

The Leaven of Pentecost: Don't Let It Sour Your Spirit

The Perfect Church

"We found the perfect church!" I gleamed.

Alex smiled wryly.

"Seriously, I've had enough Charismatic hype and Pentecostal gimmicks. We found a church that's kept the purity of Pentecost without all the shenanigans."

He offered no comment, but I read his mind: *There's a catch somewhere; just wait.*

"Alex, you gotta hear the worship: outa' this world. There was even a prophecy in the service this morning. The sermon was pure Word. The atmosphere is Jesus; He is exalted, not man. I always knew Pentecost should be this way."

My first hint there might indeed be a catch occurred several weeks later. The speaker seemed to demean Charismatics and Pentecostals, even implying some of my favorite Bible teachers are false prophets. I was disappointed, but perplexed.

Then I purchased a book written by the founder of the large international fellowship to which this church belonged. As I pondered its message a new appreciation for the fellowship, but especially for the Pentecost I'd fled, dissolved my perplexity.

God had obviously used this servant to salvage a generation of "Jesus freaks" classical Pentecostals little understood. These young rebels against tradition and religion desperately needed to see the real Jesus, unsoured by the leaven that filled many Pentecostal churches with a lot of hot air and bacteria.

Reared in a Pentecostal pastor's home, I too had rebelled. I'd seen everything: wild emotionalism, doctrinal extremes, false prophets, licentious evangelists, misuse of spiritual gifts, hypocritical holiness, and everything else between genuine quackery and profound ignorance. My only solution had been to

reject Christianity entirely, along with the God I needed. I might have welcomed a church swept clean of everything but Jesus, but never found one.

The leaven of Passover and Pentecost

It reminds me of how Hebrew women would search their homes, removing every trace of leaven for the Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:125f). The Feast of Pentecost seven weeks later, however, *included* leaven, for it was essentially a feast celebrating two loaves of *leavened* bread. Why?

If leaven symbolizes carnality and sin, isn't God regressing instead of progressing in His church typology? Doesn't He want us to "purge out the old leaven" so we can be a "new lump" in "Christ our *Passover*" (1 Cor. 5:7).

Interestingly, modern Pentecost began on New Year's Day of 1901 with *holiness* Bible school students in Topeka, Kansas. "In an amazing parallel to the apostolic experience, the students began to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit and to speak with other tongues after about *ten* days of earnest prayer."¹

Five years later, the celebrated outpouring at Azusa Street commenced among predominately blacks. The same year (1906) witnessed the first split in Pentecost between leaders Charles Parham and William Seymour over, not race, but Pentecostal "abuses."

Parallel to the breach between Jews and Gentile believers in New Testament times, the Fundamentalist denominations among whom Pentecost began "rejected Pentecostalism and by 1928 had dis-fellowshipped all Pentecostals from their ranks."² "The Pentecostals "preach the wildest theories and work themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal," a reporter for the *Lost Angeles Times* observed.³

A century later, from Rodney Howard-Browne's laughing revivals to the "Toronto blessing" at Airport Christian Fellowship, Pentecost has changed little.

Why the defects?

"Every natural birth is surrounded by circumstances not entirely pleasant," writes Bartleman. "God's perfect work is wrought in human imperfection. . . . D'Aubigne has said: 'A religious movement almost always exceeds a just moderation' Another writer says . . . 'recall the scandal and offense which attended the revival of heart piety under Wesley. What we denounce as error may be the refraction of some great truth below the horizon.' John Wesley himself once prayed, after the revival had about died out for the time: 'Oh, Lord, send us the old revival, without the defects; but if this cannot be, send it—with all its defects. We must have the revival.'"⁴

A better question is, why *not* human error? I expect the Spirit to deal with the *real* me, "just as I am." Why is it sometimes difficult for us to accept the *real* church, *just as we are*? When I look to Jesus "with open face," His Spirit gains access to my defects and I'm changed (*metamorphosed*) from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18).

When we as a church let go of our "form of godliness" and be who we *really are* in Christian liberty, though painfully leavened, we open ourselves to the creative genius of the Holy Spirit. Our "strength is made perfect in *weakness*" (2 cor. 12:9).

The Old Testament Feast of Pentecost, with its two leavened loaves, contained, in type, all the provision of the finished Work of Christ: seven lambs, one bull and two rams for a burnt offering accompanied by their meal and drink offerings; a goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs as a peace offering.

The New Testament Day of Pentecost contained in *reality* all the power of the Resurrected Lord of the Church. On that Day He gave the Church five ministry offices and nine spiritual gifts for our correction and growth.

The Passover, with its week long Feast of Unleavened Bread, was not an end in itself, but *preparation* for the nitty

gritty dealing of the Holy Spirit with human nature. Our human defects and idiosyncrasies draw heavily on grace, presenting limitless opportunities for the Spirit of Christ to manifest *His* remedies.

The price of relationship

Furthermore, God's program for correction pulls His family into closer relationship. The gifts and ministry of the Spirit generally appear within a context of "the whole body fitly joined together and compacted" (Eph. 4:16). Human error, in fact, *mandates* a climate of mercy. In that atmosphere faith most effectively "works by love."

The greatest men of God saw the greatest miracles in the face of the people's greatest apostasies. Four times Moses turned away God's wrath in His intent to destroy Israel (Ex. 32:32, Num. 14:13f; 16:21, 46f). When God threatened to withdraw His presence, Moses used *their very sin* and stubbornness as grounds for extended mercy (Ex. 34:9). His mediatorship moved God to one of the most lavish promises in the Bible, that He would "do marvels such as have not been done in all the earth For it is an awesome things that I will do with you (v. 10).

In response to Joshua's defense of the wily, deceptive Gibeonites, God stopped a section of the solar system for the longest earth-day in astronomical history (Josh. 10:12-13).

Elijah's parish was apostate Israel. Most of us would have welcomed a call to a more fruitful field. But from that dismal pulpit he made kings tremble and moved a nation to repentance. (1 Ki. 17ff).

Paul gave his rich teaching on spiritual gifts accompanied by "signs, wonders, and mighty deeds" to the church with the most leaven—Corinth. He "finished [his] course" but never completely straightened out their internal problems. He wrote his deepest epistle on the "body-ministry" of the Spirit and the five-fold ministry gifts to Ephesus, a church leavened with

“bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking,” even x-thieves who’d rather steal than work. (2 Cor. 12:12, Eph. 4:25-31)

How many church splits and cults began when an ambitious church leader swallowed the same bait God offered Moses in Exodus 32:10: “Let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them . . . and I will make of you a great nation”? The writer of Hebrews warns, “You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin” (12:4).

Pentecost thrives on problems.

Though I’ve not lost blood, I’ve endured much pain sitting on Pentecostal pews over the years: long-winded pointless preaching, bad theology, standing too long on pain-racked feet, ear-splitting amplifiers, and especially hype, showmanship, ulterior motives, “helping God” with a push to aid the saints in falling “under the power,” and “God just spoke to ten people to give me \$100 each.” How often I wanted God to make of *me* an *unleavened* church!

However, as I matured in understanding, something beautiful began to occur with increasing frequency. When my agony climaxed I’d *metamorphose*. In a flash of Spirit-quickened revelation I’d grasp God’s abounding mercy and grace. Instantly I’d come alive with joy, speaking quietly in tongues, bubbling with gushers of liquid love, *covering instead of uncovering* “the multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). It was heaven on earth—gloriously better than if nothing had bothered me.

What good is Pentecostal power without Pentecostal problems? Isn’t wine the product of yeast (leaven) fermenting the sweet fruit of the vine until it produces joy? No wonder people with the biggest problems laugh hardest in Rodney Howard Browne’s meetings.

As a pastor my most anointed sermons usually followed an hour of Pentecostal frustration: a “word from the Lord” or prophecy that condemned instead of edified, a Pentecostal shaking spell, a “music special” David would

have winced at and Paul would have wept over, a long-winded preaching testimony. Countless times I’d stand behind the pulpit asking, *Why God*, longing to be anywhere but where I stood.

Then the anointing. And I’d feel like the most privileged pastor in town as I faced my sheep, my crown jewels of the Kingdom.

The disciplinary chastening of Hebrews 12, though painful, will either produce “a root of bitterness” or enlarge our hearts to behold “Mount Zion . . . the general assembly and church of the firstborn . . . the spirits of *just men made perfect*” (Heb. 12:15, 22-23).

I used to be quite skeptical of “deliverance evangelists,” wondering how many fit the category of “I never knew you; depart from me” (Mt. 7:23). Now I regard them with reverence, knowing how mercifully God bears with faulty, leavened vessels, giving gifts even “for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them” (Ps. 68:18). How He must love us!

It was no different in Paul’s day. Some preached Christ “even of envy and strife.” The great apostle’s response? Rejoicing that, regardless of the motive, Christ is preached (Php. 1:18). What breadth of vision, of understanding, of mercy! What a complete liberation from the Pharisee he’d been! (Php. 3:4-9)

It’s sadly ironic that because God cannot use “many wise according to the flesh,” He chooses the “foolish. . . the weak . . . the base . . . the despised,” and the nobodies to “bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.” *And yet we criticize these vessels for the very weaknesses for which God uses them!* (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

The night of the Lumbees

I’ll never forget the night God used the Lumbee Indians to “set in order” the little church I pastored in the 1970’s.

It was tobacco country. Marlboro reigned as king among our church leaders. I felt too weakened by resentment and prejudice to administer correction. God would eventually use me

to bring victory once my attitude mellowed, I knew.

That took six years, during which time I’d rehearsed in my heart a masterpiece on cigarette smoking. I’d level it at my flock with both barrels now that I could look my nicotine addicts in the eyes with a shepherd’s love.

In the meantime, Sister Johnson (not her real name), our most spiritually gifted sister, *and bound by the habit*, called me, requesting that a certain brother hold us a week’s meetings. I told her I’d pray about it, thinking I could put it off indefinitely. I didn’t want this dear, well-meaning sister manipulating me into anything but what my sheep needed: good, solid food to grow thereby.

Next day, however, the evangelist himself called. A Lumbee Indian, his humility and soft-spokenness disarmed me. I agreed to give him two nights.

The first night I arrived at the church early and waited prayerfully. At 7:15 PM he opened the door, greeted me, and almost in a whisper asked if his brother could bring in a guitar and amplifier. Amazed at such gentleness, I gladly obliged.

My first apprehensions appeared when through the door rolled a five feet high, metallic red, padded amplifier. A stream of Lumbees followed which filled up the west half of the sanctuary.

We sang a few congregational songs and I turned the service over to the evangelist, who strapped on his guitar and invited his brother up with his guitar. I’d been preparing myself for the metallic volume obliterating any semblance of words (forget theology). But what horrified me was *my* people, the sheep I’d poured my life into, leaping to their feet, dancing, clapping, and shouting in wild ecstasy. The sermon followed along the same lines—volume without substance.

I felt betrayed. I wanted to resign, to shake the dust off my feet, but knew I’d have to wrestle it out like Jacob until I saw the Face of God (Gen. 32:24-32).

At home I slept until 3:00 AM, then hit my knees. Shortly after dawn the breath of the Holy Spirit filled me. *What I had seen as disaster the night before, I now beheld as glory.* I couldn’t wait for the evening service.

Sure enough, everything went as before—the loud guitar drowning out the words, the people leaping and shouting. Only now I too danced and clapped along with them, enjoying it with all my heart.

The evangelist began his loud “Pentecostal” preaching, as before. Halfway through the message, however, his tone changed like a semi-truck down-shifting to climb a difficult mountain. He now spoke with powerful authority and clarity.

I listened with rapt astonishment as thought for thought he preached *my* “masterpiece” against cigarettes. With one definite exception: I’d never smoked; this brother knew the anguish of bondage to nicotine and the glory of divine deliverance. And that was the connecting link my people needed, *once he won their hearts through their kind of music and worship!*

The majority of my smokers went up for prayer, including Sister Johnson, and God met her and others with victory.

God’s wisdom had overruled my narrowness. That night the Holy Spirit “waved,” *displayed, two leavened* loaves before God’s throne: a loaf of Native Americans and another of humble country folk. And I, flooded by new insight and revelation of Christ Jesus, Lord and Builder of His Church, felt proud to be one with them.

And deeply grateful I had not missed God’s delicious, awesome, Feast of Pentecost—complete with all the *leaven* it took to *humble* me and manifest His incredible *grace*.

Scriptures from NKJV

End Notes:

1. David Womack, *The Wellsprings of the Pentecostal Movement* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1968), p. 84.
2. Frank Bartleman, Vinson Synan's "Introduction," *Azusa Street* (Plainfield: Logos International, 1980), p. xxi.
3. Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street*, p. 174
4. *Ibid.*, p. 45