

**WESLEYAN HERITAGE Library**

*Holiness Writers*

# **Symbols Of Pentecost**

By

*D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.*

*“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without  
which no man shall see the Lord” Heb 12:14*

**Spreading Scriptural Holiness to the World**

Wesleyan Heritage Publications  
© 1998

# **SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST**

By

**D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.**

BEACON HILL PRESS  
Kansas City, Missouri

First printing, 1938  
Second printing, 1948

By the same author:

A B C's of Christian Living  
A B C's of Doctrine  
A B C's of Holiness  
A B C's of Stewardship  
The Baptism with the Holy Spirit  
The Christian Sabbath  
The Meaning of Holiness

Printed in the United States of America

# SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST

By

D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.

## CONTENTS

Second Title Page

CHAPTER I  
A NEW DISPENSATION

CHAPTER II  
THE RUSHING MIGHTY WIND

CHAPTER III  
THE TONGUE OF FIRE

CHAPTER IV  
SPEAKING IN OTHER TONGUES (Part One)

CHAPTER V  
SPEAKING IN OTHER TONGUES (Part Two)

CHAPTER VI  
TONGUES AT CORINTH

CHAPTER VII  
THE ABIDING EXPERIENCE

# SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST

By

D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.

## CHAPTER I A NEW DISPENSATION

Pentecost marked the beginning of a new dispensation. In fact it marked the end of a transition from the old to the new. Jesus' message was "The kingdom of heaven (the new dispensation) is at hand." He implied that John the Baptist was the end of the old dispensation when He said, "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt. 11: 11). All of the work of Jesus was within the new dispensation, His life, His ministry, His death and resurrection, and His work in pouring out the Holy Spirit upon the waiting disciples. Without His crucifixion and resurrection, there could have been no Pentecost, for Pentecost was as much His work as anything He did while here on earth: "This Jesus," said Peter, "hath God raised up. . . Therefore being. at the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear" (Acts 2:32,33).

"When the day of Pentecost was fully come" marked not only the coming of an annual Jewish feast day, it marked the beginning of a dispensation -- a dispensational Day of Pentecost; which assures us that today we are living in the Day of Pentecost as much as were the one hundred twenty who experienced the dawning of that dispensational day. Everything they enjoyed on that day which was essential to their personal salvation and relation to Christ, and all things necessary to the carrying on of the work of Christ on earth, are ours today. We need not be one whit behind them in this our Day of Pentecost.

Other dispensations had been ushered in and covenants established by God with special and supernatural signs. Not that the signs were a necessary part of the dispensation or covenant, but they were outward signs of assurance especially to those who seek a sign: "The Jews require a sign," said Paul. After the Deluge the rainbow was given as a sign of God's perpetual covenant with Noah that He would not again destroy the earth with water (Gen. 9:11-17). God confirmed His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:1-18) by a special sign -- the sign of a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passing between the pieces of the sacrifice he had made at the command of God.

Sinai, of which the Feast of Pentecost was the annual commemoration, marked the beginning of a new dispensation, the new order of revealed law. The beginnings of this dispensation were accompanied with signs; thunderings and lightnings, the burning mountain, the sound of the loud trumpet, and the audible voice of God (Ex. 19:16). Here God gave His people, those whom He had redeemed from the land of bondage, His law that they might be blessed by this revelation to know how they should live, that they might realize their relation to Him and recognize Him as their Supreme Ruler.

Pentecost, marking the beginning of a new dispensation, when God poured out His Holy Spirit upon those waiting believers -- the dispensation of the Holy Spirit was also accompanied by special

or supernatural signs -- or manifestations. There was "the sound as of a rushing mighty wind"; "the cloven tongues like as of fire," and the speaking "in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" -- not much unlike the signs that accompanied the giving of the law at Sinai.

It is essential to note that the symbols or special signs accompanying these dispensational or covenant events were never repeated, with the exception of the rainbow, and this was of a different nature entirely from the other signs for it was said by God to be "the token of the covenant . . . for perpetual generations." At times God's covenant was confirmed to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob, but never did "the smoking furnace and burning lamp" appear again. Many times the law given at Sinai was read to Israel, but never again was it accompanied by the signs of thunders, lightnings and sound of the voice. Never again were the accompanying signs of the beginning of the new dispensation given at Pentecost repeated, with the exception of the speaking in tongues, which in the same significance was given on two other occasions to enlarge the vision of the leaders of the infant Church to the scope of the Church, that all people, Jews, Gentiles and old dispensational believers were to be included in the new dispensational benefits.

In each case the accompanying supernatural sign was a symbol of what was occurring that day but not an evidence; a symbol is a device to represent what was occurring, while an evidence would always remain as a necessary part of the occurrence. The actual experience may be repeated without the symbol, whereas if they were evidences the actual experience could not exist without the repetition of these special signs.

It is quite apparent that these three symbols were all of equal importance in their manifestation of the official advent of the Holy Spirit to the Church and the ushering in of the new dispensation. It seems that "the sound as of a rushing mighty wind," and "the cloven tongues like as of fire," may have been perceptible only to those present in the Upper Room; while the speaking in other languages as the Spirit gave them utterance was the manifestation to the multitude that the new day had dawned. It is apparent that none of these symbols or manifestations was more significant or important than the other two. They were all the manifestations of the one event the Comforter had come! The vital thing that happened at Pentecost was not the special signs or accompanying manifestations, but the fact that the Holy Spirit had come to abide in the hearts of men and to be the life of the Church throughout this dispensation.

# SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST

By

D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.

## CHAPTER II THE RUSHING MIGHTY WIND

The first symbol used is wind. Yet not exactly wind, it was "a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting," a figure or something deeper than wind itself could picture.

Wind is used elsewhere in Scripture as the type of the Holy Spirit. In fact there is a close connection between the words, "spirit" and "breath" or wind. In the beginning after God had formed the body of man out of earthly elements He "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

Another picture of this type of the Holy Spirit is Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:110). The prophet was first instructed by God to prophesy on the dry bones, calling them to form together and form sinews, and flesh and skin to come upon them. This was done and they were perfectly formed bodies, but no life. He then was instructed to prophesy the second time, which he did "and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army."

Jesus in describing the mystery of the new birth to Nicodemus said, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

On the day of resurrection the risen Lord met with His disciples as they were assembled. Here He "breathed on them, and said unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost" (John 20:22). This act was not merely a promise, it was a gift from the risen Lord, as He shared with them some of the benefits of His resurrection; an earnest of their full inheritance of the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost this symbol was recognized as being of heavenly origin; "there came a sound from heaven." This statement may be associated with a statement Peter made later on that day, "Jesus . . . being at the right hand of God exalted . . . hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear." They were not confused as to the origin of this unusual manifestation, it came from the risen Lord.

The wind was the symbol of life, abundant spiritual life, a vitality of divine origin. Not natural life, not native dormant energies which now were stirred into greater activities, not the unlocking of the storehouse of latent natural resources. It was the fullness of the Spirit, a divine life, a life like unto the Giver, the Spirit of life.

Wind as the symbol of the fullness of spiritual life speaks of a freedom of manifestation. "Those men alone are free 'as the air we breathe' who are vitalized by the Spirit of the Lord, for where the Spirit of the Lord is there, and there alone, is liberty" (MacLaren). With what freedom and

spontaneity these Spirit-filled believers gave expression to the fullness of spiritual life! How captivating was their quenchless enthusiasm! They were free and free indeed.

Wind as a symbol of this mighty experience also suggests power. A power that was divine, spiritual -- a life-giving power which is free to blow as it listeth. Sometimes it may be manifested in the gentlest breezes that scarcely move the leaves of the treetops bringing seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, sometimes it rises into a tempest sweeping everything before it as in mighty spiritual awakenings and revivals of far-reaching proportions.

The waiting group, one hundred and twenty in number, a body of obedient believers, all "of one accord in one place" was the nucleus of the Church, the body of Christ This group was somewhat pictured in analogy by the body of Adam before God breathed into him the breath of life; also by the well-formed bodies of Ezekiel's prophecy, but they had no life in them. This group of believers had spiritual life, but not in its dispensational fullness. Here the Holy Spirit, in the symbol as of a rushing mighty wind, fused these individual believers into one unity, a living, spiritual organism, the body of Christ with the Holy Spirit as its life. Through His Church or body He would carry on His work in the world.

This spiritual organism now formed was in active opposition to the world. One has said that the world is an organized economy of godless ambitions, motives and interests, a social organism in league with the power of evil against the higher interests of the human spirit and the cause of redeeming grace. The Church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual organism set in opposition against this evil social organism.

The first manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit in this organism was in a new ability to overcome the attacks of the forces of evil. The strength of their foes was never underestimated, but the power of God was magnified. Into the arena of the pagan world came this new spiritual organism opposed to everything evil in the world. They were victorious. The influence of the Church spread. New converts were made. Churches were established. Opposition increased but this "body of Christ" marched forward with the tread of a conqueror, they were sharers of Christ's resurrection power. It caused the upset of political and religious powers. It changed the moral complexion of the world. In a few short years it had so revolutionized the world as to cast it into a different mold. What was the secret of this success? It was Pentecost -- The power of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ. What one person could never have done, the group, inbreathed by the Holy Spirit into one body, did under the power of God.

The "sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" was a symbol of something mighty occurring in the lives of these persons individually and in the group collectively. It was a sign that the Spirit of life, the Spirit of freedom, the Spirit of power -- the Holy Spirit -- Had come. Let us never lose sight of the fact that we are now living in the Day of Pentecost and all its blessings and privileges are ours today.

# SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST

By

D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.

## CHAPTER III THE TONGUE OF FIRE

Fire always has been with the Jews a symbol of the divine presence. God spoke to Moses out of the bush that burned with fire. The pillar of fire was a sign of God's presence with Israel. Sinai, the mount that burned with fire, was the place where God revealed the law of Israel. No symbol could have been more fitting on this occasion than "cloven tongues like as of fire sitting upon each of them." It was the symbol of quick triumphant energy, that God was visiting His people in a new and glorious revelation.

The symbol of the fire suggests purifying. The old prophet had spoken of a coming One sitting as a refiner and purifier of silver and thoroughly purging the sons of Levi. John the Baptist foretold of this purifying when he announced the work of Jesus. "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather the wheat into the garner; and he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Fire is the medium for purifying metal especially; it melts down and is a means of separating the pure metal from the dross until the image of the refiner may be clearly reflected in the molten metal. The Holy Spirit purges the dross of carnal affections, carnal dispositions, impurities of sin, and all which "is enmity against God," not subject to His law, from our natures. Peter testified that at Pentecost their hearts were purified by faith.

The fact that the tongues like as of fire sat upon each of them is indicative that something wonderful was happening within each of them. We know what happened to them all by what happened to the disciples. Contrast their lives before and after Pentecost. The consciousness of their weaknesses was overcome by the realization of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Their human vacillations were checked through His abiding presence. Their carnal and selfish desires were supplanted by the perfect love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. Their former feelings of indignation and revenge, their bigotry, completely disappeared in this experience and they became possessed of a desire to render service to all men. Their hearts were purified by faith. "Two powers conquer my sin," says MacLaren. "The one the blood of Jesus Christ which washes me from all the guilt of the past; the other is the fiery influence of that divine Spirit which makes me pure and clean."

Fire symbolized a divine transforming energy. It is the nature of fire to transform things into its own likeness. Fire is destructive, it is also creative, transforming. The Holy Spirit brought power into their lives. They were transformed from hesitant, backward, vacillating folks into courageous, heroic proclaimers of the gospel of Christ. Their human personalities were surcharged with divine energy. Fear that had defeated them was gone. They became bold. They were conscious of God's power within them. What quenchless enthusiasm marked these people! What fervent zeal they had! What burning love! They were ablaze with divine energy. "Men ablaze are invincible," says Samuel

Chadwick. "Hell trembles when men kindle. The stronghold of Satan is proof against everything but fire. The Church is powerless without the flame of the Holy Ghost."

One great need of the Church today is a mighty baptism with the Holy Spirit; something that will burn up our coldness and formality, something that will destroy our indifference until we glow with enthusiasm, something that will make our creed a living power in our lives, something that will kindle within us a triumphant, transforming energy which will not be cooled by the conditions of the day. This experience completely transforms the center of life to Christ instead of self. Is this not what Paul meant when he wrote, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me"? The Holy Spirit not only consumed the sinful until Peter testified that their hearts were purified by faith; but he brought to them a clear and deep impression of Christ. Christ meant more to them after this experience. Now they had a consciousness of a deeper and more vital relation to Him. They were inspired with a passionate devotion to Him which did not exist before.

Fire is also a symbol of stability and strength. Fire hardens the clay vessel formed by the potter. Fire tempers the metal, making it hard and useful. It suggests strength, stability, steadfastness. These believers at Pentecost received not only purging from their dross, the divine energy of fervent love, but also a strength and stability of character, an inner spiritual fiber which enabled them to be victorious in every test. They possessed a divine power or strength which would not bend with the pressure of the world, which would not give way under persecution, which made them overcomers. They had a personal consciousness that they had contacted a deep current of divine power. The Holy Spirit had come, and according to the promise of Jesus, from within them rivers of living water were flowing. Like a great river flowing out into the ocean sending its force miles out from the shore backing up the pressure of the ocean, so this divine power flowing from them kept back the pressure of the world from their hearts and lives. They stood like giants amidst the fiercest persecution and opposition. They endured suffering and death with a heroism akin to their Master's. They burned their way through a cold, pagan world, and stood all tests that Satan and his cohorts brought against them.

The symbol of fire suggests the purifying, energizing, strengthening work of the Holy Spirit. We, in this our Day of Pentecost, may enjoy all that is symbolized by this fire. "Christians," says Maclaren, "are to be set afire of God. We ought to be like the burning beings before God's throne, the seraphim, the spirits that blaze and serve. We ought to be like God himself, all aflame with love."

# SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST

By

D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.

## CHAPTER IV SPEAKING IN OTHER TONGUES

(Part One)

The third symbol of Pentecost was, "They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." The important matter of all this manifestation, was not the manifestation itself, but the fact that "they were all filled with the Holy Ghost."

"They began to speak" suggests that they were possessed of a divine impulse to break forth into testimony, their deep emotions must be expressed, the inner fire must shine forth, the soul thus filled must break forth into speech; and they spake "as the Spirit gave them utterance." They spake with new tongues, in languages strictly different from their native tongue, languages which they had not naturally acquired, yet in the languages of the people present at the Feast of Pentecost. It was in no sense the work of man, it was the work of God, they spake "as the Spirit gave them utterance."

The visitors at the feast from many different nations, representing as many or more different dialects, marveled because all that spoke were Galileans -- The folks from the country not noted for their intellectual attainments -- and yet they heard these unlearned men speak the message of God in the native tongues in which they were born.

This symbol was prophetic of the universal spread of the gospel during this dispensation, the Day of Pentecost. It is significant of the fact that the Holy Spirit is the master of all languages, and that the message of God is adaptable to men of any language or race. Because of Pentecost, people of every kindred, and tribe, and tongue, and nation, would hear the gospel and eventually be gathered around the great throne of God to sing the praises of Christ eternally. An interesting sidelight on the use of all languages to spread the gospel is the fact that the various Bible Societies have now translated the Bible, the whole or in part, into one thousand different languages and dialects. God still speaks in the language of the people.

"Pentecost," says Maclaren, "reversed Babel, not by bringing about a featureless monotony, but by consecrating diversity and showing that each language could be hallowed, and that each lent some new strain of music to the chorus."

It is important to note that they all spoke, just like the cloven tongues of fire sat upon each of them. It was a group manifestation as well as a personal experience. Also, they all spoke in real languages which those present understood. There is not one instance in the New Testament where the Holy Spirit came upon any single individual and as an individual he spake in tongues as the evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. In each instance recorded the group spoke in tongues; it was of much deeper significance than a witness or evidence to an individual. It was always a Sign of something important to the church and not to the individual.

The symbol of speaking in tongues differs from the other two symbols -- the wind and fire -- in several respects. It perhaps was the one symbol apparent to the multitude for there seems to be no reason to believe that the wind or fire was perceptible to any but the occupants of the Upper Room. Again, it was the symbol used on two other occasions to show to the leaders of the church the full scope of the church. Yet it is no more important than are the other two symbols, nor more significant, for all were manifestations of the one event. The symbols of wind and fire were never used again, tongues in the Pentecostal sense were given as a sign on two other occasions, then this symbol ceased, taking its place along with the symbols of wind and fire. We shall study in the next chapter the significance of the manifestation of tongues in these other two places, namely at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:46), and at Ephesus (Acts 19: 5, 6).

The new tongues of Pentecost are not limited to the speaking in other languages. Peter speaking to the people in his own language spake with a new tongue, a tongue set afire with the Holy Spirit. Any heart filled with the Holy Spirit will break forth into speech with a tongue set afire of God, speech which clearly and understandingly declares the wonderful works of God. He will speak his own language with a new tongue.

As marvelous as were the symbols of this event, the beginning of a new dispensation, the Day of Pentecost, "the change in the apostles was more wonderful than any of the marvelous portents of the day. The wind and the fire passed, but the transformation remained. It is easy to see the difference in Peter, but it was no greater in him than in the rest. All that Jesus promised had come to pass. The Paraclete had come, and they were comforted. The Spirit of truth had come, and they knew. The witness to Christ, and they became witnesses. Fear had gone. Within two months of His death they proclaimed the truth of Jesus in the open streets where He had been murdered.

"What did Pentecost do for men? It brought a new dynamic of righteousness. . . . In the incarnation of the Word made flesh the Light came into the world. Pentecost focused the Light. . . . Pentecost brought a new fellowship. That is the abiding miracle. Community of the Spirit of Jesus issued into community of life in His name. The kingdom of God henceforth is a new theocracy, dominated, sanctified in the Spirit of Pentecost. The new thing is not in the wind, the fire, or the gift of tongues, but in the possession of the Spirit by each for the good of all" (Chadwick).

# SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST

By

D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.

## CHAPTER V SPEAKING IN OTHER TONGUES

(Part Two)

There are three instances recorded in the Acts of the Apostles where the symbol of speaking in tongues is mentioned. The first is on the Day of Pentecost, when "they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." We have noted that here the speaking in tongues was a sign to the multitude of the beginning of a new dispensation, the birthday of the Church.

The next occasion is in connection with Peter's ministry to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48). Let us note the background of this incident. Peter had been chosen by God to become the human instrument through which the Gentiles were first to become partakers of the benefits of the new dispensation. Peter's Jewish prejudices would not permit him to enter the house, even of a devout Gentile; so God prepared him for the experience by the vision given on the housetop (Acts. 10:9-22). Rather hesitatingly Peter went to Caesarea, taking with him six brethren from Joppa. Upon entering the house of Cornelius he "found many that were come together" to hear God's message. "While Peter yet spake . . . the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.... They heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God."

Why were the tongues given on this occasion? Here was something unusual for the leaders of the new Church. They had not presumed that the Gentiles would be partakers of the new dispensation benefits, rather they assumed it was for Jews only. Here is the first Gentile group to hear the new dispensation message, they were the first Gentiles to have the Spirit fall upon them. God would here settle the question once and for all that the Gentiles were included in the Church and that the blessings of this new dispensation were theirs. He confirmed this by giving the special sign of speaking in tongues.

For what reason was this sign given? Was it an evidence to Cornelius and the group of believers there? Or was it a sign to Peter and the six brethren from Joppa who accompanied him? It was a sign to Peter and the brethren. Note, "And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God" (ch. 10:45, 46). Peter's testimony was "As I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning" (ch. 11:15). As a sign to Peter and the brethren that God put no difference between Jew and Gentile, that the barriers of race and nationality were broken down, also to assure them that what God did for the Gentiles was of equal quality to what He gave them "at the beginning," these Gentile believers spoke in tongues. It was a sign, not to the Gentiles, but to Peter and the brethren; and through them to the entire church at Jerusalem which, after hearing Peter's testimony of what happened at Caesarea, "glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (ch. 11:18).

The third instance where tongues are mentioned is in connection with Paul's visit to Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7). Here Paul met twelve men, all believers. But here an unusual situation existed. These, when Paul met them, were old dispensational believers baptized unto John's baptism. Paul instructed them about Jesus (v. 4), then they received Christian baptism (v.5), then Paul laid his hands on them and the Holy Ghost came upon them, and they spake in tongues and prophesied (v.6). To establish these believers and to confirm the actions of Paul God again gave the special sign of speaking in tongues. Also this incident settles once and for all that old dispensational believers may be admitted into the Church. It was a sign of the scope of the Church and not an evidence to individuals of an experience.

The scope of the Church was now revealed to its leaders; Jews were baptized with the Spirit at Pentecost, the blessings and benefits of Pentecost and the new dispensation had been extended to Gentiles, the Romans at Cornelius' house, to Greeks and old dispensational believers at Ephesus. The circle was now complete. No other group existed which were not represented in these Jews, Gentiles, and believers of the old dispensation.

These three manifestations of speaking in tongues revealed to the Church that this new dispensation knew no bounds of race, nationality or religion. There is no other record of speaking in tongues in this Pentecostal sense. When the scope of the Church or new dispensation had been revealed fully the symbol of speaking in tongues ceased; it took its place along with the symbols of wind and fire, all signs of the beginning of a new dispensation.

That speaking in tongues was an unusual manifestation is evidenced by the fact that where no unusual conditions existed, there was no manifestation of speaking in tongues.

There is the incident where they prayed until the place where they were assembled was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost (Acts 4:31), but they did not speak in tongues. In a sense this incident differs from an initial experience of Pentecost for it was a special outpouring of the Spirit to equip them to meet an emergency.

At Samaria (Acts 8:14-17) when these converts received the gift of the Holy Ghost they did not speak in tongues. Why? Because there were no unusual circumstances. Samaritans were so near to Jews that they had already been recognized as being eligible for the new dispensation blessings.

Another matter worthy of note is the fact that where the manifestation of tongues was given the experiences were not of superior quality to those experiences where tongues did not exist. The experience received by the Samaritans was not inferior to that of the Ephesian group just because they did not speak in tongues. The fundamental experience was the same.

It is apparent that when God's purpose of indicating the scope of the Church was accomplished the sign of tongues was no longer needed, and it was therefore not repeated. True, there were tongues at Corinth, but it was of an entirely different nature from the symbol of Pentecost.

# SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST

By

D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.

## CHAPTER VI TONGUES AT CORINTH

What difference, if any, was there between the incidents of speaking in tongues recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the tongues situation at Corinth? The essential difference is that those incidents recorded in Acts constituted a sign or symbol with respect to the ushering in, the expanding, and the establishment of the new dispensation, the Church. The tongues used in these incidents recorded in Acts were not permanent, nothing is written to indicate that any of the persons or groups who spoke in tongues when the Holy Spirit came upon them ever spoke in tongues again. At Corinth it was a gift of the Spirit, apparently of a more permanent nature, but here it had no unusual significance, and according to Paul's estimation it had very little value in the church.

There was also a difference in the characters involved. In the Acts it was a symbol of a mighty experience in which their hearts were purified by faith (Acts 15:8, 9) At Corinth it was a gift from God to satisfy people of childish desires, and carnal dispositions; and their speaking in tongues amounted to a perversion of the gift in so much that Paul wrote this group to correct this unsatisfactory situation.

In no manner can speaking in tongues as recorded in the three incidents of Acts be considered the same as the unsatisfactory state at Corinth either in the purpose of the gift, or its manifestations. The only likeness is, they spoke in tongues, but the character of the speakers and the purpose of the speaking were widely different.

It is noteworthy that the church at Corinth is the only church where the gift of tongues is mentioned. This fact is conclusive that this was the only church where it existed. If it existed at Ephesus as a permanent gift, why did not Paul include it in the list of spiritual gifts of ministries outlined in Ephesians 4:11? The background and condition of the Corinthian believers provided reason for this special manifestation.

Paul emphatically states that they were zealous of spiritual gifts (ch. 14:1, 12). What is the origin of this desire or zeal? It is found in their former associations with the mystery religions of the pagan people. At Corinth was located the temple of Aphrodite or Venus, the Greek goddess of love -- or lust. This temple had its numerous priestesses, called pythons. A Greek writer of about two thousand years ago wrote of these priestesses thus: "These pythons gave themselves over to their gods; they are possessed by a power which they cannot resist: they labor under the afflatus of the gods. The wild, unearthly sounds often hardly coherent, burst from their lips. It remained for the interpreter to gather up the scattered utterances and give them shape and meaning."

Many of the Corinthian believers had been worshipers of these idols and devotees of the mystery religions. Their standard of moral living even after becoming Christians was colored somewhat by the prevalent moral standard of the pagan religionists until Paul had to rebuke them for the moral

inconsistencies. There was among them also some quibbling concerning meat offered to idols. In their former religious state they had heard the priestesses uttering strange sounds and apparently in their thinking such speaking was inherent to religion. Hence they were "zealous of spiritual gifts" when they became Christians. They did not want their new religion to be behind the old pagan religion in the special manifestations of gifts. Would not God do as much for His followers as the pagan folks received from their religion? seems to form the basis for their being "zealous of spiritual gifts."

Another fact is apparent. These Corinthian believers were children in their thinking, especially relative to these spiritual gifts (ch. 14:20). They were afflicted with what is called "infantilism"; which means having a desire for the gaudy, for toys, for primitive activities; possessed with a desire to "show off" like a spoiled child. "They were children," says Dr. Whedon, "preferring profitless sounds to profitable thought." They were zealous of spiritual gifts, especially of speaking in tongues, which to them was an outward show without consideration as to its real worth.

A further indication of this infantilism is their carnal state and its manifestations in childish practices; their divisions over human leaders, contentions over nonessentials, their being puffed up, their degrading of the Lord's Supper and like conditions which Paul rebuked in this letter.

God seems ever ready to adapt His blessings to the needs and abilities of His people; so to this church the Spirit gave diversities of gifts, dividing to every man severally as He will; but not altogether without regard to the desires of the individual, for Paul exhorted these people to "covet earnestly the best gifts" (ch. 12:31), to "seek [those gifts] that ye may excel to the edifying of the church" (ch. 14:12); "desire . . . rather that ye may prophesy," "covet to prophesy" (ch. 14:1, 39). If the Spirit did not have some respect to these individual desires why did Paul lay such stress on this fact? It is apparent then that the gift of tongues was prevalent at Corinth because they were zealous for it, and this zeal was not entirely removed from their desire to equal in unusual manifestations the priestesses of the pagan religions. Just as a loving parent gives rattles and gewgaws to the baby, and as God yielded to the desires of Israel for a king, so God satisfied the infantile desires of these believers with the gift of tongues or spectacular manifestations.

Speaking in tongues at Corinth was not on a par with, nor was It given for the same purpose as tongues in the three incidents recorded in Acts. The desire for the manifestations, or even their manifestations, does not prove that the subjects were the holiest persons in the church, for this Corinthian church was by no means prominent among the churches for its holiness.

Paul states that he spoke in tongues more than any of the Corinthian believers (ch. 14:18), but in the same statement he magnifies the use of prophecy and condemns the use of tongues in public service by this statement, "Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (v.19). He would not have part in their extreme practices and childish desires.

Some other facts may be noted relative to tongues at Corinth. It was not a universal gift (ch. 12:30) whereas all the persons involved in the three incidents of the Acts spoke in tongues. When speaking in tongues one spoke mysteries unto God which other folks could not understand, whereas

at Pentecost others clearly understood the message given. Tongues at Corinth were purely for personal edification -- if not for selfish gratification (v.4); it was without profit and as meaningless to others as an uncertain bugle call to an army (vs. 6-8); its prevalent use caused others to consider believers insane (v. 23); only under certain conditions was speaking in tongues to be permitted (v. 28), whereas if tongues were the evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, surely He would not inspire Paul to forbid the manifestation of such evidence. The prevalent use of tongues brought confusion and disorder (vs. 32, 33, 40), while at Pentecost and the two subsequent experiences mentioned everything was orderly and owned of God. Speaking in tongues, said Paul, was a sign of unbelievers (ch. 14:22) not an evidence of personal experience. Hence if the congregation is made up of believers, speaking in tongues is out of place. Tongues at Corinth were unintelligible to the congregation unless interpreted, here they were inferior to the Pentecostal tongues where Spirit-filled believers spoke to every man in his own native dialect.

# SYMBOLS OF PENTECOST

By

D. Shelby Corlett, D.D.

## CHAPTER VII THE ABIDING EXPERIENCE

The Day of Pentecost ushered in a new dispensation -- the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. This event was the work of Jesus Christ as much as was His work on Calvary. It marked God's full provision for man's redemption and the bestowment of His divine equipment for the life and power of His Church. As with the beginning of the dispensation of the law, the beginning of this new dispensation was accompanied with supernatural signs, symbols of the fact that something mighty and wonderful was occurring. The wind represented the Spirit's sudden descent in power, pouring new life into the body of waiting believers forming them into an organic union, the Church of Christ, His living embodiment on earth. The fire indicated the Spirit's work in His purging, energizing and strengthening ministry. The speaking in other languages was prophetic of the universal spread of the gospel during the dispensation, also indicative of the inner fullness of the Spirit which inspired them to break forth into utterances of joy in telling of the wonderful works of God as the Spirit gave them utterance. The signs or symbols all passed away, but the experience and fact of Pentecost remains.

The chief fact of Pentecost was the coming of the Holy Spirit in dispensational fullness. All that had been pointed to in prophecy, by prophets of old and by Jesus himself, was here fulfilled. The Comforter had come! The tarrying disciples were endued with power from on high. The power of the Holy Ghost had come upon them. His coming was not the mere occasion for supernatural manifestations, He came to abide with His people forever. He came to be the representative of Christ in His Church, to administer the things of Christ, to make available to the Church all that Christ had promised and provided in His life and through His death. He came as the spiritual life of the Church. As such He remains in the world, in the Church today. This is His day, the dispensational Day of Pentecost. The signs of the coming of that day have passed away, but everything experienced by those waiting believers in the dawning of that day, everything that was essential to their personal experiences and to the life and success of the Church of Christ, is ours today.

The Day of Pentecost was a collective experience. Something happened to the whole group of believers. This was the birth of the Church when those individual believers were brought into a spiritual union, with every member joined by the Holy Spirit to the living Christ and made members one of another -- the Church of Christ, a spiritual body or organism with Christ as its Head was that day brought into existence. This brought a unity of purpose, a new consciousness of fellowship, and a feeling of great responsibility to the world. Statements made by Jesus now took on new meaning. The Great Commission, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," now became the passion of their lives. To be witnesses to Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth was not a duty to them, but it was an overflow from a deep inner experience -- the Holy Spirit would speak through them.

Pentecost is still a collective matter. It is through the Church, not through its individual members primarily, that God has moved in mighty spiritual revivals down through the centuries. It will be

through a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit in power and spiritual passion upon the Church today that any lasting and far-reaching spiritual results will come to this generation. Yet this collective experience cannot come except as individual members of the organization become deeply concerned and pay the price in sacrificial living and praying for such benefits to be brought.

Pentecost was a great personal experience. Something happened to the group because something was experienced by each of them. Here hesitant, backward, fearing disciples were transformed into mighty evangelists of the gospel of Christ. Here those who had been previously members of Jesus, the True Vine, who were partakers of the earnest of the new dispensation benefits, were made partakers of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Here those whose impurities of heart had been manifested by petty bickerings, selfish seeking, and bigotry, were cleansed and their hearts were purified by faith. Here their human vacillations were checked and they became stalwart soldiers of Christ; a mighty personal experience which is the privilege of every child of God throughout this dispensation.

Three things were evidences of this experience. Positively, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Negatively, their "hearts were purified by faith." Continuously, they lived in the full life of the Spirit. His coming and His abiding presence were His own evidence, the inner fullness and purity of heart was the evidence within the believers. And such it is today.

Peter emphasized the privileges of all believers throughout the dispensation when he by inspiration declared, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." None are excluded from that promise. We may each enjoy the same essential experience that Peter and the others enjoyed in the beginning of this dispensation. There is no excuse for feebleness, for powerlessness, for defeat. Through the experience of Pentecost, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, we may enjoy the victorious inner experience of heart purity, and a victorious life in the Spirit. The signs and symbols accompanying the opening of the dispensation have passed away, but the experience abides.