Exploring the Meaning of Pentecost:
Pluralism, Unity, and Christian Faith

Study #1: What Does This Mean?

Scripture Text: Acts 2:1-12 (NRSV)
2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** 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. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

Notes
Pew Report: Global Christianity (2011): 2.18 billion Christians (6.9 billion total)

Traditional divisions: Roman Catholic (50.1%); Protestant (36.7%); Orthodox (11.9%); Other Christians (1.3%)

Theological and ecclesial plurality in Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy

The Protestant tradition: Plurality in plurality—Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Anabaptist, Anglican, Methodist, etc.

World Christian Database: info on 9,000 denominations; 13,000 ethnolinguistic people groups; non-traditional churches

Neo-Apostolic Christianity: More than 20,000 distinct groups or movements that do not consider themselves Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant

2025, 581 million persons, 120 million more than those who self-identify as Protestants; half the size of RC church

Theological Differences/Divisions: What is God Like? What is the Gospel? Who is Jesus Christ? What is the Church? What is the Bible? Etc. It seems that everything up for debate.

How do we make sense of this in light of some common Christian beliefs based on Scripture?

2 Timothy 3:16-17: All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

James 1:5: If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you.

John 16:13: When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak what he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

John 17:20-22: I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.

Possible Responses (Among Others): The Bible is not inspired. God is not as generous in dispensing wisdom as implied. The Spirit has failed to guide the church into truth. One segment of the church is right, the others need to follow along. Christian plurality is a hopeless morass.

Thesis: The events of Pentecost mean that the expression of biblical and orthodox Christian faith is inherently and irreducibly pluralist.

The plurality of the Christian faith (and the world) is not a problem that we need overcome. Scripture both reflects and anticipates the pluralism and diversity of the Christian community. Pluralism is the intention and blessing of God, for the church and the world.

Questions for Reflection

How do you understand the significance of the Pentecost story in Acts? What does it mean to you? Why do you think the author tells this story?

What do you think about the vast plurality of the Christian tradition? What is your level of awareness? Does it surprise you? Does it trouble you?

How do you think about the theological and ethical differences among Christians? How do you understand them? What might they teach us about the nature of faith?

What challenges and opportunities does the diversity of Christianity present for the church? Do you think an awareness of this is important? Why or why not?

What does the diversity of the church mean to you? What difference does it make in your life and faith?

What is particularly significant to you in this study?

What questions do you have?