



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 The Spirit's Gift and Witness
(*Pentecost*, pp. 11-20)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Descent of the Holy Spirit
(*Pentecost*, pp. 44-51)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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The Holy Spirit's Gift and Witness

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.

Prayer

Father, through your Holy Spirit
you create us and sustain us.
Open our hearts and minds to your presence now
as your Spirit moves among us.
Transform our minds
that we may see your great salvation in one another.
We pray in the name of Jesus,
and through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-15

Reflection

Many communities, cities, and nation states today are threatened by social disintegration; they face mistrust and angry disagreement— even rioting, terrorism, and warfare— that are stirred by social, economic, religious, and economic differences among people. But these problems are not new. As Aaron Kuecker notes, “The strife that comes from competing social identities— particularly ethnic identities— is a social reality shared by the New Testament and contemporary worlds.”

For instance, even though Luke-Acts is well known for its expansive and hospitable vision of salvation, identity-related issues provide much of the narrative tension in those books. Members of the early church, it seems, sometimes lost sight of what brings true unity and what unity is supposed to look like.

“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,” Kuecker explains. Believers cannot create unity in their communities artificially through exclusion or coercive homogeneity. Christ’s universal lordship is what unites members in their differences, and that is something meant for and available to everyone regardless of nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or gender. Submission and conformity to Christ will bond them to him and to one another through his self-giving love, but it does not make them look the same or sound the same. They do not need to share a culture or a language, as was dramatically revealed at Pentecost when the Spirit shaped believers’ common identity not by *eliminating* linguistic diversity, but by *amplifying* it. Their shared identity in Christ did not just transcend or accommodate differences; it reconciled and enriched them, making them fruitful.

Yet loving people who are different is not easy. In Luke’s narrative, loving people with competing identities is beyond the grasp of disciples, almost impossible for those who do not follow Jesus, and still very difficult for the post-Pentecost Church. God alone, through those upon whom he has poured out his Spirit, can practice the kind of self-giving love that results in reconciliation and shared identity



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with those who are profoundly other. Perhaps this is most clear in Luke 9, where in just ten verses the disciples argue about who is greatest, John attempts to stop an outsider from ministering in Jesus' name, and James and John offer to call down fire on an inhospitable village of Samaritans.

Becoming a community of reconciled difference is a difficult goal. It requires members to cling to the identity they share, which can seem distant and abstract compared to their immediate and threatening social differences. But whenever personal or subgroup identities become primary, even the Church becomes dysfunctional and her members can perpetuate injustice.

Kuecker highlights several instances in Acts where we can see the success of the Spirit's work at the boundaries of identity:

- ▶ *Pentecost* (Acts 2) is the most dramatic example. In the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Christ is proclaimed to the diverse crowds not just in a language they can understand, but "in the language of their birth." The message of Christ does not annihilate their individual identities, but embraces and reconciles them.
- ▶ The *early Jerusalem church* (Acts 4), which is gathered from diverse Diaspora Israelites, is a community of incredible relational, social, economic, and spiritual solidarity. The immediate result of the gift of the Spirit is a peaceable community crossing socio-economic and linguistic boundaries.
- ▶ The *Jerusalem Council* (Acts 15) finally determines that non-Israelites can worship the God of Israel through Christ by the power of the Spirit. Significantly, through the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit, the Gentiles are fully accepted as brothers and sisters by the Israelites without forfeiting their ethnic and social difference.

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, that bears witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord of all peoples.

Study Questions

1. According to Aaron Kuecker, in what sense do the events of Pentecost do more than 'reverse' the story of Babel? What does this reveal about Christian unity?
2. Why is it that "whenever subgroup identities become primary, injustice and ruptured relationships are close at hand"?
3. Would you describe your congregation as "a community of reconciled difference"? How can it move closer to this calling of the Spirit?
4. Loveday Alexander describes the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost as "a gift that brings God's living word to articulate expression in a host of individual tongues." How do the four images that Heidi Hornik discusses in "Descent of the Holy Spirit" interpret this gift visually?

Departing Hymn: "A Rushing, Mighty Wind"

The Holy Spirit's Gift and Witness

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the proliferation of languages at Pentecost leads to the formation a new unity through reconciled difference.
2. To explore the difference between homogeneity and true Christian unity-in-diversity.
3. To discuss how you congregation can become a healthy community of reconciled difference.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Pentecost (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. The departing hymn "A Rushing, Mighty Wind" is located on pp. 67-69 of *Pentecost*.

Begin with an Observation

"Depicting the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost has fascinated artists for centuries," Heidi Hornik notes. "The dramatic arrival of the third person of the Trinity – with a sound like a mighty wind from heaven and a tongue of fire appearing to rest on each disciple, then the disciples speaking in various languages and the crowd reacting to this marvel – requires a complex composition. It also allows for an extraordinary level of artistic interpretation and creativity."

She finds the image of fire is "particularly poignant" as a theological sign, for "as Loveday Alexander observes:

The thing about a flame is that the more you divide it, the more there is to go round: split a flame in half and you get more, not less. So the coming of the Spirit is a gift of new life to the community, which brings out the individual gifts of each member, a gift that brings God's living word to articulate expression in a host of individual tongues." (*Pentecost*, 45)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide aloud.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 2:1-15 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The miraculous events at Pentecost subvert the idea that a shared language or culture is necessary for unity in the Church. Christian unity is founded on the universal Lordship of Jesus Christ, which transcends all ethnic, cultural, social, economic, and gender divides. Therefore, Aaron Kuecker suggests, congregations are called be "communities of reconciled difference" that are characterized by unity in diversity rather than oppressive homogeneity. He explores the book of Acts for examples of Spirit-inspired communities of reconciled difference as well as how things go wrong when subgroup identities become primary.

Study Questions

1. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit overcomes the profound disunity caused by the proliferation of languages at Babel, but not by eliminating those different languages or replacing them with a shared language. Indeed, Aaron Kuecker suggests, the apostles and crowds did not need a shared language, for most would have spoken Greek or Aramaic. Thus they did not need a miracle to occur in order to understand each other. Instead of eliminating difference, the Holy Spirit emphasizes the diversity of those united by Christ's lordship. The crowds hear Christ proclaimed "in the language of their birth" (Acts 2:8) — emphasizing their diverse homes and cultures, and coming to each individual intimately, on their own terms. Christian unity, then, does not require that their ethnic differences be obliterated or hidden, but only that their identity in Christ be primary, valued above all others. The distinctions brought about at Babel are not reversed, but their consequent discord is overcome. The differences are turned to good as the Gospel expands and reaches diverse people with the message of Christ.
2. Aaron Kuecker writes, "It is frequently at the boundaries of social identity that antagonism — whether explicit or implicit, passive or active — erupts." We are familiar with the fear, anger, resentment, and even violence that emerge from the friction at these boundaries. We are not comfortable with those who are different; we feel threatened by people whose experience we do not share, whose problems and victories are not ours. It is no wonder that problems arise among Christians who prioritize secondary identities — as members of a particular nation, region, class, race, ethnicity, or other group.

The love Christ has for us is the one thing that transcends every division, every identity we may have. It is the one thing that allows us to see even our enemies as potential brothers and sisters, adopted into God's family just as we are. Seeing the world in this way reconciles us to one another without a compulsion to homogeneity.
3. Consider how your congregation prioritizes members' shared identities in Christ. What programs, ministries, or worship traditions help members to embrace those who are different within and outside of your congregation? How might your church improve in welcoming those with diverse ethnic, cultural, economic, and other backgrounds? Discuss specific ways your congregation can foster greater reconciliation within and beyond the Body of Christ. Remember, we must work hard to seek unity in Christ, but it is only through the self-giving love of the Holy Spirit that we will ever succeed. Do not only start campaigns or plan new ministry opportunities, but turn to the Spirit for guidance and the gifts necessary to become more like the community of reconciled difference founded at Pentecost.
4. Split into four groups — one each to discuss the illuminated manuscript, Duccio, El Greco, and Emil Nolde's paintings of the event of Pentecost. Consider how each artist interprets the dramatic sign of the Spirit's gift of new life. (Heidi Hornik compares them in regard to four "main narrative and/or iconographical themes: the way the fire is distributed, the presence or absence of Mary in the group, the location of the event, and the symbolic depiction of God the Father.") After allowing enough time for each group to finish, call the groups back together to discuss the paintings. How are they different? What do they share? What insights do they offer about the event of Pentecost?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.