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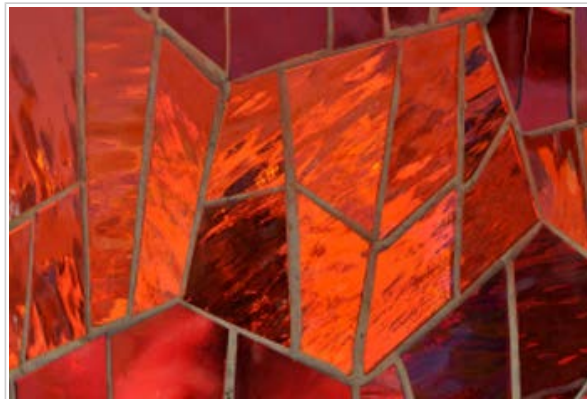
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## Pentecost as traditioned innovation

*The coming of the Holy Spirit is both a fulfillment of that which is old and a radical new beginning, writes New Testament scholar C. Kavin Rowe.*

by [C. Kavin Rowe](#)



April 28, 2009

Christians who hunger and thirst for change often look for inspiration to the New Testament's story of Pentecost in chapter two of the book of Acts. The dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit "50 days" after Jesus' passion and resurrection signifies a break with the old way of doing things and opens the possibility of genuinely new life. Yet the newness of life after Pentecost is inseparable from the traditions that precede it, and the sustainability of such new life depends directly on the development of new traditions. To understand the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, therefore, we must hold innovation and tradition together.

During the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples that the cup was the new covenant in his blood (Luke 22:20). After his resurrection, he instructed them to wait in Jerusalem until they would receive the Holy Spirit (Luke 24/Acts 1). The gift

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of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the moment at which the new covenant in Jesus Christ goes public.

Throughout the story of Pentecost, Luke draws upon a Jewish tradition that associated the feast of Pentecost (Weeks) with the giving of the Jewish Law at Sinai. Knowing this allows us to see that the event in Jerusalem is narrated as the new Sinai, the new bond of God with his people on the other side of the promises of renewal heralded, for example, in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 11. At Pentecost God gives “a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 11:19).

And yet precisely because the story of Pentecost cannot be told other than with the theological grammar of the Old Testament, it would be a deep mistake to see the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as an innovation that breaks fundamentally from that which preceded it. It is rather that the coming of the Holy Spirit is at once a fulfillment of that which was old -- the pentateuchal and prophetic traditions -- and a radical new beginning.

The new beginning that is Pentecost runs much deeper, therefore, than a simple renewal of tradition. Fulfillment turns out to be something more like the beginning of a new age in which new communities will need to be formed. Thus does Luke interpret the coming of the Holy Spirit through the lens of the book of Joel and declare that the “last days” in which God’s Spirit will be poured out have now arrived (Acts 2:16-21). And thus does Luke immediately speak of the necessity for devotion “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” and the subsequent new community and its remarkable patterns of life. (Acts 2:42).

This intersection of eschatological time and community life illustrates a centrally important point about life in the new reality given by the Holy Spirit: namely, that the new age, too, requires the development of tradition. In the terms of Acts, baptism must occur, apostolic instruction must be given, bread must be broken, prayers must be said, and so forth for the community to come together and grow. Absent the development of tradition, Acts would teach us, new communities risk immediate withering and extinction -- indeed, decay threatens the moment after the original inspiration -- for the simple reason that without the development and nurturing of tradition a community cannot over time sustain even the vaguest sense of identity and purpose. “Untraditioned” communities -- to say it baldly -- do not exist. The innovation of the Holy Spirit is thus not against tradition but requires it. Fulfillment is unintelligible apart from that which is fulfilled (tradition), and life within the new reality requires ongoing organization and education in the patterns that sustain a group whose common purpose is consistently to figure forth the innovation of the Holy Spirit. More simply said, even dramatic innovation will always require tradition.

In short, it would be an ultimately impossible understanding of Pentecost to read the coming of the Holy Spirit as the new wind that blows away the stale and musty cobwebs of tradition and in their place leaves the fresh fragrance of freedom. To the contrary: in what is one of the more notable instances of innovation in the Bible, we find that the newness and freedom brought by the Holy Spirit has tradition at its core.

C. Kavin Rowe in a series of reflections on traditioned innovation as a way of thinking biblically.

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