

## **“What Meaneth This?”: A Question for Twenty-first Century Pentecostalism**

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Acts 2:1-6,12-24,36,37

January 5, 2005, Neil Conan interviewed Simon Winchester on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation*. Titled "After Tsunami, Religion Plays Role in Coping," the interview explored the religious response to the devastation that occurred at Christmas 2004, leaving over 297,000 people dead or missing. Winchester, noted for his book, *Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded*, a study of the impact of the 1883 volcanic eruption and tsunami that devastated Indonesia, described how Indonesia's two dominant religious groups tried to assess the meaning of the event. While Hindus viewed it as part of the cycle of life, Moslems viewed it as a sign of Allah's judgment upon those who had compromised with rising Western and Christian influence. As a result, Moslem clerics called for violent resistance to Christianity and the West. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Winchester then described a new book he is writing on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. As this group well knows, just days before the earthquake a small band of seekers led by William Seymour met in Los Angeles. Winchester said it was "a very small meeting of an extremely flamboyant Christian movement known as the Pentecostalist movement that had pastors waving their

arms and speaking in tongues. The leader said that God was going to give a sign." On Wednesday, April 18, San Francisco was devastated by the earthquake and in Los Angeles, as Winchester describes it, "thousands began attending the meeting and the Pentecostalist movement, which is still extremely important in the United States, was born as a result of this earthquake."<sup>1</sup>

While we may question Winchester's conclusion regarding the birth of Pentecostalism, we do know that the earthquake was significant to the Azusa Street leaders and attendees. Frank Bartleman, a first-person chronicler of the Azusa Street revival, observed, "A tremendous burden of prayer came upon me that the people might not be indifferent to His (God's) voice." The day after the earthquake, Bartleman was in a prayer meeting when he and others felt the room shake in an aftershock felt in Los Angeles. By May 1, in reply to the question, "Did God do that?" Bartleman released 75,000 copies of his tract, *Earthquake*.<sup>2</sup>

This observation about the Azusa Street revival, the San Francisco earthquake and the contemporary quest for meaning in light of the 2004 tsunami intrigues me. While there are numerous secular

and religious views concerning the meaning—or lack thereof—of cataclysmic events in the natural world, it seems timely that we examine Pentecostalism at the beginning of this century with much the same framework as one hundred years ago and two thousand years ago.

Let us not forget that two thousand years ago the first followers of Jesus responded to a series of events that affected the natural world. First, Matthew 28:51 records an earthquake occurred when Jesus died. Second, the disciples hardly had time to sort this out before Jesus, in N.T. Wright's memorable phrase, "went through death and came out on the other side"<sup>3</sup> in the resurrection, again accompanied by what St. Matthew termed "a great earthquake" (28:2).<sup>4</sup> Jesus became the first fruits of a radical change in the molecular structure of human existence! Their graves already broken open by the Good Friday earthquake, "the saints who had fallen asleep were raised and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:51-53). Third, fifty days later the natural world again accompanied a divine purpose as the Holy Spirit arrived with "the sound of a mighty rushing wind" and "tongues of fire" visible upon one hundred and twenty heads (Acts 2:2,3).

When asked, "What meaneth this?"<sup>5</sup> the apostle Peter turned to a text bearing witness to both the Holy Spirit and a natural calamity: the prophecy in Joel 2:28-32. It seems to me we need to return to Peter's use of Joel's prophecy to seek afresh an answer to the "meaning" question of Pentecostalism for our generation.

First, Peter knew the context of Joel's prophecy: a ninth century agricultural crisis brought on by a massive invasion of locusts. In our technology driven world, we struggle to comprehend the calamity of this invasion. Joel understood it as "the day of the Lord;" Yahweh's judgment upon a covenant-breaking people. It meant a future without grain and wine, essential to everyday life and to Israel's worship.

Second, the intention of this calamity was to restore covenant faithfulness on the part of the covenant breakers. This restoration began with repentance that led to the promise Peter cites in his Pentecost sermon.

Peter's use of Joel 2 is sandwiched between two questions. The sermon begins in reply to the query, "What meaneth this?" It concludes with the hearers cut to the heart and asking, "What shall we do?" These two questions frame our need as Christians, particularly as Pentecostals, to live in such a demonstrable way that people ask, "What does this mean?" It means living in such a fashion that people recognize the legitimacy of our claims and, with Holy Spirit conviction, cry out, "What shall we do?" It means our answer to the original question must have meaningful content. Peter defined Pentecost by appealing to the four major theological themes expressed in the Joel passage.

First, Peter introduced the "last days" (Acts 2:17). He understood an eschatological urgency rooted in Joel's "day of the Lord" and further refers to "the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord" (Acts 2:20).

Second, Peter emphasized the freshly heard languages and experienced power of the Holy Spirit by recognizing the “pouring out” of the Spirit “on all flesh.” The Hebrew word *shaphak* (pour out) is used also in the sense of God’s wrath being poured out (e.g., Psalm 79:6; Ezekiel 7:8). While it took Peter time to process the implications of “upon all flesh” (and two thousand years later we are still processing the implications), he recognized that something had occurred that morning that meant significant paradigm shifts. The wind-swept river of God took them into a world larger than they had ever dreamed:

- A kingdom greater than historical Israel and the rise and fall of nations
- Young and old equal recipients of revelation
- Men and women as mouthpieces of God
- Servants, low on the economic and social ladder, swept upward in this Holy Spirit tsunami

Third, with the “sound of a mighty rushing wind” still ringing in his ears, Peter understood the impact of “wonders in heaven above and signs on the earth beneath” (Acts 2:19). In Romans 8:21, the apostle Paul affirmed the creation, still captive to the bondage of corruption, was awaiting an eschatological manifestation of Spirit-filled generations who truly comprehend their liberty as the children of God.

Fourth, this massive build-up of revelation from eschatology to pneumatology to creation theology was like a giant wave washing away all confusion so this one clear affirmation could stand: “Whoever calls on the name

of the Lord, shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). To make certain his hearers knew who this Lord actually was, Peter drew their attention to the historic fact of “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know.... God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus, whom you crucified” (2:22, 36).

As we stand on the threshold of remembering one hundred years and two thousand years ago, Pentecostalism must rediscover the present power of the affirmations expressed and experienced by our first century and twentieth century fathers and mothers in the faith.

I find much in the Charismatic/Pentecostal world encouraging. I am not a pessimist about what God is doing through Pentecostalism, as well as through other streams in the desert of this world. Here are five specific points of encouragement I see:

- There is great renewal with a passion for Christ among many young people. I see a passion for intercession and evangelism among this group.
- The great leaders of the past modeled extraordinary faith. While their days are limited, I see a new set of faith-filled, vision-inspired leaders arising.
- Pentecostalism has taken advantage of the media to present the gospel.
- Pentecostalism has a growing awareness of the Holy Spirit’s power to meet people’s social, economic and political needs.

- There is great diversity within the various cultures and sub-cultures of Pentecostalism. In preparing this message, I sent a copy to Matt Green, a vibrant emerging young Pentecostal leader who is editor of *Ministries Today*, for his input. He wrote back, “Doug, plead for the academic community to pursue engagement with the ‘popular’ charismatic/Pentecostal community...to be willing to put up with a little nonsense so that they can contribute; to be willing to associate with the grassroots practitioners of Pentecostal theology.”

Nevertheless, I am concerned about some things:

- The loss of holiness (not in the Wesleyan/Reformed doctrinal debate) as a lifestyle that truly beckons the lost to God’s purposes and blesses godly living.
- The loss of humility as we pride ourselves on having such large worldwide numbers and our share of mega-churches. We are so pleased that we have again made *Time* magazine again. Our loss of humility reminds me of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s experience of waiting to have the bishop’s miter placed upon his head. His mother sensed his pride and rebuked him: “Joseph, don’t look so pleased with yourself.”<sup>6</sup>

Please do not take me wrong. I am not in an “anti” frame of mind. Just because something does not fit my style does not mean it is not of God. It took a long

time, but finally I am old enough to know God does not need my approval on how He chooses to work.

It is deeper than that to me. I have a nagging sense that all our popularity and success may have marginalized us more than we were sixty years ago when our churches were on the other side of the tracks. I struggle with what Os Guinness says is, “the cultural captivity (of) *fashionability*, the power of the pull of corrupt timeliness or distorted relevance. The recent Christian obsession with relevance and the future leads all too often to moral and intellectual cowardice. Afraid to challenge the power of progress and the lure of the latest, or to delay the arrival of the brave, new future, we bite our lips and cave in weakly to what we know in our hearts is neither right, nor wise, nor lasting.”<sup>7</sup>

This is why I have felt compelled to return to Peter’s sermon to answer the question, “What meaneth this?” In my working answer to this question, which I think every generation of Christians, not just Pentecostals, should prayerfully ask, I offer the following to you.

1. We need an urgent sense of being in the “last days.” I do not want to debate traditional Pentecostal eschatology with you. I am not talking about a linear progression with a new set of charts, especially now that President Bush may be messing up our Middle East scenarios. I am talking about a profound sense of the *nearness* of the Lord to us, of an eschatology that is conscious of the closeness of His kingdom “right here, right now.” To me, this nearness is expressed in *intimacy*. I believe *eschatology* and *intimacy* are related concepts. However, this is more than a

modern version of C.H. Dodd's "realized eschatology" or "kingdom now" theology. It is an invitation to take seriously the only days for which we are directly responsible: the days "right here, right now." At best, by God's grace, we can "redeem the *kairos*" moments of the past and live presently so that the future does not curse us.<sup>8</sup> In these last days of our generation, I am convinced God is nearer to us than we usually dare imagine.

2. Regardless of what else Peter had in mind, have you noticed his eschatology moved to the nearness of God through the Holy Spirit's coming "upon all flesh?" This kind of eschatology means God is so near we can hear him. He speaks to us and will speak through anyone who will be available as his mouthpiece. Look at the communication emphasis: men and women will prophesy, generations will share visions and dreams and prophecy will overcome social stratification. It is a picture of the Word of the Lord filling the earth. It is not an *eschaton* of fear and escape; it is filled with life and hope. Prophecy, visions and dreams all point to one thing: God has a future for his creation! It's the language of hope! New Testament prophecy is about edification, exhortation and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

3. That is why the impact upon creation is so important. It is the power of words, yes, the Word, manifested in wonders and signs in the natural realm. That is why I believe Pentecostalism should be right at home in Postmodernity. The ordered, stale, predictable boring world of Modernity is coming to its appropriate end. Pentecostalism can say to this world that change need not be feared but

invited. Change is evidence of redemption. Change means God is still speaking to us and shaping his future in our present.

4. One hundred years ago, Pentecostalism had its opportunity to transform the United States' cultural landscape. That opportunity is upon us again, but the landscape is international. Of all Christian groups, Pentecostals should be able to navigate in, among and through the various tribes that comprise Christendom and the cultural matrix of our times. Of all tribes, Pentecostals should be able to navigate through the Spirit's crosswinds or the ways the Holy Spirit operates in seeming paradoxes and tension points.

With apologies to Jeff Foxworthy, I offer you some of the tensions and paradoxes that I think Spirit-filled Christians in this century should accept:

- If you go to the World Council of Churches to listen and then to Bob Jones University hoping they will listen to you, you might be a Pentecostal.
- If you see value and hope in the United Nations and feel at home in the Republican Party, you might be a Pentecostal.
- If you're committed to conservative traditional values but sense the Democratic Party better understands the poor, you might be a Pentecostal.
- If you're a Wall Street financier, but take the R-Train back to a Brooklyn slum to be the presence of Christ among hurting people, you might be a Pentecostal.
- If you love a down-home rural gospel church and teach your

born-again children to aspire to own MTV, you might be a Pentecostal.

5. I recognize a tension in everything I've just mentioned. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to move between these worlds because we have clarity about Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished. He is the answer to any questions that arise about our "Pentecostalism."

"What meaneth this?" will be answered in the coming years by many streams. The answer(s) will come from small-town congregations, mega-churches, denominational leaders, parachurch ministries and emerging international Pentecostal/Charismatic ministries. I believe the answer will also come, perhaps most forcefully, from Pentecostal colleges, universities, graduate schools and seminaries. This flies in the face of critics like C. Peter Wagner, but I truly believe the "Pentecostal academy" should take on the prophetic role of shaping the twenty-first century answer to "What meaneth this?" It should not occur isolated from the larger Pentecostal church family. However, for the season the Holy Spirit gives you to educate the emerging leaders of the future, he also asks you to disciple, prepare and release them for the world they will inherit and shape. The "Pentecostal Academy" must have the Spirit of prophecy active in its core values and practice in order for personal, ecclesiastical and cultural transformation to incubate and come to maturity. To wrap this up, I want to go back to the early years of another century, a man and a university. Those of you with a Lutheran bent know that Protestantism is only twelve years from the five

hundredth anniversary of the start of the Reformation. In his monumental work, *Luther and His Times*, E.G. Schwiebert described the impact of Luther and the University at Wittenberg.

In 1514, Paul Lange, a Benedictine monk, traveled through central Germany looking for the leading university professors to include in a *Schriftstellerlexikon*, sort of a "Who's Who" for that day. He also looked for the *vir inluster*, the promising younger professors. A young monk named Martin Luther was not even interviewed.<sup>9</sup> Unnoticed by the world, the thirty-one-year-old monk was well on his journey to a life-changing encounter with the Scriptures.

Schwiebert describes how, from 1514 to 1517, Luther won over the entire Wittenberg faculty to his views of Scripture, the Church and justification by faith. The nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses on October 31 was not the isolated act of a renegade priest but the culmination of ideas birthed in the give-and-take of teaching and preaching in a community of faith seriously engaged in the gospel.

In the forty years from 1520 to 1560, approximately 16,000 students from across Europe matriculated at Wittenberg. It "became the mirror in which the growth of the German Reformation was reflected."<sup>10</sup>

I read Schweibert's book about two years ago, and those insights about Luther and Wittenberg have challenged me to consider what the Christian community at large and, in my case, a Pentecostal must be about for Jesus' sake.

I am convinced that century twenty-one is meant to have Pentecostal schools with teachers and leaders who comprehend what Luther and Wittenberg did five hundred years ago. I believe Acts 13 and the Antioch church are instructive for us in the “academy.” There were teachers. That means there were learners. There were prophets. That means there were listeners. From that setting, the Holy Spirit sent forth leaders who penetrated a new world to them: the Graeco-Roman Empire. I’m praying the Holy Spirit will give teachers and leaders in the Pentecostal academy that kind of dual edge ministry, passion of the Spirit and instruction that moves beyond conveying knowledge to imparting a powerful personal and corporate walk in the Spirit.

I started with a tsunami, a natural disaster that we in the West barely consider now that the media has moved on. Six years ago, Leonard Sweet challenged the institutional church with his *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture*. Near the close of the book, a small section on “A Theology of Pentecost,” challenges us with this observation, “The spiritual and social implications of Pentecost, which defines the relationship of the human spirit to the Holy Spirit, have yet to be explored for the age in which we live.”<sup>11</sup>

Maybe together we can go exploring “for the age in which we live” in such a way that once again they will ask us, “What meaneth this?” and “What must we do?” Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The interview can be heard at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4265383>.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street* (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publishing Inc. 1980 with forward by Vinson Synan), 46-50. This is a reprint of Bartleman’s 1925 original *How “Pentecost” Came to Los Angeles – How It Was in the Beginning*.

<sup>3</sup> Wright used this phrase in his lectures at the Sprunt Lectures, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia in February 2001.

<sup>4</sup> All biblical citations are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:12, King James Version (KJV).

<sup>6</sup> Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. *The Gift of Peace* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), quoted in *Newsweek* (May 22, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Os Guinness. *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 75, 77.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 5:15, 16.

<sup>9</sup> E.G. Schwiebert. *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 293.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 603, 604.

<sup>11</sup> Leonard Sweet. *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 378.