

MISSION: A PARADIGM FROM PENTECOST

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And He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:46-49 NASB)

The preceding quotation is Jesus’ parting commission to his disciples immediately prior to his ascension as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Though brief, it carries major missiological implications that Luke expounds in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. Acts includes in its prologue this reiteration of the final commissioning:

Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (Acts 1:4-8)

These words serve to prepare the reader for the treatment of the mission inaugurated by the risen Christ. Luke’s account of a final commissioning

is not unique in the New Testament canon, but it is distinctive for its treatment of the mission as inseparable from the person of the Holy Spirit. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses” is the Lucan missiological axis on which rests the mandate and experience of the apostolic mission through the ages. It is poetically trinitarian, as the Risen Son proclaims “the promise of My Father upon you.” Thus, Luke presents as Jesus’ own concern that the gift of the Spirit is a prior condition to the endeavour of witness.

Jesus’ words, “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now,” foreshadow the narrative of the events of Pentecost, which occurs in the second chapter of Luke’s second volume. If the book of *Luke* is his telling of the gospel of salvation, *Acts* is his construal of “salvation applied”.¹ The pentecostal event is the initial immersion of the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. As such, it provides a weighty exploration of the mission of God. First, the narrative of Pentecost proposes a paradigm for mission that closely resembles the major components of Jesus’ final words to the disciples. Second, even a cursory reading of the relevant passages raises the question: to whom is the mission directed? This question was pressing for the early believers, one which occupies a great deal of the New Testament. So, in the first two chapters of *Acts* Jesus inaugurates the proclamation of his promise of forgiveness, in which his followers will bear witness to his story, in a cycle of mission, through the power of the Holy Spirit, emanating from the first group of believers out across all human boundaries. Pentecost clarifies the agency and scope of the Risen Lord’s mission, and his invitation for the participation of his followers.

Pentecost Clarifies a Missiological Paradigm

The paradigm for the mission of Jesus is foremost one of trinitarian initiation. The content of preaching is the mighty deeds of God: what God has accomplished, the Spirit whom God will send, the forgiveness that God calls people to and bestows on them. The particular emphasis of Pentecost is the free giving of the Holy Spirit for mission as promised by the Father and proclaimed by the Son. While the origin of the mission is never questioned, the very title, the *Acts of the Apostles*,

1. William J. Larkin and Joel F. Williams (eds.), *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach* (New York: Orbis, 1998), p. 170.

points toward some human agency in the mission of God. In Acts, Luke clarifies that agency.

Luke sets up the narrative of the outpouring of the Spirit in the upper room, where the disciples were “continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 2:14). They were united and they were praying. They were not, as one might imagine, crusading to the ends of the earth at the first recognition of what was accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ. The response to witnessing the resurrection was, first of all, communion with God. Once again, God initiated the very task he commissioned from his followers, in the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Having waited and depended on their master, the disciples experience the radical outpouring of his generosity and presence through miraculous signs that amaze those present. Yet, the most astonishing affirmation of the pentecostal outpouring is not its miracles of wind, sound and tongues, but the permanent endowment of the Spirit upon the followers of Jesus. The promise, according to Peter, spans generations. “The Gospel,” writes Robert S. Coleman, “became life and power within them”.²

On this particular occasion, the Holy Spirit demonstrated miraculous power by giving verbal utterances to the believers, for proclamation of the Jesus story and its intrinsic promise for humankind. While many or all of the Galileans spoke (2:7), it is Peter’s speech that Luke records. Peter begins his address by offering an explanation for the supernatural events on the day of Pentecost: the wind, the sound and the utterances. He defends the validity of the miracle by arguing its divine origin. As the wind of the Spirit is poured out on the disciples, they are enabled to speak in the vernacular languages of the assembled people. The speakers were Galileans, a people with a reputation for being uncultured; hence, the reaction of amazement among the crowd.³

At least two points should be highlighted here. First, that God enabled the witnesses of Jesus’ message to speak in the vernacular languages asserts the Christian call to unity and to an inclusive mission. “Ever since the early church fathers,” writes Stott, “commentators have seen the blessing of Pentecost as a deliberate reversal of the curse of Babel...in

2. Robert S. Coleman, “The Promise of the Holy Spirit for the Great Commission”, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 16 (1992), pp. 271-83 (280).

3. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church and the World* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 65.

Jerusalem the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that the nations would now be gathered together in Christ”.⁴ Secondly, that the Holy Spirit initiated the proclamation of the gospel in the native languages of the audience advocates the necessity of relevant proclamation. The Holy Spirit is one who enables the proclamation of the gospel message in a way that is relevant and accessible to all people within the radically open scope of the new mission.

After Peter clarifies the significance of the miracle, he seizes the opportunity to proclaim the mightiest of God’s deeds. John Stott considers Peter’s speech to systematically reveal six components of the gospel message in Acts 2:22-39: Jesus’ life and ministry; his death; his resurrection; his exaltation; his salvation; and the new community stemming from these.⁵ Whatever else this may imply, it clearly shows that the pith of Peter’s preaching is the exposition of the Jesus story.

In the Lucan model, the desired response to the Jesus event is twofold: repentance and baptism. The audience assembled for Peter’s preaching is said to be “pierced to the heart” (2:37) upon hearing the apostle’s words of accusation, “this Jesus whom you crucified” (2:36). Howard Marshall concludes that “Peter’s hearers took his words as applying to them personally. Many of them had perhaps tacitly agreed with the action of their leaders in putting Jesus to death”.⁶ The conviction of ultimate human failure before God would have been palpable for that particular crowd of Jews and proselytes, people whose identities were contingent on the privilege of serving that very God. Their impending response is predicated on their acceptance of responsibility for humanity’s ultimate failure.

Immediately following a conviction of failure comes an invitation to forgiveness and baptism: “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). Peter acts as God’s emissary to extend the gift of forgiveness to them. Repentance here indicates a turning from error, in action as well as attitude. Together with baptism, it is a repudiation of autonomous human rebellion, a break from a “perverse generation,” an Old Testament moniker for the insurgence of the Israelites in the wilderness against the Lordship of their Saviour.⁷

4. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 68.

5. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, pp. 75-77.

6. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 80.

7. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 80.

Water baptism is the outward expression of the death of the former self-directing identity and the re-emergence of a life hidden in Christ, under his Lordship. Stott calls it the “humiliation of baptism”.⁸ The response of the assembled audience is a refusal to persist in the rebellion that killed God incarnate. It entails two great gifts from a very forgiving Lord: forgiveness for the rebellion and, adding mercy to mercy, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The decision to accept God’s gift of forgiveness brings with it the further gift of the Holy Spirit with benefit to the believer; however, here the emphasis is for the benefit of the not-yet believer. The Holy Spirit enables the mission of God by gifting God’s servants with utterances, prophecies and other miraculous gifts. Peter quotes from the prophecy of Joel, which includes the gifts of dreams, visions and other wonders (Acts 3:17-21). The excerpt ends, “And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:21). Had there been any doubt as to the intended beneficiaries of the giving of spiritual gifts to believers, this lays it to rest: the Spirit gifts believers for mission to those not yet reached. What can seem self-evident must be reiterated on account of the human tendency to fuel pride with the blessings of God. No such allowance is made; the gifts, whatever joy they bring the believer, are for the spiritual benefit of others. The Holy Spirit’s autonomy in gift-giving includes the message that the kingdom of God is inclusive. Stott writes, “the universal gift (the Spirit) will lead to a universal ministry.”⁹ An overriding concern of Luke’s treatment of the mission as initiated by Jesus and experienced at Pentecost is the startling scope of the missionary field.

Implicit and explicit in this are three affirmations as to the availability of the promise of the Holy Spirit regardless of geographic, chronological or social boundaries. Indeed, it is important to note that the outpouring of the Spirit was not new at or after Pentecost; it is part of the experience of God in both the Old Testament and the life and ministry of Jesus. What is new is the broadening of the possible recipients of that blessing.

First, in his pre-ascension commission to the disciples, Jesus forecasts the proclamation of the message “to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Luke reiterates in Acts 1:8, “you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part

8. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 78.

9. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 74.

of the earth.” The message is configured in a kind of expanding geographical pattern, representative of its spread from Jerusalem and Judaism outwards to all people of all cultures and lands. This theme is central to the entire narrative of the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost. Ferdinand Hahn observes,

The story of Pentecost, with its list of Jews and proselytes coming from all nations (2.9-11), and the quotation from Joel about ‘all flesh’ (2.17), shows that a world-wide horizon is already being opened up here.¹⁰

Luke makes this rhetorically conspicuous with the phrase “devout men from every nation” (2:5). The message was proclaimed that day in the various languages of those present, representing a substantial number of cultures (2:9-11).

Second, the scope of the mission is not only without geographic boundaries, but also without boundaries of time. When the disciples press Jesus to disclose the timing of the coming of the heavenly kingdom, he tells them that timing is an issue of the Father’s sovereignty (2:6-8), not for them to negotiate about or even know; they are to carry out the mission without placing temporal boundaries around it. This is made clearer still in 2:39, where Peter assures the assembled audience that the promise is for “you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call unto Himself.” Thus, while stressing the primacy of God’s prerogative to initiate the giving of the Spirit, Peter further preaches the radical inclusiveness of this offering throughout subsequent generations.

Third, the excerpt from Joel makes clear the social scope of the new promise. “I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (*pasa sarx*, all flesh), regardless of sex, age and status: sons, daughters; young, old; servants; men, women.¹¹ The main theme “is that God is going to pour out his Spirit upon all people, *i.e.* upon all kinds of people and not just upon the prophets, kings and priests, as had been the case in Old Testament times”.¹²

Together, these three affirmations regarding the scope of the new church’s evangelistic mission must have come as a great shock to the devout Jewish crowd, whose identity was hitherto predicated on an

10. Ferdinand Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament* (London: SMC Press, 1965), p. 132.

11. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 74.

12. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 73.

exclusive claim to divine grace. Peter's message is daring to those assembled and for all time. He is audaciously proclaiming that the least likely will receive the gifts of God, in salvation (forgiveness) and in empowerment (the Holy Spirit poured out for mission).

There is in the Pentecostal model a kind of dance between God and his creatures, which alternates between divine initiative and human participation. We have seen this paradigm in the writing of Luke: Jesus promises the Spirit, his disciples wait; the Spirit unleashes power, the disciples proclaim. The result is that still more people come to accept the generous gifts of God, which are forgiveness and the indwelling of the Spirit. The Spirit, Pentecost teaches, is given not for the spiritual warmth of the individual, but in order to continue this cycle of the mission of God through human agency, in a kind of emanation from the person of Jesus throughout geography, time and human circumstance. The human being is saved from the human initiative ("this perverse generation!") in order to participate in the initiative of God. Pentecost teaches that this is the hope of all humankind.

The Promise: You Shall Be my Witnesses

Located somewhere in that ever-expanding pattern is the church of today and beyond, worldwide. What applications can this church glean from the missiological paradigm of Pentecost? The answer is found in locating that church precisely within the emanation that is instigated by God. Before everything else comes the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty in the completion of his mission. The Church must submit to the Spirit, the free and surprising actor of proclamation; as such, much of mission will remain beyond dogma, systems and schemes.

First, the church must continuously focus on the content of proclamation: the message of and about Jesus. It is not church affiliation or Christian ethics that are the substance of the pentecostal proclamation; it is the accomplishments of Jesus, the "mighty deeds of God." Pentecost teaches that, with the guidance of Spirit, his message needs to be proclaimed in all languages, not only in every verbal language, but across all barriers of communication. There is hope in this for our circumstances. Preaching is easily frustrated in a post-Enlightenment, rationalist, individualist Western milieu. However, if Galileans could speak with every tongue to devout religious people, believers in this context can be empowered to preach in a context of intellectual

adversity. The gospel message is the same regardless of context; but the Holy Spirit enables ordinary believers to bear witness to that message in ways that pierce the hearts of any whom God calls.

Second, the Church must continue to be challenged to expect God to move where He is not expected: among those on the margins, among those of all demographics, and in all cultures. The message is unifying, as it legitimizes the possibility that God could be gracious to and through any human life. In a North American context, where there is an attitude of cultural superiority that makes the church suspicious of its kin abroad, this means embracing the validity of other cultures as loci of legitimate spiritual activity. In another culture it may mean legitimizing the spiritual equality of the genders, or classes and so on.

Tony Campolo recounts an instructive experience he had in New Zealand. A prominent Christian leader had been advocating that Christians seek to destroy the Maori culture, on account of the prevalence of demonic worship among its people. Others had countered his arrogant claims. Campolo was questioned on his position and offered the following:

I went on to explain that I believed that the Maori culture was created by God and that while some evil influences had permeated it, as it had all cultures, God basically loved the Maori way of life and wanted to purify it and lift it up to what it was originally intended to be. I explained that the more Christianized the Maori society became, the more “Maori” it would be. The music, dances, and other art forms of the Maori people should not be rejected, but should be utilized as instruments for glorifying God. It is hard to describe the enthusiasm with which my Maori friends greeted my perspective on their culture, and I was soon to see its impact.¹³

Third, believers must wait and pray expectantly for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Again, the church can anticipate that the Spirit will move through vehicles other than those expected. Much inauthenticity could be avoided in evangelism were Christians to genuinely regard the responsibility of that weighty task as belonging to the Spirit.¹⁴ Neither conviction nor salvation are ours to effect; neither should we presume that our powers and wisdom will be effective mediators of the Jesus message to all people. Only the Spirit can achieve such a monumental task. Would Luke embrace the Christian commercial industry of growth

13. Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 194.

14. Coleman, “Promise of the Holy Spirit,” p. 278.

schemes? How does the human tendency to systematize evangelism and fill pews relate to the Pentecostal outpouring? They are at odds, and Pentecost upholds the example of the first missionaries: prayer and dependence on the Spirit's leading.

Despite human pride and failure, the message is one of great hope, as it ultimately calls for people to wait and for God to act—a counter-intuitive but ultimately victorious combination. The message affirms Christian unity and Christian hope, as well as the radical inclusiveness of the God whom Christians serve. The Spirit has been promised by the risen Lord, as have his gifts for the spreading of the gospel story. The church can take courage to know that under divine care, it will continue to emanate throughout the earth, throughout the ages and throughout the hearts of all kinds of people, which is the will and glory of God.