

CLOTHED WITH POWER

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Acts 2:1-21

Not long ago, I was in Gallatin for a meeting at the Presbyterian church. On my way there, I passed another church that caught my attention. That particular church had a sign by the road that identifying it as The Book of Acts Pentecostal Church. The Book of Acts Pentecostal Church—that is a great name. It tells you exactly what you need to know about that church. It is a church in the Pentecostal tradition. Their foundation in scripture is the New Testament’s Book of Acts. That is logical given that it is in the Book of Acts that we are provided the details of that moment when the Holy Spirit descended upon the followers of Jesus during the festival known as Pentecost.

Book of Acts Pentecostal Church is a far better name than First Presbyterian Church. What does that name tell you?—that we are a church, that we are Presbyterian, and that we are First. First at what? Playing dodgeball? Baking pies? What is it that we are first at? If we are first, then who is second? It’s certainly not an expression of Christian humility to brag that you are number one. And didn’t Jesus tell us that the first shall be last?

Nonetheless, First Presbyterian Church still provides more information than those new churches with their intentionally vague names such as Mosaic Church or The Foundry. On my way home today, I’ll drive past the Bridge Church. Actually, it’s not even Church, it’s Bridge Fellowship. And it always makes me think of my grandmother who liked to play bridge. A fellowship of bridge players—she’d love that. Book of Acts Pentecostal Church is a mouthful but it tells you all you need to know.

But it was not the name of this church that caught my eye. What got my attention was the bottom half of the sign. In movable letters below Book of Acts Pentecostal Church was the message to everyone passing by. The message stated, “Read Romans 1.” I was confused. I thought this was the Book of Acts church and now they are telling me to look at another book. Talk about mixed messages! That’s like that Coca-Cola plant putting a banner out front that says, “Drink Pepsi.” Or the Ford dealer with a sign that asks, “Have you driven a Mercedes lately? They’re really fancy.” Or the scoreboard at Neyland Stadium announcing, “I heart Vanderbilt.” So, ‘Read Romans 1’ kind of threw me.

Pentecostalism is best described as being a Christian movement rather than being a church or denomination. It is the fastest growing group of Christians in the world with over 700 denominations and numerous independent congregations. It is

estimated that there are between 250 and 500 million Pentecostals around the world. And that number is growing.

Pentecostalism originated in the United States. It started around 1900 at a series of revivals in Los Angeles known as the Azusa Street Revivals. The roots of Pentecostalism have been traced to the Holiness movement of the Methodist church. The original Pentecostals embraced in three doctrines: salvation, sanctification, and baptism in the Spirit. They defined salvation as the forgiveness of sins and belief in Jesus Christ as personal savior. Sanctification is an inner purity of heart in which the believer no longer practices sin. And once these first two steps are accomplished, the believer then receives the baptism of the Spirit. Evidence of this baptism is the ability to speak in tongues. All Pentecostals believe that Christianity should result in visible changes to a person's life. An ongoing emphasis of Pentecostalism is an emotional excitement or fervor of faith. Pentecostals seek to live spirit-filled and spirit-empowered lives. Empowerment by the Spirit is reflected with the receiving of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and having the power of divine healing.

Worship in the Pentecostal church is designed to bring about an experience of God's presence. The gifts of the spirit are often demonstrated during church services. Services can incorporate healings, trances, and speaking in tongues. Congregations are likely to respond actively to the sermon with applause, or shouts of amen or hallelujah. The goal of worship is to allow the people to feel that the service is actually led by the Spirit.

Pentecostals take their name from the experience of the disciples at the festival of Pentecost as described in the second chapter of the Book of Acts—our reading for today.

The Book of Acts is the continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Luke's Gospel ends with Jesus ascending into heaven. Acts picks up at the same place. Before he ascends, Jesus tells his followers, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem... and to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1:8). Jesus then ascends into heaven and this is the last time the disciples will see him. The group returns to Jerusalem as Jesus commanded.

Pentecost was a Jewish Festival also known as the Festival of Weeks. It celebrates God giving the Law to Moses. It falls fifty days after Passover.

On the day of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus were gathered together in a house in Jerusalem when something happens. Suddenly, in that place, there is a great and terrible noise. It sounded like violent, rushing wind.

And then wisps of light appeared, looking like flames of fire, moving through the room and settling on each person in the room. And as these flames settled—as

Jesus predicted—each person is filled with the Holy Spirit. Then each one begins to speak in a different language. This is the Spirit at work.

Because it is Pentecost, Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims and worshipers convening there from points across the known world. And here, we are offered that wonderful list of cultures and nationalities: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, and so on. It's like the roll call at the United Nations.

Because of the racket and commotion, these pilgrims are drawn to the house where the followers of Jesus are gathered. The Christians, at this point, have spilled into the street.

The pilgrims are amazed to hear the Galileans speak in different languages, in each person's native tongue. The Apostles are preaching and telling those in the crowd about *God's deeds of power*.

Peter steps forward and takes control of the situation. He addresses the crowd and places the events in context by quoting the Old Testament book of Joel where Joel foretells of that day when God will pour out God's spirit on all people. On that day, there will be prophesying and dreams and visions. When that day comes, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Peter goes on to preach the story of Jesus and how Jesus is part of God's great plan for all. The crowd responds to Peter asking what they can do. Peter tells them, *Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*. We are told that 3000 people were baptized that day. And the community of believers grows and the people share their belongings and give to those who are in need. They worship and eat together and give praise to God. The church is born.

The Holy Spirit is powerful. It moves through us, connecting us to each other and to God. It inspires us and pushes us; it guides and directs us in the ways of God. The Holy Spirit is God with us.

So, it is interesting to see in the Pentecost story how the very first thing the followers of Jesus do when filled with the Spirit is to speak in other languages, other tongues. Maybe that is what the occasion demanded—the ability to witness to all those people from foreign lands, to share with them the story of Jesus and the power of God, to offer them the way of salvation.

As Christians today, when do we need the ability to speak to others in their native language? The obvious answer is when we reach out to refugees and immigrants to assist them in their journey through our land. We can demonstrate God's love if we can speak kinds words they can understand. And what about those

who speak our language but whose backgrounds and life experiences are radically different from our own? If we allow it, the Spirit is there to help us speak to anyone.

What we see here in this story is just how evident the Spirit is. It comes with a sound like that of a violent wind. It looks like fire. The Holy Spirit is not something discreet or subtle or inconspicuous. It is loud; it is brash; it is meant to be noticed. When it settles on someone, the result is that something happens. People are changed. The Spirit empowers people and it brings people together.

At the end of Luke's gospel, just before Jesus ascends into heaven, Jesus commands his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they *have been clothed with power from on high* (Luke 24:49). God is going to send something. The disciples don't know what it is—only that they have been told to wait. Whatever it is, they will be *clothed with power* when it arrives. Later, on Pentecost, they will receive the Holy Spirit. That is their clothing of power.

That is how we should view the Holy Spirit, as clothing that we wear on the outside, something that all can see. The Holy Spirit is not meant to be unobtrusive or covert. It is not meant to reside inside of us unheard and unseen.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit the disciples will go and change the world.

I believe that the Holy Spirit resides on each of us. It is God's gift and it is an obligation. With the power of the Spirit, the early followers of Christ did amazing things. We can do the same. With the Spirit, we are to be witnesses to our neighbors as well as *to the ends of the earth*.

Back to that sign outside the Book of Acts Pentecostal Church in Gallatin with the message to Read Romans 1. I went and revisited that chapter of Romans. There's a reason the Book of Acts church was asking people to read Romans 1. That chapter is filled with Spirit talk. Paul describes Jesus as the *Son of God with power according to the Spirit*. In that chapter, Paul gives thanks to God *whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the Gospel of his Son*. Paul tells the church in Rome that he is longing to see them *so that I may share with you some spiritual gifts to strengthen you*. For Paul, the Spirit is alive and active. It is part of him; it is part of his mission to the world.

As our Pentecostal sisters and brothers proclaim, the Holy Spirit is a powerful partner in our faith. It is something that we should embrace. May we wear it with pride.