Spirit in our lives.