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A Violent Wind

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A Violent Wind

D'ESTA LOVE

One of the most powerful scenes regarding the Spirit is recorded in the account of Pentecost found in the second chapter of Acts.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (2.1–4)

This is a powerful and astonishing event. A crowd of about 120 Israelite believers (1.15) is gathered with the apostles on Pentecost when the spirit of God is poured out upon them. This pouring out is so forceful it sounds like a violent wind from heaven that fills the entire house, and it is accompanied by tongues of fire that rest on all who are there, giving each of them the power to speak in other languages. Furthermore, the sound of the Holy Spirit being poured out is so loud as to draw a large crowd of devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem, and everyone hears in their own language what is being said (2.5). Peter stands with the eleven and addresses this audience, opening his sermon with a quotation from the prophet Joel:

After all this it will happen that . . .
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
And your young men shall see visions,
Even on your male and female slaves,
In those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2.28–29)

Clearly, as Peter witnesses this great outpouring he recalls Joel's vision and interprets these events of Pentecost as a fulfillment of his prophecy.

Joel's Prophecy

Joel speaks the word of the LORD and envisions through his prophecy a powerful event. The spirit of God will come upon all flesh and they will prophesy, male and female, young and old, slave and free. His words are spoken out of and to a hierarchical and patriarchal social world structured by pairs of unequal status, each pair with a superior and an inferior member. We know these human divisions well from our reading of scripture: male and female, old and young, slave and free, with the addition of Jew and Gentile. These designations carry social status and rank, as well as definite, crystalized role expectations. The lesser members are subordinate and inferior to the superior and superordinate members. The relationships in each pair are marked by power

and powerlessness, superiority and inferiority, inclusion and exclusion. These realities separate slaves from free individuals, men from women, and Jews from Gentiles. Crossing forbidden boundaries often carried the weight of purity contamination.

But in Joel's prophesy, God envisions something utterly new for God's people—no longer excluded but included, no longer separated but joined together, no longer divided but united—and the unifying, empowering, liberating force is the spirit of God poured out on all flesh. And when the Spirit is poured out, dramatic change takes place. It carries the promise of God's newness and leaves the prophetic enterprise open to what God envisions, not what culture or social norms demand. This is a word from God that crosses—even destroys—the social divides that separate the people of God and promises full inclusion in the life of God without distinction.

Luke catches the vision of the fulfillment of Joel's prophesy in both the Gospel of Luke and book of Acts. In the latter writing, Luke speaks explicitly about the outpouring of God's Spirit upon all flesh. In both writings, he gives us stories and images of lives that are changed, of social upheaval, of dramatic reversals in role expectations, and of the power of God to make things new.

The Gospel of Luke

Let's begin with Luke's gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ, the good news of the kingdom of heaven, the good news of the spirit of God poured out. In Jesus, God is bringing his Joel vision to pass. He is bringing something entirely new—filled with hope and promise for all flesh. As we read the birth narratives of Luke chapters 1 and 2 we observe the presence of God's Spirit upon Mary and Elizabeth, Zachariah, Simeon, and Anna. They are filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and prophesy of God's deliverance as the mighty are brought down and the lowly are lifted up. The mighty and lowly are on a level plane. The mighty and the lowly receive God's mercy without distinction. It is the Spirit of our God who is at work bringing about these great reversals.

Prior to the birth of John, it was foretold by Gabriel that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born. As God's prophet in the wilderness, the word of the LORD came to John, and, filled with the Spirit, he went about in the region of the Jordan preaching from the prophesy of Isaiah:

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 "Prepare the way of the LORD, make his paths straight.
 Every valley shall be filled,
 and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
 and the crooked shall be made straight,
 and the rough ways made smooth;
 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (Luke 3.4–6)

This is a prophesy that echoes Joel's words and carries the good news that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

At the baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit descends upon him in bodily form as a dove, and the Spirit leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. In chapter 4, Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit," returns to Galilee and in Nazareth, at the synagogue service, he reads:

The spirit of the LORD is upon me,
 because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free—
 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor. (Luke 4.18–19)

And so we see Jesus, filled without measure with the Holy Spirit, crossing the boundaries of his social world and, in so doing, pronouncing judgment on the boundaries and the boundary keepers and the exclusions of his world. His mission stretches across social and racial and gender boundaries to include all humankind—all flesh—even to the margins of society. Those who are neglected by the keepers of the purity boundaries, those who are judged and condemned, those who languish in invisible and silent worlds are all made whole, forgiven, and set free because God's promises are being fulfilled.

It is a time of unexpected change: a barren woman who is with child, a priest who cannot speak, a virgin who conceives, a babe who leaps in the womb, lowly shepherds who witness the heavenly host and proclaim the good news. We are speaking of upheavals. People of low status brought near; people of low status lifted up; people who were unclean are clean; people who were silenced are now speaking the good news, prophesying of God's new world. Such change can only take place through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you see it? Something powerful is happening. The kingdom of God is coming—good news! The barriers are being broken not just between God and humankind but among all people—male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free—all flesh. It is God's jubilee, the last days when his spirit is poured out on all flesh. Luke pushes the boundaries to present God's vision fulfilled in Jesus. In so doing, he prepares his readers—he prepares us—for the opening of the Book of Acts, for Pentecost, when God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh.

Pentecost and the Early Church

We should not be surprised then when Peter stands at the dawn of God's bright new future—as Zachariah foretells it, “the dawn from on high will break upon us” (Luke 1.78)—and recalls Joel's vision. The setting of Pentecost itself evokes the fulfillment of Joel 2.28 as the spirit of God is poured out with the sound of a violent wind that fills the entire house.

A great change is taking place—something entirely new is coming—and this is no time for a sweet summer breeze. This is a great upheaval that necessitates a violent wind. It necessitates repentance and something as radical as new birth—baptism for the remission of sins. It is God's salvation, it is God at work, it is the kingdom of God, and it is unlike the kingdoms of this world.

The force of power unleashed through the Holy Spirit not only allows listeners to hear God in their own tongues, it cuts across social boundaries and upsets the cultural norms and expectations that have characterized the social world of scripture, including the entire Greco-Roman world. As we heard in the prophecy of Joel, which Peter quotes, the Spirit is poured out on *all flesh*—that includes men and women, young and old, slave and free. The Pentecost story is an example of the Spirit poured out on Israelite believers, but as we go to Acts 10 we hear the Spirit call Peter to cross another deep divide as he goes to the house of Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort. In that setting Peter preaches the good news to the Gentiles and, in the midst of his sermon, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Acts 10.44–45). Therefore, the great inclusion that has been accomplished through the mighty workings of the Holy Spirit extends to Gentiles.

From Pentecost God's spirit is poured out on all flesh in the earliest expansion of the church from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth. As the spirit of God moves across all the divides of human experience and power structures of the ancient world, we see men and women of every strata of society praying and prophesying, breaking bread together, worshiping together—co-laborers together in the establishment of the early church.

Let's be clear about the change that has taken place. In the social world of Jesus and the early church, men and women did not come to the table together—so divided was their world. Even their religious life was segregated, and women were excluded from the places of prayer and the study of Torah. In other words, men and women did not worship together. Now the table is for all. Men and women worship together—not segregated in designated places. They pray together—no longer are women excluded from the places of prayer.

We see this clearly in Acts chapter 1 as Luke tells us the apostles and certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers devoted themselves together in prayer. In fact, in the male-dominated world

of the first century we see the conspicuous presence of women in Luke-Acts. Scholars have noted how Luke pairs men and women. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, these pairs are evident in the birth narratives: Zachariah and Elizabeth, Zachariah and Mary, and Simeon and Anna. Or in most parables or teachings on the kingdom, the illustrations are about men. But Luke gives us the story of the lost sheep and pairs with it the story of the lost coin. One searcher is male; the other is female.

In Acts it is interesting to observe that in the public speeches to Jewish and Gentile audiences, the audiences are male, as is the social norm for that world. Yet Luke makes a point of saying that great numbers are added to the LORD—both men and women. Or he gives us a scene when Paul leaves for Jerusalem, and Luke tells us that all of them—including wives and children—went with Paul and knelt on the beach and prayed. We are observing a new community of faith that is coming together: male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free without distinction.

Luke tells us, as does Paul as he recounts his history, that Saul ravaged the church—dragging off both men and women. Or look at the pairing of men and women in Acts: Lydia and the Philippian jailer, or Pricilla and Aquila (and notice that her name is listed first). As we look at the Pauline mission and depictions of the church in its infancy and its expansion to Gentiles, again we see the conspicuous presence of women serving as coworkers, teachers, leaders of household churches, and deacons. Women are even as referenced in Romans 16: Priscilla (again), Mary, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, and Julia—with Junia described by Paul as “outstanding among the apostles.” We also know of Phoebe, Chloe, Euodia, and Syntyche from Paul’s letters to the Romans, Corinthians, and Philippians. And only in the Gospel of Luke does the author name women who followed Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Joanna (the wife of Herod’s steward, Chusa), and Susanna.

I hope you are capturing this vision. Something has happened here and it is not a change in their social world. It is not societal change that breaks the divides and includes and empowers men and women for God—it is the outpouring of God’s Spirit on all flesh—and the social changes in their lives, among the believers, and in the church are remarkable, given their expectations. They still live in a divided world of hierarchy and power, but they are not of it.

We hear echoes of Joel’s prophecy and Peter’s sermon—do we not?—from Paul in Galatians 3.28 as he describes a new humanity in which there is “**NO LONGER** Jew or Greek, **NO LONGER** slave or free, **NO LONGER** male and female; for you all are one new person in Christ Jesus” (emphasis added). Did you hear it? No longer, no longer, no longer. What do we think Paul’s meaning is here? We often spiritualize the meaning. Sometimes we say that we are all equal at the foot of the cross. That is certainly true, but do we not live our lives at the foot of the cross? We are talking about life in the kingdom, and the geographic center of the kingdom is the foot of the cross. There are no distinctions. We are united as a new people in Christ Jesus. Social status, gender, and power are of no consequence, as they were of no consequence to Jesus. We are united as a new people in the fellowship of God’s people.

In the social world of the first century, characterized by rigid divides of power and unequal status, the prophet’s vision was full participation in the life of God. Am I making myself clear? It is not societal change that breaks down the walls of human division and empowers people for God. It is also not democratic ideology that sets us free and gives us a place at the table of the LORD—it is the spirit of God poured out on all flesh.

Can we envision a world in which our sons and our daughters will prophesy? We live in a social world unlike that of the first century. Our social world has been influenced and transformed by democratic ideology. The constraints and social structures that divided the agrarian social world of scripture are not our reality. Yet we still hold on to the vestiges of our cultural past. While men and women are not separated and divided in our social world, in our churches they still are.

In any social world or culture, it is the spirit of God that equips men and women for ministry. Today we claim the promise of the Holy Spirit poured out on us, but our churches still have not fully received and embraced the gifts of the Spirit as given to men and women without distinction—without regard for gender. Our roles in the kingdom should not be determined by gender but by our gifts. In far too many of our congregations women still sit in their silent worlds, unable to find their voices even to speak God’s name in prayer in the assembly of the saints.

The spirit of God has been poured out on all flesh. Everyone from all corners of the earth will receive the spirit of God, and they will prophesy. As others before me have observed, “When the voices that were once silent speak, when the people who were shut out are let in, when those who were excluded are included, when our sons and our daughters proclaim the good news without distinction, we will know that the Spirit of God has come.”

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1. This is not a specific quotation from one source; rather, it is a compilation of things I have read and heard from others. Many individuals before me have expressed these ideas and I want to acknowledge their contributions to my education and understanding of the spirit of God.