

A Timely Look at Pentecostalism through a Law-and-Gospel Lens (Part Three)

Colleagues,

Here is the final installment of Steve Kuhl's presentation on Pentecostalism, delivered at the Crossings conference last January. I pass it along without further ado.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Holy Spirit in the Age of Pentecostalism (Part 3 of 3)

Steven C. Kuhl

34. As Pentecostals zero in on the Acts 2 Pentecost story, they become focused on the supernatural elements within the story, in this case the miracle of speaking in tongues, and make that the point of the story. That is their hermeneutic. Accordingly, the purpose of the Holy Spirit is three fold. First, it confirms through supernatural signs and wonders (Acts 2:3) the eschatological message that "the last days" are upon us (Acts 2:14). Second, it gets the attention of the world (Acts 2:7) through these signs and wonders. Third, it empowers the disciples with supernatural gifts by the Spirit to explain these signs and wonders (Acts 4) to the world. The story is regarded, then, as literally paradigmatic, that is, it is assumed that the kinds of supernatural manifestations that happened at Pentecost is the new normal for any Spirit-filled gathering. As ingenious as this interpretation is for connecting Pentecostal experience

to the Bible, is that really the point of the Pentecost story? I think not.

35. To be sure, the story *presupposes* a supernatural worldview, but does it *proclaim* a supernatural worldview? I think not. The story is all about God being present through the power of the Holy Spirit to deal with the world in a new way: not through the old way of the law, which condemns sinners, but through the new way of the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and raised, which offers forgiveness to sinners. Distinguishing law and gospel is the hermeneutical key for unlocking the meaning of the text. Let me illustrate this with three points.

36. First, that this spectacle happens on the Jewish Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1) is symbolically and interpretively significant. Pentecost was the liturgical feast day when the Jews observed the event of God's giving of the law to rule over Israel through Moses, 50 days after the Passover. The point of the story is that that dispensation is now coming to an end. To use words from the prophet Joel, referenced by Peter: the law, has seen its "last days" (Acts 2:17), so to speak. From now on, says Luke, let this Day of Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus, mark the beginning of a new day in which the Holy Spirit, not the law, rules your lives. What distinguish the rule of the Spirit from the rule of the law is this: the law brings the word of God's condemnation of sinners, the Spirit brings the Word of God's forgiveness for sinners, accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection. This is a pneumatology of the cross because the Spirit brings the benefits of the cross of Christ to sinners.

37. Second, central to the story is not the initial set of questions (two of them) that the crowd asked concerning the supernatural sights and sounds they saw and heard. Remember, those sights and sounds created "bewilderment" in some (How can

this be?, vv. 6, 8) and “sneers” in others (Are they drunk?, v. 12). Rather, central to understanding the text is the third and final question the crowd asked of the apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” (v. 37). Significantly, that question comes in response to Peter’s clear and poignant sermon connecting the fulfillment of the esoteric words of the prophet Joel and the messianic psalm of David to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the answer to this third question is remarkably simple and unspectacular: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (v. 38). It is important to note that repentance *and* being baptized for forgiveness of sins *and* receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit are not three isolated things, but the packaged whole that defines the new life in Christ. This side of the resurrection, life in the Spirit has repentance and forgiveness as its basic law-gospel framework: the law’s incriminations are acknowledged in repentance, and gospel’s overruling of the law through forgiveness is received by faith. Whatever other features life in the Spirit might take on is open-ended, as the Acts of the Apostles will show.

38. The third point concerns the matter of speaking in tongues. Undeniably, the Pentecost story tells us that the apostles received the supernatural ability to speak in the languages of other nations. But again, so it seems to me, the point of the story is not that such supernatural phenomenon are necessarily part and parcel of the Spirit’s way of making an effective and powerful Christian witness. Rather, the gift of tongues serves to make a basic point about the gospel that was important in the early life of the church: namely, that it was for everyone regardless of national origin or cultural-legal affiliation. Therefore, the story illustrates another application of the hermeneutical distinction between law and gospel. The nations do

not need to learn the Hebrew tongue (or adapt to Jewish law and custom) in order to be included in the promise of the Jewish messiah, Jesus Christ, and be part of the reconciled people of God. The work of the Spirit is to accommodate the needs of the nations by raising up proclaimers who will bring the message of the forgiveness of sins to them. In other words, the apostles are free, as Paul would say, to be all things to all people for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:19-23). When in Rome one is free to do as the Romans do; when in Jerusalem one is free to do as the Jews do. What is important here is the freedom the Spirit gives to the church, or, in this context, to the apostles, for the sake of gospel mission. In their administration of the gospel they are free to accommodate as they see fit to the language, customs and the cultural heritage of the people to whom they are sent. The Book of Acts is filled with examples of how this law-gospel distinction forms and shapes a variety of missionary practices by the apostles.

39. In my reading of Acts, then, I am not denying that the Spirit might work supernatural signs and wonders. My point is that, true to the character of supernatural works and wonders, they will most likely be spontaneous and rare, not predictable and regular. What will be predictable and regular is the content of the Spirit-filled message: repent and believe the good news. As I read Acts 2, the Spirit appears to be the divine emissary who oversees two kinds of works in tandem: proclaiming and hearing. The Spirit ensured that the gospel of Christ was both *proclaimed* to the world (the disciples spoke in the language of the nations, Acts 2:4) and *heard/believed* by the world (the nations heard the gospel in their own language, Acts 2:8). The point is not how the proclaimers emerged—supernaturally or naturally—but that the message was consistent. And even if Pentecostal communities routinely experience signs and wonders every time they gather—good for

them!—the challenge remains that they do not let the signs and wonders overshadow the message, that the signs and wonders serve the gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ, as Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13.

40. Finally, I want to briefly address the issue of "evidence" concerning the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in the worship gathering. Pentecostals make an important point when they assert that worship is not simply a human activity, but the arena in which God is present through the Holy Spirit to build up the people of God for the sake of faith and mission. In that regard, I would like to think that Luther's description of the Holy Spirit's work in the Small Catechism's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed would please Pentecostals. One translation puts it like this:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true.

41. For Luther, the whole counsel of the triune God (aka, the gospel) is that sinners get connected to Christ and his saving work so that they might be reconciled, forgiven, justified, have things made right with God. The problem is, sinners don't have the ability to do that. With regard to God, they are by nature oppositional defiant. That's why the Holy Spirit is necessary. To paraphrase the language of the Gospel of John, the Holy

Spirit is the one person in the Trinity who is commissioned to take what is Christ's (his righteous work of dying and rising for sinners) and apply it to sinners (John 16:12-15). That application is synonymous with faith. Therefore, Luther begins his explanation of the Third Article on a depressing note about our inherent inability to believe. He does that because it is very important for believers to know that they become and remain believers not by their "own reason or strength" but by the Holy Spirit. To claim otherwise puts them at odds with the Holy Spirit and risks losing what the Spirit has given them.

42. But how does the Holy Spirit do this work of creating faith in Christ? Are the Spirit's means secret and known only to the Holy Trinity or are they public and essentially knowable to all? To be sure, in asking this question we venture onto very slippery theological ice, the mysterious topic of election. Therefore, let me answer it in a slippery way. The means by which the Spirit works faith are a matter of public knowledge, even though the reason they work on some and not others is not. Therefore, since the means by which the Spirit creates faith is a matter of public knowledge, it is possible to point to the "evidence" of the Spirit's work in the world. In Luther's explanation the "evidence" of the work of Holy Spirit is identified by four specific verbs ("called," "gathered," "enlightened," and "sanctified and kept") with the "Holy Spirit" as the subject or actor, "me" as the object of recipient of the action, and "the gospel" as the public discernable means of the action. We can unpack these four verbs through four questions.

43. First, am I being "called by the gospel"? Is the gospel being addressed to me through the ordinary, objective means Christ himself has instituted? Here I think the phrase "by the gospel" could be any one of the five means of the gospel that Luther identified in his Smalcald Articles (III.4): baptism, preaching, confession and forgiveness, the Lord's Supper, and

the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints. If this is happening, then this is “Exhibit A” for evidence of the Spirit at work.

Second, is there a regular “gathering” of people where the gospel is preached and the sacraments given and mutual love and support is shared? That is to say, is there a community of faith where the gospel is proclaimed freshly and the sacraments administered accordingly? If so, that is “Exhibit B” for evidence of the Spirit at work.

Third, am I being “enlightened” by his gifts? That is, does the fact that “He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers” give insight or enlightenment on how I think, live, and interact in the world. If so, that is “Exhibit C” for evidence of the Spirit.

Fourth, am I being “sanctified and kept” in the one true faith? That is, not only do I trust the gospel, but is that trust being nurtured and kept alive in me by the gospel? If so, that is my holiness and that is “Exhibit D” for evidence of the Spirit. For remember, sanctification or holiness is not a moral concept whose increase is measured by the standard of law, but a spiritual condition of being “set apart” by faith in the forgiveness of sins.

44. I have no idea whether Pentecostals would identify these very ordinary public ministry activities as “evidence” of the working of the Holy Spirit in the world. They certainly don’t have the panache of speaking in tongues or healings. But neither would they necessarily exclude such extraordinary supernatural phenomena as tongues or healings from joining them as evidence. I would very much welcome discussion with Pentecostals on this.

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