

**THE PENTECOST EVENT IN ACTS 2:
SIGNIFICANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MISSIONS**
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ABSTRACT

The Pentecost Event in the Acts of the Apostles has been interpreted from many perspectives within the context of the Pentecost text. Accordingly, the issues raised from the interpretations focused on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, empowerment for missions, the emphasis on the vernacular language for the apprehension and comprehension of the Christian faith among others. These issues are based on the interpretation of the happenings on the day of Pentecost in Acts. This article attempts to draw attention to the significance of Pentecost Event in the light of contemporary Christian missions, particularly in Africa. The article engages the Pentecost narrative or text (Acts 2:1-13) critically and exegetically to unearth its contemporary significance. It argues that, the happenings on the day of Pentecost are the root of Pentecostalism. Some theological and linguistic, missiological and ecclesiological significance are noted and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The interpretations and analyses of the Pentecost narrative in Acts chapter two has gained a lot of scholarly attention recently. Accordingly, the issues raised from the interpretations and analyses focused on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, empowerment for missions, the emphasis on the vernacular language for the apprehension and comprehension of the Christian faith² among others. This article attempts to examine the Pentecost event in Acts of the Apostles and its significance for contemporary missions particularly in Africa. This is done by a critical analyses of the Pentecost text in Acts chapter 2. The important issues discussed in this article include understanding Pentecost, Pentecost and Pentecostalism, the book of Acts and missions. It further explores the theological and linguistic, missiological and ecclesiological significance of the Pentecost text for contemporary missions.

Understanding Pentecost

The word Pentecost (Pentēkostēs) is a festival known in late Judaism which is normally celebrated on the “day after the seventh Sabbath” and essentially on the fiftieth day after Passover Feast.³ Pentecost was “the festival of the first fruits of the grain harvest and it was called the feast of Weeks because it came after a period of seven weeks of harvesting that began with the offering of sheaf during the Passover celebration and ended with the wheat harvest. Around the first Christian century, Pentecost was celebrated as an anniversary to mark the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and was later considered “as one of the three great pilgrim festivals of Judaism”⁴ This event was also observed together with other special holy days (Passover and Feast of Tabernacles),⁵ perhaps in the Jewish calendar and its observance draws many pilgrims from every part of the Jewish diaspora.⁶

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² Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Orbis Books, 1995), 60.

³ Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Vol. 9), (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House 1981), 269.

⁴ Gaebelien, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 269.

⁵ Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 887.

⁶ Elwell, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, 887.

In Howard Marshall's words:

The Jewish festival known in the New Testament as Pentecost is the same as the Feast of Weeks (Shabuoth) in the Old Testament. It is called the feast of harvest in Exodus 23: 16; cf. 34:22. It celebrated the offering of the first-fruits of the wheat harvest, and was the second of the three great festivals of the Jewish agricultural year. According to Deuteronomy 16:9-12 it was celebrated seven weeks after the beginning of the harvest with a free will offering to God. More detailed legislation is given in Leviticus 23:15-21 (cf. Num. 28:26-31), where the date is established by counting 50 days (that is, seven weeks plus a day) from the day when the first fruits of the harvest was offered to the priest.

Although this date may originally have been a movable one, dependent on the vagaries of the harvest, it came to be a fixed one, established by its relation to the Feast of the Passover.⁷

Marshall asserts further that:

The festival thus fell in the third month of the year. In the Old Testament legislation, it lasted one day, which was regarded as a Sabbath or holiday, and various special sacrifices were prescribed to be offered on it. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the feast of weeks is mentioned only in the list of regular yearly feasts celebrated in the Solomonic temple, II Chronicles 8: 13. In the New Testament there is reference to the Jewish festival in Acts 20:16 and I Corinthians 16:8, apparently as a means of indicating a date, just as a modern Englishman might refer to "Whit-Monday" without thinking of its theological significance.⁸

This background does not differ from the records in Acts about the day of Pentecost according to Luke's narrative (Acts 2:1-13). It therefore confirms that Luke was actually referring to this same Jewish festival in Acts that has drawn many Jews together in Jerusalem including the apostles who were also gathered, perhaps not for Pentecost but at Jesus' word that they should wait (Acts 1:8).

Again, some scholars after studying the story of Pentecost, have found a deliberate contrast to the story of Babel (Genesis 11) and a Christian counterpart to the giving of the law at Sinai.⁹ The celebration of Pentecost in Judaism is also linked with the renewal of the Covenant God made with Noah and Moses.¹⁰ E. Lohse underscores this view that "Pentecost is linked more closely with the age of Moses and celebrated as a festival of the giving of the law".¹¹ For him, the Christian Pentecost is linked to salvation history as reported by Luke in the phrase "When the day of Pentecost had come" (Acts 2:1). This was in fulfillment of Jesus's promise in Acts 1:8.¹² This means that there was some kind of religious significance attached to the celebration of the festival (Pentecost) in the Old Testament.

From this historical perspective, it is evident that the celebration or observance of Pentecost has religious significance attached to it. The feast of Pentecost in this regard is seen as a Jewish feast rather than a Christian festival. Even though Pentecost from this view is not a Christian festival, it is incorporated into Christianity and celebrated differently among various Christian denominations as an important day in the Christian calendar. Perhaps, because of its link to the beginning of the Church. Unfortunately, some Pentecostals and Charismatics Churches may only remember Pentecost for tongues speaking rather than missions. Yet God purposefully launched the Christian mission from this standpoint with a universal focus in the mission of the church. This makes the feast of Pentecost in Acts strategic in Christian mission not just an historical event.

⁷ Harword Marshall, *The Significances of Pentecost*, <http://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1723&content...1977>, Accessed 16/3/2019, 17.

⁸ Marshall, *The Significances of Pentecost*, <http://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1723&content...1977>, Accessed 16/3/2019, 18.

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 68.

¹⁰ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 68.

¹¹ E. Lohse, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in one volume*, edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 826.

¹² Lohse, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 826.

Background to the Pentecost Event in Acts

Gaebelein suggests that, Acts of the Apostles is divided into three parts: Acts 1: 1-2:41 has the constitutive events of the Christian Mission; Acts 2:42-12:24 focuses on the Christian Mission to the Jewish World; Acts 12:25-28:31 also focuses on the Christian Mission to the Gentile World. He explains further that, the prologue to Luke-Acts is found in Luke 1:1-4. However, in Acts (1:1-4), Luke starts his second work with what Frank calls “resumptive preface” which is an attempt to link Luke-Acts and to bring out the ideas he wants to stress as being the constitutive events of the Christian mission (1:1-2:41).¹³

Taking Gaebelein’s view above into consideration, the wider context of the Pentecost Event in Acts is Acts 1:1-2:1-60. Before the Pentecost Event, Luke refers to the post- resurrection experience together with Jesus’ instructions to the apostles to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit for effective witnessing, beginning from Jerusalem. Acts 1: 6-7 centered on the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Luke then discusses how Jesus ascended to heaven and His return being affirmed by the angels. From that point, the apostles (the eleven without Judas Iscariot) returned to Jerusalem and met in the upper room after witnessing the ascension of Jesus. This follows a word from Peter to the Church with regards to the position of Judas Iscariot who lost his apostleship and was being replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:2-26). Luke then begins the Pentecost narrative from Acts chapter two.

The Book of Acts and Missions

It is important to state that the Pentecost event was the drive for Early Church movement or missions. The records of the Early Church missions and the spread of the Christian faith is evident in the book of Acts. The Acts of the Apostles is considered to have been written by Luke, Paul’s companion. The title “Acts” (praxeis) evidently meant to suggest both movement in the advance of the gospel and the achievement by the apostles.¹⁴ The advancement of the gospel may connote the various mission strategies undertaken by the apostles to spread the Christian message of salvation to other people. One important fact about the book of Acts is that it contains a lot of information about the history of the early church and its expansion. Frank E. Gaebelein notes that,

Indeed, if we did not have Acts, or if Acts were proved basically unreliable, we would know nothing of the earliest days of the Christian movement except for bits of data gathered from the letters of Paul or inferred by looking back from later developments. To attempt a study of early Christianity apart from Acts, therefore, is to proceed mainly *ignotum per ignotius* (“the unknown explained by the still more unknown”), for information about the early church gained from Paul’s letters often lacks an historical context.¹⁵

Similarly, Acts is seen as an excellent history that records the life of Jesus and the expansion of the Church at the time of the apostles. Luke begins this history from Jerusalem with Jesus’ earthly ministry in view following his resurrection and ascension into heaven. Furthermore, “Luke methodically records the spread of the new religion (Christianity) throughout the then Roman world. At the beginning it is spread largely through the influence of the apostle Peter. The first half of Acts recounts this. In the second half of the book, Luke shows how Christianity spread even to Rome through the phenomenal life and ministry of the apostle Paul.” Acts is simply a short form for “The Acts of the Apostles” or The Acts of Jesus Christ and more significantly could be titled “Acts of the Holy Spirit” in the Church of Jesus Christ through God’s people.¹⁶ Actually, Acts of the Holy Spirit seems appropriate a title for the Book of Acts since the work of the Holy Spirit looks more prominent in Acts. However, the Holy Spirit did the work through the Apostles.

Furthermore, the book of Acts is about mission. This mission was not limited to Acts 1:8. The Christian Church was to bear witness to Jesus Christ and that specifically was the task of the apostles and many other believers. The message of Acts however was proclaimed in an expounded series of public addresses throughout the book. The message “was concerned with the fact that Jesus, who had been raised from the dead by God after being put to death by the Jews, had been declared to be the Jewish Messiah and the Lord, and hence the source of salvation. It was through him that forgiveness of sins was offered to men,

¹³ Gaebelein, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 252.

¹⁴ Frank E. Gaebelein, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 207.

¹⁵ Gaebelein, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 207-208.

¹⁶ James Montgomery Bioce, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2001), 13-15.

and it was from him that the gift of the Spirit had come down to the Church.”¹⁷ Moreover, the place of prayer and visions in Acts of the Apostles, as well as to such charismatic experiences as speaking in tongues (languages) and prophesying that characterized the book indicate that there is a real encounter with God and missions in Acts. Obviously, the spread of the Christian mission is the main story-line in the Acts which starts with a small group of Jesus’ disciples grouped in Jerusalem who by the gift of the Holy Spirit became his witnesses in an increasing number. The early chapters portray the growth and problems the early Church encountered in missions and how they addressed them, following many conversions into the Christian faith.¹⁸

Prince S. Conteh observes that the events of the early Church history reported in the book of Acts of the Apostles can be put into two categorical periods which serve as the basis for the book’s outline.¹⁹ The book shows that, in the first period, the Church’s mission was centered on Israel – “which include Jews of course, but also Samaritans, god-fearers, and gentiles,” as reported in chapters 1 – 12 and that this part of Acts seems to consider the activities of Peter with much attention on the observance of the Law.²⁰ Records point out that, significantly in the second period of the early Church, mission was directed towards both Jews and Gentiles, as recorded in chapters 13-28 and for this section, it basically focuses on Paul’s missionary work.²¹ To some extent, Conteh agrees that the Christian mission has experienced a great progress through missionary activities among different people, groups and languages. However, Conteh’s work seem to be silent on the approach used by the various missionaries to under the mission as it moved from its origin (Jerusalem) to different geographical areas and cultures. It is observed that throughout the book of Acts the “thrust is one of extension, propagation, multiplication and advance” of the Christian mission.²² As a result, Christianity moved from Jerusalem to Rome externally and advanced from the Jewish phase to a worldwide audience²³ and since then the Christian mission had sought to penetrate different cultures in history. It is important to point out that the external advancement made in Christian mission in history and now, is the fact that Christianity has had to contextualize the Christian mission.

Some English versions of the Bible show that the purpose of Acts is to tell how the early disciples of Jesus proclaimed the gospel of Christ starting from Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8). The author suggests that Acts tells “the story of the Christian movement as it began among the Jewish people and went to become a faith for the whole world.” Looking at Acts from this perspective, it indicates that its contents have laid crucial foundations for missions in contemporary times. In view of its missional agenda, Acts may be divided into three principal parts: (1) the beginning of the Christian movement in Jerusalem following the ascension of Jesus; (2) expansion into other parts of Palestine; and (3) further expansion, into the Mediterranean world as far as Rome.²⁴

Apparently, the book of Acts is a record of the expansion of the early Church and shows what God did to His people and with His people. The book was to show the movement of the Christian faith through the Holy Spirit, from its Jerusalem-based, Jewish-oriented beginnings to it becoming a worldwide faith. This is important to understanding the content and structure of the book.²⁵ The records of mission in the book underscores the fact that the Christian mission was meant to expand into different cultures and people who were not of the Jewish origin as recorded in Acts 1:8. Obviously, Acts demonstrates the work of the Holy Spirit which started on the day of Pentecost which subsequently gave birth to the Church and also to strengthen its leadership as seen in the events recorded in the book.

J. R. W. Stott argues that the “Day of Pentecost was unique and is unrepeatabe because the outpouring of the Spirit on that day was the final act of Jesus following those equally unique and

¹⁷ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 25.

¹⁸ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 25-26.

¹⁹ Prince S. Conteh, *An Exegesis of Paul’s Use of Deisidaimon (“religious”) in Acts 17: A Handbook for Students and Pastors (Koforidua: Flash Image, 2012)*, 13.

²⁰ Conteh, *An Exegesis of Paul’s Use of Deisidaimon*, 13.

²¹ Conteh, *An Exegesis of Paul’s Use of Deisidaimon*, 13.

²² Irving L. Jensen, *Acts: An Independent Study (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1968)*, 36.

²³ Jensen, *Acts*, 36.

²⁴ *Good News Bible: The Bible in Today’s English Version (New York: Thomas Nelson publishers, 1976)*, 1102.

²⁵ Juliana Senavoe, *Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation (Kumasi: Christian Service College, 1996)*, 15-16.

unrepeatable events, his death, resurrection and ascension.”²⁶ Even though the Day of Pentecost is unrepeatable, its impact on missions remains with the Church in diverse ways especially among the Pentecostals and Charismatics.’ Looking at Acts of the Apostles carefully, Luke raises major questions for contemporary Christians and missions. Issues like “baptism of the Spirit, signs and wonders, Church discipline, the diversity of ministries, Christian conversion, racial prejudice, missionary principles, the cost of Christian unity, motives and methods in evangelism, the call to suffer for Christ, Church and state, and divine providence.”²⁷ These issues seems to be the focus of contemporary missions. Thus, the book of Acts has more to tell about Christianity than just giving a historical account of its beginnings. In fact, it shows drastically a spiritual encounter with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost through the apostles and the gospel in the early Church till today.

Conteh further observes that,

As the apostles were led to universalize (Acts 1:8) and extend the gospel message to all nations (Acts 10:34-35; 15:7-11; 17:2-32), they encountered as a matter of course peoples of different religious backgrounds. It was a challenging task for the apostles to disseminate the gospel message in a pluralistic religious environment. This challenge persist to the present day as the church worldwide continually faces challenges as it proclaims the message of Christ in a postmodern and pluralistic world.²⁸

The above quote suggest that the Christian mission cannot be undertaken without encountering different cultures, and peculiar challenges. Yet, there is the need to find appropriate ways of meeting this challenging task especially in a world of varied cultures. “The gospel is intended for people of all nations (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8).”²⁹ However, the crucial challenge is, how this gospel would be contextualized and understood as it is intended for all. In view of this, there should be a dialogue between Christian and African values, beliefs and practices (both Christian and African) “which might serve as a springboard for an inspirational and fruitful understanding between cultures”³⁰ for an impactful Christian mission in Africa. Perhaps, this to an extent, could help to reduce or abolished the general negative and hostile attitude of some Christian missionaries towards African culture.

While acknowledging other purposes of the book of Acts, in this article however, it is important to note that its contemporary interpretations and implications have an impact on the Church today especially in missions.³¹ Therefore, there is the need to recognize the contemporary position of inspiration of the book of Acts to its readers. Its theological, missiological and ecclesiastical implications for the Christian faith today is outstanding. That is to say, some Christians draw certain theological foundations for the Christian mission from the book. For instance, the emphasis on speaking in tongues by some Christian denominations seem to be influenced by the Pentecost encounter in the book of Acts and for such Christians, speaking in tongues is a fundamental sign for being born again. Some Christians especially the Pentecostals and Charismatics also claim that, they had their roots from the Pentecost experience as recorded in Acts.

Pentecost and Pentecostalism

According to E. Kingsley Larbi, “The second strand of the renewal movement in the country (Ghana) is the Pentecostal movement”. For him, “the origins of Evangelical Ghanaian Pentecostalism is largely traced to Peter Anim, and his Faith Tabernacle Church”. He asserts that these “Pentecostal churches and Spiritual churches may be seen as belonging to the same church type because both groups apparently emphasize the Pneumatic elements of the Bible”.³² J. K. Asamoah- Gyadu also contends that,

Historically the emergence of Pentecostalism worldwide has interpreted as standing in direct continuity with the experiences of Charles Fox Parham and William J. Seymour’s Azusa Street

²⁶John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: to the Ends of the Earth*, (Leicester LE 17 GP, England, Inter-varsity Press, 1990), 4.

²⁷ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 5.

²⁸ Conteh, *Essays in African Religions and Christianity*, (Accra: Cynergy Media Ent, 2014), 45.

²⁹ Conteh, *Essays In African Religion And Christianity*, 74.

³⁰ Conteh, *Essays in African Religions and Christianity*, 87.

³¹ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 4-5, 21.

³² Emmanuel Kingsly Larbi, *Pentecostalism the Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, 2001), 68-69.

movement of 1901 and 1906 respectively. While scholars like Synan hold the view that practically all the Pentecostal groups in existence can trace their lineage to the Azusa Mission, there is evidence to suggest that not all Pentecostal outbursts around the world may be causally linked to North American initiatives.³³

He continues that,

Pentecostal outbursts in India, for example, are said to have predated the North American experience by at least forty years, taking an indigenous course with little or no Western missionary involvement. In Haiti, where glossolalia is considered akin to certain features of voodoo spirit possession, ‘speaking in tongues’ which defines much of Western Pentecostalism, it is claimed, does not set the Pentecostal apart from others nearly as much as the ceremony of burning voodoo objects and paraphernalia.³⁴

From the above, both Larbi and Asamoah-Gyadu traced the beginning of Pentecostalism to individuals in Ghana and worldwide. This article however, argues that it is linked up to the Pentecost event in Acts. Pentecostal and Charismatic (Pentecostalism) movements in general is undoubtedly traced to the happenings on the day of Pentecost in Acts. Accordingly, Pentecostalism took inspiration from the Pentecost event in Acts which seems to have marked the beginning of the Christian movement or mission. This means that Pentecostalism is as old as the Church. “The history and theology of Pentecostalism must be linked up with its earlier precedents”,³⁵ perhaps from the day of Pentecost. It is without doubt that some of their beliefs and emphasis are linked with wider developments and understanding of the happenings of the day of Pentecost. It is possible, therefore, to suggest that, theologically, the root of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and even certain Charismatic movements or spiritual groups in the mainline churches is embedded in the contemporary understanding of the Pentecost in Acts.

The Significance of Pentecost Event in Contemporary Christian Mission

Apart from remembering Pentecost for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, an important question is whether the festival had acquired any further significance in contemporary times beyond being a festival of harvest.³⁶ How far this understanding of Pentecost in contemporary times is crucial to the apprehension and comprehension of Christian faith and missions. Among others, this study argues that, the happenings on Pentecost day in Acts has theological- linguistic, missiological and ecclesiological significance as discussed below.

Theological and Linguistic Significance of Pentecost

The theological and linguistic significance of Pentecost event in Acts 2 is noted in verse 6-8 and 11 of the text. In verse 6 of the text, the multitude gathered together. Luke shows this in (verse 6a) with the phrase, *Genomenēs de tēs phōnēs tautēs synēlthen to plēthos* (And at this sound the multitude came together). The multitude was brought together because of the sound. The question then is, what was in this sound that could cause their attention? Luke indicates that the people heard the disciples “speaking in their own languages” (*hoti ēkouon eis hekastos tē idia dialektō lalountōn autōn.*) and for that matter they were utterly confounded “because they kept hearing them speaking, every single one, in his language.”³⁷ The Greek, *hoti* (because) in verse 6 suggests the purpose for their bewildered response as they continue to hear the apostles speaking (*ēkouon* is imperfect) in their native *dialektō* (speech, language).³⁸ The imperfect directs attention to the fact that the “speaking” was a continuous action, that is for a period of time.

³³ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments Within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Netherlands: African Christian Press, 2005), 10.

³⁴ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*, 11.

³⁵ Cephas N. Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism* (Netherlands: University of Birmingham, 2002), 76.

³⁶ Marshall, *The Significances of Pentecost*,

<http://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1723&content...1977,18>. Accessed 16/3/2019.

³⁷ Lenski R. C. H., *the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1957), 65.

³⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2012), 101.

As the multitude continued to experience this phenomenon, they were thrown into confusion. Luke describes this with the passive form *synechuthē* (to confuse, confound) from the root verb *sycheo* (I confuse), refers to being amazed or surprised. But this verb is translated differently in some versions of the Bible. For example, “bewildered” as in RSV, ESV, NASB, NLT; “in confusion” in NET; “confounded” KJV. The verb also appears in Gen 11:7, 9 in the LXX.³⁹

It is important to note that the multitude was confused not because the disciples spoke in many languages but that they could not believe what they were experiencing as each one of them could hear his own language being spoken by Galileans. They were not actually confused rather they were surprised because they understood what they heard. Though they heard in many languages, they understood that the message was one, that is, the mighty works of God.

In verses 7-8, Luke stresses on the fact that the multitude was still amazed leading to questions regarding who the disciples were. The question *Existanto de kai ethaumazon legontes ouch idou pantes houtoi eisin hoi lalountes Galilaioi.* (Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?). This question indicates that the Jews could be identified as Galileans by their speech. Interestingly, the phrase *tē idia dialektō hēmōn en* (in our own language) appearing in the dative shows up only three times in the New Testament, in Acts (1:19;2:6,8) and also found in Acts 2:11.⁴⁰ This phrase was actually the cause of their surprise as each group of people kept hearing (repeatedly) the message in their own language. The repetition of this phrase in the text may suggest Luke’s emphasis on language in missions. It further “underscores that the native language is meant”. In this way, “God is using for each group the most familiar linguistic means possible to make sure the message reaches to the audience in a form they can appreciate.”⁴¹ Thus the miracle underscores the divine initiative in making possible the mission God has commissioned. Actually, God is bringing the message of the gospel home to those who hear it.⁴²

In the light of the above exegetical view, Bediako posits that:

The happenings on the day of Pentecost, as recounted in the second chapter of the Acts of Apostles ... give an important Biblical and theological warrant for taking seriously the vernacular languages in which people everywhere hear the wonders of God. The ability to hear in one’s own language and to express in one’s own language one’s response to the message which one receives, must lie at the heart of all religious encounter with the divine realm. Language itself becomes, then, not merely a social or a psychological phenomenon, but a theological one as well. Though every human language has its limitations in this connection, yet it is through language, and for each person, through their mother tongue, that the Spirit of God speaks to convey divine communication at its deepest to the human community.

Bediako then continues:

The significance of Pentecost, therefore, has to do with more than answering to the chaos of Babel and restoring human beings. Its deeper significance is that God speaks to men and women – always in the vernacular. Divine communication is never in a sacred, esoteric, hermetic language; rather it is such that ‘all of us hear ... in our own languages ... the wonders of God.’⁴³

As argued above, theologically and linguistically the vernacular language should be seen as a tool for authentic Christian mission and encounter. It may further implied that the basic understanding of the Christian faith in contemporary missions is rooted in the indigenous languages. In view of this, mother-tongue biblical interpretation is to be regarded as a vehicle through which everyone can hear the divine message of God in his/her own language. Hearing and responding to the Christian message in one’s own language is the focus of mother-tongue biblical interpretation to ensure that people hear God in their own language.

Therefore, the true discovery of Christianity in the African context is through the vernacular languages which the people would hear and understand God in their contexts. In the light of this, the

³⁹ Bock, *Acts*, 101.

⁴⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 102.

⁴¹ Bock, *Acts*, 102.

⁴² Bock, *Acts*, 102.

⁴³ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60-61.

vernacular or mother tongue should be considered as the drive or vehicle for contemporary missions and theological discussions.

Ekem has observed that if the Pentecost event recorded by Luke in Acts 2 affirms the use of various mother tongues for the proclamation of the gospel, it also consolidates an earlier process of mother-tongue translation that stretches as far back as the post-exilic era in Israelite history, when returnees from exile needed an explanation or interpretation in Aramaic of the Hebrew scriptures (Neh. 8:8). This internal transfer of thought from one language was necessitated by the Persian colonial policy of imposing Aramaic as a lingua franca. These returnees from exile had lost command of, or fluency in, their original Hebrew mother tongue and interpretation of the adopted language.⁴⁴ This observation above suggests that one of the theological significance of the Pentecost event is noted in mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics which helps through translations into the mother-tongues; people can hear the divine message in their own mother-tongues. It is important to state that the preference of foreign languages (English language) in missions today as against the African mother tongues may gradually reduce the command of, or fluency in the original African mother tongues. This may affect future Christian missions drastically in Africa.

Similarly, Kwasi A. Dickson also holds the view that it is important for African Christians to be in a position to be able to express in a vital way what the Christian faith means to them, “and to do so in and through a cultural medium that makes original thinking possible.”⁴⁵ For Dickson, the Christian mission “can be meaningful only when Christ is encountered as speaking and acting authentically, when he is heard in the African languages, when culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ. To put this in another way, Christ must be heard to speak to African Christians direct.”⁴⁶ It is true that “the language (or languages) that an individual speaks is a very important part of cultural identification”.⁴⁷ It is argued also that when two people get to know that they share a common culture or language they turn to form a strong relationship with one another.⁴⁸ In the same vein, mission is about building a strong relationship through language or culture of a people. The fact is that, unless the Christian faith finds its place in the African soil, Christian missions in Africa would not progress.

Lamin Sanneh states that:

In practical terms however, missionaries started by inquiring among the people what names and concepts for God existed, and having established such fundamental points of contact, they preceded to adopt local vocabulary to preach the gospel. This field method of adopting the vernacular came to diverge sharply from the ideology of mission. By the same token, the new interest in creating vernacular scriptures for societies that had no scriptures of their own ushered in a fundamental religious revolution, with new religious changes. By embarking on translation, missionaries stimulated this, ethos, thus helping to lay the foundation for a remarkable stage in the religious evolution of African communities. The quarantine of the missionary enclave eventually yielded to indigenous necessity, and from that contact the vernacular reform impulse was ignited.⁴⁹

Therefore, to understand the concept of God better, and for that matter the Christian mission in the African context, there is the need to translate the Christian concept of God into the African vernaculars for missions. The early missionaries to Africa did so.

In like manner, Jean-Cluade Loba-Mkole and Ernest R. Wendland have argued that the Christian mission emerged as a witness to the grace of God manifested in Jesus-Christ. This activity began first in dialogue with people using their different languages and cultures. For them, the book of Acts (2:1-36) shows that on the Pentecost day, Jerusalem was crowded with people of diverse origins and languages. In their opinion, the Pentecost event enabled them to discover one of the important characteristics of Christian mission, for instance, a religion not confined to a particular mother tongue, but which on the contrary speaks

⁴⁴ John D.K. Ekem, Re-appraising the History and Place of Mother tongue bible translation: *Journal of African Christian Thought*, (vol. 15, No. 2, 2012), 10.

⁴⁵ Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 4-5.

⁴⁶ Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 5.

⁴⁷ Everett M. Rogers and Thomas M. Steinfatt, *Intercultural Communication*, (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1999), 102.

⁴⁸ Rogers and Steinfatt, *Intercultural Communication*, 103.

⁴⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Mary knoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 157-161.

all languages.⁵⁰ Moreover, “mother tongues are channels by which people encounter the Gospel and the God of Jesus-Christ for the first time. Mother tongues are also the place from which people respond to God and to the Gospel.”⁵¹

Moreover, Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor argues that mother-tongue:

is a linguistic category that is used to denote origin—the language one learned first, in which one has established the long-lasting verbal contacts. In a conventional sense, Mother-tongue expresses the idea that linguistic skills of a child are acquired from one’s mother and therefore the language from the mother tongue would be the primary language that the child would learn. Its importance lies in the fact that it identifies a speaker internally and externally with a particular language, even though it may not be the language one knows best and uses most.⁵²

This view underscores the fact that the “tongues” (languages) the apostles spoke were mother tongues of those who heard it (Acts 2:6-8) on the Pentecost day when people encountered God for the first time through the mother-tongue.

Apparently, if mother tongues are not given the necessary consideration in contemporary missions, the church in Africa will not be able to reach out to many through some significant aspect of culture.

It is therefore important that churches take seriously the mother tongue language because it serves as a divine medium through which the sacred scriptures are communicated and understood. However, it is also possible that some churches may downplay the vernacular enterprise in contemporary missions especially in Ghana. The reason being that, in some churches particularly the new ones, the use of indigenous language in mission “mean repossessing a heritage from the missionary past in order to enhance and develop it”. For others too, “the task will be considerably more difficult, since no such heritage from the missionary past can be so easily called upon.”⁵³ This implies that, in such churches there is little or no use of the vernacular in mission. Therefore, “the African experience of the Christian faith” and mission “is not seen to be fully coherent with the religious quests in African life”.⁵⁴ The relevance of mother tongue in this twenty first century Christian missions especially in Africa far outweigh its challenges in the quest for African Christianity. Furthermore, the mission target for the twenty first century Church in Africa may not be possible without enhancing the vernacular enterprise in the church setting.

Missiological Significance of Pentecost

It is a fact that Christian mission and its approach has changed drastically over the years beginning from early Church period, missionary era (early missionaries to Africa) to recent. It is evident that the Pentecost narrative in Acts establishes the bases for the move in the early Church’s missionary agenda. Thus, Pentecost is a missiological expression of the meaning, plan and the move of God for mission in contemporary Christianity especially in Africa. The missiological significance of Pentecost is observed in Acts 2:9-11a.

Accordingly, Acts 2:9-11a shows a list of countries within the Jewish Diaspora. It has been observed that in some of these countries in the Diaspora listed in Luke’s records were places where the descendants of the ten tribes of Israel lived who were reported lost and some members of the two tribes who did not return from exile.⁵⁵ The list brings out the main communities where Jews of the Diaspora were staying and underscores the universal scope of the gospel.⁵⁶ In this case, the list should be viewed as a representation of the Jewish Diaspora present at Pentecost and it seems right to accept the list as it is and

⁵⁰ Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole and Ernest R. Wendland, *Interacting with Scriptures in Africa* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2005), 40.

⁵¹ Loba and Wendland, *Interacting with Scriptures in Africa*, 40.

⁵² Jonathan E.T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “The Practice of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in some Ghanaian Communities: A Case Study of the Phrase *bny ysr’l* (Deut. 32:8),” *Journal of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics* 1, no 1, (2015):135.

⁵³ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 61.

⁵⁴ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60.

⁵⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), 84.

⁵⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 103.

consider it in accordance with Luke's purpose,⁵⁷ probably the gentile mission. Even though the event focused on the Jews, Luke's intention perhaps was for a larger scope considering the languages and tribes that were present for Pentecost. Therefore, it is suggestive to say that the event points to the gentile mission which became a reality in the latter parts of Acts. Missiologically, the list further affirms cross cultural missions with native language as a key to breaking down missionary boundaries.

The expansion of the early Christian faith through missionary activities became a reality because the Holy Spirit came upon the believers at Pentecost.⁵⁸ This suggests that the understanding of Pentecost and work or ministry of the Holy Spirit cannot be overlooked in contemporary Christian mission. I. Howard Marshall commenting on the Pentecost Event states that the disciples received the Holy Spirit when the days of waiting were over and this caused them to burst out into praising God in "languages other than their own."⁵⁹ For him, this strange event caused the disciples to move into the open and finally attracted the attention of many people who were moved by what they heard. In his view, placing this strange activity of the disciples at Pentecost in Acts corresponds to the position of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels, and its significance is that the Church was now equipped for the task of witness and missions and proceeds straightaway to undertake it."⁶⁰

"The feast of Pentecost is not merely a celebration of an historical event which took place in history, neither is it a literal illustration of the text of Pentecost in the book of Acts."⁶¹ The Pentecost event however, depicts the strategic revelation of God's plans in mission for the twenty first century church. Placing this event in the beginning of the book is not for nothing at all. Strategically, the event is to be seen as the drive for the missionary activities throughout the book of Acts. Its celebration therefore should mark a new beginning or approach to missions. It appears that the Pentecost in Acts represents a new dimension or shift in the mission of God from the Old Testament perspective into the New Testament era. Unfortunately, some Christian's denominations celebrate Pentecost as a memorial feast rather than an evangelistic event. This event seems to reflect and also underscore the contemporary theological and missiological position of the Pentecostal and Charismatic understanding of the Christian faith and missions.

Ecclesiological Significance of Pentecost

Placed within the context of scripture, the New Testament Church was founded by Jesus Christ (Matt 16:18). However, the official recognition and public operations of the apostolic Church "started as a minority but growing movement"⁶² on the Pentecost day. The ecclesiological significance of Pentecost in Acts is therefore traced to the beginning of the early Christian community, the early Church. In Acts 2:1, the expression *Kai en tō sumplērousthai tēn hēmēran tēs Pentēkostēs ēsan Pantēs homou ēpi to auto* ("When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place") gives a clear introduction to the beginning of this New Testament Church. Lohse argues that the verse introduces the first Christian Pentecost which must be seen in analogous to Luke 9:51.⁶³ Observing the text (Acts 2:1) carefully, Luke's focus was to describe the setting of the early Church. However, he did this with reference to the day of Pentecost to designate a period when the Church had met. It is clear that the happenings on Pentecost day illustrates the fulfilment of Christ's mission and the commissioning of the Church on earth under the leadership of the apostles through the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the ecclesiological understanding of the Christian faith (Church) finds its meaning and expression in the Pentecost event as recorded by Luke in Acts.

⁵⁷ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary on Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 2001), 103

⁵⁸ Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 268.

⁵⁹ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 67.

⁶⁰ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 67.

⁶¹ Ayman.Kfouf, *Pentecost, the Birth Day of the Church: A Theological Reading into the Icon of Pentecost*, ww1.antiochain.org/sites/default/files/Pentecost. Accessed 16/3/2019... 2013, 1.

⁶² Elom Dovlo, "'The People of God': Scripture Race and Identity in African Perspective", *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology*, vol.7 (1) (2017): 22.

⁶³ Lohse, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 50.

CONCLUSION

Obviously then, the significance for the critical analyses and interpretation of Pentecost in Acts has an impact on the understanding of the mission of God (*mission dei*) in recent times. Clearly, the Pentecost narrative provides us the theological and linguistic, missiological and ecclesiological developments of the Christian faith in history. The event in Acts further points to the fact that God's strategy for his mission into the world and cultures is multi-dimensional in approach. As God places emphasis on language (mother-tongue) development as a key for a significant impact in the world through missions especially in Africa. It is said that African Christians "seek to explain and give theological shape to their experience of receiving the gospel especially in their own vernacular. Literally, their experiences reflect the importance of scripture."⁶⁴ Thus the fundamental understanding of the Pentecost experience for the African is that, it affirms Africans as the people of God and also reflect in the way they should receive the Christian gospel and their approach to the mission of God among themselves.

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⁶⁴ Elom Dovlo, "'The People of God': Scripture Race and Identity in African Perspective", *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology*, 27.

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