

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF UPLAND

“WORDS OF FIRE”

NOEL K. ANDERSON, PASTOR

Texts: Leviticus 23: 9-16 & Acts 2: 1-4

PENTECOST & SHAVUOT

Today, we step into a story that spans centuries—a story of harvests, of covenants, of failure, and finally, of promise fulfilled. We begin in the ancient rhythms of Israel’s calendar, at a feast known as Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks.

Shavuot falls seven weeks after Passover—fifty days—and marks the first wheat harvest. But over time, it came to mean even more. It became a time to remember when God gave Israel something even more precious than wheat: the Law, the Ten Commandments—the “ten words”—on stone tablets handed to Moses on Mount Sinai.

We tend to see depiction of Moses with two headstone-looking tablets, presumably 5 “commandments” written on each one, but that’s not the right idea. Covenants were written for two parties, so the second tablet is likely an intended copy. Ancient Jewish tradition says when God wrote onto the tablet, his finger wrote straight through—writing both sides at once—word 1 and 6, 2 and 7, and so on.

The Law given to Moses comprised the stipulations of the covenant made with Moses. *If you keep my statutes, then I will be your God and you will be my people.*

Imagine it: fire on the mountain, a trembling people, a covenant established. This moment wasn’t just about receiving rules; it was about receiving a steering wheel from heaven—a divine means of guidance. Through the Law, Israel would be in right relationship with God. The Law was the *means* of righteousness for Israel—the *means* of a right relationship with God. It required that they do their part in the relationship, hence the steering wheel.

But how did it turn out? Like the old SNL skit, *Toonces the Driving Cat*, the people steered the car off the cliff every time. How long did it take Israel to mess up the covenant relationship? Exodus 32 gives us the answer. While Moses was yet *receiving* the Law, the people were forging an idol. When Moses descended and saw the golden calf, God’s righteous judgment followed. In Exodus 32:27–29, we read that 3,000 people died that day—the cost of disobedience.

That's what the Law does when written only on tablets of stone. Not because it's *bad*—but because *we* are. Human depravity, the stubbornness of our hearts, means that no cooperative model works. God gives the Law; we break it. God hands us the steering wheel, and we repeatedly drive off the cliff. Again and again—as did ancient Israel, so do we.

But God wasn't done.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God made a breathtaking promise. In chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, He spoke of a new covenant: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” No longer would the Law remain *external*. God would fix the steering wheel Himself. We were upgraded to a self-driving Tesla, which probably takes a while to get used to. That's Pentecost—God's gift of His Holy Spirit.

PENTECOST: THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

And so we come to Pentecost—fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus. Just as Shavuot marked the first wheat harvest, Pentecost became the first spiritual harvest, when the Holy Spirit descended on the followers of Jesus in the Upper Room.

What a scene it must have been—the sound of a rushing wind, tongues “languages” of fire, and languages from every nation spoken aloud. It was the un-Babel—where humanity's pride once divided us by language, now God's Spirit united us by the Gospel.

But look closely—there's a stunning echo from Sinai.

On the day the Law came, 3,000 people died. On the day the Spirit came, 3,000 were saved (Acts 2:38–41). The Law brings death because it exposes sin. The Spirit brings life because He applies the grace of Jesus Christ.

WE BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Nicene Creed says, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.” Without the Spirit, we are not Christians. No Holy Spirit means no Christianity. We believe in the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, but what are the manifestations and which do we consider real and legitimate?

In Acts, the new Christians spoke “in tongues,” but these were all identifiable languages. They were words of fire—the Gospel of Jesus proclaimed for every nation, Jew and Gentile alike.

So-called *Pentecostalists* love the Holy Spirit and manifest the Spirit in more ways than I can go into, but they might include rolling around on the floor, jumping up excitedly,

falling over as though fainting, laughing uncontrollably, or stumbling around as though drunk.

One of my old seminary friends (with the greatest preacher name you'll ever hear), Stuart Calvin Lord, worked Sundays at a gospel tabernacle in Brooklyn. This particular congregation was Pentecostal and gloried in manifestations of the Holy Spirit (and I have no doubts that the Holy Spirit was indeed active and present with those folks!). However, they had solidified a local custom of praying in tongues with such complete surrender, that they would gather up front on all fours and while indulging in full-fledged *glossalalia* (that's *tongues*), they would also drool uncontrollably. Yes, the pastors encouraged this, saying that nothing should be done to inhibit the Spirit's flow through a person. Instead, elders came down and placed napkins beneath the faces of the inspired, and they would drool freely onto the napkins.

Stuart's comment: "I always thought the Holy Spirit was supposed to be more intelligent than that!"

We put no bounds on the Holy Spirit—and Scripture certainly allows for the Spirit to work in diverse ways—but the true evidence of the Spirit is not noise or dancing, but on content; specifically, the recognition of Jesus Christ as Lord.

Yes, if you want proof that the Spirit is at work, it is in the healing of the spiritually blind. Whenever anyone says "Jesus is Lord" and means it, there is proof of the Holy Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit reveals Jesus Christ as God and Messiah. The Holy Spirit points with eternal persistence at Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Wherever Jesus is revealed and revered, *that* is the mark of the Holy Spirit.

ADVOCATE, COMFORTER, CONVINCER, & CONVICTER

Scripture reveals the Holy Spirit in several roles and functions. Let's look at them briefly in terms of *Advocate*, *Comforter*, *Convincer*, and *Convicter*.

1. *The Holy Spirit is Our Advocate*

When Jesus spoke to His disciples on the night before His crucifixion, He told them something astonishing:

"It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you" (John 16:7).

To their sorrow, He promised something greater than His physical presence—the very presence of God dwelling within them, beside them, and for them. He promised the Holy Spirit, who would play four profound roles in their lives—and ours.

The word Jesus uses is *Paraclete*—translated as Advocate, Helper, or Counselor. Think of a defense attorney, standing beside you in a courtroom. The Judge is Jesus Himself, but

the Adversary—Satan—is always ready to accuse. The book of Revelation calls him “the accuser of the brethren.”

But in this courtroom, the Advocate doesn’t plead our innocence—He pleads the sufficiency of Christ’s blood. He whispers, not “You’ve done nothing wrong,” but “Your wrongs have already been made right by Jesus.”

When we feel disqualified, unworthy, or stuck in shame, the Spirit speaks to the Father on our behalf, and speaks to us the truth of grace. You are not defined by the prosecution's evidence. You are claimed by the righteousness of Christ.

2. The Holy Spirit is Our Comforter

In John 14:25–26, Jesus tells His friends:

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

Why does that matter?

Because when life unravels—when grief strikes, when diagnoses come, when prayers go unanswered—we don’t just need answers. We need presence. We need someone who says, “It’s going to be okay.” Not because everything will be easy, but because God will be with us in it.

The Spirit brings a peace the world cannot give. A peace that doesn’t depend on circumstances. A Comforter who sits beside us in the ashes and breathes hope back into our souls.

3. The Holy Spirit is Our Convincer

Many Christians long for certainty—“If only I could know God is real... if only I could be sure I’m saved.” But the Spirit doesn’t always give certainty—He gives something deeper: assurance.

Again in John 14, Jesus says the Spirit will “remind you of all I have said.” He convinces us by recalling the Word, by applying the truth, and by anchoring us in the Gospel, especially when doubt creeps in.

Assurance doesn’t mean we never question. It means that even when we do, we hear a still, small voice saying:

“Yes—this is true. Yes—He loves you. Yes—you belong to Him.”

The Spirit convinces not by shouting but by steadying. Like a friend who puts their hand on your back when you're losing your footing.

4. The Holy Spirit is Our Convicter

In John 16:8–11, Jesus says:

“When he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment...”

That word "prove" can also be translated as *convict* or *expose*.

This is the Spirit's work in the world and in us—not to shame, but to shine light. Conviction is a gift. It's how we know we need grace. It's how our pride is broken so that love can break in.

The Spirit points us to the Gospel, yes—but also sends the Gospel through us. He convicts the world by empowering the Church. Through our lives, our words, and our witness, the Spirit calls people home.

Conviction is also seen in one's *commitment* to the faith. The best Christians who ever lived—beginning with the Apostles—went to suffering, torture, and early deaths only because they refused to renounce their faith in Jesus. They went to their executions singing, and (I believe) with something like a smile on their face.

And so, Pentecost is not just the birthday of the Church; it is the beginning of the harvest. The Spirit doesn't come to give us goosebumps—He comes to make us workers in the field.

FINAL WORD

The Spirit *advocates* when we feel accused.

He *comforts* when we feel lost.

He *convinces* us of what is true.

He *convicts* us so we may grow—and others may be saved.

So yes, *assurance*, not *certainty*. Yes, *comfort*, not *control*. Yes, *conviction*, not *condemnation*. This is the life of the Spirit.

And friends, if the Spirit is within us, then we are never alone—and we are never without help. Come, Holy Spirit! Amen. †

QUESTIONS

1. What is God's gift to Israel celebrated in Shavuot (Pentecost)?
2. What is God's gift to Christians at Pentecost?
3. How is the Holy Spirit manifested today?
4. What is the number one indisputable manifestation of the Holy Spirit?
5. In what way is the Holy Spirit our Advocate?
6. How is the Holy Spirit our Comforter?
7. How is the Holy Spirit our Convincer?
8. How is the Holy Spirit our Convicterr?