



Filled with the Spirit on Pentecost

Acts 2:1-13

How can we individually and even corporately as a church have "Spirit-filled" worship and evangelistic zeal? No doubt you have had this question posed to you by a charismatic or Pentecostal friend. As a former Pentecostal-turned Reformed, let me give you a clear answer from the Holy Scriptures. There are two ways to be "Spirit-filled." The first way is the way of man or the way of the Law. Recall Paul's words in Galatians 3:2,

"Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?"

Are we as Reformed churches going to "get in the Spirit" by relying upon the laws of church growth methods and programs, psychological research, or worse — by our own obedience? This is man's way. The second way is the way of God, or the way of the Gospel. The classic text for Pentecost, Acts 2, speaks of this way. It is not a "how to" text of Law, but an "already done" text of Gospel. What it declares to us is that the church is a Spirit-filled organism and institution. This is the wonderful and joyful news of Pentecost in Acts 2. We do not have to, nor can we, do anything on our own to "get in the Spirit;" instead, we must simply receive the Spirit by the God-ordained means of faith.

Pentecost had fully come

Acts 2 begins by saying, *"the day of Pentecost arrived"* (Acts 2:1). What was Pentecost? It was one of the three required feasts for all Hebrew males (Exodus 23:17), which occurred on the fiftieth day after the Passover. It was called the *"Feast of Harvest"* (Exodus 23:16) because it celebrated the end of the barley harvest that the LORD had abundantly provided for his people.

Our text also tells us that Pentecost had *"arrived"* (2:1), or better, had *"fully come"* (KJV). The significance of the word that Luke uses is that it has a special, prophetic significance. The word he uses was used in the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Jeremiah 25:12 to say that the seventy years of Babylonian exile was *"completed."* Luke also uses it in his Gospel of Jesus, to say that *"the days drew near"* for the Lord to ascend into heaven (Luke 9:51). Just as we say "time's up" when the grains of sand fill the bottom of an hourglass, so too, the fulfillment of the Old Testament feast of harvest came in Acts 2. What the disciples were celebrating was not only the end of the feast, but the beginning of its New Covenant reality. Pentecost is the dawn of the new age, the beginning of the harvest of the nations, who would come to Mount Zion to be taught by the LORD himself (Isaiah 2:2-4).

Pentecost was fulfilled; it is never to be repeated by the works of our hands, by the efforts of our feet, or by the mantras of our mouths. Nevertheless the benefits and blessings of that day of fulfillment continue with us today. On Pentecost, what our Lord Jesus Christ merited for us was poured out upon us (2:33). In the ensuing verses, Luke describes the blessings of Pentecost for us.

The sign of a new creation (2:2)

The first blessing was that a new creation had come. In an insignificant room, filled with 120 insignificant men and women, the significance of that day would be made known by a powerful

sign. No cool, gentle breeze refreshed them, but a *"rushing mighty wind"* filled the room, signifying that the church is a new creation.

Think about this for a moment. We take it for granted that wind in Scripture often signifies the Holy Spirit. The question is why? None other than Jesus says this:

"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

(John 3:8)

Just as wind is seemingly sovereign, powerful, and is controlled only by itself, so too it is really with the Holy Spirit. Let us look at a few Old Testament examples of this.

In Genesis 1:2 the Spirit of God is the sovereign, creative presence of God. *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters"* (Genesis 1:1-2). In the beginning God brought into existence all things out of nothing by his sovereign will. When the earth was in its as-yet-unformed state, the Spirit of God hovered over it to fashion and to form it as a beautiful temple for the LORD. From the very beginning, then, the Spirit has been the executor of the creative presence and power of God.

Look also at Genesis 2:7, where we read, *"Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living creature."* Adam was *"of dust,"* meaning that he was made up of the same stuff that you walk on every day. Adam was dust, dirt — a lifeless lump of clay. It was the creative, life-giving power of the Spirit, the breath who gives life, that made Adam a living being.

As it was in creation so it is in redemption. Turning to the prophet Ezekiel we see the scene of a valley filled with dead man's bones (Ezekiel 37) and hear the LORD'S command that Ezekiel make them come to life by preaching to them. This preaching of the Gospel causes breath to enter the bones, flesh to attach to them, and life to enter them. The LORD interprets what happened, saying, *"These bones are the whole house of Israel"* (Ezekiel 37:11). Once more the Spirit created, but this time it was the covenant people of God who were fashioned virtually from nothing — lifeless and decaying bones!

Prior to the Holy Spirit's life-giving work in our lives, our souls were dark and empty, formless and void. We were, and still are, filled with depraved thoughts, full of darkness. We were that vessel of clay, dead in our trespasses and sins. The Law commanded us to *"love the LORD our God and our neighbor as ourselves,"* but we had no power to obey. Nor did the Law give us that power. We were a valley of dead, dry bones; a wasteland of spiritual and eternal death. But behold what God has done for us! He has made us a new creation — his church! He has given light to darkness, breath to dust, flesh to bones! As the Canons of Dort say,

"What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law could do, that God performs by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation; which is the gospel."

(III/IV.6)

Not only as individuals, but also as the church of Jesus Christ are we a new creation that sings,

*The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,
She is His new creation, by water and the word.*

Corporately as the church we have been giving new life and resurrected from the dead. We have been made a vessel of honor to glorify God through telling others about the wonderful new life God has given us. We are not the frozen chosen, but a Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered, Spirit-anointed community of faith going into the world to spread this glorious news: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

The sign of the new temple (2:3-4)

The second blessing of Pentecost was depicted in the sign of *"tongues as of fire."* This was the signification that the church is the new temple of God in the midst of the earth. The imagery of fire in the Scriptures signifies both cleansing and judgment. All of those present at Pentecost certainly knew the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3. The place where Moses stood was *"holy ground"* because the LORD was there, signified by the burning bush. The image of fire illustrates the cleansing aspect of God's holiness and purity. Yet the fire of God's holiness also brings judgment, forcing Moses to the ground to acknowledge his un-holiness. God signified his presence with his people in the wilderness by the pillar of cloud each day and pillar of fire each night. This fire comforted Israel with protection and guidance, but warned the Egyptians of judgment if they traversed its boundary.

Most important for understanding the *"tongues as of fire"* in Acts 2 is the account of the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34-38. When the tabernacle was completed it was subsequently filled with the glorious cloud. The Spirit of God descended to give his approval by consuming the offerings and filling the Holy of Holies with glory just as he descended to give his blessing to the first *"temple"* pronouncing it *"very good"* (Genesis 1:31). Thus, all who brought offerings to the tabernacle knew that they would be cleansed as through fire just as surely as their offerings were judged in the same fire.

We know, though, that the people of God failed God miserably. The prophets described this failure in terms of the temple and its priesthood being utterly defiled. The LORD spoke the gospel of a coming day when he would *"suddenly come to his temple"* and purify the priests of Levi as a *"refiner's fire"* (Malachi 3:1-5). At Pentecost, the earthly and typological tabernacle passed away and was fulfilled by the heavenly reality, even the Lord Jesus Christ himself (John 2:21; Hebrews 10:20). The prophets looked forward to him, the temple made without hands (Hebrews 9:11), the temple whose latter glory far surpassed anything the glorious temple of Solomon could offer (Haggai 2:9).

What is so amazing is that as we are united to Jesus Christ, we as his church are also described as the temple of God. Luke records for us in Acts 2:4 that *"they were all filled with the Holy Spirit"*. The cloud and fire that descended upon and into the tabernacle of Moses has filled a new temple and its new priesthood. We are to offer up *"spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:5). Do you see now why there is nothing we can do to become "Spirit-filled?" It is a work of the sovereign grace of God the Holy Spirit that makes us such, and not our works.

The sign of a new humanity (2:4-13)

Finally, the third blessing of Pentecost is that there is a new humanity to worship the triune God in his churchly temple. We see this in the audible sign of the disciples *"telling ... the mighty works of God"* in the languages of the nations.

At Pentecost, God reversed the curse that he inflicted on humanity at the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). There at Babel *"the whole earth had one language and the same words"* (Genesis 11:1). This led them to be elevated in their own self-righteousness even as they elevated the works of their hands in the form of a city ascending to heaven. But the LORD saw this and came down upon them in judgment, saying, *"Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech"* (Genesis 11:7). Thus he *"dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth"* (Genesis 11:8).

What is a curse in the world with all the divisions of languages becomes a blessing in the church. Because the church is a new humanity; God's gracious work in sinners' hearts is what unites them, and thus undoes the cursed divisions of tribes, tongues, languages, and nations (Revelation 5:9). By his grace diverse peoples are reunited into one people, the people of the Lord Jesus Christ; and by this grace they are reunited into one Body, the Body of Christ. The prophets foresaw the new age of the Spirit in which *"five cities in the land of Egypt (will) speak the language of Canaan and*

swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 19:18). Those who had once hated God and his people would know him as Savior! And therefore, even now those once "afar off" (Ephesians 2:13) have become sons of Abraham, in whom "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

What a message of unity and blessing; what a message we have for the world. In all our diversity we truly come together to celebrate and participate in Pentecost. Despite the color of our skin, the place of our birth, or the political ideology in our minds, we unite before the world as a witness of the saving grace of God in which *"there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28).

May we learn to live as this new creation! May we be moved to a more fervent love for one another as a new humanity. In this way we shall truly be "Spirit-filled," Pentecost churches.

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