

## Spirit, Word, Truth & Life!

**“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 his own language.” (Acts 2:5-6) The festival of Pentecost began during the time of Moses and is still observed by orthodox Jews today. In the books of Moses Pentecost is referred to as the Shavuot, which means “the feast of weeks.” It was called the feast of weeks because it marked the end of the annual seven-week grain harvest that began the day after the Passover. Since it came on the fiftieth day after the Passover it was called Pentecost—which simply means “the fiftieth.” It was also called the “ingathering of the firstfruits of the harvest,” and to celebrate it the Israelites would sacrifice a grain offering to God and renew their covenant vows to obey all of his commands. So Pentecost had been around for fifteen hundred years when the Pentecost described in the *Book of Acts* took place—the Pentecost we are celebrating today. On that day of Pentecost God gave new meaning to the words “firstfruits of the harvest.” God sent great signs to signal the occasion: a roaring wind, tongues of fire and a new language which could be understood by people from many different nations who spoke many different languages. The Old Testament prophets had spoken of this day. Isaiah had written, “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland...to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise!” The prophet Joel called it “the great and glorious day of the lord,” and God said, “even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth...and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance...” To grasp the significance of what God was doing on this day of Pentecost we need to go back to the beginnings of human history—to a place called Babel, where God came down from heaven to keep man from destroying himself. At Babel, which later came to be known as Babylon, men decided to pool all their resources and work together in a coordinated effort to overthrow God. God had given them two commands: to call on his name in prayer and to be fruitful and multiply and fill the entire earth as stewards of his creation. But the men of Babel had a different plan. “Come on,” they said, “let’s build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the whole earth.” Instead of glorifying God by calling on his name they decided to “make a name for themselves”—to glorify themselves rather than God. And instead of spreading out and filling the earth they decided to gather together in a city and build a tower that reached to the heavens. It was an ambitious undertaking, driven by pride and rebellion. But God saved them from their self-destructive pride by throwing a monkey wrench into their plans. He ruined their synergy by turning their common language into many different languages so that they couldn’t understand each other. Then he set them wandering so that they would spread out over the entire earth. As always, God’s will was done.**

As they spread out and settled in various places, different cultures and societies and formed around their different languages. The formerly homogenous human community was splintered into many different communities where people spoke different tongues. And since sin abides in the human hearts and sin has a synergy of its own, as the communities grew into nations, they began to harbor suspicions about each other. A dynamic of mutual antagonism sprung up—a dynamic which determined the pattern of human history from that time forward. For human history is the history of nation against nation: of war and genocide and espionage and assassination. Jesus called it “wars and rumors of war.” And as science and technology increased the nations’ ability to engage in wars and rumors of war, they got better and better at destroying each other. This continued up to the present day, with the result that more people perished through war, genocide, espionage and assassination in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in all previous centuries combined. It’s hard to call that “progress.” But on the day of Pentecost we are celebrating today, God offered a new dynamic, a new pattern to mankind to replace the pattern of wars and rumors of war. He reversed the curse of Babel by giving mankind a new language that all men could understand, and by inviting them to take up residence in a new kingdom: the kingdom of God. This was the kingdom God had promised to Abraham and which had been proclaimed by Old Testament kings and prophets from David to Malachi. On that great and glorious day, the church was born. We are told that as the disciples were gathered together, “suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.” This “wind from heaven” was none other than the Holy Spirit of God. Tongues of fire came to rest on each of their heads and, “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the spirit enabled them.” A huge crowd gathered comprised of Jews from every nation on earth who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Pentecost. Jews from Asia and Arabia and Egypt and Greece and Rome all heard what the disciples were saying in their own native language. And so language, which had divided mankind, now would be the means of reuniting mankind. “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues,” they said. A beautiful new synergy was born. In the church—the kingdom of God—there would be perfect fellowship in one spirit and one language. The spirit was the Holy Spirit and the language would be the word of God. And at the heart of the word of God was the message of God’s love for mankind in the good news of salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. And that message, carried by the church, would go out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth and turn the hearts of men from selfishness and suspicion to faith and love. One spirit, one word, one truth would bring light and life where there had been darkness and death. One language—the word of God—would ignite love and fellowship and unity where there had been dissension and war. God had come to dwell with mankind—first in the person of his son and now in the person of the Holy Spirit. Man would no longer need to glorify himself by building towers: he could learn to glorify God through serving others—even as Jesus had glorified himself by serving man. [Story of St. Thomas Aquinas and the pope of Rome] As the signs and wonders continued, Peter stood up and spoke to the crowd.

He explained to them that when they crucified Jesus Christ, they crucified their own savior. They were “cut to the heart,” and asked Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter’s reply is the first proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Bible: “repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” About three thousand people believed Peter’s message and were saved that day. And the rest is history. The Gospel did go out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, but not in the way that anyone expected. The church had begun with the persecution of its Savior and it grew through the persecution of his followers. In Jerusalem, the Apostles and the new believers were persecuted—jailed and flogged and even stoned to death. It was not long before the Christians were driven out of Jerusalem by the roman and Jewish authorities. The goal was to wipe out the Christian faith, but the result was just the reverse. Like sparks fly out from a smoldering campfire if someone stomps on it and start new fires wherever they land, wherever the persecuted Christians ended up, they started new fires of faith. Christianity swept the ancient world like a forest fire driven by a great wind and the more it was persecuted the faster it grew, until it came to be said that the blood of the martyrs was the seedbed of the church. Two and a half centuries later, Christianity was the faith of the Roman Empire. The firstfruits of the new Pentecost did indeed yield a mighty harvest. You and I can start fires of our own, you know. All it takes is twenty-six words that Peter spoke to the crowd on that day in Jerusalem: “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”  
Amen.