



## **PENTECOST**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, May 23, 2010**

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**Lection - I Corinthians 12:4-11** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 4) Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, (v. 5) and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; (v. 6) and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. (v. 7) To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (v. 8) To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, (v. 9) to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, (v. 10) to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of Spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues (v. 11). All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Historically, Pentecost is one of the three main feasts celebrated by the Jews; it is also known as the “Feast of Weeks.” It was celebrated at the end of the grain harvest in the month that was once referred to as “*Siva*” (known to us as May/June) after Passover.

But for us as Christians, Pentecost is most notably known for and marked by the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit upon believers who “tarried” and was accompanied by the “sound of rushing mighty winds” and “tongues of fire” that enabled those gathered when the Holy Spirit fell to speak in other “tongues.”

However, Pentecost was more than just these external acts. The implication of this cumulative outward exhibition is far more profound. This supernatural manifestation not only equipped believers to “speak in tongues,” understood by the diverse crowd gathered, it empowered them to live, and for some to die, for the cause of the Gospel.

African American congregations are made up of people acutely aware of the “causes” that “call” for the “living and giving” of our very lives. Pentecost Sunday can serve as a powerful reminder of the Spirit’s ability to unite and ignite us to advance the Kingdom of God.

Pentecost Sunday is now celebrated by African American churches across the world.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: I Corinthians 12:4-11**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

At the penning of this lectionary, a man of African and Caucasian descent serves as the 44th President of the United States, a Hispanic woman now sits on the Supreme Court and “hip-hop” (a definitely black form of music) is the “new” sound of young, white America, too. The message that “we can do more together than we can apart” is now a most expedient one as we attempt to “pull together” our specific gifts and talents to confront the circumstances facing our world.

Yet, despite our obvious need for unity amid diversity, the “isms” of our age -- racism, sexism, classism, elitism -- continue to threaten our hope of being connected as people of God. Despite the churches’ rhetoric, the Sunday morning hour continues to be the most segregated hour in America.

Although the past year marked a historical “change” for African Americans, the claims of some of the political white “right” that they “want their country back” (as if Barack Obama stole the White House; the Supreme Court did not decide if he would be elected), and the 2009 arrest of Professor Henry Gates in his Connecticut home as a possible intruder, attests to the fact that we are still in desperate need of a day of Pentecost, a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit to remind us that we are all a part of the body of Christ and essential to the kingdom becoming on earth as it is in heaven.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Seeking to bridge the widening gap of division that threatened to destroy the young Corinthian church, as well as to address other matters, the Apostle Paul wrote the First Epistle to the Corinthians during his three year stay in Ephesus.

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Paul struggled to teach the oftentimes carnal Corinthians, who had formerly been pagan worshippers, the difference between worshipping the true and living God in contrast to their worship of “idols” [vs.2].

Because the Corinthian church, as did others, often attributed different “gifts” to more than one god, such as Diana the goddess of fertility, Aphrodite the goddess of love and Apollo the sun god, Paul begins verse 4 informing the church that there is but one God and through this God all spiritual gifts function. The Greek word for spiritual gifts is plural (*pneumatika*) meaning things pertaining to the Holy Spirit.

In verses 5 and 6, Paul further states that these “spiritual gifts” are exemplified through varieties of “services” and “activities,” but it is the same God that causes them to “work” in and through us all, for “the common good of all” (verse 7) or the profit (*sympheron*) of God’s church and not the promotion of an individual personality.

The church of Corinth, much like the Church of today, saw their diversity as more of an occasion to compete and divide rather than to complete and provide. They failed to see their diversity impact the entire community.

This text provides a powerful opportunity to share the profound impact racism has had on the idea of diversity amidst unity, labeling it as something deviant or unachievable. Such thinking has undermined America’s ability to become the global salad bowl (not melting pot) it alleges to be.

Considered by some to be the most important gifts, because they enable the sharing of the Gospel message, the gift of wisdom, that is, the ability to share the wisdom of the gospel of Christ, and the gift of knowledge – the ability to articulate with understanding via the Spirit -- is discussed in verse 8. Pentecostal and charismatic believers define these two utterance gifts as the supernatural ability to give divinely-inspired instruction and direction to someone’s life aside from the sharing of the Gospel.

The power gifts or gifts of faith and healing are examined in verse 9. The gift of faith mentioned here is not the measure of faith given to all believers to accept Christ, but rather the ability to supernaturally believe God for such works as the healing of terminal illnesses or mental illnesses. Such works of the gift of healing were demonstrated by Jesus when he healed blind Bartemaus and the man possessed of demons. Paul exhorts believers that such power can be manifested today in the life of the believer as they allow themselves to be a conduit of the Spirit of God.

The third power gift, the working of miracles or acts of power (*dynameis*), is mentioned in verse 10, as well as the gift of prophecy, or the supernatural ability to foretell or give insight to convey

a mystery of God. The gift of prophecy is to be distinguished from the office of the prophet. The former is the ability to share on occasion insight or futuristic information, while the latter is the possessing of the title of prophet, as did Elijah, and the prophets of old. The discerning of spirits, or the ability to determine the origin of a spirit, discussed in verse 10 is a keener sense than that which was referred to in I John 4:1. Here, John encourages every believer to “try the spirit by the spirit.”

To conclude, in verse 10, Paul discusses the issue that is perhaps the second greatest source of contention (the ordination of women being the first) among Protestant churches, the idea of tongues and their interpretation. Acts 2 describes tongues as a divine utterance given by the Holy Spirit. These tongues were given to edify and exhort as stated in the sacred text. In this verse the emphasis is on the word “*glossa*,” or language, which infers that the tongues and the interpretation which arise from them is the ability to speak in unknown language as was seen on the day of Pentecost.

Though the gift of tongues and interpretation is mentioned in Acts 2 and I Corinthians 12:10, there are some striking differences that are worthy of mention. The tongues spoken in Acts 2 caused the unbelievers to be amazed, while the unbelievers of Corinth thought the apostles “mad.” At Pentecost, tongues were a sign to the believer but to God at Corinth. In Acts 2, there was no mention of the necessity of an interpreter, while Paul suggests in this text and others that an interpreter is present.

Finally, Paul reaffirms the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in the activation and the distribution of spiritual gifts.

## **Celebration**

This text prompts us to celebrate the power and sovereignty of God as God works in the life of every believer. As we marvel, as God’s power brings holiness and wholeness to our lives, we sing again the songs of the church of old, “Deeper, deeper, blessed Holy Spirit, take me deeper still, till my life is wholly lost in Jesus, and His perfect will.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage that are implied and some that are present in the text include:

**Sounds:** The rushing mighty wind heard on the day of Pentecost; persons “speaking in other tongues;” persons interpreting the tongues; wisdom being uttered; knowledge being uttered; and

**Sights:** “Cloven tongues of fire” that sat on the believers; seeing the working of miracles; the gift of healing at work (fill in the type of healing you believe was done by believers then and can be done by believers now).

## **Notes**

1. Jones, Charles P. "Deeper, Deeper." Yes, Lord! Church of God in Christ Hymnal. Memphis, TN: Church of God in Christ Pub. Board in association with the Benson Co., 1982. #417