

Cloven Tongues of Fire

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Lord of heaven and earth,
pour out on us the abundant gifts of your Holy Spirit.
May the work begun by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost
continue in us as we hear your Word and do your will. Amen.

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21 (KJ21)

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 all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together and were confounded, because every man heard them speaking in his own language. And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another, "Behold, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how then do we each hear them speaking in our own tongue wherein we were born? Parthians, Medes, Elamites and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, in Egypt and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians — we hear them speak in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." And they were all amazed and were in doubt, saying one to another, "What meaneth this?" Others mocking said, "These men are full of new wine." But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice and said unto them, "Ye men of Judea and all ye who dwell in Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words. For these are not drunken as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day; but this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. And on My servants and on My handmaidens I will pour out in those days My Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath — blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood before that great and notable Day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Cloven Tongues of Fire

Happy Birthday, church!

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the moment that gave birth to the Christian church. Pentecost marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon this world, the gift enabling Jesus to be two places at once, at the right hand of the Father, and with us here and now. The Spirit continues the living Christ's ministry everywhere in God's people.

There's nothing more quintessentially "Christian" than Pentecost. Except for the fact that it's a Jewish holiday.

Fifty days after Passover there's another celebration, Shavuot, or the "Feast of Weeks," or because of the fifty days, "Pentecost." I came across author and teacher Leonard Sweet's thoughts on Pentecost and I'd like to share some of it with you this morning.

Shavuot is a "dual" festival. It's a celebration of the end of the grain harvest and marked by grain sacrifices, feasting, and wine. But by the first century it was also a commemoration of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. It was fifty days after the Passover, and the Hebrew people's exodus from Egypt marking their arrival at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

We all know what happens next. At Sinai "there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain." Mt. Sinai was "wrapped in smoke, because the Lord has descended upon it in fire." While the people stayed at the foot of the mountain, Moses and Aaron went up through the smoke and fire on Mt. Sinai and received the two tablets of Ten Commandments from the Lord. So here in Acts 2:1, when the text declares "the day of Pentecost had come," it was not a pronouncement of a new celebration invented by this new community of Jesus followers. The declaration "the day of Pentecost had come" was a calendar notation. The Jewish festival of Pentecost had arrived.

But now that day was about to change. Now that day of Pentecost was about to have yet another layer of meaning spread over it, onto it, and into it. For it was on the Jewish festival of Pentecost, a festival already associated with the flaming presence of God's living presence revealed among the people, that Jesus chose to send down the Holy Spirit to his disciples.

Pentecost One celebrated the Hebrew people getting flamed by the Law.

Pentecost Two celebrated the whole world getting flamed by the Spirit.

For Luke, the author of Acts, the Jesus-Moses connection was essential to understanding the gospel. And this theme is very present at Pentecost. The Sinai covenant that Moses had ushered in to the people of Israel was being revised by the new and final covenant that Jesus life, death, and resurrection brought to all the nations of the world.

The Sinai covenant fires that Moses alone experienced at the first Pentecost was now being extended and expanded to all God's people. Like the fire and sounds of rushing wind Moses experienced on Sinai, the fire and wind symbolize for us the living presence of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

Did you catch it? When God appeared on Mt. Sinai to bring the Torah, the words of God to the people, God came amidst smoke and fire, noise and wind. This was the first Pentecost, the first “fifty days” marking God’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

After the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus there comes another “fifty days” until the gift of the Holy Spirit descends and ensures the eternal deliverance of God’s people from the curse of death itself. That first fire on Moses’ smoking mountain is made personal for each and every believer with this second fire, a transforming, empowering fire that flames all who confess Jesus as the Risen Lord.

These tongues “as of fire” Luke describes as “*diamerzo*” in the original Greek language. That word “*diamerzo*” literally means “divided” or “separated.” The King James uses the word “cloven” and translates it this way: As the Holy Spirit filled the 120 disciples in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost, “there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them” (KJV).

Cloven means “split” or “divided in two.” These “cloven tongues” are separated from each other rather than divided within (or “forked”). In other words, Luke is wanting us to see two separated, “divided,” “tongues of fire” descending upon each of the disciples.

At the first Pentecost the word of God came down to Moses on how many tablets of stone? Two tablets. Two individual gifts of God for the people of God. Here now at this new Pentecost, the Holy Spirit blows upon the believers as two flame-like experiences of empowerment.

In Pentecost One God’s Word was engraved on two tablets of stone by wind and fire.

In Pentecost Two, God’s Word is engraved on the two sides of the human heart by wind and fire.

The two tablets of God’s Sinai words become part of the very being of these believers—burned into their very hearts. The two tables are no longer written upon stone tablets but are emblazoned upon the hearts and souls of Jesus’ disciples.

Law and Letter becomes Spirit and Truth.

This is the unprecedented power of the new Pentecost. The first “sign” of the Spirit is that the apostles begin to speak in the native tongues of all those who are gathered within earshot. This sign of absolute inclusivity is met with confusion by those who witness this transformation. While some were “amazed and perplexed,” asking “what does this mean?” (v.12), others “sneered” and wrote of the words of the disciples as ranting drunkenness: “They are filled with new wine” (v.13).

This is history’s first “flaming.” We now prefer the word “trolled,” but in Internet-speak to be “flamed” is to be singled out for attack online. You can be “flamed” by a single emotional outburst by someone online who takes affront at what you have posted. Or you can also be more systematically “flamed” by “professional flammers” whose sole purpose for being is to aggravate and agitate, “stir the pot,” keep things smoking hot.

So it is that the first flames of the Holy Spirit, the power of Christ’s presence that brings the Torah from Sinai to his remnant of followers in Jerusalem, is also the first instance of “flaming.” So it will be for you. If you’ve been “flamed” by God’s Spirit, you will in turn get “flamed” by the world. Just as it was for the first generation of disciples. After they had been flamed by the Holy Spirit, they became

the target of flame throwers. It's called "the cost of discipleship." If you've been flamed, touched from on high by the first of the Almighty, you'll be flamed here on earth. But fire beats back fire. Just don't be afraid to be fired up and on fire.

Nicholas Taleb in *Antifragile* says, that "the main thing in life is not to be afraid of the wind of change that blows out a candle, but fans fire into flame."

Immanuel, let's draw on the Holy Spirit each and every day. Let the light of the Spirit blaze from us for witness—to all people, of every ethnicity, age and gender. Let's draw close and warm ourselves by the Pentecostal fires to dream big—and receive inspiration and wisdom to carry out God's vision for us and the world. The winds of Pentecost fill our sails with joy and hope in the storms of hardship we inevitably go through. The second wind of the Spirit reassures us that Christ's life in us always defeats death and discouragement. The Holy Spirit can spark change in our lives individually and as a community. Where we can do spiritual house cleaning. Where we can re-commit our lives and our families, and re-orient our priorities around God.

The fires of Pentecost rekindle within us a sense of wonder and reverence of God and his gifts all around us. The Holy Spirit forges fellowship and communal bonds—where we can welcome, share meals together, love one another, and meet each other's needs. The Spirit compels us into the world with God's love. With the Spirit, every day is Pentecost.

Immanuel, let's put on our safety helmets. Let's buckle up. Let's see where the Spirit is going to lead us, and what the Spirit is going to lead us to do for the glory of God—in here and out there.

Amen.

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