

# PENTECOST

Pentecost is traditionally one of the three major holy days (“feast days”) of the Christian Year – the other two being Christmas Day and Easter Sunday. Its title, “Pentecost”, simply means “fifty days”, as it occurs fifty days after Easter Sunday. Therefore, like Easter, it is also a “moveable feast”, not set as is Christmas on a specific date. Another name for Pentecost is “Whitsunday” or “White Sunday” because it is traditionally a day for the baptizing of converts to Christianity who wear white robes. In reality, the color for Pentecost/Whitsunday is red, to symbolize fire and blood – the fiery descent of the Holy Spirit and the blood of martyrs.

The Christian feast of Pentecost is actually built upon the Jewish festival of the Feast of First Fruits (Deut. 16:9), which was also called “Pentecost” (“fifty days”) because the Feast of First Fruit comes fifty days after Passover! As the Christian Pentecost is one of the Church’s three most important festivals, so the Feast of First Fruits was one of ancient Israel’s three festivals.

The Feast of First Fruits (Deut. 16:9-12; Lev. 23:15-21) was to occur at the harvest of the spring wheat, seven weeks after its planting close to Passover. All were to gather at the Temple to make their offerings out of the abundance of their harvest and to thank God. After the offering was given at the Temple, the family was to gather for a celebratory meal.

But this meal was not for them alone. They were to invite to the meal “your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, the strangers, the orphans and the widows” with whom the family has a relationship in order to share the family’s abundance with them. And why should each family share its abundance with the poor? “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt” (Dt. 16:12a). You were poor and powerless once yourself, so remember those who are now poor or powerless in your midst. Thus, the Feast of First Fruits was not only a religious holiday of thanksgiving, of celebration and of feasting; it was also a vehicle to reverse poverty and powerlessness in the community.

As the Jewish feast of First Fruits celebrated the liberation and empowerment of the nation’s poor, so the Christian feast of Pentecost is designed to celebrate the liberation and empowerment of God’s people through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is popularly called the “Birthday of the Church” (even though the church was birthed at the resurrection of Jesus, and even though its origins lay in the congregation of ancient Israel). It is so called because on this day, the Holy Spirit fell upon the gathered followers of Jesus with “tongues of fire”, and the church was launched into its mission of bringing the good news of liberation and salvation through Jesus to the world (Acts 2:1-21).

Thus, Pentecost occupies a very strategic place in the Christian Year, for it stands between that half of the year that celebrates the coming of Jesus Christ and the second half of the year celebrating the creation and mission of the church. It concludes the church’s celebration of the advent, birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. And it introduces the observance of the “church militant”, as we rehearse and encourage ourselves from June through November of a church deeply engaged in the world, bringing good news in sign, deed and word of God’s work to transform the world into the world as God intended it to be!

## **Pentecost Sunday**

**Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; John 7:37-39; John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-21; I Corinthians 12:3b-13.**

**Numbers 11:24-30** is a story of the selection of leaders of Israel, such selection being verified by the presence of the Spirit of God upon them. In being so presented, it bears intriguing similarity to the story of God's anointed of Jesus' disciples with the Holy Spirit that designates them as Jesus' successor and imbues them with Jesus' power (Acts 2:1-13).

The story begins with Moses' complaint to God. "Why . . . do you lay the burden of all this people on me? I am not able to carry all the people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once and do not let me see my misery" (11:11b, 14-15).

Moses is feeling overwhelmed with the task of the leadership of Israel. The ceaseless quarrelling, debate and need for adjudication is proving too much for him to tolerate. Therefore, he complains to the Lord. And God says to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself" (vss. 16-17).

God leads Moses to distribute his workload among seventy elders, so that each bears a responsibility for the governance of Israel, and yet no one is faced with an overwhelming expectation of work. But God does more than divide labor. He also gives to these elders "some of the spirit that is on you" so that they assume and carry out their new responsibilities, understanding that they all belong to the "family of God"

"So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent (of meeting). Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again" (vss. 24-25).

In this sequence, Moses chooses the seventy elders who will share both his work and authority. But it is God who confirms that choice by filling them with "some of the spirit that was on Moses". This is a reference to the divine "spirit" or "wind" (Hebrew *ruakh* that is later referred to in Judges 3:10, II Kings 2:9-10 and Isaiah 42:1). This is a transferrable spirit, moving from one person to another (cf. II Kings 2:9-10). The evidence that any of those "called out" by God have been truly "called forth" is that they speak words of prophecy or ecstatic utterance (cf. I Sam. 10:10; 19:24). But, whereas in Acts, the filling of Jesus' followers with the Spirit is permanent, in the Old Testament it is only temporary, occurring only to authenticate their Godly election as elders.

The story ends with the noting of two additional elders – Eldad and Medad – who later are called forth by God and are filled with the spirit, so that they, too, “are prophesying in the camp” (vs. 27). Joshua calls on Moses to stop them from such frightening action. But Moses responds, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them (all)” (vs. 29)! In other words, Joshua fears that such a display of ecstatic speech would undermine the authority of Moses. But instead, Moses wishes that all the former Hebrew slaves spoke in such ecstatic language because that would be an indication of their chosenness by God and their willingness to follow God, no matter how ridiculous such an action might seem. Moses, in other words, was open to the unpredictability of God, willing to move into any direction to which he felt called or which was indicated to him through God.

**Psalm 104:24-34, 35b.** Psalm 104 is another of the grand psalms. Whenever I read it, I can hear an Anglican boys choir singing it with pure tones, for that is exactly what this psalm deserves!

This psalm is really a hymn to God as the creator and provider to the whole world. It teems with a love for life and for the whole created order – from the universe and the earth itself to wild animals, birds, the fish of the sea – even whales!

“O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it! These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the ground” (vv. 24-34).

This hymn to God and his creative providence for us all ends on a note of praise to him, and yet with an imprecation against those who refuse to recognize the creative and protective love of God. Thus, it ends on both a triumphant note and yet a disturbing note, creating a tension at its conclusion, a tension which is not resolved.

“I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him for I rejoice in the Lord. Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord” (vss. 33-35)!

**John 7:37-39** is the concluding statement by Jesus at the Festival of Booths (or Tabernacles). In John 7, Jesus is urged by “his brothers” not to go up to Jerusalem to participate in the Festival of Booths. But Jesus decides to go later in the festival, and to go incognito. However, he is recognized there, and consequently he ends up teaching in the Temple. His message is one about who he is, using the metaphor of water. He concludes his teaching by saying, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out

of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (7:37-38). Then John concludes, "Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit because Jesus was not yet glorified" (vs. 39).

Israel celebrated three festivals each year: Passover, First-Fruits and Booths (or Tabernacles). Booths was a harvest festival, held at the close of the autumn of each year. It was normally called "the Feast of Ingathering" or "the Feast of the Lord" by early Israel (e.g., Exod. 23:16; 34:22; Lev. 23:39; Judg. 21:19; I Kings 8:2, 65; II Chr. 7:8; Neh. 8:14; Isa. 30:29; Ezek. 45:23, 25). But it became known as the festival of "Booths" or "Tabernacles" in order to commemorate the booths built by Israelite farmers in their fields at harvest time where they slept in order to protect their still-unharvested crops. In postexilic Israel, it also became associated with Israel's liberation from Babylonian captivity. So the Festival of Booths was primarily a thanksgiving celebration for the bounty Israel had experienced from their harvest.

The requirement of the Mosaic Law was that each Jewish adult male was required to "appear before the Lord" (or, in other word, at the Temple in Jerusalem) at each of these festivals to make sacrifice to God and to leave an offering at the temple (Deut. 16:16). Therefore, it was appropriate that Jesus attend the Festival of Booths at its celebration. But therein lay the rub! The conflict between Jesus and the Judean political, economic and religious leaders was steadily accelerating. Therefore, it was imperative that Jesus select carefully his moments of confrontation with Israel's leaders. Because of his earlier intervention during the feast of Passover (John 6), Jesus was considering not making an appearance at Booths. But, on the other hand, he was required by the Mosaic Law to be there. Consequently, Jesus decided to go near the close of the festival and incognito. But he was recognized, entered into an inevitable confrontation with the Judean leaders, and thus began teaching openly in the Temple!

As in his earlier appearance at the Feast of Passover where Jesus claimed himself as the bread of life (John 6:35-59) as distinct from the liturgically unleavened bread that symbolized Passover, so Jesus in the Feast of Booths claims himself as the living water of that festival (7:37-38). "Living water" – that is running or splashing water – was the element that symbolized Booths, as unleavened bread symbolized Passover. As an integral part of the celebration of Booths, the priest would pour "living water" onto the altar. Thus, by claiming himself as "living water", Jesus is substituting himself for the efficacy of Booths just as he earlier substituted himself as the manna of Passover (cf. 4:10-14; 6:35).

Jesus is the means for Israel's liberation from oppression and from sin, John is stating in this passage. He is the "living water", from which those who believe in him may drink and be continuously refreshed. This suggestion on John's part is outrageous enough. But then John takes a second outrageous step. He states as a quotation a compilation of a number of Hebrew Bible statements that connect God's gift of water with the gift of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Isa. 12:3; 44:3; 58:11; Ezek. 36:25-27). "Out of the believers' heart shall flow rivers of living water", John summarizes scripture as saying (vs. 38).

To then drive home his point, John then comments, "Now Jesus said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit because Jesus was not yet glorified" (vs. 39). In other words, John is saying that although the Spirit made occasional

appearance in the Hebrew Bible to ecstatically fill and speak through prophets, in the era after the “glorification” (or death and resurrection) of Jesus, God would make the Spirit manifest in all those who named Jesus as Lord, and that same Spirit would empower their actions and inspire their words in the more intimate relationship that God would have with believers through Jesus (Jn. 14:17; I Cor. 6:19). Thus, in Jesus, the Feast of Booths would reach its zenith and be completed through the baptism of Jesus’ followers by the Spirit and by water (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 16:7; Eph. 4:8) that would empower them to become the champions of the poor, the powerless and the rejected throughout the world.

**John 20:19-23** is the formal completion of the Gospel of John. It is true that there is still an additional chapter (ch. 21), but the twentieth chapter ends in such a decisively-finalized manner that it is clear that the author meant the book to end with John 20:31. Biblical scholars have puzzled about this discrepancy for centuries, but the present generally-accepted consensus is that John ended his book with 20:31, then later penned an epilogue (or disciples of his wrote the epilogue) which was attached to the book. No extant copies of the Gospel of John come without the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter, so if it were added, that addition happened before or soon after the book’s initial release.

The Gospel lesson for today that draws the Gospel of John to a close consists of three segments. Verses 19-23 deal with the occasion of Jesus’ appearance to his disciples on His day of resurrection. Verses 24-29, which are not included in this gospel lesson, is the story of “Doubting Thomas”. Finally, verses 30-31 provide the formal conclusion of the Gospel of John. Thus, the originally final stories of this gospel all deal with Jesus’ appearance after his resurrection, first to Mary Magdalene, then to the disciples, and finally to the missing Thomas. This ending doesn’t deal with any resolution regarding the broken relationship between Jesus and Peter, however, and thus the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter belatedly deals with that piece of unfinished business.

The first story of this Sunday’s Gospel lesson is of particular importance. The story is straightforward enough. Jesus appears to all his disciples except Thomas, who were gathered in a home with the doors “locked for fear of the Judeans”. Jesus suddenly appears in their midst, and says to them, “Peace be with you”. Thus, he wishes them shalom. The text tells us that “the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord”. Jesus then says to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then, breathing upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit, he commands them “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (20:23). That is the conclusion of this story.

What is actually occurring in this story is John’s interpretation of the commissioning of Jesus’ disciples. It is the apex, the high moment of the Gospel story itself, that moment in John’s gospel toward which the entire book points. Therefore, it is crucial that we understand the lesson that John is seeking to communicate to his readers.

A commission is the call by Jesus to his followers for them to undertake an imperative function of their ministry. A commission is not an optional activity which the Church may choose to

undertake. It is an imperative of ministry, a trust and responsibility which must shape both the Church's conceptual framework and its praxis of ministry.

To truly understand Jesus' command in today's Gospel lesson as the commission of the Gospel of John, one must recognize that this was the final gospel that was written. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke had been written during the twenty-five years preceding the writing of the Gospel of John. And it is clear both from the commission John records here as well as the over-all tenor of his book that John felt that in their respective commissions, Matthew, Mark and Luke had left out a critical imperative of the work of the church commanded by Jesus. And it was John's intention to correct that oversight.

Their respective commissions? Yes – their respective commissions. We tend to think of the Gospel of Matthew as containing the “Great Commission”. But, in reality, each of the four gospels contains a commission from Jesus that in essence passes on Jesus' primary work to the disciples (and thus the church) to be continued. Each of the commissions peculiar to a given Gospel is their respective call to the church to continue the unique ministry “into all the world” that Jesus was undertaking throughout that specific gospel. Matthew, concerned to present Jesus as Israel's rightful (and prophesied) Messiah, has Jesus commission his followers to be the creator of a New Israel, learning, following and obeying a new Law (Matt. 28:18-20). The essential task of the Church, Matthew insists, is to make disciples for Jesus from those who were once disciples of Moses. When one obeys that new Law and embraces that new life, Matthew teaches, one will discover the “Great I Am” in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

Mark, concerned with Jesus' way becoming the “third way” which reconciles together Jew and Gentile (and any other division of life), stresses in his commission (Mark 16:15-18) that it is not a single race or class of people who will receive the gospel. Rather, Jesus' “third way” is for each individual – whether Jew or Gentile – who will choose to hear and respond. If they believe and are baptized – whether Jew or Gentile – they will be saved. If they reject the gospel, no matter what their race, ethnicity, historicity, tradition or forebears, they will be rejected. Thus, to Mark's Jesus, the Church, whether in Israel or among the Gentiles, will be called to the same ministry and empowered by the same Spirit who called and empowered Jesus. They will preach with Jesus' power, heal and care for people as did Jesus, and seem almost invulnerable and fearless before the principalities and powers (“snakes and deadly things”).

Luke's gospel is the only one that sets out God's commission to Jesus (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus' personal commission is to bring good news to the poor, to seek the release of the captives, to bring sight to the blind, to work for the liberation of the oppressed and to insist upon the redistribution of national wealth (the meaning of the phrase, “the year of the Lord's favor”; see Lev. 25:10). According to Luke, Jesus' work is the work of liberation – not just liberation from sin, but liberation from poverty, social domination, physical infirmities, political oppression and economic exploitation.

And that to which Jesus is called, Jesus calls his followers. When Jesus proclaimed only in Luke, “The kingdom of God is among you” (17:21), he was indicating that the seeds of the kingdom had already been planted by him both in us and in our midst. So it then becomes our responsibility to carry on the ministry he had initiated. “Whenever you enter a town and its

people welcome you, cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (10:8-9). “The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. . . . For I am among you as one who serves” (22:26-27). Thus, God’s commission to Jesus is also Jesus’ commission to us – Jesus’ church!

But something is still missing! It is true that Jesus’ imperative of ministry to the church is for the church to be primarily about working for the liberation of humanity from oppression and exploitation (Luke), proclaiming the good news of God’s reconciling salvation in Christ (Mark) and making disciples of those who profess Christ (Matthew). But it is more than that. There is another absolutely strategic ingredient that is missing. And it is that missing ingredient of mission that John writes about in his Gospel, reclaiming that ingredient as absolutely essential to the mission of the church.

The two great assertions from the Gospel of John are these: that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that if we receive that Life by abiding in Christ (John 15:4-5; 17:21), we become Christ’s new community in the world. Because Jesus is the Countercultural Christ who offers humanity a new way of life (John 3:16), we who embrace him and are embraced by him become God’s new countercultural community in the world – the Church!

It is in the light of these two great assertions that the Great Commission in John both becomes obvious and begins to make sense. This is Jesus’ Great Johannine Commission. “Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21-23).

There are three highly strategic and inter-related elements within John’s Great Commission. The first is found in the first words Jesus speaks as he presents this commission. Those words are “Peace be with you”. That was not simply a greeting. That was not simply a wish to “have a good day!” What Jesus actually said was “*Shalom* be with you”. And wishing one “shalom” in the Jewish tradition was not simply wishing one another “peace”. The Hebrew word, *shalom*, caught up within that single word the entire purpose of Hebrew life and belief. That one word encapsulated what it meant to be a part of the Jewish community. The Hebrew word *shalom* captures the Hebrew vision of human society, the non-human world, and even the environment as a relational whole.

“Shalom” occurs when “right religion” is being practiced – that is, when the beliefs, values and religious activities of the nation’s leaders and people are bringing them together to build a society centered in an active, dynamic relationship with God and, consequently, a compassionate and caring relationship toward each other (Num. 6:24-26; Deut. 10:12-20; Phil. 3:10). “Shalom” occurs when the people and their political systems are acting justly and mercifully toward each other. The mark of a shalom society is that its political institutions are acting justly in their management of public life while being particularly compassionate toward those who could be most vulnerable (Micah 6:8; Deut. 16: 19-20; 17:12-20; Col. 1:15-20). “Shalom” occurs when poverty is being eliminated. Israel and the Church are to perceive their wealth as a gift from God, a common wealth God has invested in them so that they could be good trustees of it. The end for which they are to manage that wealth is the elimination of poverty for everyone in that

society (Deut. 6:10-12; 15:4-11; Lev. 25:23-34). Political justice, economic equity, elimination of poverty, and people “at one” with each other and with God make up, together, a community of “shalom”.

A primary message of the Gospel of John is that the “Judeans” – that is, the Jewish political, economic and religious hierarchy – were not committed to building a “shalom community”. Because this leadership was encapsulated in a religious office -- the office of the high priest – that leadership was supposed to be obedient to the Law of Moses (which, if they had been, would have required them to be working for a society of political justice, economic equity and spiritual relationality). But, instead, they were committed to the building of their own power, prestige and plenty and thus, out of necessity, acting exploitively and oppressively toward the peasants of the land. It was because of their commitment to domination and control that Jesus both opposed them and worked to create an alternative society – a society counter to their culture and to Roman culture – the Church!

So when Jesus begins his Great Commission of John with the words, “Shalom be with you”, he is blessing them with the reminder that they are called by God to be about the task of being the shalom community in their life together and in their treatment of each other. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”, Jesus added. As he was the harbinger of God’s shalom community by being the countercultural Christ who came up against the Judean and Roman systems and called them to accountability, so his followers are now being called to be, in their life together and in their actions, the shalom community, coming up against the systems and calling them to accountability, as well.

The second element within John’s Great Commission for Jesus’ alternative community is “Receive the Holy Spirit”. The text tells us that immediately after Jesus commissioned his disciples to go forth as Jesus’ new community of faith, “he breathed on them”, thus giving through his breath the Breath of Life – the Holy Spirit. The implication here is that we cannot build the shalom community through dint of our own determination. It takes the grace of God working within us, among us and even in spite of us to truly create the shalom community. And we need to operate in that awareness. The success of building a truly authentic community of shalom is based upon a recognition that it must always come to us as grace. It comes about as God works within and among us to create community, and our task is to get our own agendas and convictions out of the way in order to allow the Spirit to do His work within our midst in order to empower us to be, in deed as well as in word, God’s alternative community.

The final element of John’s Great Commission is also the most important element. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained”, Jesus commanded his followers (20:23).

There can be no authentic community without forgiveness. As the branch grafted into the Christ vine and thus an extension of Jesus, the Church is here commissioned by Jesus to do what only God could formerly do – to forgive and to retain sin! The task is not to proclaim the forgiveness of sin. The task, as commanded by Jesus, is to actually forgive or retain sin!



This is the commission most embraced by the Roman Catholic Church in its sacrament of confession. And likely, because it has been so strongly embraced by the Catholic Church, it is the act either most rejected or most ignored by the Protestant Church. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the priest stands in the place of Christ and, in the confessional, requires divulgence of sin, repentance and the completion of a prescribed penance before granting forgiveness.

But it is important to affirm that the task of the Church as forgiving and retaining sins is not peculiar to Roman Catholicism. The author of John saw the forgiveness and retaining of sins as absolutely essential to the building of an authentic counter-cultural community. And the Protestant reformers understood exactly that. In rejecting the Catholic formulation of this practice, they did not abandon the concept but rather sought to “reform” it through their doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers”. Rather than “toss the baby out with the bath”, the Reformers sought to preserve the baby while tossing out the bathwater of the confessional!

Martin Luther’s formulation of the “priesthood of all believers” was designed to deal with the necessity for this strategic ministry in the building of the Christian community. The church today misunderstands the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as every person being his own priest before God. But that is not what Luther taught. What Luther taught was that every Christian is the priest of his or her Christian neighbor. We are each other’s priest, hearing confession and granting absolution. Luther put it most plainly:

“He (the Christian) is a priest not to his own advantage but to serve other men. This service is to bear the sins and iniquities of others, lest they be the chief actors both in their own perdition as well as that of others”.<sup>1</sup>

What Luther sought to do was not to remove from the Church the responsibility of participating in the forgiveness of sins. Rather, it was to remove from a particular class of Christians – the ordained priesthood – that exclusive responsibility in order to distribute that privilege upon the entire Christian community.

John Calvin stressed the importance of the one seeking forgiveness to make both private and public confession. “The secret confession which is made to God is followed by voluntary confession to men, whenever that is conducive to the divine glory or our humiliation”,<sup>2</sup> Calvin wrote. He recommends the pastor to play this role, but leaves open to “any particular individual into whose bosom we are to disburden our feelings” such hearing of one’s confession. Calvin then states most specifically, “For as the duty of mutual admonition and correction is committed to all Christians, but is specially enjoined on ministers, so while we ought all to console each other mutually, and confirm each other in confidence in the divine mercy, we see that ministers, to assure our consciences of the forgiveness of sins, are appointed to be the witnesses and sponsors of it, so that they are themselves said to forgive sins and loose souls”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Epistle to the Hebrews*. Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XVI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Volume One, Book Three, 4:10 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Erdmann’s Publ. Co., 1957), p. 543.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume I, Book III, 4:12, p. 544.

But the priesthood of all believers moves beyond forgiving sins to the task of retaining sins, as well. To retain sins simply means that the Christian community ought not to be too quick to forgive sins. Otherwise, that community can make grace cheap. And although grace is free, it is certainly not cheap, because it cost Jesus his life! There must be a place in the church for authentic awareness, confession and repentance of one's sin. But there are also those occasions when Christian believers refuse to face the reality of their sins. In such cases, the church must be willing to hold those people publicly accountable for their sins, and to refuse to grant forgiveness (i.e., to "retain" sins) until there is appropriate repentance on the part of the sinner.

Why would the Jesus of the Gospel of John enjoin the church to forgive and to retain sins as a primary commission of the church? The chief aim of the author of John was to build the case for the church being a genuine, balanced and countercultural community of shalom, the authentic extension of Jesus Christ in the world today. And you can't have authentic community without the willingness to face, confront, forgive or retain sins. To do otherwise is to succumb both to cheap grace and to a collection of people who are as corrupt in their dealings with each other as the Judean elite was with the Jewish peasants of Jesus' day.

John would add the granting of the forgiveness of sins to the other commissions championed by the writers of Matthew, Mark and Luke. As the authentic Jesus lies in the junction point between all four Gospels, so the authentic and balanced church lies between the acting out of all four commissions. The Body of Christ is called to work for the political and economic liberation of humanity, to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, to grant forgiveness of sins and to make disciples of all people. It is called to the entirety of this ministry. The truly faithful church is a balanced church. And a balanced church is one that takes all four commissions equally seriously in the carrying out of its life and work in the world!

Thus, John has the resurrected Jesus meet with his disciples and commission them to "forgive and retain sins" as the essential task that builds Jesus' authentic shalom community.

John has now completed his task. He had declared that the eternal Word, who is God and was in the beginning with God, had become "flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:14). John had displayed through the telling of the story of his ministry that this enfleshed Word was the specific human being – Jesus of Nazareth (1:19—20:29). John had shown that Jesus had repeatedly confronted the "Powers that Be" of both Israel and Rome, calling each to their God-determined roles of working for justice, equity and (in the case of the Jewish leaders) relationship with God, exposing their preference to use their respective offices to dominate the people and to build their own power, prestige and plenty. John had demonstrated that this Jesus called a new people to found a new "Israel", a new community of shalom living together as God intended sharing wealth, treating each other with justice and with compassion, and loving God. John had exposed the commitment of the Judeans and of Rome to destroy Jesus because his critique had robbed them of their power and position, but he had turned his trial into their trial where their shameful commitment to domination had been clearly exposed and he had somehow turned his crucifixion into an enthronement. Finally, John had concluded with the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, which had infused new life and hope into Jesus' shalom community, so that they

could now join with him in working for the transformation of the world. So now, it is time for John to conclude his great book.

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31).

Thus, the Gospel of John comes to its original ending, reminding the reader that this was not a history of Jesus, but a gospel of Jesus. Its aim was not to simply tell the story of Jesus’ life (first this happened, then this happened, then that happened), but rather to tell the truth about Jesus – so that the reader would recognize him for who he is, the Word of God made flesh. This gospel was written so that, like Thomas, the reader “may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God”. For only by believing in the countercultural Christ can we become a part of Christ’s countercultural community – community as God intended it to be – and can thus live our lives to bring justice, equity and the abolition of poverty to the earth within a shalom that is centered on the praise and enjoyment of God forever! Only by so believing and acting will we experience “life in his name”.

**Acts 2:1-21** is the account of the anointing of the Holy Spirit falling upon the followers of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost (Feast of the First Fruits), and thus signaling the birth of the church. The scripture lesson actually covers two portions of that story: the giving of the Spirit to the Christian community (2:1-13), and the introduction of Peter’s sermon delivered to the Jews who observed this filling of the Holy Spirit (2:14-21; the entire speech runs through vs. 36).

“When the day of Pentecost had come, the believers were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1-4).

This great event was both climax and inauguration. It was the climax of Jesus’ work among the disciples as they, like him, were filled with the observable power of the Holy Spirit. It was inauguration, because it was the clear indication from God that the mantle had shifted from Jesus to his followers who would now become “little Christs” to the world. Thus Pentecost marked the birth of the apostolic mission of the church, bringing Jesus’ kingdom of God (the shalom community) to the whole world.

It was particularly auspicious that this filling of the Spirit and consequent commissioning of the church occurred on the Feast of Pentecost. The word “Pentecost” literally means “fifty days” in Greek. Pentecost was the festival that followed fifty days after Israel’s celebration of Passover – the birthday of Israel! It was the festival of “First Fruits” (Deut. 16:9-12; Lev. 23:15-21), in which Israel both celebrated the spring harvest (the “first fruits” of that year’s crops) and remembered its origins as impoverished slaves in Egypt (Dt. 16:12) by sharing their abundance with the poor and powerless in an intentional reversal of the nation’s fortune.

Now, in essence, a new “First Fruits” was being celebrated by a “new Israel”, as the anointing by the Holy Spirit of Jesus’ followers declared that they were now called to carry Jesus’ “kingdom of God” not just to Israel, but to all humanity. And that kingdom that they were to carry with them was one both of being chosen and blessed by God and of working to create a new world order where poverty would be eliminated and the powerless given power. These early disciples were the literal “First Fruits” of Jesus’ redemptive and liberating work – and would now carry that fruit with them as they worked for the redemption and liberation of the world!

That new mission would be symbolized in the actions of that day, when the Spirit’s anointing of the followers of Jesus would be followed by their proclamation of this liberating news in the languages of all the people gathered in Jerusalem (2:5-13), Peter’s sermon that calls upon Israel to embrace Christ and His Kingdom (2:14-36), the enthusiastic response of the people as they embrace the gospel (2:37-41), the creation of a Christian community that is based on the equitable sharing of wealth so that poverty would be eliminated (2:42-47), Peter’s healing of a paralyzed man (3:1-11) and his proclamation of God’s new shalom community through Jesus in the very citadel of the vested interest of the Jewish “principalities and powers” (3:12-26).

In order to understand the significance of Luke’s inclusion of the Pentecost story in his “Acts of the Apostles”, one must recognize that in the Gospel of Luke, the Holy Spirit is confined to the empowerment of Jesus’ own ministry. The only exceptions are those who are integral to the inauguration of the salvation history to be wrought through Jesus in the stories surrounding his birth – Mary (1:35), Elizabeth (1:41), John the Baptist (1:15, 17), Zechariah (1:67) and Simeon (2:25-27). Otherwise, Luke is very careful to attribute the filling and empowering of the Holy Spirit as being given exclusively to Jesus.

But now, the transfer takes place. That Spirit who had empowered Jesus was now given to all the followers of Jesus who would now be empowered to continue Jesus’ ministry of redemption and liberation upon the earth. And signs are given to make clear that transfer of power. Those signs are “a mighty wind”, tongues of fire and speaking in the languages of all those from around the world gathered in Jerusalem. Each gift is significant.

The gift of “a mighty rushing wind” or “violent wind” was, to all Jews, a symbol of the Holy Spirit’s presence (Ex. 3:2; 13:21; 24:17; 40:38; I Kings 19:11-13; Ezek. 37:9, 13). In fact, the Hebrew word for “Spirit” is “ruach” or “wind”, while the Greek word “pneuma” means both “wind” and “spirit”. The gift of “tongues of fire” was a symbol of God’s cleansing and judging power (Matt. 3:11, 12). And speaking in all the languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem (those languages are named in vss. 9-11) was the clear indicator and manifestation of the Spirit’s occupation of these disciples of Jesus. In fact, the people observing this phenomenon commented, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans (in other words, these are unlettered, unschooled people from the poorest and most ignorant area of our country)? How is it that we hear each of us, in our own native language, about God’s deeds of power” (2:7—8, 11b)? This was clearly a miracle that only God could perform.

Thus, the wind, the tongues of fire, and clear communication in all the languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost<sup>4</sup> are the three signs of the Spirit's indwelling and empowering of Jesus' followers. The Jews, of course, responded in two predictable ways to these manifestations of the Spirit. Some accepted the phenomenon as truly of God and embraced Jesus and His Kingdom (the shalom community) – and their acceptance into this new way of life that impacted their politics, economics and values is recorded in Acts 3. And other Jews rejected the evidence, with the excuse “These followers of Jesus are filled with new wine” (vs. 13).<sup>5</sup> Some believed. And others closed themselves to the message.

In the light of this criticism, Peter speaks to the crowd. He quotes from Joel 3:1-5, indicating that this prophet predicted that, in the latter days, there would be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God that would be manifested with wind, tongues of fire and truth-telling. Thus, Peter said in essence, “*That* is what you Jews have observed – God coming to his people. So listen, take seriously what you are seeing, do not dismiss it – for it may be the very word of God to you!” So, people, hear that word, call upon the name of the Lord, and embrace Jesus and his coming shalom community (manifested in the life and actions of his church, right here and now – 2:42-47). For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:21).

**I Corinthians 12:3b-13** seeks to put spiritual gifts within a larger context of the work of the Holy Spirit. The basic principle is stated at the beginning of the passage: “No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit” (vs. 3b). It is the Spirit who prompts our response to the gospel, our commitment to Jesus and our work to carry out the mission of the church. The initiative and the continuing power to live out the gospel come from God, not from our self-initiation. That is the underlying principle of this epistle lesson for this Pentecost day.

Paul focuses his examination of the work of the Spirit on the exercise of our spiritual gifts. He begins by stating, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (vss. 4-6). The word “varieties” is obviously key, repeated in all three statements. The Greek word means “dispersals” or “apportionments”. The idea Paul is stressing is that the spiritual gifts we claim and exercise have all been apportioned by God. God has looked at the church and what it needs in this specific place and at this specific time. Out of that discernment, therefore, God determines the gifts that a congregation needs to more effectively implement its ministry. He then elects those in that church body to exercise these

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<sup>4</sup> Note that this incident is not a manifestation of *glossolalia*, or the speaking in tongues (speaking in a Spirit language). That gift of ecstatic utterance is recorded in the scriptures (e.g., I Cor. 12:10, 28, 30; 14:2, 4-6, 9) but it is not the gift given in this incident. The text is very clear that Jesus' followers were speaking in the primary languages of the people gathered from around the world in Jerusalem for the Feast of the First Fruits; the emphasis of the text is not on the gift of tongues, but on the imperative of carrying the gospel to the whole world.

<sup>5</sup> Peter's response to those who accused the Christians of being drunk is significant. He replied, “These are not drunk, *for it is only nine o'clock in the morning*” (2:16). That is not a statement of early morning sobriety (“it's too early to be drinking so thoroughly”). Rather, part of the liturgy of the Feast of the First Fruits (Pentecost) is that everyone was to fast *in both food and drink* from the last meal of the previous day until 10:00 in the morning of the next day; only at 10:00 could they take their first drink of wine. So these Christians, who obediently followed the Law, would not be so gross as to be drunk at 9:00 in the morning on a sacred feast day like Pentecost! There has to be another explanation for their capacity to speak in other languages, Peter is saying – and that explanation is their anointing by the Holy Spirit!

strategic gifts, apportioning out those gifts. That means that no one gift is “better” or more “spiritual” than any other. Rather, God has simply arbitrarily decided which people should exercise designated gifts, with all the gifts needed for this moment in the life of that church being distributed so that those gifts might contribute to the building up of the life and witness of that church.

The varieties of spiritual apportionments fall into three categories: “gifts”, “services” and “activities”. The gifts are *charismata* (i.e., gifts bestowed by God; cf. 7:7; Rom. 12:6-8). The “services” are ministries that support and strengthen Christians (16:15). It is unclear what “activities” mean (it could be that Paul was simply seeking to continue his parallel construction, and therefore chose a synonym for “services”).

Everyone in the Church, Paul suggests, has been given a spiritual gift. No one gift is superior to another. But all gifts have been given for one reason, and one reason alone: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (vs. 7). The Greek translated “the common good” actually means “that which is helpful or advantageous” (cf. 6:12b; 7:35; 10:23b, 33). This statement was written by Paul, as was this entire passage, in order to confront certain attitudes within the Corinthian Church that were creating great grief and were tearing the church apart. Paul’s words are suggesting, first, that no one gift is superior to any other gift, but all are distributed and assigned by God to strengthen the church and enable it to more effectively carry out its mission. It is clear from both of Paul’s letters to the Corinthian Church that there were opposition parties in that church, each claiming to be superior to the others. As well, certain gifts were being extolled as superior, particularly the gift of tongues; Paul intends to dispel this notion.

Second, Paul’s statement of all gifts being assigned for the common good is designed to indicate that the spiritual gifts invested in us by God are not meant to enhance either our status within the Christian community nor our relationship with or even our service of God. All gifts are to contribute to the common good of the church. To use any gift for selfish purpose would be to destroy the whole intent of that gift, and invalidates it. Because there are different needs and situations in the church, God has given different gifts to address those needs.

Having presented the principles, Paul then moves on to list some of the gifts. The list is not meant to be exhaustive (see Rom. 12:6-8, where Paul’s list of gifts is quite different to what he lists here), but illustrative. The gifts he names as being of particular service to the Corinthian church at that moment are “utterance of wisdom” (that is, truth-telling), “utterance of knowledge” (that is, teaching truth), “faith”, “gifts of healing”, “working of miracles”, “prophecy” (that is both discerning the future and instructional speech; see 6:12; 7:35; 10:23, 33), “discernment of spirits” (that is, the gift of reflecting and weighing what others say, and then speaking to it; cf. 14:29), “tongues”, and finally, “interpretations of tongues”. It is significant that, if one of the problems the Church in Corinth faced was “spiritual one-upmanship” around the issue of whether one spoke in tongues or not, Paul places tongues and the interpretation of tongues at the end of the list; it is as if he is suggesting that speaking in tongues is not most important but is least important. That possibility is strengthened by his assertion that tongues should never be spoken in public or in worship unless there is someone there to interpret that tongue (14:9-11).

Paul then concludes his entire polemic regarding spiritual gifts with a definitive word. “All these (gifts that I have just listed and those I have not listed) are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit” (vss. 11-13).

It is not about you. It is about Christ. It is not about whom you are or the gifts you might have or the strategic place you hold in the church. That is all as nothing! It is about God, God’s formation of the church, God’s election of us, God’s call to us, God’s gifting of us, and God’s using of us. It is about a sovereign God, the unity we have been given through Christ, and the power invested in us by the Spirit. It is all about God! So step away from the center you never did occupy and accept your rightful place at the foot of the throne, there to worship and to be used by God as God determines, so that the Cross might be lifted high and all the world drawn to the One who is making all things new!

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