

Just Like at the Beginning

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The Pentecostal Evangel

Peter wasn't trying to get outside the box. When the delegation from the Roman centurion Cornelius interrupted his rooftop prayer time, he had been having a most disturbing vision ... about eating ceremonially unclean animals. Now there were three "unclean" people at the door, summoning him to ministry at the home of a Roman officer.

Gentiles were certainly beyond the scope of his intended ministry; but the rest is history. Many generations later, what happened then matters to you and me. The great missionary Paul would call it the "mystery of Christ" that everyone is included in grace. Jews, Romans, barbarians. . . everyone is included in God's amazing grace.

The clincher for Peter was that "the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning." The Spirit fell on them. The presence and power of the Person, God the Holy Spirit, came on them. Just as in Jerusalem on the apostles and on more than 100 other Jewish disciples in the Upper Room, now the Spirit was wonderfully overwhelming a house full of Gentiles as they heard about and believed on Jesus. He was their Messiah too. And they demonstrated the same personal evidence of their experience in the Spirit — they were worshipping in unknown tongues.

Speaking in tongues had evidential value to Peter and the six Jewish men accompanying him, as Luke points out, "For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God" (Acts 10:46). Their emphasis, however, was not on evidence, but on the Spirit and on the obvious fact these Gentiles could experience Him just like the Jewish believers had at the beginning.

In like manner, the modern Pentecostal revival would arise from earnest study of those Book of Acts precedents, with a deep longing that we too might receive the Promise of the Spirit, like "at the beginning." Tongues-speaking would be called "initial physical evidence," an audible link with events in Acts, but the stated standard would be "according to Acts 2:4," a humble appeal to be filled with the Holy Spirit just like the Upper Room believers were at the beginning, to be emboldened and empowered by the Spirit himself to bring compelling witness of Jesus the Savior across the street and around the world.

Beyond evidential value, praying and worshipping in an unknown tongue releases the human spirit in expressions to the Lord that bring deep personal edification. The time spent waiting prayerfully focuses heart desire on Jesus and leads to practical understanding of what it means to yield to the Spirit. Learning to give over the tongue to the Spirit's utterance opens a door to being used in other spiritual gifts.

Receiving the Spirit, like at the beginning, obviously includes tongues with the blessings and benefits of that gift. However, a preoccupation with “initial physical evidence” can lead to a mistaken emphasis. Some Christians who have a brief initial utterance in tongues seek no further exercise of the gift because the desired goal has been achieved. Others seem unable to receive because they passively wait to witness a supernatural sign instead of actively worshipping the Lord and learning to yield to the Spirit. In the Gospels, Jesus pointedly rebuked those who seek signs and miss the substance.

For Peter, seeing everyone at the house of Cornelius receiving the Spirit (tongues and all) broke down the wall between Jew and Gentile. He would describe the events in detail on returning to Jerusalem (Acts 11). Years later a church council would consider how to disciple new believers from pagan backgrounds. There, Peter would remind everyone of his pioneering ministry to Gentiles, and how God gave them “the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us” (Acts 15:8).

Rightly understood, the teaching about receiving the Holy Spirit doesn’t divide us; it joins us together with the apostles and with one another. If our teaching and ministry practice are true to those beginnings, our emphasis will not be on “evidence,” but on the Spirit himself and on the purpose of the Spirit to draw attention to Jesus.

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