

**WEDNESDAY AM BIBLE STUDY**  
**OCTOBER 23, 2024**

**THE BOOK OF ACTS**

**RESOURCES**

Christian Dogmatics (edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson)  
The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church (edited by Paul D. Opsahl)  
The Lutheran Theology of the Holy Spirit (by Fred Perry Hall)

**INTRODUCTION**

The overarching messages found in the Gospel of Luke continue in the Book of Acts. These messages include the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ, salvation for all (Jew and Gentile alike), and the upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God where the poor and humble are exalted. One major difference between the two books of the Bible is that Acts deals less with actions and places more emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit which has spoken through the Old Testament prophets (Luke 1:67) and which descended upon Jesus in a unique way at his baptism (Luke 3:21-22) and which had been surrendered to God, the Father, on the cross (Luke 23:46) is now given to the church.

As an extension of Jesus' ministry (his life, death, resurrection, and ascension) God bestows the Holy Spirit upon all believers and inaugurates the third and last period of salvation history. It is both distinct from and simultaneously in continuity with the Old Testament and the life of Christ.

- In the period of the Old Testament which, according to Luke, also includes the time covered by the first two chapters of his gospel, the Holy Spirit was given to certain individuals who spoke as prophets.
- In the center of time, which began with Jesus' baptism and ended with his ascension, Jesus was the sole bearer of the Spirit.
- At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit created the church and was promised to the church until the end of time (which we call the Parousia). No longer did just a handful of people receive the Holy Spirit. Since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon every believer. Pentecost marked the fulfillment of the promise made in the Old Testament and by Jesus, himself.

**ACTS 2 – THE PENTECOST NARRATIVE**

Some are quick to see Pentecost as the reversal of the story of Babel as outlined in Genesis 11. However, there is little evidence from both the historical and religious context to suggest that Luke or his readers would have made such a connection. There is more support for linking the Pentecost event with the renewal of the Sinai covenant.

In preparation for this session, I read an article by Chad Bird, a pastor, professor, and guest lecturer in Old Testament and Hebrew. The article was written for 1517 (what used to be called *The Lutheran* magazine). His questions address the importance of the covenant and Pentecost as he writes:

*At the foot of Mt. Sinai, God told Israel how to celebrate Pentecost once they reached the holy land. Generations later, on the day of this Old Testament festival, Christ poured out his Spirit in Jerusalem. What made Pentecost the ideal day for this gift to be given? Of the 364 other days of the year upon which Christ could have poured out his Holy Spirit, why did Jesus do so on exactly the fiftieth day after Easter? What makes Shavuot so fitting a time for Jesus to give his Holy Spirit to the church?*

I will attempt to answer those questions based on what we know about the Old Testament traditions. The second major festival that the Israelites celebrated (Passover being the first) was Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot in Hebrew). The *Feast of Weeks* is better described as the feast of seven weeks. It begins on the day after Passover. From that point, the Israelites were to count forty-nine days before starting the celebration of the Feast of Weeks as outlined in Deuteronomy 16:9-12 (hence the name, Pentcost, which means *fiftieth*).

Pentecost is an agricultural festival. The Israelites presented to the Lord two loaves of bread, made from fine flour and baked with leaven, as the first-fruits of the wheat harvest. In addition to the grain offering, they offered one bull, two rams, seven lambs, along with a sin offering of a male goat, and two male lambs for a peace offering (Numbers 28:26-31). Since the first sheaf of the wheat harvest was presented to the Lord on the day after Passover, and the first sheaf of the wheat harvest was offered once more fifty days later, Passover and Pentecost marked the beginning and end of the grain harvest.

Over time, Pentecost came to be the anniversary feast of the giving of the Law and the establishment of the covenant at Sinai. In Exodus 19:1, the Israelites arrived in the wilderness of Sinai in the *third month* after they had left Egypt. Since they left on the day after Passover, in the middle of the first month, the fiftieth day after Passover would have fallen within this same time frame. Also in 2 Chronicles, the writer describes a gathering in Jerusalem, during the third month, where the covenant was celebrated and renewed.

Another link with the Old Testament connects Pentecost with the Jubilee Year. In Leviticus 25:8-55 we have an extensive outline of the fiftieth year (every seven sabbaths of years). During this time, any ancestral land that Israeli families had sold was given back to them. Also, any Israelite who had to sell themselves (or was sold) into slavery to another Israelite would regain his freedom. Not only the people but the land itself was *free* from being worked. No planting or sowing, harvesting or reaping took place during the fiftieth year.

Like the sabbatical year, the jubilee year was a great sabbath rest or rest for the people of God and the land that belonged to them. As we can see, the number fifty was closely associated with the remission of debts, the emancipation of slaves, and rest within God's protective care. Like the festival held every fifty years, so the festival held every year on the fiftieth day proclaimed: 1) how God had freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and 2) how God had fulfilled his promise to give the people the Holy Land and 3) how God provided rest for the Israelites from their labors.

## **OTHER CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE OLD TESTAMENT FESTIVAL**

As the days between Passover and Pentecost were symbolic of the days of waiting between the Israelites' departure from Egypt and their entrance into Canaan (when they could finally offer the first-fruits from the soil of the Holy Land) so these days between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the giving of the first-fruits of the Spirit on Pentecost were also days of waiting.

As just noted, when the Israelites celebrated Pentecost, they offered to God the first-fruits of the wheat harvest. At the new Pentecost, God offered to the church the first-fruits of the Spirit. By offering the first-fruits of grain, the Israelites bore witness that the whole field and crop belonged to God, whose continued blessing was requested through the sacrifice itself. Similarly, Christ placed the Spirit within each believer as a pledge that the whole person, body and soul, belonged in God's care which would continue until the *full harvest* at the end of time.

When the law was given at Sinai, God appeared in a thick cloud, at the sound of a ram's horn, with thunder and lightening flashes and in smoke. And the mountains were burning with fire. Then the Lord spoke to the Israelites from the midst of the fire. At Jerusalem there was the rush of a violent wind from heaven, divided tongues, as of fire, which rested upon each of them. In both cases there was divine speech connected with divine fire, but the message could not have been more different.

The Pentecost in the Old Testament was an annual celebration of the giving of the first covenant and the one in Acts is then considered to be the celebration of the new covenant. The new covenant was prophesied by Jeremiah in 31:31-34. It was then established by Jesus at the Last Supper and preached by the apostles at the pouring out of the Spirit in Acts 2. In the old covenant the Ten Commandments were given to the Israelites. In the new covenant we receive the fulfillment of the law of Moses and the message of the prophets. The Spirit who anointed Jesus at his baptism was the same Spirit who came upon the apostles at Pentecost to preach freedom from sin, the gift of the kingdom of God, and rest in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

## **INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PENTECOST EVENT**

As mentioned earlier, the sequence of events in Acts 2:1-21 is commonly interpreted as the reversal of Genesis 11:1-9, the Tower of Babel event when God was said to have confused the languages of the people. Based on that theory, when we fast forward to Acts 2, then, it is understood that the Holy Spirit (and by extension the Christian gospel) restored the unity among the different people of the world that was lost at Babel.

The vision of unity proposed by this interpretation is appealing and the two episodes are certainly connected. The verb used for *confuse* in Acts 2:6 (*syncheō*) is the same word in the Septuagint translation of Genesis 11. Its noun form is also used for the name of the city, Babel (*sygchysis*) which literally means *confusion*.

One scholar that I studied, Eric Barreto (from Princeton Theological Seminary), challenges whether this accurately reflects what happened in Acts 2. He points out that this interpretation overlooks the fact that no restoration of a common language occurs in Acts 2. Instead, the disciples are heard in all different dialects dependent upon their audience.

What we witness, then, is the Holy Spirit validating differences and working through it, not erasing differences and working despite it. The oracle from Joel cited by Peter affirms this interpretation (through its vivid language of *all flesh*) to describe the Spirit's infiltration in the lives of people of all genders, ages, and social status.

### **QUESTIONS TO PONDER**

Does the Acts story call us to be a church with only one language and one voice?

Can we strive for unity without erasing differences and instead affirm them?

Is the Spirit found in a church where all members look, think, and act alike?

Is the Spirit found in a church that takes differences as a starting point for manifesting the Spirit?

### **THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTS 2**

- The promise of the Holy Spirit compelled 120 people to gather in anticipation on that day. They rearranged their schedules and synchronized their calendars to make themselves available to God.
- By the power of the Holy Spirit, each person in that room was able to speak in a language other than their own.
- The Holy Spirit got the attention of the crowd on the street either because of the mighty sound of the rushing wind (which would catch my attention) or the sheer chaos of all those people speaking together at the same time.
- Peter was emboldened to speak to the crowd by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- As a result of the work of the Holy Spirit and the message Peter delivered, over 3,000 people were baptized and formed a community where the Word was taught and preached as they gathered around the table for communion and prayer.

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit transcended multiple layers of differences to fulfill God's promise.

### **SOME THOUGHTS FROM PASTOR GERHARD KRODEL, LUTHERAN THEOLOGIAN**

Krodel did a study on the Pentecost story. He noted that this account contradicts the Johannine story in which the gift of the Spirit was imparted on the disciples by the resurrected Christ on the same night that he rose from the dead (John 20:22). In that account, Jesus breathed into his disciples the Holy Spirit (and not fifty days later by the ascended Lord). Krodel believed any attempt to harmonize the two texts would lead us nowhere because Luke deliberately separated what originally was viewed as being one event, namely, the resurrection of Christ (and the exaltation that came with it) and later the bestowal of the Spirit.

Since Luke separated the resurrection from the exaltation by 40 days, he also had to separate the bestowal of the Spirit from the resurrection. Hence, Krodel believes the author of Luke-Acts chose the next Jewish festival for the imparting of the Spirit.

Krodel also came to the conclusion that the language miracle of Pentecost should not be interpreted as constituting a *miracle of audition* through which each foreign visitor merely heard in his/her own language what the apostles said in Aramaic.

On the contrary, Luke presented us with a miracle of proclamation because from his own experiences preaching creates faith and it can also cause division. Therefore, the gospel is to be proclaimed in an understandable language at all times. The author of Acts sees the chief effect of the Spirit's coming upon the disciples in their bold proclamation of the mighty acts of God.

Krodel went on to explore the theological message which Luke sought to convey to his readers by means of the Pentecost narrative and the interpretive speech by Peter. He starts out by saying that a careful study of Acts 2 shows that it summarizes the Book of Acts even as the Nazareth story in Luke summarizes the third Gospel. Several Lukan themes are brought out in Acts 2, such as the outpouring of the Spirit as the fulfillment of prior promises made by Jesus, by John the Baptist, and by the prophet Joel. Moreover, Luke retained the Christological basis of the Spirit in Acts 2:33. The Holy Spirit is received by Jesus from the Father and poured out by Jesus upon the disciples. As an eschatological gift, it is granted to every believer.

The primary effect of the Spirit is the proclamation of the mighty acts of God in an understandable language. Since all Christians are recipients of the Spirit, therefore all are prophets. Peter declared this when he added the quotation from Joel, *and they shall prophesy*. The mandate of witnessing to Christ is laid on all disciples and therefore we hear later on in Acts of nameless Christians who were scattered like seeds across the region *preaching the word*. The task of witnessing to Christ by the power of the Spirit was not restricted to Peter and to Paul, the chief figures in the Book of Acts.

Luke saw this as a unique miracle, similar to the conception of Jesus Christ. It was the miracle of the church's birth and of the beginning of the age of the Spirit. The first outpouring of the Spirit upon the disciples is therefore unrepeatable, for it erupted not as a consequence of preaching, but directly. Its visible and audible manifestation were likewise unique. Later on, Luke will narrate several *mini-Pentecosts* but these took place after preaching and well after the events of Acts 2.

The Pentecost account also serves as a pre-enactment of the universality of the church's mission. The list of nations and the reference to *those who are afar* indicate the worldwide dimension of the church. Later on, Luke will narrate how the church, under the direction of the Spirit, broke through barriers of Judaism and was led across new frontiers.

The Spirit now directs the church in its mission. The most important decision made by the apostles in the Book of Acts is introduced in Acts 15:28 – *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*. Leaders will be chosen by the gift of the Holy Spirit. All are called to mission and service.

## **OCTOBER 30**

### **ACTS AND THE EARLY CHURCH**