

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
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**“Unity of the Spirit”  
Numbers 11:24-30  
Acts 2:1-21**

**Day of Pentecost  
June 4, 2017**

### **Numbers 11:24-30**

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. 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 as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, “My lord Moses, stop them. “But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

### **Acts 2:1-21**

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

### **“Unity of the Spirit”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today we are celebrating the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost doesn't have as much hullabaloo about it as Christmas or Easter, and that makes sense. Nevertheless, Pentecost is an important day to celebrate. This is the day that we, as the church of Jesus Christ, received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This is the day that the church, as we know it, was born. Christmas is important because of Jesus' incarnation. Easter is important because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Pentecost is important because of the Holy Spirit. The third Person of the Trinity is our lifeline, is our connector, is our counselor, is our guide. The Holy Spirit is how God interacts with us and we interact with him. This is why today is such an important day in the life of the Church. Since this day is remembered as the day the Holy Spirit came for the Church, why were all these Jews gathered in Jerusalem? Surely they weren't there for the birthday of the Church. What's going on in the background of this story?

Well, the word Pentecost is actually a Jewish word and is a Jewish holiday. The Hebrew word is Shavuot, and it is a festival celebrating quite a few things. It celebrates the Feast of Weeks because it comes seven weeks after Passover. It celebrates the Feast of Harvest because the first fruits of the harvest were gathered at that time. It also celebrates the giving of the law, since Israel reached Mount Sinai about two lunar months after the first Passover. This last celebration is, I think, quite a significant one. The giving of the Law, that is the Ten Commandments, marked a very important transition in the life of Israel. Before that point, the Israelites were in covenant with God, meaning they were his people and he was their God. With the giving of the Law, the People of God are now given a framework of unity to witness to that covenant.

These are the reasons why so many people were gathered in Jerusalem. They just celebrated the Passover about seven weeks prior, the farmers are bringing in the first fruits of their harvest to the market and to the Temple, and people are celebrating the giving of the Law of Moses. This explains why Luke tells us in verse five, “Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.” Folks from all around the known world, wherever Jews ended up, always made at least one pilgrimage back to Jerusalem. So imagine this scene with me. There are hundreds, thousands of people moving about Jerusalem. There's festivity in the air. The harvest has just come in, there's bounty everywhere. People are jubilant about the Passover, the faithful are celebrating the Ten Commandments. These folks are joyful about the things that make them unique and set them apart from the Gentile world. But you also have another group of people who are joyful, but for a different reason.

There are a group of folks who gathered in Jerusalem for Passover. At that meal, a man named Jesus hosted the supper, he was later betrayed that evening, tried before a kangaroo court, and sentenced to death on a cross. After his resurrection on Easter Sunday, Jesus spent the next forty days appearing to his disciples. On the fortieth day, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples of the world, thereby changing their title from disciple—that is a follower of—to the new title of apostle, which is a person sent out to deliver a message. Ten days after the

Apostles were commissioned, fifty days after Passover, they gathered together with an excitement and wonder about their new ministry. Ten days prior, their resurrected Lord commanded them to go and spread his Good News; but he also told them to stay in the city until they were clothed with power from on high.<sup>1</sup> The newly minted Apostles were likely excited, nervous, anxious, and eager about their new commission, but they needed to wait for this power from on high. What will it look like?

Well we know what that looked like, we heard it this morning. But what does it mean? Other than the birthday of the Church, why is Pentecost so important for us today? I want to answer this by focusing in on verses eight to eleven. “And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” How is it that such a diverse group of people, folks who had no connection to Jesus, are now hearing from his Apostles, in their own language, the very Gospel of Jesus Christ? The short answer is the Holy Spirit.

In his commentary on this very passage, Calvin says that God furnishes “the apostles with the diversity of tongues now, that he may bring and call home, into a blessed unity, men which wander here and there.”<sup>2</sup> Back in the other end of the Bible, you may recall a time when all the world spoke one language. All the world in its sin conspired together to build a tall tower in order to reach God. In order to shatter this conspiracy, God confounded the people with a multiplicity of languages. Thus the Tower of Babel and the birth of linguistics. The human race, which shared one tongue, because of sin, was further divided. Language has been and sometimes still is one of the major dividing forces of humanity. Think about how many controversies and wars there have been over the ages because people had poor communication skills. Think of all the European countries that have morphed and dissolved because of language. Think of all the Americans who, over history, were oppressed or ignored because they didn’t speak English. Language divides us.

But as Calvin notes, there’s a blessed unity in God that no division, whether near or far, can loose. He tells us, “For although they lived here and there in exile in far countries, and being one far from another, did, as it were, inhabit diverse worlds, yet did they hold among themselves the unity of faith.”<sup>3</sup> Take a closer look at what’s going on here. The Holy Ghost has fallen upon the Apostles and they begin testifying to the mighty works of God, in a language foreign to them. I don’t think Luke is saying they were speaking in Latin, Greek, Arabic, etc. The Evangelist is telling us that the Holy Spirit began to speak through them in a heavenly language, foreign to the Apostles. Because the Holy Spirit is God, he, too, cannot exist in sin, therefore the language of the Holy Spirit is not an earthly language, which were born out of sin. Instead, the Holy Spirit *both* brings forth the truth of the Gospel from the mouths of the Apostles *and* opens the ears of these foreign visitors to hear the truth of the Gospel in their own language. The Holy Spirit is doing two things simultaneously. This is why one of the onlookers asks in verse eight, “How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?”

How is it that Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Arabs, Judeans, Egyptians, and Romans could hear, in their own tongue, of the mighty works of God? My friends, the answer is through the *unity* of the

Spirit. No matter the culture, the language, or the nationality, the truth of the Gospel will be heard. That is the Holy Ghost's doing. I've seen examples of this in my experience. Now I'm not talking about the speaking in tongues that some Christians proclaim today. I have heard that and experienced that, but I don't think that's necessarily what Luke is showing us. I've had times when I've put together a sermon hastily, and believed within my heart that it was a terrible sermon but I didn't have time to change it. After delivering a sermon that I considered subpar, it never fails that someone tells me they needed to hear that sermon or that my subject matter was spot on. Only the Holy Spirit can take our words and illuminate the Word.

The Holy Spirit brings us together from across this globe. Christians of every language and every culture are unified by the Spirit. We may speak differently, we may worship differently, we may look differently, but we share with one another the same truth of the Gospel. In this day and age, with the prevalence of the internet and social media, we cannot ignore the diversity of this wide world. For instance, with YouTube I can watch TV shows, movies, and newscasts from Japan, India, Latin America, wherever! In fact, within minutes, the world was notified of yesterday's terror attack in London. Everyday our young people are bombarded with a diversity of viewpoints, cultures, languages, and opinions. And don't hear me wrongly, diversity is a good thing. Diverse experiences are a good thing. But there is not a diversity of truth. There is only one truth and one faith that leads to eternal life. And that truth is what the Apostles proclaimed at Pentecost some 2,000 years ago. It's the same truth that Calvin says unifies the diversity of believers. It's the same truth that we share in when we come to this table. In the midst of all this wonderful and overwhelming diversity, we must always keep in mind the one truth, the very reason why the Apostles gathered, that Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection, is our Lord and Savior, and this belief is the greatest unifying force in the world.

Let us pray. O Holy Ghost, rain down upon us as we share in the meal our Lord instituted. Counsel us in the way of truth. Guide us down the path of righteousness. Advocate for us before God's throne. Illumine in us the Gospel. Inspire us to witness to it. Encourage us to stand up for it. Instill within us a longing for justice and a deep, unbounding love for others. O Holy Spirit, unify us in the bonds of your sustaining love, so that we, like the Apostles, may proclaim the truth of the mighty works of God. In your marvelous name, we pray. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:49

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts* vol 1, CCEL <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom36.html>. Page 52

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, 56.