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Pentecost: the Feast in the Light of the Old Testament (Part 1 of 3)

Pentecost was a huge event in God's dealing with his people. It was a turning point. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit inaugurated "the last days" (Acts 2:17), the final age before Christ's return. So what exactly was the Feast of Pentecost and how did the events in Acts 2 relate to that? What is the meaning of all of this for us today in appreciating the work of the Holy Spirit? In this and two subsequent articles, let's consider Pentecost: its meaning, fulfillment, and continuing relevance for us today.

Pentecost: the Old Testament feast

Although we tend to associate Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost was of course first of all an Old Testament feast. So we need to go back to Old Testament times if we are to fully understand the fulfillment of this feast in the saving work of Christ. Indeed, the first part of Acts 2:1, which begins the account of the outpouring of the Spirit, can probably best be translated as follows: "When the Day of Pentecost was being fulfilled." The realization that this was an Old Testament feast deepens our understanding and appreciation for the fact that it was this festival that was chosen as the time for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The Feast of Pentecost did not exist in isolation on Israel's calendar of special days. It was closely linked to, and dated from, celebrations connected with the Passover. The Passover feast was celebrated at twilight in the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month (Lev 23:5). It was followed on the fifteenth day by the beginning of the closely related seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:6). On the next day, the sixteenth, the first fruits of the (barley) harvest had to be brought to the Lord (Lev 23:11, cf. vv. 6-7). Seven weeks and one day later, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) was celebrated, during which, among other things, offerings from the grain (wheat) harvest and two loaves of bread had to be brought to God (Exod 34:22; Lev 23:15-

17). (The fact that this festival was on the fiftieth day later gave rise to the name Pentecost, from the Greek word for "fiftieth.") Because the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread with all its different ceremonies and requirements was dominated by the Passover, it was known as Passover week. It is within the light of the Passover that Pentecost needs to be understood.

Pentecost was a day of joy for the harvest that God had given his people. Not surprisingly, it was therefore also known as Harvest Feast (Exod 23:16; 34:22) and Day of First-fruits (Num 28:26). This day, however, was not the first time that first fruits were brought. The first fruits of the barley harvest had already been presented three days after Passover. Why did the Lord require the first fruits on Pentecost?

Pentecost was first of all an Old Testament feast

The Passover celebrations reminded Israel that God had passed over the blood-sprinkled Israelite homes and had killed the firstborn of Egypt. So God had worked their exodus from Egypt's bondage and led them out into freedom as his people (Exod 12). God's salvation is, however, a complete salvation. He not only delivered his people from Egypt, but he also brought them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. God will provide! For this reason God already told Israel in the wilderness that when they would come to Canaan, and celebrate the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the sheaf of the first fruits of the harvest would need to be brought to God three days after the Passover (Lev 23:10-11).

Fifty days later, near the end of the harvest season, more fruits of the field, including two loaves of bread, were to be given (Lev 23:16-17), for Israel had to realize and give recognition to the fact that God not only delivered his people from certain death in their bondage

in Egypt, but he also provided life nourishment in the land of promise. The first fruits of the harvest, and indeed the entire harvest, were the result of his salvation as commemorated at Passover. Thus also on the day of Pentecost Israel not only had to give first fruits, but also had to recall their bondage in Egypt (Deut 16:12) and so enjoy and celebrate the new life God had given them because of the Exodus. This new life also enabled them to live in holy service to God.

New Testament fulfillment

With this orientation to the Old Testament feast we can appreciate something of the tension and anticipation surrounding the first Pentecost after the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Christ lay down his life on the cross, he did so as our Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5:7), fulfilling the Passover feast and setting his people free from the dominion of the evil one (cf. Col 2:14-15). Three days later he rose from the dead as the first fruit of the salvation he had accomplished for his people (cf. 1 Cor 15:20, 23). He thus fulfilled the offering of the first sheaf of grain on that day and showed that God's salvation not only delivers his people from bondage, but also gives the new life (cf. Rom 6:5-11). Now Pentecost had come. With a fulfilled Passover and the fulfillment of the offering of the first fruits three days after Passover, what would Pentecost bring? Was this feast not closely related and did it not speak eloquently of the provision of a full harvest and the new life of service that God gave his people on the basis of the salvation he had accomplished as seen in Passover?

With a fulfilled Passover and the fulfillment of the offering of the first fruits three days after Passover, what would Pentecost bring?

In Acts 2:1 we are told that "they were all together in one place." No one was missing. There was a sense of expectation (see Acts 1:4, 5). They were not disappointed. The risen Lord poured out his Spirit as he had promised (Acts 1:8). Having effected the deliverance of his people from the bondage of sin, he continued his work of salvation by giving them his life-giving Spirit. The people whom he had redeemed as his possession on Golgotha and for whose justification he had been raised from the grave (Rom 4:25) were now invigorated with the newness of life in Christ and made a new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). What a change that meant! Filled with the Spirit of the risen Lord, they shared in

the first fruits of what life with God, on the basis of his accomplished salvation, was all about. In this way they were equipped to serve the God of their salvation.

One of the immediate consequences of the outpouring of the Spirit was that the Spirit of Christ gave them new power and boldness. After the death of the Passover Lamb, they had been frightened, disheartened, and had met behind closed doors. But now they received courage to speak openly of the mighty works of God (Acts 2:11). Peter, who a little over seven weeks ago had not dared to confess the Lord Jesus before a servant girl (Matt 26:69-72), now boldly proclaimed the Christ before the "men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem" (Acts 2:14).

God's people may have a foretaste of the full life with God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ

Peter's sermon is a clear proclamation of the crucified Christ who rose from the dead for the New Testament Pentecost can only be understood within the context of Christ's work of fulfilling the Passover as the Paschal Lamb. On the Day of Pentecost the Lord Jesus Christ who had brought about the deliverance of his people continued to provide for them. With his life-giving Spirit he made them a new creation (cf. Rom 8:9-11), equipped to serve him with the prophetic proclamation of his salvation for the great ingathering of the harvest in the last age. That fact speaks of the abiding significance of Pentecost. Christ, the Passover Lamb and risen Lord, continues his work (cf. Rev 5). The three thousand who believed on the Day of Pentecost were but a beginning. The results of Christ's once-for-all salvation work continue to be evident as he gives new life to his redeemed people and as he harvests to the glory of the Father. The final result will be a new creation, not just as seen in the people whom he recreates after his image, but a new recreated world for them to dwell in. For Pentecost, coming after a fulfilled Passover, means that God's people may have a foretaste of the full life with God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This is what gives life, a lustre of joy, and festivity for those who confess the Lamb of God. They can live in the expectation of the coming, complete fulfillment of Christ's salvation work.

The question is often raised: what is the difference between the work of the Holy Spirit in Old Testament Israel and the people of God today, the new Israel of God, the church (Gal 6:16)? Is there a difference? More about that next time.





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Pentecost: the Feast in the Light of the Old Testament (Part 2 of 3)

The question is often raised: what is the difference between the work of the Holy Spirit in Old Testament Israel and the people of God today, the new Israel of God, the church (Gal 6:16)? Is there a difference? Well, surely there must be. After all, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is signaled as the beginning of a new era. On that day, the Apostle Peter proclaimed:

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" (Acts 2:16-21).

A new era – the last days! And the work of the Holy Spirit figures prominently!

There is also another indication that a new era started. There is a striking passage in John 7:39 which literally reads that in the days Jesus walked on earth: "the Holy Spirit was not yet." Now since the Holy Spirit obviously existed in Old Testament times, this passage in full is usually translated: "Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified." So what exactly is the difference between the work of the Spirit in the Old and New Testaments?

In considering this question, let us briefly consider the continuity between the Old and New Testaments with respect to the work of the Spirit and how the Spirit worked in ancient Israel. In the next article, we will deal with the new elements of the work of the Holy Spirit in the last days in which we live and consider some of the consequences.

The work of the Spirit and God's people in the Old Testament

Since we are dealing with the Spirit's work with respect to the people of God, we will not deal with his other work as in the creation of the world and related topics (cf. Gen 1:2; Ps 104:30).

In the Old Testament, as in the New, we may assume that God works faith and repentance (Acts 11:18; 16:14; 2 Tim. 2:25; John 6:44; Phil. 2:13) and that he used the Holy Spirit to do so (cf. Rom 2:29; 1 Cor 2:4; 6:11; 12:3; Gal 3:3). It is striking however that very little is said about the work of the Holy Spirit with respect to the believers as such and we simply acknowledge this as a reality.

The Spirit and the special offices

However, the Spirit is specifically mentioned when it comes to special tasks and offices in God's service. Moses had the Spirit (cf. Neh 9:20) and God temporarily equipped the seventy elders who were to help Moses with the Holy Spirit so they could prophesy (Num 11:16-30). Obviously this gift of the Spirit was very special (cf. also 1 Sam 19:20-24). Moses cried out: "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" (Num 11:29). Later on all the prophets were endowed with the Spirit. Micah as a prophet could say: "I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8). Indeed, a prophet is characterized as "the man of the Spirit" (Hos 9:7; NIV "inspired man;" cf. Neh 9:30; 2 Chron 15:1; 20:14; 24:20). As 2 Peter 1:21 puts it: "Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Coming to Israel's rulers, God raised up judges and equipped them by causing his Spirit to come upon them (Othniel – Judg 3:10; Gideon – 6:34; Jephthah – 11:29;

Samson – 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; cf. also 1 Chron 12:18). Incidentally, the phrase indicating that the Spirit comes upon someone does not necessarily mean that one is regenerate. After all, the Spirit also came upon the pagan diviner Balaam (Num 24:2) whom God used to bless Israel, even though Balaam had wanted to curse God's people.

With respect to the office of king, we read that King Saul received "the Spirit of the Lord" who would equip him for the task of kingship (1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6). After Saul was rejected as king, the Spirit departed from Saul and came upon David (1 Sam 16:13-14; 2 Sam 23:2). With David's anointing, he received the Holy Spirit (1 Sam 16:13). David as anointed king was very conscious of the Holy Spirit's presence. When he fell into sin he prayed to God: "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (Ps 51:11; also see Davidic Ps 143:10; cf. also 2 Sam 23:2; 1 Chron 28:12).

Other examples of exceptional people include the craftsman Bezalel who was charged with the awesome responsibility to make designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze for the tabernacle. Of him Lord said: "I have filled him with the Spirit of God" (Exod 31:3; 35:31)

So, to sum up, we read very little in the Old Testament about the work of the Spirit in the lives of God's people as a whole, although clearly lives of faith and obedience were the result of God's work by his Spirit (cf. John 3:3-6). The only time the Old Testament clearly speaks of the Spirit actually dwelling within a person is with respect to some of those with a special office or task as designated by God himself. The obvious emphasis in the Old Testament is not that God lives within his people but that God, the Holy Spirit, is with his people.

God was *with* his people

And so even though some of those in special office appear to have had an indwelling Spirit, they were the exception. The overall emphasis is on the Spirit being *with* God's people rather than being inside each individual. To mention some highlights: he spoke directly to Adam and Eve even after the fall into sin (Gen 3:9-19), Enoch walked with him (Gen 5:22, 24), as did Noah (Gen 6:9). Abraham and Isaac walked before him (Gen 17:1; 24:40; 48:15). Indeed, throughout the patriarchal period we read of God accompanying his people rather than dwelling in them. When God led his people out of Egypt, Scripture characterizes the days of Moses as a time when God "set the Spirit *among* them," that is, among Israel, and guided and gave to his people rest by the Spirit (Isa 63:11, 14). This must refer to God's presence in the pillar of cloud (Exod 13:21-22) and later in the tabernacle (Exod 40:34-38).

And so, how was God with his people in Old Testament times? It was by living in their midst in a special building, first the tabernacle (Exod 40:34-38) and later the temple (1 Kings 6:13; 8:10-11; 2 Chron 5:13-14). This was God's dwelling place. His throne room was the Most Holy Place where he was enthroned on the Ark of the Covenant (Exod 40:34-38; Ps 80:1). This Most Holy Place was separated from the Holy Place by a heavy curtain (Exod 26:31-33; 36:35). Israel was shielded and protected from God's holiness by the sacrificial services administered by the Levitical priests. Israel would surely have been destroyed by God's holiness without that insulating wall of the service of reconciliation. This dwelling of God with his people in the old dispensation was a dwelling at a distance from them. He lived with Israel yes, but there was a distance and in the midst of much sin (Lev 16:16).

The temple Solomon built was eventually destroyed by the Babylonians as part of God's judgment on his people. When God's people returned to the land of Israel, the temple was rebuilt in the days of Haggai and Zechariah. While it was being rebuilt, God assured the people: "I am with you" (Hag 1:13) and "my Spirit remains among you [lit: in your midst]" (Hag 2:5). This can be understood in the context of the temple. And so in the old dispensation, the Holy Spirit worked in the lives of his people from God's dwelling place, the tabernacle or the temple (cf. Neh 9:19-20). Only the priest could enter the tabernacle or temple (Heb 9:7).

God did not want to leave it at this. It was not as it should be. There was something wrong (Heb 8:7-8). Indeed sin and the resulting punishment overwhelmed God's people. A new covenant was needed. There had to be a final solution for those sins for in the Old Testament times. God had simply passed over them (Rom 3:25). Juridically there was as yet therefore no lasting solution. And so God promised a new covenant.

The Lord God did not want to continue to live forever enclosed as it were within the Most Holy Place. He wanted to move right into the very hearts and lives of his people because he made them to be his temple and dwelling place. That is the significance of Pentecost! Of course this dramatic development did not happen overnight. After all, as mentioned, God's people are sinful and by nature depraved – with their debts not even paid! But Christ came, paid the debts, and opened the way for God to claim his people as his dwelling place, his temple here on earth!

This had enormous consequences as we will see in the next concluding article.





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Pentecost: the Feast in the Light of the Old Testament (Part 3 of 3)

The great breakthrough at the New Testament Pentecost

The Lord Jesus came to earth in order to fulfill all the requirements of the law so that God's people could be holy and pleasing to God. Christ satisfied God's just demands for sin committed (2 Cor 5:21; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). When the end was in sight and the completion of his work was coming closer, the Lord Jesus said in John 14:16-17 "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives *with* you and will be *in* you." Notice those words: "for he lives *with* you and will be *in* you." There is progress here in the history of revelation. Sin does not have the last say. God will come to dwell right inside his people! Before Pentecost the Spirit was with God's people but not within in the way he would be later. This calls to mind the words of John 7:39 where it says that Christ "meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified." The timing of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was linked to Christ's glorification. That means that only after his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension were accomplished would the Spirit be given to the church. For only then would all be accomplished for the payment of sins and the justification of his people on the basis of his sacrificial death. And he would be given in fullness unprecedented in the history of the world up to that point.

Let us consider some of the aspects of the outpouring of the Spirit that set it apart from the Old Testament work of the Spirit.

The new temple of God

The main change is of course the fact that God's presence was no longer centred in the temple. When Christ died on the cross the temple and the entire sacrificial service of reconciliation became obsolete. Indeed, at the very moment that the Lord Jesus died, the temple curtain dividing the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place ripped from top to bottom (Matt 27:51; cf. Heb 9:3, 8; 10:19-20). This was God's doing. By this action, God put the temple aside as his dwelling place and claimed his people, sanctified by the blood of *the* Lamb, as his new home on earth.

This was unlike anything in the Old Testament. The church and not the temple is now God's permanent home on earth! That awesome truth is clearly taught in Scripture. The congregation as a whole is called such when the Apostle Paul wrote the Corinthians saying: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you [plural]?" (1 Cor 3:16) This truth is repeated in 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Do you not know that your [plural] body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you [plural], whom you [plural] have received from God?" This truth is never articulated this way in the Old Testament. But the reality of the Spirit's dwelling in the congregation is repeated many times in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul writing to the Roman Christians and to Timothy speaks of the Spirit who lives in them (Rom 8:9, 11; 2 Tim 1:14; also Eph 3:17). Indeed, the church is the house of God (lit.: 1 Tim 3:15).

The reality of the indwelling Spirit in the church as his temple has two huge implications. First, New Testament believers have what the Old Testament believers did not have, namely union with Christ through the Spirit. The author of Hebrews mentions that in comparison with the believers of the old dispensation, "God had planned something better for

us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (Heb 11:39-40; cf. 7:22; 8:6). This "something better" is the spiritual union Christians today may have with the exalted and glorified Christ. It is the basis for all the other blessings of salvation, "yet it was not enjoyed prior to Christ's death and resurrection. Old Testament believers were regenerated, justified, and sanctified on the basis of Christ's (future) work," but the mode of covenant fellowship in which they experienced these blessings was with God's official dwelling at a distance from them. His being among them "lacked the finality and permanence of union with (the glorified) Christ." (The quotes are from R.B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 36.)

We are so used to hearing of the union with Christ by the Spirit, but behind this theological truth is the momentous reality of having an intimate relationship with almighty God (cf. Matt 13:16-17). It means that as Christians we have been given new hearts on which the law of God can be written (Ezek 36:26-27; Jer 31:33). It also means that we have been adopted into the family of God as his children (Rom 8:14-17 [cf. 5:5]; Gal 3:23-4:7).

The second related implication is that the outpouring of the Spirit truly ushered in a new age – the last days in God's program for this world. The momentous event of the Spirit coming down to live in the church means that the church becomes a separate, independent entity in a way that ancient Israel was not. Ancient Israel, the church at that time was defined as a nation, among other nations. However, the church as home of the Holy Spirit transcends all national and ethnic boundaries. The unity is the unity not in race but in the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:18; 4:3-6). This means that the people of God are free to expand and go wherever the Spirit directs. Driven by the Spirit, the gospel spread in the early church, eventually all over the Roman Empire. Today the Spirit still drives mission activity and the triumphant Christ gathers his people through the Word and Spirit.

This brings us to the next topic: the Spirit's presence also means a superabundance of gifts.

Outpouring of gifts

Prior to his ascension into heaven, the Lord Jesus told his disciples: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). It is clear from the context that this power they were to receive is directly related to equipping them to spread the good news of Jesus Christ as his witnesses. The Spirit would enable them

to be good witnesses of their Saviour and so spread the gospel even to the ends of the earth. That is what the book of Acts also tells us (Acts 8:29, 39-40; 10:19, etc.).

This receiving power to spread the gospel is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost. "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" (Acts 2:17-18). All will now share in the prophetic office of spreading the good news! Everyone is equipped to publicly witness to the risen Christ. Moses' wish that all would be prophets has been fulfilled (Num 11:29). And it is not restricted to Israel. Also the Gentiles receive the Spirit (Acts 10:45).

As Christians we have been given new hearts on which the law of God can be written

When the Spirit was given, the Spirit was "poured out." This suggests an overflowing abundance, and unprecedented deluge. This is also in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 44:3-4, "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams" (cf. Isa 44:3).

There is a divine and royal abundance here fitting for the glorified Christ as the Spirit is poured out. Nothing like this ever occurred in the Old Testament. This too is a distinguishing feature of the New over against the Old Testament.

The gifts of the Spirit are many. But to go into them at this point would be to divert from the main topic being addressed, namely the significance of Pentecost in distinction with the Old Testament work of the Spirit.

Continuing implications of Pentecost

In conclusion, there are two important implications of the events of Pentecost that can be mentioned. First, with God the Holy Spirit actually residing within the church and its individual members, the struggle against sin is taken to the next level. With the Holy Spirit living in the church and its members, sin cannot be tolerated. If even the eye looks lustfully, it is adultery (Matt 5:28). Sin must not be tolerated and it must be

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opposed at every turn. It must not have dominion (Rom 6:22), for Christ has triumphed over sin and Satan and his Spirit now resides in God's people. But the struggle is hard (Rom 7)! We can even grieve the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul admonishes: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Eph 4:30). A timely warning, for it is possible to quench the Spirit. The warning in 1 Thessalonians 5:19 is apt: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire."

A second important implication of the Spirit's dwelling in the church and its members individually is that our future is guaranteed. As a matter of fact, God's Word tells us that the presence of the Spirit in his earthly temple and dwelling place is like a

down payment for the inheritance of the future glory (Eph 1:14). God "has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Cor 5:5). By his indwelling Spirit, God claims us as his very own. "He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Cor 1:21-22). The Spirit's presence in the church and in the personal lives of Christians provides a foretaste of the future perfection. Those filled with the Spirit have life eternal now. The Spirit's presence guarantees this life with Christ, now and forever (cf. Rom 8:11; John 5:24). The indwelling Spirit places Christians in the company of a triumphant multitude of people who, though they may suffer now, know that the victory has been won. The future is with them! Put differently, Pentecost ushered in the last age, the last days, and so the only promised redemptive act of God still needing fulfillment is the return of our Saviour and the coming of the new heaven and earth.

And if we get into a situation of great trouble and darkness and don't even know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with the Father and we may rest assured that everything will work out for the good of those who love God. The victory over all misery and sin is ours. The present and the future belong to the triumphant Christ (Rom 8:15-39)!

