

PENTECOST A JEWISH FESTIVAL

by Bruce Woolard

The event recorded in Acts II, referred to as Pentecost, is generally thought of in terms of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the followers of Christ. Much confusion and wrong conclusions have been made regarding this very special day.

The origin of Pentecost is rooted in the Old Testament account and relates to the Nation of Israel. The fact that some modern religious groups purport to have experiences similar to what occurred in Acts II does not make the event a Christian phenomenon.

“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come they were all with one accord in one place and suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind and it filled the house where they were sitting and there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues as the spirit gave them utterance, and there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devote men, out of every nation and the multitude were confounded because they heard them speaking in their own language and they were amazed because those who spoke were Galileans.” (Acts II:1-7).

It is important to note that the people consisted of Jews and proselyte Jews (gentiles converted to Judaism). These people came from all the foreign countries of the then known world. Their interest in gathering in Jerusalem was to celebrate a Jewish religious festival.

“And you shall count unto you from the morrow after the Sabbath from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering seven Sabbath (7 x 7) shall be completed. Even unto the morrow after the seven Sabbath shall you number fifty days and you shall offer new meat (food) unto the Lord.” (Leviticus 23:15-16)

The word Pentecost is derived from the Greek word for fifty days and therefore fifty days after the Festival of First Fruits the Jews celebrated the sacrificing of new food or produce to God. The First Fruits Festival was celebrated on the day that the harvest was reaped. In gratitude to God the people would bring the first fruits of the wheat, the fruit, the vegetables and the produce to the priests (Levites). There would be an observance on the seventh day of each week for seven

consecutive weeks (7 x 7 = 49). The fiftieth day after the first fruits were brought to the priests would herald the beginning of the Festival of Pentecost.

The Festival of First Fruit is recorded in Leviticus 23:10-11.

Pentecost followed this festival fifty days later.

Now what is significant about Pentecost as recorded in Acts II is that only Jews and people linked to Judaism as a religion would see the need to gather in Jerusalem for this feast. Gentiles pagans would not be interested in this celebration it was strictly Jewish. This point is too often overlooked by modern day Christians. They cite the arrival of the Holy Spirit as the beginning of Christianity but this is not true. The arrival of the Holy Spirit was in fulfilment of a promise that God made to Israel that He would give them a New Covenant that would be better than the Old Testament. Therefore, the arrival of the Holy Spirit was to fill the followers of Christ with power to demonstrate to the Nation of Israel that Jesus, their Messiah, who they killed was indeed the King of Israel. The New Covenant could only become a reality when the Messiah suffered and died. If one understands that a testament is similar to that of a Family Will. The Last Will and Testament only becomes effective when the one who has given the Testament (Testator) dies. The Will is of no effect until the Testator dies (Hebrews 9:16-18). Jesus came to offer the Nation of Israel a New Testament, and New Will, the old will given to them by Moses would be replaced by this new will.

“For if the first covenant (Old Testament) had been faultless then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them He saith behold the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah (Hebrews 8:8-13).

So the New Covenant could only become a reality once Jesus died. Fifty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead the Feast of Pentecost was celebrated. Now one must remember that this Jewish festival of Pentecost celebrated fresh or new foods that were eaten, during the festival. This is highly symbolic because Jesus was the “first fruits” of the resurrection from the dead.

“But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept for since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. In Adam all die, in Christ shall all be made alive. Everyone in his own order after Christ as our first fruit. (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

The symbolism is so very clear. For the Believers Jesus was the “first fruit” and the Holy Spirit fifty days after Jesus resurrection ushered in the New Covenant, the new spiritual food for the Nation of Israel.

This was a fulfilment of Joel the Prophets prediction that God would work in the midst of the Nation of Israel and that He would pour out His spirit upon them (Joel 2:27-29). This is precisely what happened on Pentecost. God had sent the Holy Spirit to testify that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and that a sign of the Holy Spirit’s arrival would be manifested in tongues of fire upon the head (in the Old Testament fire always represented blessing or purging) the rushing wind (in the Old Testament God’s spirit is referred to as wind and is derived from the Hebrew word “ruach” and the Greek “pneuma”).

The Jewish people were familiar with the priest and rabbi’s teaching them the Word of God through the Hebrew language. The Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem came from all the other nations of the world. This group is called the “Jewish Diaspora” and spoke the language of the foreign countries to which they were dispersed. On the day of Pentecost these Jewish people were surprised because they heard the word of God being preached to them not in the Hebrew tongue but in the language of the foreign countries from which they came. This was a watershed. This was something new. Some of them mocked, but others were intrigued and wanted an explanation for what had happened. Peter, the apostle, stood up and said to them:

“You men of Israel hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs which God did by Him in the midst of you, as ye yourself know has been raised from the dead, and we are His witnesses.” (Acts II 22:22-32).

Note that Peter spoke to the House of Israel indicating that this event was Jewish and not Christian as some would have us believe. The language that the followers spoke was a clear language and a dialect that was foreign, but could be understood by those who knew the language. Those who spoke the language did not understand what they were saying but the hearers, from the foreign countries, understood the dialect. God has said that He would speak to the Nation of Israel in another tongue, yet they would not hear Isaiah 28:11 *“For with stammering lips and another tongue will He speak to this people.”*

This miracle of Pentecost marked the beginning of the New Covenant to Israel. God’s plan was that the followers of Christ, who were Jewish, should take the message to Jerusalem first, then to Judea, then to Samaria and ultimately to the outermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). So, their primary focus was winning the Nation of Israel. Remember Jesus told His disciples not to go to the Samaritans

or the Gentiles but only to the Household of Israel (Matthew 10:5-6). After His resurrection He again tells them to reach the Jews first then the other nations. The truth is that the Jewish nation did not only reject Jesus Christ as the Messiah but they rejected the call of the Holy Spirit and only three thousand people in the nation accepted the message of the apostles. This message was resisted and the coming Kingdom that God had promised to Israel was postponed.

This postponement period is what we call Christianity. God raised up another apostle by the name of Paul to reveal truth that had not previously been known to the followers of Jesus and through Paul's instruction we learn that Christianity, which is the Body of Christ, is not Jewish neither is it ethnic. The emphasis of Christianity is diverse and distinct from national Israel. The nation rejected their King, therefore the Kingdom did not come. We, as Christians today, do not need to receive the Holy Spirit through sign manifestations because we are not Jews who require signs.

“For the Jews require a sign and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we (Christians) preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness. But to them who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

Every person who confesses faith in Christ is baptised by God's spirit into the Body of Christ. See 1 Corinthians 12:13. Every Christian has the Holy Spirit, Romans 8:9,16. We receive the Holy Spirit when we are saved Ephesians 1:13.

In 1906 in Los Angeles the USA, in a street called Asuza an Afro-American by the name of Henry Seymour held special religious services and claimed that the manifestation of tongues appeared among the people. This is historically the beginning of the modern Pentecostal Movement, so one hundred years ago a new Pentecost is purported to have begun. Many erudite and Godly Bible teachers believe that this manifestation was the beginning of the infiltration of false teachings and manifestations in Christendom, a fusion of deceptive doctrine with Christian teaching.

If one takes it at face value certain Bible texts i.e. Acts 2, Acts 8, Acts 19, 1Corinthians 12 and 14, it would appear that tongues or speaking a language that one has not learned is a common practice in the first century. This is undoubtedly true but must be seen in the context in which it took place. In the first century the Bible was still progressively being revealed. Only partial knowledge of God's truth was known, therefore, through signs and wonders God revealed His truth to the early followers of Christ.

Therefore, spirit manifestations such as prophecy and tongues were prevalent. When the complete and full revelation of God was given, these partial gifts ceased. We believe in spiritual gifts but recognise that the sign gifts have fulfilled their purpose now that the Bible, as God's revelation, is complete.

“Love never fails, prophecies will fail, tongues will cease, knowledge (revelatory knowledge) shall vanish away. We know in part and we prophesy in part (only partial information) but when that which is perfect (complete) is come then that which is in part shall be done away (when the Bible's revelation was complete sign gifts of which tongues was one passed away). When I was a child I spoke as a child, understood as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things (here the writer refers to the infant stage of truth and the adult stage of development).” 1 Corinthians 13:8-11

The modern tongues movement which started in 1906 in the USA was initially rejected but in 1966 many main line churches began to experience the same phenomenon. This experience gained in popularity and through the Alpha Course the teaching of tongues as a sign or manifestation purportedly confirms the arrival of spiritual blessing on recipients. Today most churches ignorantly accept that tongues is a modern day phenomenon equal to what happened on the day of Pentecost.

The truth about tongue speaking is not generally known because this phenomenon is not exclusively a “Christian experience”. People from Hindu and ancestral beliefs also experience the same phenomenon, from the Red Indians of America to the Zulu or Xhosa sangoma, speaking in tongues is common.

My research and personal experience, has convinced me that the modern day speaking in tongues is the voice of the sub-conscious (like talking in your sleep). There is no evidence that modern day speaking in tongues is a clear dialect, as a matter of fact, scientific research based on recordings of those who purportedly speak in foreign languages without having learnt them, indicate that the syllables do not form words but rather make up sounds designated as gibberish or babble. This type of phenomenon was rife among the pagans in Biblical times. Even in these modern times “spirit activities” or “psychic behaviour” may manifest itself in an expression of ecstasy called ecstatic utterance. Sadly, many Christians base truth on their own human experience rather than the objective teachings of the Sacred Word.

Remember this statement that God is not the author of confusion; He is a God of order. 1 Corinthians 14:33 & 40.