

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 24, 2015**

**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
THE GREAT COMMISSION AND US (2)**

Acts 2:1-21

Please join me in a moment of prayer:

Breathe on us, breath of God. Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on us today. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Speak Your truth and grace into our lives today. Refresh us, renew us, revive us in and through the power of Your Spirit. Speak to us from Your Word. Give us ears to hear, the eyes of faith to see, and hearts and minds to understand, to believe, and to live it, for the glory of Your name. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, and there is no more appropriate passage in the Bible for the church's celebration of Pentecost than Luke's description in Acts 2 of what took place in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost following the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus into heaven. So, let's look together at God's Word as it is given to us in Acts 2:1-21. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

When the day of Pentecost came, they (the disciples of Jesus, numbering about 120) were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues (or languages) as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in their (the hearers') own languages. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't these all Galileans? How is it then that each of us hears them in our own native languages?"

Let's pause here for a moment to notice that, in verses 9 and 10 and the first part of verse 11, Luke gives a list of the nations and provinces from which thousands of pilgrims have swarmed to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, beginning in verse 9 with "Parthians, Medes, and Elamites." To put it in terms more familiar to us, think of members of our church family from other countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Ghana, Greece,

France, Northern Ireland, Mexico, Colombia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Laos – not to mention such diverse places as Texas, California, Washington, Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Montana, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Louisiana, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia, and, of course, the great Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Forgive me if I've left any out that should be on the list. Imagine what it would be like to hear the wonders and praises of God being declared simultaneously in all the native languages and dialects represented in our church family! Wouldn't that be cool? That is what took place in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost.

Now, to resume our reading in verse 12:

Amazed and perplexed (at what they were hearing), they (the crowd that had gathered) asked one another: "What does this mean?"

Some, however, made fun of them (Jesus' followers) and said: "They have had too much wine."

In other words, they tried to dismiss the whole thing as a case of intoxication resulting from the consumption of excessive amounts of adult beverages. But the charge wouldn't stick. Notice what happens next:

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine o'clock in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

'In the last days, God says,
 I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
 Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 your young men will see visions,
 your old men will dream dreams.
 Even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
 and they will prophesy.
 I will show wonders in the heaven above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood and fire and billows of smoke.

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

This is the Word of God, and it is meant for you – it is meant for us – today.

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Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, was a Jewish festival held each year to celebrate the grain harvest. Not unlike our celebration of Thanksgiving here in America (except without turkey and football), it was a special occasion to acknowledge and give thanks to God as the source of all their blessings. It was known as Pentecost, which means “50th” in Greek, because it was held 50 days after Passover. It was one of three “pilgrim festivals” every Jewish male was to attend. And so, as a result, visitors from near and far streamed into Jerusalem for the celebration. By the time of Jesus, Pentecost had also come to be observed as the anniversary of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai, which took place 50 days after the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt. So, for both historical and religious reasons, the celebration of Pentecost held significant meaning for observant Jews.

As it does, or should, for the church as a whole and for us as followers of Christ, because Pentecost is really a big deal. It was on the Day of Pentecost, on the 50th day after the resurrection of Jesus, ten days after His disciples watched as He ascended into heaven, that the Holy Spirit came visibly and powerfully on the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, fulfilling the promise Jesus had made to them (Acts 1:4-5), filling them with the presence and power of God the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8) and to carry out the Great Commission Jesus had given them to spread the gospel and make disciples of every nation under heaven (Matthew 28:19-20).

That the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was accompanied by the sound of a rushing wind and the appearance of “tongues of fire” was not accidental or incidental. Not that we should expect the same dramatic signs whenever the Holy Spirit is on the move in an unusual way. God doesn’t always make a lot of noise. Often He works quietly, mysteriously, and speaks not in a roar or in the voice of Morgan Freeman or James Earl Jones, but in a whisper (1 Kings 19:12). In the case of Pentecost, though, God gave these signs to get the attention of the crowd in Jerusalem, which was further astonished when they heard the followers of Jesus – Galileans – speaking in *their* languages as they proclaimed the wonders of God.

There is no need to get into the contemporary doctrinal debates regarding the spiritual gift and practice of speaking in tongues. To a certain extent, if one avoids the extremes at either end of the spectrum, it is a non-essential of the faith about which sincere, Bible-believing Christians may and do disagree. Regardless of one’s beliefs about the charismatic gifts of the Spirit and their use today, the phenomenon of speaking in other tongues or languages that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost has a significance we dare not miss.

Ever since the time of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), when God confused human languages and scattered people all over the world, language barriers had divided people groups and nations, making communication with people who don't speak our language difficult, if not impossible. At Pentecost, though, God reversed the curse of Babel. At Pentecost, the language barrier was removed supernaturally as a sign of God's redemptive purpose to bring peoples and nations together in Christ. It was a sign, says John Stott, of "the multi-racial, multi-national, multi-lingual nature of the kingdom of Christ" (Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, 68). It was and is a sign that the message of the gospel is meant not just for one nation or one race or one ethnic group, but for the world. It was and is a sign of God's intent to be known and worshiped by disciples from every nation, tribe, and language known to man (Revelation 7:9). It was and is a sign of the power God has given His church to fulfill the Great Commission.

You see, without the power of the Spirit, our most earnest evangelistic efforts, our most diligent attempts to make disciples, and our most unwilting commitment to world missions will end in failure. In the power of the Holy Spirit, though, it is an entirely different ball game. But we have to understand and believe that the Spirit has come. We have to understand and believe – really believe – that the Holy Spirit has come *to us*. We have to understand and believe – I mean, really believe – that the Holy Spirit is *with us* and lives *in us*. And we need to let the Holy Spirit *have us*. We need to let the Holy Spirit *use us*. We need to be filled again and again with the Holy Spirit. We need to look to the Holy Spirit for the grace and power to do what He calls us to do, to serve His purposes in our generation.

On Pentecost, we celebrate the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit, the endowment of the Holy Spirit upon the church at Jerusalem, and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit promised to the church today. Promised to every believer. To you. To me. Promised to us *personally*. And promised to us *corporately* right here in our fellowship at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Kingstowne, Virginia, where we desire *to know Christ and to make Him known*.

In a sense, Pentecost is the birthday of the church. Some churches hold a birthday party for the church on the Day of Pentecost. Which is not a bad idea. The coming of the Holy Spirit to the church on Pentecost signaled the start of a new era in history. It marked the beginning of the church as the Body of Christ, animated and fueled by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit was not promised or given only to the 1st-century church of the apostles in Jerusalem. The same Holy Spirit, with all the varied giftings of the Spirit and in all of the Spirit's wonder-working power, is God's gift to us in His church today, to us who are commissioned to be ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20) in a world that daily, it seems, is becoming less tolerant of and more hostile to the message of the gospel and the teachings of the Christian faith. Our success, or the success of the church in fulfilling the Great Commission, will not be achieved by our own might or power, nor by the persuasive force of our intellect or eloquence, nor by worldly wisdom, but, as the prophet Zechariah reminds us, "by my Spirit, says the Lord" (Zechariah 4:6).

Two weeks ago I began to talk with you about the Great Commission Jesus gave His disciples, and how this Great Commission applies to us today. I told you the story of Eugene Peterson and Garrison Johns as a humorous example of a Great Commission method not to be emulated, imitated, or duplicated. It is one thing, of course, to talk about how not to fulfill the Great Commission, and another thing to talk about how to fulfill it.

Perhaps the first thing to recognize and emphasize (or re-emphasize) is that it is impossible to carry out the Great Commission apart from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work in us and through us. Without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to fulfill our calling as witnesses and ambassadors for Christ. It is as simple as that. The apostles and the rest of the believers with them in Jerusalem required the power of the Holy Spirit who came upon them in such a dramatic way on the Day of Pentecost. Until the Spirit came, they were spiritually impotent. Until Pentecost, they lacked the power needed to carry out the Great Commission.

The same is true of us. Unless we too are filled with the Holy Spirit, unless we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, unless our witness and ministry are powered by the Holy Spirit, we can never hope to do our part to fulfill the Great Commission. But here is the thing: *We have* received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit *has* come. Since the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is the birthright and inheritance of every believer, every true follower of Jesus. Including you and me.

If you sincerely trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life, if you belong to Him by faith, *you have the Holy Spirit living in you*. Will you resolve today to let the Holy Spirit have you? Will you let Him have all of you? Will you let the Holy Spirit have His way in you? Will you resolve with me to let the Holy Spirit have His way in us? Will you resolve with me to let God, by means of His Spirit at work in our lives, be truly sovereign over us? Who knows but that the greatest days of the church – the greatest days of *our* church, the greatest days of *Christ's* church here at Faith – lie ahead?

You have received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is present and operative in your life. The Holy Spirit is present and operative in the life of the church, too. The Holy Spirit is present and operative in the life of *our* church. We may be insensitive to the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst, preoccupied as we so often are, as Jesus said, with the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for more and more things (Mark 4:19). We may actively hinder or block the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst by fostering division, refusing to forgive, harboring a critical spirit, or insisting that the church focus its energies on meeting *our* “needs.”

Paul warns in Ephesians not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). And he urges the Thessalonians to be careful not to put out the Spirit's fire (1 Thessalonians 5:29). Which means that we must be attentive and responsive to the nudges, movement, direction, and empowerment of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in order to let the Spirit have us and use us for His kingdom purposes.

I know I am not alone in yearning for a new Pentecost, a new Holy Spirit-powered revival in our day that glorifies God and makes Him known and worshiped where He is not yet known

or worshiped, a revival that truly exalts Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, a revival that results in changed lives, changed families, changed churches, changed communities, even changed nations. God knows we need it in America. I long and pray for the Holy Spirit to move among us sovereignly, powerfully, redemptively, and revivingly to awaken us, to cleanse us, to heal us of our brokenness, to refine us, to refresh us, to inspire us, to guide us and motivate us, to equip us and empower us, to renovate and transform our lives for the living of these days.

For this to happen, we must cultivate and continue to cultivate a heart of dependence upon God, a heart of surrender and trust, a heart in tune with and responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, a heart radically devoted to loving God, loving one another, loving our neighbors, and loving the world in Jesus' name. A heart committed to serving God's purposes by being salt and light in this world (Matthew 5:13-16), and by joining with sisters and brothers in Christ to do our part to fulfill the Great Commission in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, knowing that if the Holy Spirit is in it, our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.