

“What Meaneth This?”

A Question for 21st Century Pentecostalism

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

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

Winchester then described a new book he is writing on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. As this group well knows, just days before the earthquake, a small band of seekers led by William Seymour met in Los Angeles. Winchester said it was “a very small meeting of an extremely flamboyant Christian movement known as the Pentecostalist movement that had pastors waving their arms and speaking in tongues. The leader said that God was going to give a sign.” On Wednesday April 18th San Francisco was devastated by the earthquake and in Los Angeles, and as Winchester describes it, “Thousands began attending the meeting and the Pentecostalist movement, which is still extremely important in the United States, was born as a result of this earthquake.”¹

While we may question Winchester’s conclusion regarding the birth of Pentecostalism, we do know that the earthquake was significant to the Azusa Street leaders and attendees. Frank Bartleman, a first-person chronicler of the Azusa Street revival, observed in response to the earthquake, “A tremendous burden of prayer came upon me that the people might not be indifferent to His (God’s) voice.” The day after the

earthquake Bartleman was in a prayer meeting when he and others felt the room shake in an aftershock felt in Los Angeles. By May 1st, in reply to the question, “Did God do that?” Bartleman released 75,000 copies of his tract, “Earthquake.”²

I have been intrigued by this observation about the Azusa Street revival, the San Francisco earthquake, and the contemporary quest for meaning in light of the 2004 tsunami. While there are numerous views, secular and religious, concerning the meaning, or lack thereof, of cataclysmic events in the natural world, it seems timely in that we have an opportunity to examine Pentecostalism at the beginning of this century with much the same framework as one hundred years ago and two thousand years ago.

Let’s not forget that two thousand years ago the first followers of Jesus responded to a series of events that impacted the natural world.

First, Matthew 28:51 records an earthquake when Jesus died.

Second, the disciples hardly had time to sort this out before Jesus, in N.T. Wright’s memorable phrase, “went through death and came out on the other side”³ in the resurrection, again accompanied by what St. Matthew termed “a great earthquake” (28:2) – Jesus becoming the first fruits of a radical change in the molecular structure of human existence! Their graves already broken open by the Good Friday earthquake, “the saints who had fallen asleep were raised and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many” (Matthew 27:51-53).

Third, fifty days later the natural world again accompanied a divine purpose as the Holy Spirit arrived “with the sound of a mighty rushing wind” and “tongues of fire” were visible upon one hundred and twenty heads (Acts 2:2, 3).

When asked, “What meaneth this?” the apostle Peter turned to a text bearing witness to both the Holy Spirit and a natural calamity: the prophecy in Joel 2:28-32.

It seems to me that we need to return to Peter’s use of the Joel prophecy to seek afresh an answer to the “meaning” question of Pentecostalism for our generation.

First, Peter knew the context of Joel’s prophecy: a 9th century agricultural crisis brought on by a massive invasion of locusts. In our technology driven world we struggle to comprehend the calamity of this invasion. Joel understood it as “the day of the Lord,” Yahweh’s judgment upon a covenant-breaking people. It meant a future without grain and wine, essential not only to everyday life but to Israel’s worship.

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

Peter's use of Joel 2 is sandwiched between two questions. The sermon begins in reply to the query, "What meaneth this?" It concludes with the hearers cut to the heart and asking, "What shall we do?"

These two questions frame our need as Christians, much less as Pentecostals, to live in such a demonstrable way that people ask, "What does this mean?" It means living in such a fashion that people recognize the legitimacy of our claims and with Holy Spirit conviction cry out, "What shall we do?"

But it means our answer to the original question must have meaningful content. Peter defined Pentecost by appealing to the four major theological themes expressed in the Joel passage.

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

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

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

Third, Peter with the "sound of a mighty rushing wind" still ringing in his ears, understood the impact of "wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath" (Acts

2:19). This is what the apostle Paul affirmed in Romans 8:21 of the creation, still captive to the bondage of corruption, awaiting an eschatological manifestation of Spirit-filled generations who truly comprehend the liberty they have as the children of God.

Fourth, this massive build-up of revelation from eschatology to pneumatology to creation theology was like a giant wave washing away all confusion so this one clear affirmation could stand: “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord, shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). And to make certain that the hearers knew who this Lord actually was, Peter drew their attention to the historic fact of “Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know – God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2:22, 36).

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

There is much in the Charismatic/Pentecostal world that I find encouraging. I am not a pessimist about what God is doing through Pentecostalism, as well as through other streams in the desert of this world.

Here are five specific points of encouragement I see:

- There is great renewal with a passion for Christ among many young people. I see a passion for intercession and evangelism among this group.
- We praise God for the great leaders of the past who have modeled extraordinary faith. While their days are limited due to their ages, I see a new set of faith-filled, vision-inspired leaders arising.
- Pentecostalism has taken advantage of the media to present the Gospel.
- Pentecostalism has a growing awareness of the power of the Holy Spirit to meet the social, economic, and yes political, needs of people.
- There is great diversity within the various cultures and sub-cultures of Pentecostalism. In preparing this message, I sent a copy to Matt Green, a vibrant emerging young Pentecostal leader as editor of *Ministries Today*, for his input. He wrote back this message, “Doug, plea for the academic community to pursue

engagement with the ‘popular’ charismatic/Pentecostal community . . . to be willing to put up with a little nonsense so that they can contribute; to be willing to associate with the grassroots practitioners of Pentecostal theology.”

But I am also concerned about some things:

- The loss of holiness – not in the Wesleyan/Reformed doctrinal debate – but as lifestyle that truly beckons the lost to God’s purposes and blessings in godly living.
- The loss of humility – the ways we pride ourselves on having such large world-wide numbers, having our share of mega-churches, and so pleased with ourselves that we have, again, made Time magazine. Our loss of humility reminds me of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s remark that when he standing in the hall waiting to have the bishop’s miter placed upon his head, his mother sensed his pride and rebuked him, “Joseph, don’t look so pleased with yourself.”⁴

Please don’t take me wrong. I’m really not in an “anti” frame of mind. I recognize that just because something doesn’t fit my style doesn’t mean that it is not of God. It took a long time, but I’m finally old enough to know that God really doesn’t need my approval with how He chooses to work.

It’s deeper than that to me. It’s that nagging sense that all our popularity and success may have actually marginalized us more than we were sixty years ago when our churches were on the other side of the tracks. I struggle with what Os Guinness calls “The cultural captivity (of) *fashionability*, the power of the pull of corrupt timeliness or distorted relevance. The recent Christian obsession with relevance and the future leads all too often to moral and intellectual cowardice. Afraid to challenge the power of progress and the lure of the latest, or to delay the arrival of the brave, new future, we bite our lips and cave in weakly to what we know in our hearts is neither right, nor wise, nor lasting.”⁵

That’s why I have felt compelled, yes, compelled in my spirit, to return to Peter’s sermon to answer the question that is at times my question as a Pentecostal denominational leader, “What meaneth this?”

In my working answer to this question that I think every generation of Christians, not just Pentecostals, should prayerfully ask, I offer the following to you.

1. We need an urgent sense of being in the “last days.” I don’t want to debate traditional Pentecostal eschatology with you. I’m really not talking about a linear progression with a new set of charts, especially now that President Bush may be messing up our Middle East scenarios. I’m talking about a profound sense of the *nearness* of the Lord to us; an eschatology that is conscious of the closeness of His kingdom “right here, right now.” To me, this nearness is better expressed in *intimacy*. I believe that *eschatology* and *intimacy* are related concepts. But this is more than a modern version of C.H. Dodd’s “realized eschatology,” or “kingdom now” theology. It’s an invitation to take seriously the only days for which we are directly responsible, these days, “right here, right now.” At best, by God’s grace we can “redeem the *kairos*” moments of the past and live presently so that the future does not curse us.⁶ In these last days of our generation, I am convinced that God is nearer to us than we usually dare imagine.

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

3. That’s why the impact upon creation is so important. It’s the power of words, yes, the Word, to manifest itself in wonders and signs in the natural realm. That’s why I believe Pentecostalism should be right at home in post-modernity. The ordered, stale, predictable, boring world of modernity is coming to its appropriate end. Pentecostalism can say to this world that change need not be feared but invited; change is evidence of redemption; change means that God is still speaking to us and shaping His future in our present.

4. One hundred years ago Pentecostalism had its opportunity to transform the United States cultural landscape. Today that opportunity is upon us again but now the landscape

is international. Of all Christian groups, it seems that Pentecostals should be able to navigate in, among, and through all the various tribes that comprise Christendom and the cultural matrix of our times. Of all tribes, Pentecostals should be able to navigate through the Spirit's "cross-winds," the ways the Holy Spirit operates in what are to us paradoxes and tension points.

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

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

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

"What Meaneth This?" will be answered in the coming years by many streams. The answer (s) will come from small town congregations, mega-churches, denominational leaders, para-church ministries, and emerging international Pentecostal/charismatic ministries. I believe the answer will also come, and perhaps should come most forcefully, from Pentecostal colleges, universities, graduate schools, and seminaries. This flies in the face of critics like C. Peter Wagner. But I truly believe the "Pentecostal academy" should take on the prophetic role of shaping the 21st Century answer to "What meaneth this?" It should not occur isolated from the larger Pentecostal church family. But for the season the Holy Spirit gives you to educate the emerging leaders of the future, He also asks you to disciple them, to prepare them, to release them for the world they will

inherit and shape. The “Pentecostal Academy” must have the Spirit of prophecy active in its core values and practice in order for personal, ecclesiastical and cultural transformation to incubate and come to maturity.

To wrap this up, I want to go backwards in time to the early years of another century and a man and a university.

Those of you with a Lutheran bent know that Protestantism is only twelve years from the five hundredth anniversary of the start of the Reformation. E.G. Schwiebert, in his monumental work *Luther and His Times*, describes in detail the impact of Luther and the University at Wittenberg.

In mid-1514 Paul Lange, a Benedictine monk, traveled through central Germany looking for the leading university professors to include in a *Schriftstellerlexikon*, sort of a “Who’s Who” for that day. He also looked for, the *vir inluster*, the promising younger professors. A young monk named Martin Luther was not even interviewed.⁷ Not noticed by the world, the thirty-one year old monk was well on his journey to a life-changing encounter with the Scriptures.

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

In the forty years from 1520 to 1560 approximately 16,000 students matriculated at Wittenberg from across Europe. It “became the mirror in which the growth of the German Reformation was reflected.”⁸

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

I am convinced that Century 21 is meant to have Pentecostal schools with teachers and leaders who comprehend what Luther and Wittenberg did five hundred years ago. I believe that Acts 13 and the Antioch church are instructive for us in the “academy.” There were teachers; that means there were learners. There were prophets; that means there were listeners. It was from that setting that the Holy Spirit sent forth leaders who

penetrated a new world to them: the Graeco-Roman Empire. I'm praying the Holy Spirit will give teachers and leaders in the Pentecostal Academy that kind of dual edge ministry; that kind of passion of the Spirit; that kind of instruction that moves beyond conveying knowledge to imparting a powerful personal and corporate walk in the Spirit.

I started with a tsunami, a natural disaster that we in the West barely consider now that the media has moved on. But six years ago Leonard Sweet challenged the institutional church with his *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture*. Near the close of the book he has a small section on "A Theology of Pentecost," and challenges us with this observation, "The spiritual and social implications of Pentecost, which defines the relationship of the human spirit to the Holy Spirit, have yet to be explored for the age in which we live."⁹

Maybe together we can go exploring "for the age in which we live" in such a way that they will once again ask us not only "What meaneth this?" but also, "What must we do?" Amen.

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

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

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

⁴ Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. *The Gift of Peace*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997. Quoted in *Newsweek*. May 22, 2000.

⁵ Os Guinness. *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003. Pages 75, 77.

⁶ Ephesians 5:15, 16.

⁷ E.G. Schwiebert. *Luther and His Times*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950. Page 293.

⁸ Schwiebert. *Luther and His Times*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950. Pages 603, 604.

⁹ Leonard Sweet. *SoulTsunami*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999. Page 378.