

Acts chapter 2 is one of the passages of the bible we can be a little afraid of. We know it's an important passage because it's a turning point in the New Testament. Pentecost changed everything in the church. Pentecost catapulted the church out of the shelter of the upper room and into a world of preaching the gospel, and there can be no denying, a world of signs and wonders, miracles.

It's this idea of signs and wonders that frightens us. Historically in our Presbyterian tradition we've backed away from the supernatural. As part of my reading on the book of Acts I have been using an abridged commentary of John Calvin's. Even the great John Calvin seems to have skipped over this part of Acts 2, going straight to Peter's sermon. Another commentator only wanted to focus on how Pentecost proved salvation is for all people, and he's right, but completely ignored the fact that God by his Spirit appeared in this incredible demonstration of power and wonder.

It was only when I read some material written by our Pentecostal brothers and sisters that I actually found any detailed discussion on the fact that these tongues of what seemed to be fire appeared and brought with them this incredible ability to speak in other languages.

Maybe it's because of the way in some focus so heavily on the miraculous that we become nervous, we don't understand, we feel uncomfortable and so we back away from this part of the Christian life altogether.

This morning, I want to try and break through all of the fear, uncertainty and nervousness around Pentecost by talking about the **purpose** of Pentecost and the **response** to Pentecost. First, we need to understand what actually happened.

Pentecost was the equivalent to our harvest. It was 50 days after Passover and so it was 10 days since Jesus ascended into heaven. During that time, the disciples along with this larger group of 120 people were meeting in prayer in the upper room in Jerusalem.

The city would've been busy, people came for Passover and stayed on for Pentecost (maybe something along the lines of the 12th Fortnight, a standard holiday most people took). Jews from all across the region made this annual journey to the Temple for these feasts.

While this group of 120 people were praying, there came ***a sound like the blowing of a violent wind***. (acts 2:2) Luke is certain this came from heaven and with this sound came what ***seemed to be tongues of fire*** which separated out and settled over the church, the 120 people.

In Hebrew and Greek, the word for wind and the word for the Spirit are the same. Luke is trying to convey to us that this sound like wind, wasn't actually wind. It was from heaven he is looking for the words to tell us that God by his Spirit arrived in that room. The appearance of fire throughout scripture, be it at the burning bush, the pillar of fire that guided the people of God in the wilderness, the fire that consumed sacrifices and indeed at times people who had grievously sinned against God, was a sign of the presence of God.

This strange occurrence of what sounded like wind and appeared to be fire was an encounter with God and the fulfilment of John the Baptist's promise that while he baptised with water, one would come and baptise with fire and the holy spirit.

So, what's the **purpose** of this incredible manifestation of the Holy Spirit?

It seems the sound that filled the room was also heard by the people in the city. They did what most of us would do, they turned and gathered around to find out what it was they were hearing. This is when they heard the people in the room talking in various languages so that everyone who'd gathered could understand what was being said in their own language.

One of the things that frightens us when we begin to talk about spiritual gifts and especially tongues is that we struggle to understand what is happening or why it's happening. Here, in Acts 2 the purpose is incredibly clear. When the crowd realised what was happening and that they could understand everything, they said: ***we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!*** (Acts 2:11)

The purpose of this incredible display of power was that the people would understand the wonders of God. Being the people we are we sometimes become too focused on the amazing signs and wonders. They become the thing that grabs our attention, the spectacular and so we lose sight that the purpose of the sign is that the gospel, the goodness of God the grace of Jesus Christ would be proclaimed.

With this in mind then should our focus be on this supernatural ability to speak in foreign languages when the majority of people around us all speak English? There is, however, a cultural divide, a social divide, there is a change in language among younger generations – should our prayer be more that God would enable us to communicate across cultural and generational barriers, rather than just language barriers, would this not fulfil the purpose we see in Acts?

If we waited for the Spirit today as the disciples did, would the tongues we speak in make us more relevant and understandable to our community? Surely as we learn to wait on God in preparation for being his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, this is what we should be asking God to do for us, that we would be understandable.

If this is the purpose of Pentecost, what then is the **response**?

It seems there were two responses to what was going on. On the one hand some were amazed and wanted to know more: ***what does this mean?*** They asked, while others though the disciples had too much to drink.

Next Sunday Stanley will talk about Peter's sermon to the crowds and so I don't want to steal his thunder. What I do want us to understand today is this: The purpose of the spirit coming in this way was that people would understand the gospel. It was necessary then for Peter to preach, to make clear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Should God in his grace give us the ability to be effective communicators then we need to be prepared to communicate. How often do we pray for something and then sit back and wait for God to provide someone else to do the work. We do this all the time, Lord we pray that you would raise up Godly politicians to govern our land, but how many of us consider a career in politics. We pray that God would raise up ministers within our church, but how many of us are

actually prepared to put ourselves forward as candidates for the ministry. We pray that people would be healed, but how many are prepared to say to someone to pick up your mat and walk?

If the purpose of the spirit coming, that we are waiting on, is to equip and empower us to be witnesses, then our response really should be that we become witnesses.

At Pentecost there was not a special anointing on the crowds to hear and understand foreign languages, it was on the believers to speak foreign languages. Our response to the coming of the Spirit is to do something, to speak, to testify of Christ, to be a witness.

The interesting thing in this chapter, it doesn't really matter if we are working with people who are amazed, or those who are mocking – Peter addressed them both in the same way, by making clear who Jesus is, what happened to him, why it happened and how that changes our lives.

This is what we're called to – nothing more or nothing less than communicating Jesus.

Surely this is our prayer, surely as a church this is what we ought to be waiting on God for that we would be able to effectively communicate the good news of Jesus Christ in a way that is readily understood by the people we're speaking to. This is what we want God to enable and equip us for, and if God comes by his Spirit and does this (which I hope we believe he does) then it is our response to speak, trusting that as we speak the Spirit translates for us or enables us to be understood.

The purpose of Pentecost, that the gospel would be understood by all. Our response to Pentecost, to witness or testify to the gospel of Jesus Christ.