

The Miracle of the Ear

Speech was not God’s only miracle at Pentecost. The Spirit also gave the gift of understanding, overcoming division and contempt.

CARRIE MCKEAN | MAY 16, 2024



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Tongues of fire, everywhere. In this loud and furious age, a time of protests and counter-protests, words come burning, singeing, scalding, stinging. “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,” James wrote, “because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (1:19–20). But few of us—even those of us who follow Christ—seem to believe that listening more than we speak could possibly meet the reality of these days.

We give into the temptation of “thinking the times require using the tools of the enemy,” as Michael Wear says in *The Spirit of Our Politics*. We justify our tongues of fire as “just the way you play the game,” disregarding our trail of destruction—great forests put to waste by the sparks from our lips (3:5–8).

Of course, there’s nothing new under the sun. Rage travels more quickly by gigahertz than messenger, but our era is not uniquely chaotic or tumultuous. The church has lived through worse, not least the dangerous early days after Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

“[I’ve] been jailed ... beaten up more times than I can count, and at death’s door time after time,” recounted the apostle Paul of his ministry in that time. “I’ve been flogged five times with the Jews’ thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. ...

I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers" (2 Cor. 11:23–27, MSG).

That was the cultural moment in which the Holy Spirit had come to the disciples in Acts 2 and unleashed a different sort of fiery tongue upon the world—one that brought connection, edification, and clarity instead of division, destruction, and confusion. This is the spiritual inheritance we remember and celebrate on Pentecost Sunday. And it is an inheritance we need to grasp anew, for our moment is just as desperate for these gracious tongues of fire and the miracle of understanding that attended them.

In the churches of my youth, any discussion of the “rushing mighty wind” (Acts 2:2, KJV) blowing into that room of gathered disciples focused on tongues in one sense or another. At my charismatic youth group, church elders—believing in the [second blessing or second baptism](#) of the Holy Spirit—said teens couldn't serve on the youth leadership team if we didn't speak in a [glossolalia prayer language](#), also called tongues. (I didn't.)

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Meanwhile, the decidedly not charismatic church I attended on Sunday mornings didn't talk about the Holy Spirit much at all. We made Pentecost a nice memory, turning the Holy Spirit's appearance into a museum exhibit complete with Renaissance-style art of dainty flames dancing over calm, saintly heads. Maybe things were a little strange in those early days, but *we* were orderly. Reasonable. Normal and predictable. (This interpretation had the added perk of soothing my ego, reassuring me that I wasn't less spiritual than my youth group peers.)

Despite their very different conclusions, both churches started with the same question: How do we make sense of Pentecost's miracle of the tongue? The focus was so singular that it wasn't until adulthood that I learned there was a second miracle at Pentecost: Alongside the miracle of the tongue was the miracle of the ear.

In a world beset with the confusion of Babel, God sent his Spirit to restore mutual understanding. Pentecost Sunday marks a miracle of listening as much as a miracle of speaking. And in our day—when everyone is shouting and no one is listening, when we know much more of James's blistering tongues of fire than the healing tongues from Acts—Pentecost's miracle of reciprocal communication is what a scorched world needs the church to embody once again.



O for a Thousand Tongues of Fire

The Spirit's descent at Pentecost is a model for diverse and distributed leadership.
HANNAH KING

In *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*, a small book on leadership in multicultural contexts published in 1993, the Chinese-American Episcopalian priest Eric H. F. Law unpacks this “miracle of communication” by framing the Acts 2 account with the social, economic, and political power dynamics of the day.

In Acts 2, Law writes, we see two groups of people gathered. The first is the disciples, mostly fishermen and laborers from Galilee—roughnecks and rednecks, we might say today, with country accents to boot. As we learn later in Acts, early Christian leaders like Peter and John were known to Jewish elders and scribes to be “uneducated and untrained” (Acts 4:13, NASB), while to the Roman occupiers, Law says, they “were just another sect of Judaism whose leader had been executed.”

The second group is a large gathering of “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). Relative to the disciples, many of these people were members of the Jewish elite. Some had managed to make very long and expensive journeys to Jerusalem. Probably some were Sadducees, the religious aristocrats with seats on the Sanhedrin council, political influence, and connections to powerful people in the Roman government. Some may even have joined in demanding that Pilate crucify Jesus just a few weeks before.

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In short, Law argues, this second group could have made trouble for followers of Jesus, and perhaps some of them already had. Yet it is to this group that the Holy Spirit gave “the gift of listening and understanding even though what was said by the disciples was in another language.” Not everyone in the crowd seemed to accept the gift—some thought the disciples were drunk, after all (v. 13)—but many did understand and were amazed at what they heard (v. 7).

At Pentecost, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise” and brought “righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:27–30). The weak, ignorant, and powerless were understood by the strong, educated, and powerful. The ordinary way of the world was upended by Christ's upside-down kingdom. The Spirit's tongues of fire brought illumination, not harm.



SPEAKING OUT

A Nation on Fire Needs the Flames of the Spirit

As racism tears the country apart, the message of Pentecost can help the church find its voice.

ESAU MCCAULLEY

Where do we—American evangelicals—find ourselves in this story today? Are we powerful or powerless? That question is complicated by factors of race, education, and class, and it's central to so many of our culture war battles, as the same behaviors and fears play very differently if they come from an embattled minority rather than a paranoid majority.

My own background is white, rural, and working-class. Today my husband and I are solidly middle-class, but I was the first person in my family to go to college—and I barely fumbled my way there, neglecting to sign up for the SAT because I didn't understand its importance for admissions. My hometown isn't Galilee, but it's arguably an American equivalent.

I know and love many white working-class evangelicals carving out a life in dying towns, trying to imagine what future their children have in hollowed-out communities. None of them feel privileged or powerful, but all of them resent being told they are. And depending on your news source, these people—my people—are either aggrieved, forgotten, and rightfully resentful or ignorant puppet fascists who pose [an existential threat](#) to American democracy.

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Those dueling characterizations are, in part, a communication problem. We talk and talk but do not listen, and as a result we do not understand one another, even within the church. We name others' sins and fall silent about our own (Matt. 7:3). We ignore the complex nuances at play in others' communities and return bitterness for bitterness, joining the chorus of clanging cymbals (1 Cor. 13:1).

This is the stifling space in which the church needs a fresh wind from the Holy Spirit. We must repent of all the ways we've become "a church that fears the power of cultural and political circumstances more than it fears the power of God," as Wear contends. And we must ask God to help us, by the Spirit, seek *both* miracles of Pentecost.

This is what our moment requires of us—and that's true whether we most easily see ourselves as the Galileans or their more sophisticated hearers. I suspect [I'm not alone](#) in seeing myself in both groups: In some situations, considerable advantage is afforded to me by the color of my skin or the sound of my speech; and in others, I'm a country bumpkin unsure of how to navigate the halls of power. But in every case, I'm a follower of Jesus, and my identity is found in him, in humble submission to Christ's call to consider others more highly than myself (Phil. 2:3). In every case, I am to pray for God to give me what I need.

I think that's true for all of us followers of Jesus. Sometimes we need the gift of the tongue: a resolve that empowers us to stand where we need to stand, resist what we must resist, and say what needs to be said. But sometimes we need the gift of the ear, as God asks us to quiet down, listen, and tame our tongues.

Sometimes we'll have power. Sometimes we'll have none. Sometimes we'll be in need. Sometimes we'll have plenty. Sometimes we'll be privileged and revered. Sometimes we'll be reviled and scorned. Sometimes we will need to defend what we hold dear. Sometimes we will need to lay down our lives. But in all seasons, we will have the Holy Spirit, always eager to work in and through us to produce the righteousness that God desires.

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