

Pentecost: The Heaven on Earth Light Show **by Winn Griffin, DMin.**

Pentecost is one of the three annual pilgrim festivals in Judaism. The other two being Passover and Tabernacles. Pentecost was when every male Jew was required to proceed on foot to the Temple in Jerusalem. It is also called the Feast of Weeks, because it was held after the counting of seven complete weeks after "the morrow of the Sabbath" when the barley sheaves were offered as recorded in Lev 23:15-20. The festival is then held on the 50th day, i.e. Pentecost. All the pilgrim festivals possessed agricultural significance. So, Pentecost marked the end of the barley and the beginning of the wheat harvest. That is significant to remember. Pentecost as the end of one season and the beginning of another.

Let's use the metaphor of a computer program to get at the story of the church and the significance of Ascension and Pentecost. In the computer generation, we are constantly offered newer and more featured software solutions, usually designated with version numbers. We are accustomed to installing a new version of software, which often calls for the uninstalling of the older version that we have been successfully using. And sometimes if we buy an upgrade, we have to have the older version around before the newer version will install.

So let's think of Pentecost, as a newer version of the Church, which came into effect after God added features to his Church program and then rebooted for the new features to take effect. To reboot there is a momentary loss of power in order to regain a new surge of power to run the new features of the program. It is no different at Pentecost where Church Version 4 came into the world. By my calculations we have had:

- Church Version 1: The church in the garden story
- Church Version 2: The church in the Abraham story
- Church Version 3: The church in the Jesus story
- Church Version 4: The church in the Acts story

We are also familiar with the fact that new versions of software disable some former features or present them in a different way. This was certainly the case between Word 2003 and Word in Vista which is the old Word presented in a new metaphor. This same concept is true for Pentecost.

To understand the concept of Pentecost in Acts 2, we must first look at Acts 1.

There are many movies that begin with a dramatic sequence of events that sets the plot in motion and sets up the key characters, conflicts, and themes that will drive the rest of the story. Ascension and Pentecost serve that function in Acts as a telling and tantalizing beginning that makes us realize that for all the drama of the resurrection, there are more extraordinary events still to come. However, most modern Christians have not paid close attention to the dramatic structure of Acts. Ever watched a James Bond movie?— the sequenced sets up at the beginning of the films, which often look like they have nothing to do with the actual film, were setups for the audience, promising even more action as the movie moves along.

The first section of Acts provides the main shape and themes of the whole book that is to come. Luke's Acts could be entitled "the heaven on earth light show." Acts is about what it looks like when the light of heaven comes to earth, (heaven meaning the place where God dwells now, not the place where we in the West think we go when we die). Acts portrays what it looks like when the rule of God comes to earth. Acts demonstrates what it is like when heaven and earth come together as one, a foretaste of the end of time when heaven and earth are married for all eternity.

Luke writes:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But 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."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

In the first few sentences of Acts, Luke sketches many of themes that will flow out in the full telling of the story of Acts. We must constantly remember that the story of Acts is all about Jesus. While the first name ascribed to it was "the Acts of the Holy Spirit," it was such because of Jesus. Yes, it is true Jesus had done all that he is going to do while in his earthly form living in Israel for some 38 or 39 years. The Gospel of Luke, as well as the other Gospels, tells the story of the ministry of Jesus doing and teaching the Kingdom of God, and now the Acts is a continuation of the story of Jesus doing and teaching the Kingdom of God through his disciples empowered by the same Spirit that empowered Jesus all along.

In much of USAmerican church theology, the Kingdom of God is seen as the place out there in time and space where God lives, a place where, if we become followers of Jesus, we get to go when we die. The word heaven, that place where we go when we die, has become the synonym for the Kingdom of God. Or, as Augustine brought to the fore, the Kingdom is another way of saying Church. And in good Western fashion of being colonial, we then take on the job of extending or building the Kingdom which is simply referring to the building of the church. This is pure and simple wrongheaded theology.

The whole book of Acts is about the Kingdom of God. From the first page to the last page.

- For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.5).
- For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance! (28.31)

So the Kingdom of God frames the book of Acts.

In our Western telling and living of the story of God, we have forgotten the Israel dimension (Church: Version 2) within the story of God. We are often given to tell the story of God as:

- God created humankind
- humankind sinned
- God sent Jesus to rescue humankind

By telling the story this way, we have excluded a large part of the story which is found in the Old Testament. We must remember that God called Abraham and Sarah and their family as the means to rescue the world so that God could come into his creation as Israel's solo representative in order to secure that rescue. The identity of Jesus is formed as the focal point of the whole story of the Old Testament. What Jesus did was what God called Abraham and Sarah and their family to do in the first place. The tension in the story of Israel in the Old Testament is that she knows that she is the bearer of the story of the Creator God, but seemingly cannot, as she stands, actually accomplish those promises to their fullest extent, although on occasion she comes close. That version of Church did not have all the features necessary in place to perform its ultimate mission, the blessing of all the nations. The tension was to be resolved by a newer version of Church with Jesus and his disciples and continue to be resolved by the Pentecost version of the church.

In Acts 1.6, the disciples inquired of Jesus, "Is this the time that you are going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?" The answer is yes, but it is not like you thought it was going to be. It would not be in a political sense as Israel thought it would be, when the world would bow at her feet. But, it would be different because of the newer features of the Church, all the world would bow at the feet of King Jesus and confess that he is Lord.

This surely raised the question then: "What will the Kingdom be like?" In the new version of the Church, everyone will have the opportunity to be empowered by the Spirit to be witnesses of the

Kingdom Rule of God in this present age. What kind of witness? one might inquire. Not a witness about a personal relationship that one has encountered and everyone else should encounter it also, but a witness that the King of the world has been enthroned and we are to express what that King's world is like. It's a subversive story, meant to change the cultures that we live in.

The next part of the story that Luke shares is about the Ascension. What is the Ascension all about? Part of the difficulty about talking about the Ascension is due to the mental furniture that we have about heaven and earth. We believe that earth is here and heaven is out there somewhere, usually a long way away. This is the result of our Greek thinking, rather than the Bible's way of thinking, which was and is Hebraic. Our imagination is stuck in our Western worldview about heaven and earth and we try to talk about the Ascension within that framework. So, we think Jesus went up away from the disciples to heaven. The story of the Ascension, as every good first century Jew would know, was a way of thinking about heaven and earth that we Westerners think and reflect from a different worldview. The story of God presents a different worldview about heaven and earth. Heaven and earth overarch and interlock with each other. Heaven and earth were always made to be joined to one another. At his Ascension, Jesus did not go away to some sphere not available to humankind, because heaven and earth really do interlock and overlap. The Creator, the Savior, and the Empowerer are all right here and now. When we minister, heaven crosses that thin veil and what is there in heaven is now present on earth. When we pray for a sick person and healing occurs, heaven has been revealed on earth. When we feed a poor person or better yet when we work on the systemic evil of poorness, heaven has revealed itself on earth.

It is true that heaven is God's space, earth is our space. However, they are not so separated as the Westerner has come to believe. The Jew believed that there was a place where heaven and earth became one. It was the Temple in Jerusalem. For them, the Temple was where the sphere of heaven, the dwelling of God, and sphere of earth, the dwelling place of humankind, came together. So when a Jew was in the Temple, he or she was still on earth, but at the same time he or she was in the place where the sphere of God actually intersected with earth and at that moment in time that Jewish person was believed to be in the presence of God.

The Temple was not a place where one ran to find safety from the pressures of the world. The Temple was the symbol of what God was going to do for the whole world in his newer versions of the Church.

Heaven and earth are joined together in Jesus and demonstrated as such on the day of Pentecost. The new creation embodied in the risen Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, is now available in the new version of the Church via Pentecost.

Acts is about Jesus and the Church as the true Temple. Paul picks this line of thinking up in the book of Corinthians where he tells the Corinthians that they are the Temple of God. Jesus is surely the place where heaven and earth came together in perfect harmony. And in his Ascension we have a piece of the new earth now in heaven. And in Pentecost we have the power of heaven now on earth. The Ascension and Pentecost join heaven and earth. This joining is the means by which God's glory will eventually fill the whole earth. The good news

here is that we get to play a part in this ongoing story. Luke then tells us in Acts what it will look like when the glory of the Lord begins to fill the earth.

We must gain a new imagination about heaven and earth. We must think about heaven as the control room for earth. We must stop thinking about heaven as a detached-from-earth place to which we go, so we don't have to have anything to do with the earth.

In today's world, we are faced with a false antithesis of Deism and Theocracy.

The Deism of the Enlightenment Project or as some may call it, Epicureanism, which was a philosophy advanced by Epicurus that considered happiness, or the avoidance of pain and emotional disturbance, to be the highest good and that advocated the pursuit of pleasures that can be enjoyed in moderation.

Deism/ Epicureanism believes and acts out from its mindset that God is upstairs. He's a long way away from us. It believes and practices that religion is about how we in private get in touch with a far-away-distant God to relate to him, but religion has nothing to do with the real world in which we live because that world is about being happy by avoiding pain and emotional disturbances thus becoming happy in our pursuit of pleasures. This is the story that USAmerica is built on and the story that many in the church think is the Christian story.

Or, Theocracy, which is a government ruled by or subject to religious authority, which believes and acts out, like the fundamentalist of all religious parties, that we are going to force you into submitting to our way of thinking and believing about God. You are an infidel because you don't believe like we believe. Islamic fundamentalism, with this mindset, simply wants to kill you if you don't believe about God in the way that they believe about God. Or, in Christian fundamentalism, you simply get to go to hell if you don't believe in God the way in which they do.

The world, who the Church is supposed to reach with the good news of the Gospel, on the other hand, looks at those two stories and says, No! to theocracy! If that is what it looks like for God to run the show, we would rather have our Deism. Incidentally, the belief in Deism is one of the reasons why there is a constant move to keep God out of public life because he is a private God.

However, theocracy changes according to which *theos* you believe in. If you believe the wrong *theos*, in a big bad God who is ready to kill you for non belief or to send you to hell because you are evil and sinful, then you need to change your *theos*! What if we came to believe in a theocracy that is centered around the person Jesus? How would that change the way in which we live and move and have our being? The Kingdom of God is about theocracy. It's about saying to the world—this is what it looks like when God is running the public show and is not scurried off into some private chamber where folks practice private rituals.

What would it really look like if God was running the show? Showing how God runs the show was and is the ministry of Jesus. Here's a leper, I will heal him. Here's a prostitute, she can travel with me. Here are those without food, I will feed them. Here are the rich, I will show them how to use their financial gains. The book of Acts demonstrates what it is really like when the

Creator God is running the show through those empowered by the Spirit and are running the newer version of Church.

The Ascension of Jesus into heaven allows him to empower and send his people with a new version of the Church into the world to demonstrate what it's like to live in a theocracy where the true God is ruling.

For a moment, let's move to the end of the story and say a word about the second coming, which is the final act in which heaven and earth will come together for eternity and replace this fallen heaven and earth. Jesus is not coming back to take us home, as so many in the church believe, but he is coming back to establish his rule and reign by transforming the old heaven and earth into a new heaven and earth. The point then of the second coming is not to take people away from the earth, but to restore the earth to its garden shape. That is the focused goal of the story of God.

Ascension and Pentecost set up the movement of the book of Acts as the continued preaching of the Kingdom unhindered and set in motion a series of developments that culminate in a crisis. The entire audience at Pentecost is Jewish; they are from every nation under the sun, so to speak. That is a hint of the magnitude of what will happen as the story unfolds. The Jews, who had taken God for themselves, will now be asked to take their God to the Greeks and the tension was for the Greeks to Judaize themselves to receive the gospel. Peter's vision at the house of Simon the tanner, an occupation considered to be unclean by Jews of the day, suggested that God was up to something. Later in the story in Acts, after Paul's first trip abroad, the powers that be in Jerusalem were concerned because their form of viewing God was being expanded beyond their ability to accept. Clean and unclean had been redefined by the great creative programmer in this newer version of the Church. Paul's message was that everyone was welcome at the table to find and fellowship with the one Creator God. The only entry to that fellowship was Jesus, not, Jesus plus boundary markers created by the prevailing culture.

You should come to Acts 2 with the theological construct of Acts 1, i.e., that is how heaven and earth are brought together. Then, the Acts story of Pentecost becomes a counter-Temple statement. What was only possible to experience in the previous version of the Church, God and earth intersect in the Temple, is now going to be different. In the Temple you experienced the presence of God here on earth. In the new Temple, the new version of the Church, the community of faith is equipped and empowered to carry the glory of God into the world. When the church goes out into the world empowered by the Spirit, she is a sign, a foretaste, if you will, of the flooding of God's glory into all the world. The church has to catch the vision, that in her, Jesus is truly the hope of glory.

Pentecost is a thoughtful reminder that empowers us to cultivate the garden, to rebuild the ruins of our world by creating a new culture of life, not just condemning the present one we are living in. Our job is not to be only a critic of culture, not only to copy or consume culture. Our job is to be creators of culture, i.e., make something of the world in light of the story that may have taken us by surprise. This is not an either/or way of life. We do not create out of nothing, we must take these gestures, i.e., critiquing, copying, and consuming as creative tools to bring cultural activity into our story. Poking holes in every cultural happening produces in us the inability to be able to

see the good and redeem it. Remember, God created and saw his creation as “very good.” And even after sin entered into the picture, he never changed his mind. Pentecost restores us to creativity. In addition, Pentecost was a way of suggesting that every present human language and cultural form is capable of bearing the good news of the kingdom.

Pentecost can be understood as the reversal of Babel. God’s response to Babel was to reboot humankind once again and select one group of people to be his people. Their job was to bless the world. Over the years they took the message of the kingdom, i.e., to demonstrate, among all the nations, what the God of the universe was really like, But alas, they turned the message inward and not outward. They made the windows of their lighthouse into mirrors. God’s gift on Pentecost expanded the people of God to demonstrate that his work would no longer be contained within one cultural group. It was the gift to the world. We in USAmerica often make the mistake of thinking that the culture we have created in which the church was central and the chaplain of society, should simply send that cultural manifestation of Christianity abroad and let the world copy what we have, regardless of their own culture. We may have repeated the sin of Israel and turned our own windows into mirrors. Pentecost makes the good news of the kingdom available to every group, to create a way of being Christian while creating within their culture a new culture of being truly human.

So what? Good question. God had added some new features to his program of the church. The church had been rebooted at Pentecost and the newer functions are now available to everyone. We need to think of Pentecost within the structure of where it was presented within the larger story of God. Together with the Ascension, Pentecost provided a bit of heaven come to earth as the church was and is empowered to take the message to the streets of the world. That Pentecost power encounter is still being offered today. Read the story again for the first time and discover how your community of faith and your participation within it can play a part in the greatest story ever told. Go ahead, join the heaven and earth light show. It’s an adventure beyond belief.