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# The Spirit's Gift and Witness: Communities of Reconciled Difference

BY AARON J. KUECKER

**Pentecost marks not the reversal of Babel, but the subversion of shared language as a necessary basis for common identity. At Babel, the proliferation of languages leads to the proliferation of social identities and profound disunity. At Pentecost, it leads to the formation of one new social identity and profound unity.**

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**T**wo of the most significant orienting questions in human existence are “Who am I?” and “Who are my people?” The answers to these questions give us our sense of identity, social location, and belonging. Even in a highly individualistic twenty-first-century American context, the answer to the question “Who am I?” emerges from (and cannot be separated from) the answer to the question “Who are my people?” I am African American. I am Latina. I am a white male. I am Christian. I am Muslim. I am Buddhist. I am a Democrat. I am a Republican. These statements of identity, and countless other examples that we could easily produce, point to deeply personal yet profoundly social identities.

It is frequently at the boundaries of these social identities that antagonism—whether explicit or implicit, passive or active—erupts. The reconciliation of these social identities, history proves, is complex and often tenuous. For

example, the closing months of 2014 brought to the fore the painful American history of race. The shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and the powerful reverberations across the United States of that tragedy and similar episodes were but symptoms of a long, tragic history of injustice that exists as an unhealed wound just beneath the surface of America's shared public life. These events bear testimony to the power of identity, which shapes our interpersonal and intergroup relationships in ways that are profound, mysterious, and undeniable.

This narrative of social disintegration is not particularly American. In the world of the New Testament, markers of social identity were perhaps more evident and more closely linked to status, but the strife that comes from competing social identities – particularly ethnic identities – is a social reality shared by the New Testament and contemporary worlds. In the context of typically antagonistic (or just coldly ambivalent) relationships between different social groups, Luke the Evangelist announces the gospel of reconciliation in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. It is the coming of God in Christ that reconciles humanity to God and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, reconciles humans to one another. For Luke, the central work of the Spirit is the formation of a peaceable community of reconciled difference – God's one new humanity, to use a Pauline idiom – whose life and practices bear witness to the reign of God.

### **THE SPIRIT AND THE RECONCILIATION OF DIFFERENCE**

Luke is well known for his vision of salvation that extends to include Israelites and non-Israelites, enfranchised and disenfranchised, men and women, and rich and poor. Yet it is this expansive and hospitable vision of salvation, and the identity-related issues that it creates, which provides much of the narrative tension in Luke-Acts. As the Christian community encounters those who are in some way "other," it again and again must struggle with how to incorporate those who had not been a part of the early church's conception of "my people." It is in these moments of narrative tension at the boundaries of identity that the Holy Spirit bursts upon the scene in the book of Acts. We can see the significance of the Spirit's work at the boundaries of identity if we compare two texts – one before and one after Pentecost – as they describe the practices of the community of Jesus followers toward outsiders.

The climactic moment of the Spirit's identity-forming and reconciling work in Acts comes at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 where one of the central questions in the book comes to its resolution: "Can non-Israelites worship the covenant God of Israel *as non-Israelites*, or must they first be joined to the Israelite ethnic group through circumcision and Torah observance?" The Council's answer is no. Non-Israelites as non-Israelites can worship the God of Israel through Christ by the power of the Spirit. The letter that bears the conciliar decision is remarkable for its implications for identity and intergroup reconciliation within the Church.<sup>1</sup>

The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers from the nations in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.<sup>2</sup>

*Acts 15:23*

This text has two radical ramifications for the way the Spirit forms a community of reconciled difference. First, aside from one politically expedient letter written nearly two hundred years before Luke-Acts,<sup>3</sup> this text contains the first instance in the Gospels and Acts and, indeed, in Second Temple Israelite literature as a whole, where Israelites refer to non-Israelites as “brothers.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Gentiles, whose very existence in Israel’s perspective created an ethnic social category that meant “not one of us,” are here named as belonging to the same people and sharing the same identity as these Israelite followers of Jesus. Second, and equally important, these non-Israelite brothers and sisters are fully brothers and sisters even as they retain their non-Israelite ethnic identities. They are “brothers and sisters from the nations.” In other words, we see here that the criteria for unity and shared identity within the Church is not social homogeneity. This is an important claim to be made, especially in light of postmodern critiques of subtle power plays that level diversity through cultural homogeneity prescribed by the powerful. For Luke, the unity of the Church is not based upon shared cultural patterns, preferences, or practices. Instead, Luke sees the possibility of a community of reconciled difference in which profound intergroup reconciliation can take place without the obliteration of ethnic or gendered identities. This, however, is only possible through the work of the Spirit. After all, the decision of the Council in Acts 15 “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us [the Israelite Christians in Jerusalem]” (Acts 15:28).

To appreciate Luke’s radical vision in its context, we only need to look at the intergroup behavior of some of those same Israelite

followers of Jesus in Luke 9 prior to the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. The scene comes as Jesus and the disciples are leaving relatively safe home territory in Galilee for a more perilous time in Judea. There, in the span of just ten verses, Luke narrates three stories that portray the disciples as favoring their own identities at the expense of those who are in some way “other.” Each story is remarkable for its self-centrism and social antagonism.

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First, the disciples argue about which of them was the greatest, manifesting the self-centrism that often attends to personal identity (Luke 9:46-48). Then John attempts to stop ministry in Jesus' name performed by someone outside of the immediate group of disciples (9:49-50). And, finally, James and John offer to call down heavenly fire to consume a village of Samaritans who do not extend hospitality to Jesus and his followers, manifesting perhaps the most ugly and violent instance of inter-ethnic hatred in the New Testament (9:51-55).

For Luke, the ability to exercise love for those who bear competing identities appears to be beyond the grasp of the disciples in the Gospel, perpetually beyond the grasp of those who do not follow Jesus, and very difficult even for the post-Pentecost church in Acts. In Luke's view it is God alone, and those upon whom God has poured out the Holy Spirit, who can practice the kind of self-giving love that results in reconciliation and shared identity with those who are profoundly other.<sup>5</sup> The distance between the self- and group-centrism of the disciples in Luke 9 and the self-giving love of the disciples in Acts 15 is traversed with nothing less than the work of the Spirit of God, and it is to this journey that we now turn.

### **THE SPIRIT AT PENTECOST: FORMING GOD'S ONE NEW HUMANITY**

The initiation of a Christian community of reconciled difference comes at Pentecost. The Pentecost narrative is rich with Old Testament resonances that evoke themes of Mount Sinai, the Temple, and the Tower of Babel. But it is the Babel narrative, with its proliferation of language, whose echo is loudest. Luke tells the story of Pentecost not as the reversal of Babel, but as the subversion of shared language as a necessary basis for common identity. At Babel, the proliferation of languages (and, by extension, the cultural differences created and carried by linguistic diversity) leads to the proliferation of social identities and to profound disunity. At Pentecost, the proliferation of languages leads to the formation of one new social identity and to profound unity. Close attention to the contours of the text illuminates the social implications of the Spirit's work in Jerusalem.

Luke reports that all those gathered for the Pentecost festival were Judeans (Acts 2:5). That is, the group had a shared Israelite ethnic identity.<sup>6</sup> The majority of the crowd was comprised of those who had resettled in Jerusalem after previous existence in the Diaspora. This is evident from Luke's use of the word *katoikountes* in Acts 2:5, a word that means something more permanent than the temporary residency of visitors or pilgrims. Israelite resettlement was common in the first century, as (especially devout) Israelites were often eager to return from the Diaspora to Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> The diversity of the crowd was not therefore in its ethnic identity, but there was variation in the linguistic identities of the Pentecost crowd. This requires further explanation.

As at least semi-permanent residents of Judea, it is most likely that these Israelites possessed the linguistic skills necessary to communicate in Jerusalem – an assertion underscored by the fact that first-century residents of the Mediterranean basin were overwhelmingly polylingual. The two main trade languages in the early first century were Aramaic (in the eastern Roman Empire) and Greek (in the western Roman Empire). Palestine lay at the overlap of these regions, and the polylinguistic skill of at least some of the residents of this area is exemplified by Paul's use of his Greek and Aramaic linguistic ability to great advantage in Jerusalem (see Acts 21:37, 40; 22:2). In other words, the Pentecost crowd would have had no difficulty understanding the apostolic preaching in at least Greek or Aramaic, and perhaps many in the crowd could have understood both languages. Yet Luke is at pains to tell us that the Spirit empowered the disciples to bear witness to Jesus in what Luke describes as "their own language" (Acts 2:6)<sup>8</sup> and in what the crowd describes as "in the language of our birth" (2:8). These languages were the smaller, localized languages that were spoken in the Mediterranean regions described in the Pentecost catalogue of nations in Acts 2:9-11. It may be hard for twenty-first-century Americans to imagine such a context, but a good analogy is the contemporary linguistic situation in regions of Africa where tribal communities bear their own language or dialect but also have the capacity to speak a more regionalized trade language, such as Swahili. The disciples at Pentecost spoke not in the Aramaic or Greek that would have been shared by most all in the crowd, but in the birth languages of the Diaspora regions from which these Israelites had come. With regard only to the possibility of communication, the linguistic miracle was unnecessary for the proclamation of the gospel to the crowd in Jerusalem.

Yet in another important sense, the linguistic miracle was utterly necessary. The proliferation of languages at Pentecost was a significant step toward the formation of a community whose shared identity is not based upon shared culture or shared language (which is the prime carrier of culture), but instead is based upon the Spirit's gathering of a people under the Lordship of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> The Spirit shaped this community of common identity not by *eliminating* linguistic diversity, but by *amplifying* it. It is not too much to say that the Spirit resisted cultural

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homogeneity in the Jesus-movement at Pentecost (and the resulting danger of cultural imperialism) through the proliferation of languages with which the apostles bore witness to Jesus. Peter immediately capitalized on the significance of the Spirit as the central identity marker for followers of Jesus in his quotation of Joel 3:1-5. Citing Joel, he insisted that it is the Spirit (rather than any ethnic or linguistic identity) that ultimately marks humans as slaves belonging to God (Acts 2:17-21, especially 18).

The proximity of this emerging community of reconciled difference to the account of Jesus' ascension must not be overlooked. The Pentecost account ensures that Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33-36) is exaltation to a universal lordship. That is, Jesus is not Lord of just one kind, just one cultural group, or just one people out of many. Jesus is Lord of all kinds, of all cultural groups, of all peoples.<sup>10</sup> When the people of God, by the power of the Spirit, live as a community of reconciled difference – where identity is shaped by shared allegiance to Christ and diversity is not crushed in the name of unity – the very presence of the community bears witness to the universal lordship of the God made known in Christ. At Pentecost we see that such a community, and the resulting identity of those who belong to that community, is the work of the Spirit.

### **THE SPIRIT USING COMMUNITIES TO SHAPE IDENTITY**

Pentecost begins the road to the full reconciliation of competing identities under the lordship of Jesus in Acts 15. But that road has many twists and turns in the first half of Acts. Just *how* the Spirit does this transformational work is mysterious. Because Luke writes in narrative and not with the dogmatic claims at home in the New Testament epistles, we have to be content to let Luke *show us* the work of the Spirit in the formation of a community of reconciled difference, even if his chosen genre does not always *tell us* explicitly about the mechanics of the Spirit's transformational work. But once we tune our ears to listen for the appearance of the Spirit at key moments of intergroup contact, we can see that Luke appears to be convinced that the Spirit works in a particular way to create a community of reconciled difference. For Luke, the Spirit does an ongoing work of social re-location, forming a new community that is *constituted by* and *constitutive of* people whose self-giving love allows for deep works of justice and intergroup reconciliation. Participation within this community appears, for Luke, to be the means by which the Spirit continues to shape humans who are disposed toward acts of self-giving love toward those who are "other." At every point in the narrative of Acts, we can see that these communities are simultaneously *a gift of salvation*, functioning as a new family in which followers of Jesus experience a foretaste of God's kingdom, and *an act of witness*, as the peaceable practices of those communities bear testimony to a new way of being human in community. At every turn, the Spirit ensures both that the primary identity of Jesus-followers is their identity in Christ as

members of the people of God and that secondary identities (such as ethnicity) have ongoing salience within a community of reconciled diversity.

The relationship between the Spirit and the practices of the early community of believers could hardly be clearer. Luke's two major descriptions of the early community follow immediately after his first two accounts of the Spirit's irruption into the life of the community. Immediately after Peter's Pentecost proclamation that all who repent and are baptized will receive the Spirit, Luke describes a community of incredible relational solidarity. This community is comprised of Israelites with diverse Diaspora identities, who now share fellowship that crosses socio-economic boundaries. In Acts 4:32-37, on the heels of the church's plea for boldness to witness and a second powerful manifestation of the Spirit (4:29-31), Luke again describes a community of intense social, economic, and spiritual solidarity. In other words, Luke's narrative shows us that the immediate ramifications of the gift of the Spirit is a peaceable community that, here at least, crosses socio-economic and linguistic boundaries.

In Acts, the community functions well whenever believers' identity *in Christ* is their primary identity. However, whenever subgroup identities become primary, injustice and ruptured relationships are close at hand. One initial example of this occurs in Acts 6:1-7. In that short but telling episode, the community's practice of caring for widows breaks down along linguistic lines and favors those with a more prototypically Israelite linguistic identity. In light of the crisis, which is

clearly a failure of apostolic leadership and a reversion to pre-Pentecost models of linguistic identity, it is seven men *full of the Holy Spirit* who are capable of helping the community become the kind of people who can maintain the primacy of their Christian identity while living as a community of reconciled difference. The narrative is clear: when a subgroup identity becomes primary, the community

becomes dysfunctional and perpetuates injustice. It is not an accident that it is believers that, in some noteworthy way, bear the mark of the Spirit who are equipped for work of reconciliation. However, this is not only a "spiritual" decision by the community. The community intentionally selects seven believers who bear Greek names, and hence belong to the disenfranchised group, to remedy this injustice. We see

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again that the Spirit resists the destruction of diversity even as it works profound social reconciliation.

On the heels of this event, Luke testifies that the existence of the Church as a peaceable community of reconciled difference is, itself, an act of witness to the lordship of Jesus. Luke tells us that after the healing of the rift in the community, “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). This is an important pattern in Acts; there are several occasions where Luke explicitly tells us that the Spirit’s work in shaping this community serves as an act of witness to the surrounding cultures. In Acts 2:47, after the initial description of the unity of the reconciled community, Luke tells us, “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Similarly, after the church reconciles with its murderous enemy, Saul of Tarsus, Luke tells us, “Meanwhile, the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers” (9:31). When people of unlike kind live in peace through the Spirit’s work, it is an act of public witness.

If space permitted, we could walk through the text of Acts 8-15, demonstrating again and again the way that the Spirit orchestrates inter-group encounters that lead toward the formation of a community of reconciled difference that is both constituted by and constitutive of believers who are capable of exercising the self-giving love made known by Christ. We see this in the transformation of Peter and John from skepticism about the conversion of Samaritans to their fervent evangelism (see especially Acts 8:25), which is based upon the Spirit’s anointing of Samaritans *as Samaritans*. We see this in the Spirit’s intricate orchestration of Phillip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, a figure who was a stock character for the grotesque “other” in both Israelite and Roman contexts (8:26-40). We see this in the Spirit’s orchestration not only of Saul’s conversion, but of Saul’s incorporation into the very community that he had sought to destroy (9:1-31). We see this in the Spirit’s orchestration of Peter’s visit to Cornelius, and in the Spirit’s timely confirmation of these Gentiles *as Gentiles* coming to full membership in the people of God (chapter 10).

The Spirit converts *non-believers*, joining them to the people of God and the Spirit continues to convert *believers*, ensuring that their primary identity is in Christ so that they can keep up with God’s expansive work of salvation. Identity in Christ transcends every other identity, and yet the Spirit does not obliterate diversity. To the contrary, it is the Spirit’s preservation of diversity, reconciled in Christ, which bears witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord of all peoples. Within communities like this, the Spirit continues to shape humans marked by the kind of outward-looking love, even toward enemies, that mirrors God’s outward-looking love. This Christ-like love is capable of remarkable acts of reconciliation.

## CONCLUSION

There is much more to be said concerning Luke's vision of the Spirit and the communities and identity it produces. We ought to speak about the cross-shaped life of Jesus, about salvation as participation in God's life of self-giving love, and about what the Spirit's community-forming work means for resources within the Church today. At the very least, perhaps this brief overview helps us to see that the work of intergroup reconciliation and justice-doing that is offered to us as a part of the gift of our shared identity in Christ is not an optional extra tacked on to a more spiritual gospel. In this work of reconciliation, the Church receives the gift of participating in God's kingdom as a colony of new creation whose practices bear witness to the reign of God. Acts shows us in no uncertain terms that church-optional Christianity is not Lukan Christianity. Moreover, Luke presses us to offer ourselves to a vision of reconciled diversity so that we might receive and testify to the gift of peaceable community in a world of violence. This gift comes only from the Spirit, who can enable the legitimately hard work of reconciling and living in peace across lines of ethnic, linguistic, gendered, and economic distance. Given the current reminders of the painful racial disintegration in modern America, the Church would do well to plead for the Spirit to teach it anew how to receive the gift of this deep, multilayered reconciliation. Indeed, communities of this sort would be a powerful public witness in a culture marked with both old scars and new wounds caused by injustice at the boundaries of identity.

## NOTES

1 The significance of the four prohibitions given in the conciliar decision is a debated issue. Markus Bockmeuhl, in *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 2000), suggests that they are an early version of the Noachide laws, a later rabbinic notion of a set of laws given to Noah that apply universally to all humans. Richard Bauckham, "James and the Gentiles," in Ben Witherington III, ed., *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 154-184, argues that these prohibitions are drawn from Leviticus, which has a number of laws for foreigners living in the midst of Israel. Ben Witherington III, in *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 460-467, most persuasively in my view, argues that the prohibitions are all connected to practices associated with pagan worship and its public practice. The force of the prohibitions, in Witherington's view is something like, "Stay away from idol worship and its associated practices." This coheres well with Luke's vision of non-Israelites, which typically treats non-Israelites as tending toward the worship of created things (see especially Acts 10:24-26; 14:8-18).

2 This translation follows the NRSV, with the exception of "brothers from the nations," which the NRSV translates as "believers of Gentile origin," thus obscuring the verbal link between the Greek word *adelphoi* (brothers) that is used to describe both the Israelite Christians in Jerusalem and the non-Israelite Christians in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.

3 Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.225-228; 13.43-45, 163-170. Cf. the parallel account in 1 Maccabees 12:1-23.

4 The Greek *adelphoi* implies "brothers and sisters."

5 Beyond the well-known outward-looking love that earns Jesus a reputation for being a

friend of sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes (see Luke 15:1-2, for one example), Luke's most direct characterization of the Father in the entire Gospel shows the Father to be characterized by outward-looking enemy love and radical generosity that are meant to be imitated by God's people who share in Jesus' identity as children of the Most High (cf. Luke 1:35): "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35-36).

6 This is true, too, for the "proselytes" in Acts 2:10 who had undergone what amounts to an ethnic conversion from their former group to Israelite ethnic identity.

7 The return of Diaspora Israelites to Judea in general and Jerusalem in particular was common in the first century, as is attested by a good deal of both literary and inscriptional evidence. See here Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, second edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 45-80.

8 It is interesting that "their own" is here again the Greek word *idios*, which is the way Luke deals with possessions and relationships as they are related to identity in the texts from Acts 4 discussed above.

9 This point is even more powerful when we note that there was an increasing expectation in Second Temple Judaism that at the Day of the Lord all people would speak Hebrew, which was thought to be the language of angels, Eve and Adam, and Abraham, according to texts like *The Book of Jubilees* and 4Q464.

10 This concern seems to be similar to Paul's resistance to circumcision and Torah obedience for non-Israelites in Romans: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith" (Romans 3:28-30).

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