

# *“Everyone Whom the Lord Our God Calls”: Acts 2 and the Miracle of Pentecost Preaching in a Multicultural Context*

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In *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*,<sup>1</sup> Harvard’s Diana L. Eck argues persuasively that differences in religion will replace differences in race as our toughest national challenge. “One nation under God has become one nation under many gods,” she says. “Multiculturalism is America’s new social reality.” “Our campuses have become laboratories of a new multicultural and religious America.”

As someone who attempts to preach the gospel on one of those multicultural campuses, I read Eck’s book with great interest, yet ultimately, with great disappointment. She appears to want a multireligious America big enough to hold everyone except Muslim radicals, Christian fundamentalists, Jewish extremists, or anyone else who does not look like a liberal Methodist. For some reason, she condemns Christianity as “exclusive” while praising Hinduism as “inclusive.” Her treatment of Islam seems especially strange after September 11. *A New Religious America* is basically a sort of late nineteenth-century approach to religious differences. Here is praise for “pluralism” combined with dishonesty about genuinely held religious differences. American Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists are free to be just as religious as we please as long as we understand that “American” qualifies and limits, trumps and judges all other merely religious modifiers. It’s the 1893 World Parliament of Religions all over again.

A concern named “multiculturalism” has occasioned this issue of *Journal for Preachers*. The true laboratory for multiculturalism is not today’s campus but rather my congregation. As a member of the first cultural group to be adopted into the gospel, my forebears among the first wave of outsiders to be brought inside the promises of God to Israel, I certainly applaud such concern. If Jesus did not enjoy reaching across cultures, I (Gentile dog that I am) wouldn’t be here. Yet I have also learned enough of the story of how I got here (The Acts of the Apostles) to know that my inclusion was due not to multicultural sensitivity on the part of preachers but rather to the odd reach of the Holy Spirit.

True, concerns that are named with words borrowed from the culture like “inclusivity,” “diversity,” and “multiculturalism” are central to the gospel. Cross-cultural ministry is certainly a major theme of the Acts of the Apostles, perhaps *the* major theme. Those who know the Good News of Christ must tell that good news across all boundaries. Yet we do the peculiarity of the Good News an injustice when these concerns are ill named through use of the buzzwords of the dominant order. It is one thing for various racial or cultural groups to embrace such language in order to earn their rightful place within North American society. After all, the United States has a real struggle in integrating and empowering ethnic and racial minorities within a system that is based upon the self-interests of the powerful. That various groups

within the church feel the need to resort to appeals for multicultural inclusivity is a commentary upon our evangelistic failures and the church's docile willingness to order its life within the limits of the surrounding culture.

It is particularly distressing to see secular words like inclusiveness, diversity, and multiculturalism used within the church. The peculiar way of salvation that is initiated in Jesus Christ is not easily meshed with the a-theistic language of our culture wars. In the Acts of the Apostles, the problem of culture clash is named in a question: "What about the Gentiles?" Acts begins with a surprising turn toward the Gentiles. The Gentiles have no part in the promises of God unto Israel. Though within the Scriptures of Israel there are periodic references to Israel's being a "light to the nations," there are few promises made by God to Gentiles.

Gentiles and their culture have become a concern because of Jesus. Jesus came first for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. That mission was expected by the prophetic promise of a Davidic Shepherd who would gather the sheep. A major emphasis of the ministry of Jesus, and a major reason for opposition to that ministry, was that, in N. T. Wright's words, "Jesus was challenging Israel to be Israel; that is, to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth.... When YHWH finally acted for Israel, the Gentiles would be blessed as well."<sup>2</sup> What was not expected was Jesus' rather expansive notion of gathering. Gentile-inclusion, according to Luke-Acts, has been made into a crisis for God's people because of the table fellowship of Jesus, because of a Messiah who had the odd habit of seeking the unsaved and looking for the lost (Luke 2:32; 24:47; Acts 1:8), and not only among the house of Israel. Thus the evocation of Isaiah 49 in Acts 13 and Amos 9 in Acts 15 in order to support Gentile inclusion as a fulfillment of the promises of God to Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Luke's citation from the Hebrew Scriptures to support the inclusion of Gentiles, one can understand why many commentators have accused Luke of being anti-Semitic,<sup>4</sup> for what Luke is describing is a decisive break with much that had gone before. Luke is aware of the oddness, the dissonance of what he is describing in Acts, hence Luke's rather laborious citations. The citation is testimony to Luke's defensiveness about the undeniable oddness of the story he has to tell. A story any less new would not require such constant reference to tradition. The scriptural citation is also testimony to Luke's determination to present what happened at Pentecost and in the Gentile mission of Paul as the fulfillment of the promises of God to Israel. The world is changed, not by appeal to allegedly universal categories like "humanity," "love," or "inclusiveness," but rather by God's election of a particular people, in a particular place and time, to be a blessing to all the peoples of the world.

### *Pentecost as Multicultural Miracle*

For all the scriptural referencing, Luke knew that the thought of Gentile inclusion was so odd, so against the grain of Israel's conventional theological thinking, that nothing less than a miracle could explain so odd a lurch toward such offensive people as Cornelius, Agrippa, and the Ethiopian. Nothing less than the miracle of Acts 2 can explain such a move. The Gentiles are present, not through any appeals to so limp a virtue as "inclusivity," but rather through the leading, prodding, and gift of the Spirit. Even as the gospel rests upon the miracle of resurrection, so the church's inclusive proclamation rests upon the miracle of Pentecost.

Therefore it is dead wrong for commentators to attribute the turn to the Gentiles

in Acts to any alleged failure of the Jews, especially their leaders, to respond to Jesus or to Christian preaching.<sup>5</sup> Favorite texts for this misinterpretation are usually Acts 13:46; 18:6; and 28:25-28. The Gospel is opposed and rejected by a wide array of critics, some of whom are Jews. Even as it is not evocation of “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” or other secular concern, so it is not Jewish rejection of anything that causes the odd turn toward the Gentiles in Acts. That turn is solely at the instigation of the Holy Spirit. It is a sign, not of God’s rejection of Israel but rather the latest instance of God’s continuing work with Israel whom God has called to be a light to the nations.

It is equally wrong to attribute the move to the Gentiles to any moralistic admonition to make room at the table for Gentiles. Acts begins with the risen Christ charging the disciples to prepare themselves for the Pentecostal promise (1:12-2:1) by waiting and praying together. Waiting and praying signify the utter dependency of the disciples. The next move must be solely up to God, something like the resurrection itself. Empowerment will come as a gift, as a miracle, not through their efforts. Their challenge is not to become more conversant in the thought patterns of other cultures, but rather to be more exclusively tethered to their Risen Lord. What they are asked to do is not a strategy for church growth but rather the cultivation of a sense of dependency upon God to work for them what they cannot.

When, in his Pentecost sermon to the crowd in the street, Peter seeks to put the Spirit’s gift in context, he refers to Joel’s prophecy of the end (2:17-18). The prophets of Israel had linked a final outpouring of the Spirit with the end of the age (Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-3:1). Thus, at Christ’s initial mention of the Spirit, the disciples quite naturally ask if now is the time when the kingdom of Israel will be restored (Acts 1:6). Jesus tells them that they do not need to know when the kingdom will be restored; they merely need to know how to witness in the meantime, even as Isaiah had characterized the witness of Israel (Isa. 43:10, 12; 44:8).

Joel’s prophecy is a forecast of destruction and death (see especially Joel 2:32). Peter, in linking this to Pentecost, transmutes Joel’s words into words of new life. In a sense, the apostles were experiencing the end. It was the end of all of their hopes for the kingdoms of this world and the means of gathering within those kingdoms. But it was also the beginning of a new world. Now, “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:21). Alas, too much of the church’s current thinking about multi-culturalism is infected with thought of the old world and proceeds as if nothing has changed, as if the means and methods of the old world are still intact, still able, through some earnest strategy, or appeal to allegedly universal values, to bring people together despite our differences. Pentecostal preaching must be preaching that lets go of the world’s hopes for community and communion through the world’s devices.

The fire of Pentecost is a prophetic sign of judgment. John the Baptist had begun this story with his prediction of judgment fire (Luke 3:9, 16-17). Old, godless hopes for human unity are being declared null and empty. It is also a purifying fire. We are being purified of pagan expectations. Rather than being a decisive break with the promises of God unto Israel, as some commentators have erroneously contended, Pentecost is sign of the fulfillment of the promises of God to Israel, a sign of the miraculous inclusion of “all flesh” into the election of Israel. Thus it is quite natural for us to think of Acts 2 as a supremely “multicultural” text for the church.

The good news is that Pentecost continues. There will be more outpourings, in

ways that recall the first dramatic day (Acts 4:32-35; 10:44-45; 19:6). In Jesus, all have been saved and, at Pentecost, we see God's dramatic determination to have all. Indeed, anytime we preachers manage to speak in such a way that relativizes our own cultural caughtness and makes contact with someone across our cultural limitations, we are supposed to hear an echo of Acts 2.

From my reading of Acts 2 and the birth of Pentecostal preaching, I derive these insights for any of us who aspire to preach with the Holy Spirit within a multicultural context:

*All gospel induced speaking and hearing tends to be miraculous.* Luke says that at the Spirit's outpouring, disciples spoke "in other languages" (2:5-12). We will read other instances of the "other languages" when the Spirit is given in 10:46 and 19:6. Whether or not this is the ecstatic speech that Paul contends with in places like 1 Corinthians, I cannot say. What can be said is that these "other tongues," similar to the glossalalia of 1 Corinthians, were unexpected, unknown, and perhaps even unwanted. The languages being spoken were incomprehensible to those who were speaking. A miracle has occurred (2:4, 8, 17). There is no other way to bring the event of Jesus Christ to comprehension through speech other than as a miracle, that is, as an instance of the self-giving, the self-revelation of God. Did not Jesus promise that the Spirit would empower his disciples to be witnesses across cultures (1:8)? Any cross-cultural witness, any cross-cultural ministry or unity, or instances of the church reaching across the world's boundaries is based upon this promise and its fulfillment in Acts 2. There are simply too many excellent reasons—reasons based upon various cultural, economic, racial, gender, social barriers, and other assorted sin—that explain why we cannot understand one another. Our barriers to communion, community, and communication cannot be overcome through our own linguistic devices (*pace* the homiletics being taught by me and many of my colleagues in homiletics courses throughout the land). According to Acts 2, cross-cultural communication does not need better technique or greater sensitivity to and appreciation of our cultural differences. Cross-cultural hearing and comprehension is possible because God wills to make a way when, humanly speaking, there is no way.

True, those gathered at Pentecost were all Jews, gathered for a celebration of a Jewish festival. Yet they were Jews "from many nations," that is, Jewish people who had been corrupted, named, formed by the language of different cultures. They were Jews who had allowed themselves to be constricted by various adjectival qualifiers like "Judean Jews" or "Greek Jews." They were thus somewhat analogous to us contemporary Christians who have compromised and corrupted our Christian identity by allowing it to be qualified by the modifier "American." The moment we allow our Christian testimony to be restricted by the adjective "American," we have compromised the expansive vision of Acts 2.

The first Pentecostal speech was that which crossed the boundaries that cut through God's own people. Today, as we think about "cross-cultural preaching," we ought to be reminded that some of our most challenging cross-cultural work needs to occur every Sunday within the gathered congregation. There is no "Christ and culture," some distant "Christ," speaking to a monolithic "culture."<sup>6</sup> There is rather the Holy Spirit making miracle among a diverse array of tongues and cultures, a work that the Spirit seems to relish, the work that leads to the birth of the church, sometimes within the context of the church. Among the marks of any true church, the first and

foremost is this: the church as that peculiar gathering of those who do not look the same, talk the same, or think the same because they have been miraculously joined by one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

When the speeches in Acts to Jews are compared with those that are addressed primarily to Gentile audiences, we find a curious lack of fundamental difference in the content of the speech. Sermons to Jews are based upon Scripture, upon the narrative of salvation, upon prophetic testimony. Curiously, speeches to Gentiles are similarly linked to the story of God's dealings with Israel. Attempts to find, in the Acts sermons to Gentiles, Stoic antecedents and pagan referents have been unsuccessful.<sup>7</sup> Paul's brief references to pagan authors and ideas in Acts 17 in his speech on the Areopagus get him nowhere. When Paul finally mentions the resurrection, most of his hearers scoff. All of this indicates again the very basis of the mission to the Gentiles—the miraculous work of God, first among Jews, then to the Gentiles. Pagan antecedents tend not to be invoked in support of this move because there are none.

The other day, someone emerged from one of our services saying that she heard something in my sermon that moved her, changed her. She is not of the same race, gender, age, or social location as mine. Her hearing has no adequate explanation other than as a miracle.

*Apostles are not permitted to hunker down behind their native cultural community and content themselves with speech exclusively among themselves.* Throughout Acts, the church is that (often reluctant) people who are being pushed out into confrontation with and address to other peoples (8:27-29; 10:17-20; 11:12; 13:2, 4). The gospel is inherently cross-cultural, confrontive, inevitably conflicted with every cultural enclave, including the very first culture in which it found itself. Apostles in Acts will talk with anyone, even Gentiles. Peter's speech in Acts 2 is to the scoffers in the street rather than to the believers in the church. Peter preaches, not from the standpoint of some prior theory of cross-cultural communication or because he has developed an adequate theology for racial inclusiveness, but rather because it is of the nature of the gospel to be loquacious, evangelistic, and eager to speak with anyone who will listen. The event of Jesus Christ, his resurrection, was by nature a rhetoric-inducing event. The predominate imperative produced by Easter is, "Go! Tell!" (Mk. 16:7).

The gospel is about bringing God's promises and God's claims to speech in such a way that, miracle of all miracles, the gospel is heard and embraced and a new family is formed. Apostles cannot guarantee or control such hearing, for Acts is replete with instances when, despite some great preaching, preaching is not heard. Yet throughout Acts, after Pentecost, the Word triumphs, overcomes all barriers, spreads like wildfire throughout the Empire. One of the great joys of the preaching ministry is to be able to witness the rather miraculous ability of the Holy Spirit to grant, in our listeners, a hearing, a response that is not of our devising, a response that is better than our preaching. Not every outpouring of the Spirit results in speaking other tongues, for the Spirit's gifts are many and diverse. However, it is clear from the account in Acts 2 that Spirit-empowered speech tends to be assertive, pushy, antagonistic, and abrasive with all other speech, including the particular speech in which it found itself. It is the nature of the Spirit to be ambiguous, demanding of multiple, often deeply conflicted interpretations. Those who would live in the Spirit must be ready for interpretive division and cognitive dissonance, for the Spirit tends to resist singular, unitary interpretation. The response to the initial proclamation of the church on that day was

not only “what must we do to be saved?” but also “they are drunk.”

*The gospel is deferential and accommodating to no particular culture*; rather, it is indoctrination, inculcation into a new and oddly based culture, namely the church. Thus Peter remembers Joel’s prophetic vision of the crossing of gender, age, and social barriers (2:17-18). The result of Pentecostal empowerment by the Spirit is baptism (2:38), adoption by and enculturation into a new people, a holy nation, a light to all other nations, cultures, clubs, and means of human gathering. Thus many interpreters have seen Luke’s list of hearers as an echo of the list of nations in Genesis 10. Pentecost is a day in which the linguistic divisions of Babel (Gen. 11) are healed. The same God who scattered the nations in order to prevent a united nations against God, now gathers and unites the nations in a new nation convened by God. The church is a sign on earth (2:19) of what heaven wants.

Some time ago I noted that, in my experience, churches that talk a great deal about “diversity” generally have very little of it in their congregations. Churches that talk about “multiculturalism,” as opposed to churches that talk about “evangelism,” tend to be the most homogeneous of churches.

*To preach with the Holy Spirit is to be out of control, to allow our church to be dragged kicking and screaming into encounters with cultures not our own.* Apostles in Acts must learn and relearn this truth over and over again. As Acts begins, the apostles assume that the story of the church will be based upon their originating relationship with Jesus, as witnesses to “all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning”(1:1), as those who “have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us”(1:21). By Acts 2, apostles are beginning to learn that the story is based, instead, on the relentless reach of the Holy Spirit. This explains what happened at Pentecost, not their apostolic succession back to Jesus.

Peter exclaims, “For this promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (2:39). On that day Peter realized that apostles, preachers in Acts, are out of control. Their sermons have implications beyond their imagination. This is a truth that Peter, according to Acts, has to learn and relearn as the Holy Spirit reaches first toward the Samaritans (Acts 8), and most dramatically, in the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10) as Peter witnesses that the “gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:45). Perhaps Peter becomes a kind of parable for the church and the way that the church must learn and relearn, in every age, that God really does intend, through the preaching of the gospel, to reach toward “all who are far away.”

Perhaps the paradigmatic story of how the church deals with cultural differences is the last half of Acts 8, the story of Philip and the conversion of the Ethiopian. This move is so strange, so utterly unanticipated by the church and the apostles, that Philip must be jolted awake by an angel, ordered to go to the middle of the desert, there to meet an Ethiopian who has somehow gotten hold of an Isaiah scroll. When the man demands interpretation from Philip as well as baptism, even the water is miraculously provided in the desert. The story seems to go out of its way to insist that any mission across cultural boundaries is due, not to our sensitivity to and savvy working of cultural differences (*pace* Diana Eck) but rather to the insistent prod of the Holy Spirit.

There is a long debate, in the history of interpretation, concerning the purpose of the Acts of the Apostles. For one thing, Acts is not really about the apostles. As some have noted, it ought more aptly to be named the Acts of the Holy Spirit, for the third

person of the Trinity really is the main author of this story.<sup>8</sup> A number of commentators have proposed the influential interpretation of Acts as a second century apology, addressed to Roman officials, that argues for the political justification for the church within the Roman Empire.<sup>9</sup> Considering the none-too-flattering portraits of official Rome, the continued Roman persecution of the church in Acts, this reading seems strange. Rather than apology to nonbelievers, Acts, like most of Scripture, appears mostly to be addressed to the edification of believers.

I agree with Luke Timothy Johnson's assertion that Acts was a *true* apology. It is an apology directed not to unbelievers but rather to believers, not to pagans but to the church.<sup>10</sup> It is the church, rather than the world, that must constantly be reminded of the miraculous quality of the Holy Spirit, of the aggressive, world-demanding tendencies of the Third Person of the Trinity, of the relentless determination of God in Jesus Christ to get back what belongs to God. It is the church that has constantly to be reminded that the miraculous basis of the Kingdom of God is the outrageous ambition of God to have a people who transgress the limits imposed by the nations.

We preachers must be constantly reminded that God's peculiar multiculturalism begins with the Spirit's "violent wind" (2:2) that intruded into our settled, religious club and demanded that we follow the Spirit's assault upon "every nation under heaven" (2:5) with a promise to "all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:39). Preaching is always confrontive of the world's boundaries and divisions, as well as the world's sources of identity. Just this past week, even with preaching as poor as mine, I was privileged to witness a woman in my congregation who was given enough Holy Spirit to summon the courage to forgive someone who terribly wronged her. I watched a Duke undergraduate turn her back upon her family's plans for her success in order to give her life to work among the poor. Someone from a race whom my race has abused and degraded for centuries came up to me after Sunday's sermon and said, "God really spoke to me today through you." I have no other satisfactory explanations for such events than that they are miracles, gifts of the still active Holy Spirit.

Acts says we are right to see the multicultural composition of our congregations as a kind of test of the fidelity of our preaching. I think Acts would also tell us that, whenever by the grace of God our preaching overcomes some cultural boundary, we are right to rejoice that God continues to work wonders through the word. Whenever we hear "multicultural" we are supposed to think "church," that peculiar cross-cultural people gathered by nothing other than the descent of the Holy Spirit.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See chap. 7 of N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), especially pp. 308-310.

<sup>3</sup> Darrell Bock, "Scripture and the Realisation of God's Promises," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), chap. 3, 41-62.

<sup>4</sup> James T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (London and Philadelphia: SCM and Fortress, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> See John Nolland, "Salvation-History and Eschatology," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), chap. 4, pp. 76-81.

<sup>6</sup> The terms are the well-known typology of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (Harper & Row: New York, 1951).

<sup>7</sup> G. Walter Hansen, "The Preaching and Defense of Paul," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*

ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), chap. 15, pp. 307-317.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn, rev. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 98.

<sup>9</sup> See my discussion of the purpose of Acts and the Roman apology theories of G.B. Caird and E. Haenchen in Willimon, *Acts: Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 115-122.

<sup>10</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, "Luke-Acts, Book of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* vol. IV, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 403-420.