

# Pentecost, jubilee, and nation building

Kim Tan

**U**ndoubtedly the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost was a pivotal event in the story of salvation. Pentecostals have helped us understand this day in terms of the giving of gifts of the Spirit, and rightly so—as evident in Peter’s Pentecost sermon, in which he quotes the prophet Joel (“I will pour out my Spirit . . .”) to explain the “drunken” behaviour of the early disciples (Acts 2:17–18). But I would argue that a better way of understanding Pentecost is as a celebration of the giving of the law.

## A new nation, a distinctive way of life

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as a people dedicated to serving God. For Christians, too, Pentecost is about the formation of a new nation. At Sinai, the new nation was formed out of twelve discordant tribes of perhaps a million people who had been slaves in Egypt. At Pentecost, a new nation—a royal priesthood—was formed around twelve disciples. At Sinai it was the law that was to shape their common life. At Pentecost it was the giving of the law of the Spirit. Both events were accompanied by supernatural manifestations and resulted in new and distinctive lifestyles. God’s strategy to make himself known was to call a people and form

them into a nation who would be different from the other nations. This nation would have a distinct character in every aspect of their lives.

So what were the distinctives of this new nation? How were they to live with their God and one another? In *worship* there was

to be no more human sacrifice, no ornate temples, no sexual orgies, no idols. In *government* God was king. The organization was theocracy, not monarchy. Laws were based on justice and mercy. In *social relationships* the law guided interactions between

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parents and children, members of the opposite sex, neighbors, slaves, foreigners. In *healthcare* definitions of clean and unclean foods were articulated, and regulations on hand washing and quarantine were given.

Even in the mundane area of *economic life*, God wanted Israel to be different from the other nations. For a start, each family would be allotted its own land in perpetuity, and the land was to be farmed to provide income.

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They had asset-based capital with which to create wealth and to care for their families and their communities. This was revolutionary. They had left behind in Egypt a feudal system in which all land was owned by kings and the nobility, a system in which they were slaves. From slavery to land ownership—that’s quite a journey. This legislation laid the foundation for ownership of private property, the basis for what we could call a “free market economy,” in which trade and the exchange of goods and services can take place.

But God was not idealistic enough to believe that everything would work out well for everyone all the time. There would be droughts, pests that ruined crops, accidents and deaths of key family members—and inevitably, overconsumption. In time some people would fall into debt and would be forced to sell their land and migrate into towns to look for work. In anticipation of this outcome, God instituted laws that protected the poor from perpetual exploitation. There were laws on lending: “If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them” (Exod. 22:25; NRSV; see also Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 23:19). And there were laws on harvesting and gleaning: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard;

you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 19:9–10; see also Deut. 24:19–22). Festivals were occasions when the poor could get meat and cakes from the temple offerings. No wonder the people loved their festivals and celebrated them joyously.

### **Three programs to promote a just society**

The most comprehensive legislation revealing God’s desire that this new nation live as a just society was spelled out in three programs:

**Tithing year.** Every three years (according to Deut. 26:12), God required the people to bring a tenth of their possessions to the town center and to invite the widows, orphans, foreigners, and Levites to take what they needed. Imagine Christian churches practicing such a tithe every three years!

**Sabbath year.** Every seventh year, God required the nation to do three things: proclaim a yearlong holiday for the land, animals, and servants (Just say no to exploitation!); cancel all debts (because God has cancelled our debts against him), and release all slaves (because God has set us free).

**Jubilee year.** Every fifty years, the jubilee is the culmination of these programs, which is why it was called the sabbath of sabbaths. In the fiftieth year, God required the nation to do the three things that were required during the sabbath year—give a year’s holiday to the land, animals, and servants; cancel all debts; and release all slaves. In addition, God required that the lands that had been sold during the previous forty-nine years be returned to their original owners. Try to wrap your head around that provision: Good news for the poor! Bad news for “those who join house to house and add field to field” (Isa. 5:8). Houses in cities may however be bought and held in perpetuity (Lev. 25:30).

The jubilee was a reset button designed to prevent the kind of situation in which the rich get richer and richer and the poor get poorer and poorer.

What the jubilee affirmed were the following principles:

1. God wants his people to own property so they can provide for themselves and their communities. Capital is needed in order to create wealth. Poverty results from an absence of capital, either asset-based or intellectual.

2. God wants his people to rediscover family. On the Day of Atonement, when the ram's horn would be blown to signal the beginning of the jubilee, a mass migration would have happened across the land as people returned to their family homes. The result would be the reuniting of family members who had been dispersed and lost touch with one another.
3. God wants his people to rediscover shalom. What do families do when they are reunited after a long absence? They have meals together and they tell stories and laugh and cry together as they sit under their vines and fig trees.

To understand the incredible impact of these three programs, consider this fifty-year grid:

1	11	21 tithe+sabbath	31	41
2	12 tithe	22	32	42 tithe+sabbath
3 tithe	13	23	33 tithe	43
4	14 sabbath	24 tithe	34	44
5	15 tithe	25	35 sabbath	45 tithe
6 tithe	16	26	36 tithe	46
7 sabbath	17	27 tithe	37	47
8	18 tithe	28 sabbath	38	48 tithe
9 tithe	19	29	39 tithe	49 sabbath
10	20	30 tithe	40	50 jubilee

In a fifty-year period, the three-year program would have been practiced sixteen times, the sabbath-year program seven times, and the fiftieth-year program once. But notice the triple whammy. Year 48 would have been a tithing year; year 49, a sabbath year; and year 50, the jubilee year. Add to these program the festivals; weekly shabbat; laws on lending, gleaning, and harvesting; responsibilities of the extended family, clan, and tribe—and what you have is a social safety net that is in part statutory (mandated by God's laws) and in part voluntary (a matter of families caring for each other).

## What kind of a crazy God is this?

We need to remember that all these laws were given at Sinai before the nation entered the land of promise. Had I been one of the slaves, I would have asked, what kind of a crazy God have we left Egypt to follow? The answer would have been: a God who loves righteousness and justice and wants to see social holiness as a distinguishing mark of this new nation.

God made an incredibly bold promise to the nation: if they obeyed these commandments, there would be no one in need among them (Deut. 15:4). Alongside this promise was a threat. If the nation did not obey these laws, God would proclaim on them a sabbath the likes of which they could not imagine (Deut. 15).

## A distant vision, a prophetic hope

But for a few isolated attempts (Jeremiah, Nehemiah), there is no evidence that any of the three programs was ever practiced, and the promise that there would be no poor among them was never fulfilled. In the book of Ruth, Boaz is an example of someone who practiced the laws on gleaning as well as kinship. Jeremiah's prophecy suggests that it was because the nation did not observe

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the sabbath year that they were taken away into captivity by the Babylonians (Jer. 17). If the people did not voluntarily give rest to the land and the animals, God would do so by removing the people from the land into exile. A salutary lesson for us all.

The jubilee became a distant vision, a hope carried by the prophets for a time when the messiah would come and bring in a kingdom of justice, righteousness, and social holiness, when all Israel would be able to enjoy shalom beneath their vines and fig trees (Micah 4:4; Zech. 3:10). It was Isaiah in

particular who dreamt about this fulfillment: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, . . . to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor"—that is, the jubilee year (Isa. 61:1–2).

## **Messianic reinterpretation**

Centuries later these words would be read by the carpenter from Nazareth as a mandate for his ministry. “Today these words have been fulfilled in your hearing,” he told an astonished audience after announcing the platform for his ministry with these words from Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18–19). Here Yeshua was in effect saying that the jubilee program is by no means dead. God is still interested in a people characterized by social holiness, and Yeshua and his disciples were the agents chosen to bring this new reality into being.

The practical outworking of returning land may not have been possible anymore, because the vast majority of the people were landless descendants of those who had returned from exile. Nevertheless jubilee was still relevant, because its principles are eternal and need to be expressed in new ways for a new generation. Yeshua was bringing in the long-awaited kingdom, and it looked very much like jubilee revamped.

He reinterpreted the jubilee radically, making it an everyday event, a way of life rather than an event that comes around only every fifty years. He reinterpreted it to suit a nation living as taxed subjects of Roman imperialism in which the vast majority were poor, dispossessed, and landless. Furthermore the jubilee mandate was to be internalized to include spiritual liberation as well as freedom from slavery, “rest for your souls” as well as physical shabbat. His practice of the common purse with his disciples was a new expression of family in which everything was held in common—meals, material possessions. This is a microcosm of the new way of living out jubilee.

The ministry of Yeshua and the church have therefore to be viewed from the perspective of jubilee. After all, if the jubilee mandate was good enough for Yeshua’s ministry, shouldn’t it be good enough for ours? His was a holistic mission, unlike our modern missions that so often seek to make converts and not disciples.

## **Jubilee in the early church**

Pentecost with its supernatural manifestations—a mighty rushing wind, tongues of fire, people speaking in tongues—provoked questions that led to Peter’s proclamation of the gospel. These

people are not drunk. They have been filled with the Spirit. This was what Joel had prophesied would happen.

Most evangelicals would endorse the centrality of Peter's proclamation, while charismatic Christians might emphasize the supernatural signs that accompanied the sermon. But for me, the greatest miracle at Pentecost was not the supernatural manifesta-

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tions. It was the sight of new believers selling their assets and sharing their goods and daily meals with strangers who had become their newfound family members. What stands out for me is this creation of a new community that, astonishingly, cuts across all existing racial, economic, and social lines. This economic sharing is truly miraculous.

And it takes us back to the jubilee and Sinai. These early chapters of Acts tell the story of the birth of a new nation, a people of God newly formed around the twelve dis-

ciples. God was giving his Spirit—this time to write his laws in human hearts, not on a tablet of stones. The coming of the Spirit led to a spontaneous new expression of jubilee. Granted, the twelve disciples had had some experience of this economic sharing during their three years with Yeshua. Even so, they displayed a Spirit-led spontaneity as they coped with explosive growth in numbers of new family members, many of whom were poor. This new nation lived out jubilee in a fresh way for a new generation in an urban setting. This new supernaturally generous community had a wow factor that attracted thousands who joined them.

The early church grasped the comprehensive nature of the gospel as their new faith affected every aspect of their lives, including what was in their pockets. Theirs was a whole-life discipleship, not the dualistic faith of modern Christians.

Jubilee was a radical socioeconomic program that would have resulted in social holiness for the nation. It was an imaginative, humanitarian program involving a year's holiday to discourage exploitation of the land, animals, and slaves. It also included a requirement to forgive debts, release slaves, and return to their original owners all properties bought during the previous forty-

nine years. Along with wealth creation, the law provided a blueprint for wealth distribution in order to create and maintain a just society.

We observe that all the jubilee principles were also evident in the new community described in the early chapters of Acts:

**Compassionate capitalism.** Despite attempts to describe the economics of the early church as communist or socialist, the reality was that it was a form of compassionate capitalism. Believers still owned private property—a central tenet of the original jubilee provision. They opened up their private houses each day to share meals. The story of Barnabas—in contrast to that of Ananias and Sapphira—showed that the properties belonged to them and their giving was voluntary rather than coerced (Acts 4:36–37; compare Acts 5:1–11).

**Nontraditional family.** The church at Pentecost discovered a new meaning of family. All those born of the Spirit calling God their father belonged to the same family irrespective of race, social status, or gender. And as new brothers and sisters they cared for one another spiritually, emotionally, materially, and economically.

**Rediscovery of shalom.** There was forgiveness and healing—physical, emotional, spiritual. There were restored relationships. Their material needs were being met. “Great grace was upon them all.” We see a new community formed, made up of restored people, sharing their lives, welcoming strangers with confidence into their midst, feeding the widows, and generally being at peace, having favor with God and others. In a word, they rediscovered shalom.

### **Only by the Spirit’s power**

As we have noted, jubilee failed in the Old Testament. It was never carried out by the nation of Israel. Why? I believe it is because it was just too radical. It could not be carried out with mere human effort, because of our addiction to materialism. The jubilee promise that there would be no needy ones among them (Deut. 15:4) was finally fulfilled at Pentecost through the power of the Spirit: “There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). Only through the coming of the Spirit was it possible for people to love one another in this radical way. The true sign that



a person is full of the Spirit is extravagant generosity. Likewise, a Spirit-filled church will overflow with expressions of generosity toward its “family,” community, and beyond.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has written,

*It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community. He committed the entire work of salvation to that community. It was not that a community gathered round an idea, so that the idea was primary and the community secondary. It was that a community called together by the deliberate choice of the Lord Himself, and re-created in Him, gradually sought—and is seeking—to make explicit who He is and what He has done. The actual community is primary; the understanding of what it is comes second.<sup>1</sup>*

And I would add that our Lord left behind a community so that the world might see what kind of a kingdom he inaugurated and ultimately what kind of king he is.

Again I ask, if Yeshua used the jubilee mandate as his mission, should we not follow the master? If this is our calling, how do we express jubilee through the church for our generation, which longs to be wowed by something real and radical?

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 20.

## **About the author**

Kim Tan is the founder Chairman of SpringHill Management Ltd. (UK), a fund management company in biotech and social venture capital investments. He is cofounder of Transformational Business Network, a charity with social transformational businesses in developing countries. For a fuller treatment of his views on and experience with biblical principles of jubilee, see Kim Tan, *The Jubilee Gospel: The Jubilee, Spirit and the Church* (Colorado Springs: Authentic Media, 2008).