PENTECOST PEOPLE:

Theological Background

Pentecost People: Becoming Locally Global

It is not the only motif the shapes the narrative of Luke-Acts, but it is certainly a very significant one. This two-volume gospel narrative is designed to clarify the global significance of the gospel story. This motif begins in the first volume with 'infancy narratives' - stories in which women (not typically on the receiving end of affirmation) immediately appear as the principal players in events that surround the birth of Jesus (Luke 1-2), and it is still fully alive at the end of the second volume, many many chapters later, where Paul's final appeal to his hearers in Rome (Acts 28:28) finishes with the reminder '... this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen' (Acts 28). It is a narrative that makes it clear why in the new-born churches there can no longer be any conceivable justification for ethnic or cultural exclusivity in authentic Christian communities, those that are serious as followers of Jesus. Many marginal groups, each familiar to first century hearers, are brought into focus in a sustained and growing litany of striking remembrances. Women, children, people with disabilities, pagans and Gentiles - one by one they enter the narrative as recipients of grace, each drawn into the great saving initiative of God in Jesus.

A manifesto for the new movement is rehearsed in Luke 4, re-cycling for a new generation the prophetic insights from Isaiah of the Exile, and compelling evidence that this manifesto is finally having its day in the ministry of Jesus is spelled out in a succession of striking encounters, sayings and miracles.

Uniquely important in the sequence, however, is the stories that frame the opening of The Acts, now well-placed the make connections back to the Gospel and to demonstrate that everything that had been learned from the life of Jesus is now resurrected and fulfilled in a new community, empowered by what the Fourth Gospel will one day call 'another' comforter, making Jesus present, as it were, a second time over. Historically the dominant exegetical emphasis has fallen on the account in Acts 2, recalling the events at the first Day of Pentecost celebration following the dying, rising and appearing of Jesus, and this emphasis is not insignificant for our own globalising theme. At its core is an initiative of God that makes it possible for everyone to hear the good news of Jesus such that '... each one heard them speaking in the native language' (Acts 2:6). This is a major event in the narrative of salvation, marking the inauguration of a time when language will no longer be tolerated as a barrier to access

into God's favour. It is, as commentators and theologians have often noted, a definitive reversal of the curse of Babel, the story which for generations had articulated a reason for the inevitable conflict between people from different language groups. It should have been enough, you might think, for Peter to preach in the universal Greek language of the Mediterranean market-place - surely, the majority would have understood the message; but no, nothing less than 'their own native language' was good enough for God's coming kingdom. If we now attempt to contextualise this insight in the churches of later centuries, we might well find ourselves putting it like this: ***no regular participant or occasional visitor to any genuinely Christian act of worship should ever feel themselves to be an outsider, experience exclusion, that is, on basis of language or culture***. This presents a continuing challenge as we tell the salvation story in our own day.

There is a good case, however, for the suggestion that our prioritised focus on the Day of Pentecost, has missed a significant point - that the Lukan narrative is still unfolding, and that there is much more 'pentecostal' energy as yet untapped. We could argue, as some have, that the real hinge of the Luke-Acts narrative is the visit of Peter to the House of Cornelius at Joppa in Acts 10. Within the terms of the narrative's own structure, we learn that the miracle at Pentecost was not enough to convince Peter that God's saving work, symbolised by an exuberant vitality of the Holy Spirit, was accessible to all people, regardless of language or ethnicity - available to Jews and Gentiles (all the others) alike. It would take another divine initiative, originating in Peter's blasphemous dream-life and Cornelius's accessible spirit, to tip the balance. When it comes, however, the new insight is blatantly clear, the saving work of God's Holy Spirit is equally available to everyone, regardless of ethnic or cultural origin. When we now contextualise this across the centuries we might want to say something like this about our approach to what we do in our Christian worship: ***in shaping Christian acts of worship, not only will every effort always be made to prevent language becoming a barrier to inclusion but, more than that, wide-ranging cultural differences will normatively be affirmed with enthusiasm and respect***. We will make such a commitment, because this is how we credibly re-enact the initiative that God took, first in Jesus, and then in the young church - and this is why disciples are called, to embody the 'alternative' comforter.

Once the story of Joppa is done and dusted, the Lukan trajectory is all down- hill towards Rome. Now the gospel has been free to become global, transcending every potential barrier of language or culture. Acts 11 onwards makes a gripping read, and some of the memories of those heady days are so intense that they are fraught with the dangers of minunderstanding. Who gets the Spirit, then, and when and why?

Who does God use most strategically in the story: the missionary (usually Paul, sometimes another) or the recipients (a Macedonian, a gaoler, a local magician). But however difficult it might be to interpret the detail, the trajectory is beyond doubt. What began in Jerusalem (or Bethlehem) is not complete until it reaches Rome, the centre of the Gentile world. Before we know what has hit us, we find ourselves confronted with the prophetic challenge, that amongst the most important distinctives of authentic post-pentecostal worship has to be its multicultural inspiration and accessibility. If this is so, then we have stumbled on an emphasis that is hugely needed in today's worshipping communities if we are to redress a wide-spread misunderstanding that God is content with what we have come to think of as normal, mono-cultural, linguistically exclusive acts of public worship.

One of the recurrent tensions in Acts, one that has sometimes caused Baptists some serious heart-searching is the tension that arises between the church local (of which there are many in Acts and with which we easily identify) and churches-together (or the Church, as it often gets called in later history). A Baptist distinctive has included variations on the claim that the local, whilst not necessarily independent of its need for others and the blessings of inter-dependence that accompany it, has nonetheless all the ecclesial potential of the global. Every church is able, under the grace of God, to be Church, that Church is not another something that happens only when many churches are networked, but is simply church on another scale, more like the outer envelope in a stack of Russian dolls than a new kind of doll that lords it over the smaller ones. If this is the case, and there is a good argument that the Luke-Acts narrative affirms us in thinking this way, then there is now no justification for any church to aspire to anything less than the vision of becoming a full 'Pentecost people'. We are under gospel orders to enact this pentecostal vision in every aspect of our community life, and most certainly in our public acts of worship; to do less is to miss the vision of kingdom as it can be traced from the narratives that begin with the birth of Jesus. Our calling is, with God, to be locally global.

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