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Pentecost and the Gift of Tongues (*Acts 2:1-4*)

Introduction – Pentecost is the glorious remembrance and celebration of the day that the church was recreated in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the day in which the firstfruits of the harvest of the gospel from all peoples was brought into the church, and the day in which a promised sign was given to unbelieving Israel that she had been cut out of the covenant of God in judgment.

But today, in most American, evangelical circles, “Pentecost” means something different. It now points to a personal prayer language, a mark of greater sanctification (sometimes taught as a necessary sign of salvation), the speaking of nonsensical sounds (not a known language) and calling it a spiritual gift. Often taught by well-meaning, sincere brothers and sisters in Christ, the fact is that the practice is based upon a misunderstanding of the day of Pentecost and the establishment of the church in Jesus Christ under the authority of His apostles.

Tongues of Judgment Upon Jerusalem – The supernatural gift of tongues plays a very important symbolic role in the first century. For centuries, God had on several occasions threatened the Jews with oppression from foreigners speaking in alien tongues as a sign of His displeasure and judgment. Consider four of those.

The Tower of Babel – After the flood, God had a message for Noah and his sons (Gen 9:1,7). Later, we see the people refusing to listen to God (Gen 11:4). Because of this, God caused tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment (11:7) and scattered them abroad in their disobedience. There was grace in this judgment as well, for in isolation God intended to draw the nations to Himself (Gen 12:3, Acts 17:26-27).

Blessings and Curses of The Covenant – As Moses preached his last messages from God, He called them to obey the voice of the Lord (Deut 28:1-2), and promised great curses upon Israel if they did not obey (28:15). Included in these curses would be a foreign nation which would come upon them, “whose language you will not understand...” (28:49). In addition, He promised to scatter them in judgment among all peoples (28:64-68) in total abandonment.

Fall of Jerusalem #1 – Centuries later, as Judah is falling to Babylon, Jeremiah, a prophet also brought a message from God (Jer 4:1). But the people only hardened their hearts (5:3), and since they would not listen to the words of the Lord, they were told they would hear the sound of a foreign tongue invading their land (5:15). They are also told that they would be taken into exile, dispersed to this foreign land. In the midst of this judgment, Jeremiah promises a day when God would write His law upon the hearts of His people in the New Covenant (31:33).

Restoration Rejected – God worked over and over with this rebellious people, offering them restoration with Himself, but as Isaiah preached, they refused to listen (Is 28:12). This is why Isaiah said that the teaching they would receive would be from stammering lips and another tongue (28:11), and the voice of this “teaching” would be the voice of those bringing them into exile (28:13).

Signs of the Fall of Jerusalem #2 – In the Book of Acts we have the same thing happening. Jesus has preached (like Jeremiah – see Matt 16:14) of the need of Israel to repent, for the kingdom of God was at hand. But Israel rejected the message and killed the Messiah. Judgment, manifest through the gift of fiery tongues, and the sound of known languages from other people-groups (not babbling) were a sign to unbelieving Israel that the Jesus they had rejected now sat at the right hand of the Father as Lord and Christ (Acts 2:22-36). As before, some were cut to the heart, repented and turned to the Lord (2:37-38), and many refused to believe, even bringing a great persecution upon the new church (Acts 8:1).

Paul’s Corrections on Tongues (1 Cor 14:20-22) – Paul used the passage in Isaiah to correct a misunderstanding and misuse of tongues. They were to mature by remembering that tongues were a sign for unbelievers (unbelieving Israel in particular) and not for believers. They weren’t to use tongues for prayer or praise (14:13-17) nor for self-edification (14:26 and all of Chapter 12). While the gift of supernaturally proclaiming the gospel (and the vindication of Jesus) in a foreign tongue existed in the church, its use was being misdirected and was causing divisions and factions in Corinth. The supernatural gift cannot be found today, but the so-called practice of “speaking in tongues” is again being used (by some) to identify those who are super-spiritual, causing division in the church.

Rejecting the Modern Day Teaching of Speaking in Tongues is Not Rejecting Pentecost – Having ascended to His throne, Jesus did just what He promised; He sent the Holy Spirit to the church, from Whom we have received power from on high (Acts 1:4).

New Creation – There was a rushing mighty wind, and not unlike the Spirit which hovered over the earth at the first creation (Gen 1:1), so the tongues of fire sat upon those believers at Pentecost. God was ushering in the New Humanity in Jesus Christ. There was a sound from heaven, and the army of Israel was born again (Ezek 37:1-14).

Firstfruits of World Harvest – Just as Jesus had promised, His gospel would go out to all the earth and all nations would be discipled. It began that day, on the Feast of Harvest, the Feast of the Firstfruits, on Pentecost, where “*about three thousand souls were added to them*” (Acts 2:41), “*And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved*” (v47). And so it has continued.

Sign of Judgment Upon Unbelieving Israel (Acts 13:44-52) – As Paul preached, many believed, but many rejected his teaching. The Jews, “*filled with envy*” hated Paul’s success among Jews and Gentiles. As in previous times, words of judgment upon Israel were also words of grace for the world.

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