

Twenty-One Centuries: Twenty-Two Voices

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!" They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!"

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young will see visions.
Your elders will dream dreams.
Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.
The sun will be changed into darkness,
and the moon will be changed into blood,
before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*

Acts 2:1-21 (C.E.B.)

In many ways it is true to say that the church was born on Pentecost, the day Luke tells us the followers of Jesus received the Holy Spirit. Our celebration of Pentecost today will feature the voices of Christians from each of the centuries of the church's history. Some are familiar to us. Some are well known. Others we will hear are unheard of or rarely studied. In fact, some are fictitious representatives from their era.

It is our hope that each voice we hear will help us see – and know – that our present is connected to our past; just as our future is rooted in the present.

First Century (Read by Marcus Loganbill)

My name is Luke. I was with Jesus when he preached. I saw him heal many people and perform wonderful miracles. But now I want to tell you what happened on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter. I'll read from my diary about what happened on that day.

Read Scripture Text

That is what I saw and that is what I heard Peter say. Someday soon I hope to write an orderly account of all that happened with Jesus but for now, since I am a physician, there are people who need my help.

Second Century (Read by Margaret Wiebe)

My name is Irenaeus. It has been almost two hundred years since our Lord's birth and life is very difficult for his followers. I have seen for myself the terrible persecutions of the Church. To show you what I mean, I will read a district governor's letter to Emperor Trajan. The governor wrote, "I do not know exactly what to do with the Christians. Shall I punish the boys and girls as severely as grown-ups? Is just being a Christian enough to punish, or must something bad actually have been done? What I have done, in the case of those who admitted they were Christians, is, if they are Roman citizens, I send them to Rome. If they are not Roman citizens, I have them killed. I was sure they deserved to be punished because they were so stubborn. I gave them three chances to save themselves by putting incense on your altar and cursing Christ. They won't do it. I had some women slaves called deaconesses tortured; but could not find out anything worse than some crazy ideas. Many people have been touched by this foolishness and the temples were nearly empty."

Now that we are being tried by fire, I often remember what Paul said in a letter he wrote to the Church in Rome, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

Third Century (Read by Connie Luty)

My name isn't important. I am just one of the preachers of the Word. Sometimes I preach about the great truths of the faith but now, because the persecutions have slowed greatly, I talk to the people about humble matters. Here is part of what I said about manners and courtesy last Sabbath Day:

Don't cram food in your mouth as if you were packing for a journey. Don't talk with food in your mouth and don't try to drink and eat at the same time. Expensive utensils are not necessary. Won't a knife cut without a jeweled handle? What if a pan is made of earthenware? Does the table have to have ivory legs to hold a loaf? Jesus ate from a common bowl and told his disciples to sit down on the grass. He wiped their feet with a linen towel. He did not bring down a silver foot bath from heaven. Keep laughter in check. Man should not laugh all the time just because he is a laughing animal any more than a horse should neigh all the time because he is a neighing animal. A smile is better. One need not be gloomy. And if attacked by sneezing, do not startle the company with the explosion.

Remember now what Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Fourth Century (Read by Treva Greaser)

I was there when the emperor Constantine marched into Nicaea for the first meeting of the leaders of the whole Church. It has been peaceful since he became a Christian back in 312. Many of my friends think the emperor embraced Christianity solely to keep his empire together. I suppose they are right, but it has helped all of us live in more peaceful times.

The emperor called for this Council because of an argument started between an old priest and a young deacon in Alexandria. The old priest says that Christ was less than God but more than a man. The young deacon says that if Christ is less than God but more than man it means he is neither one or the other.

This controversy has consumed the entire meeting. The young deacon, his name is Athanasius, states there is one God, and that Christ shares in the being of God. The Spirit shares completely too. God is one. But within the One are three, sharing in his being: the Father who is the Lord of all the universe, the Son who lived on earth and for us died and rose, and the Spirit who breathes upon our spirits and teaches us the things of God.

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Fifth Century (Read by Heidi Johnson)

I am the bishop of a small town in North Africa. My name is Augustine. It is a hard time to be a bishop. The barbarians are plundering the Empire and Christians are suffering everywhere. I ask myself, why? The fight going on now is only part of the never-ending conflict between good and evil. The Roman Empire has grown by taking land from other people. But the Empire will pass. Something else will come, it is already beginning now. The Christian Church, although not perfect, is an expression of the forces making for good.

Nothing on earth lasts, except love. Money is made smaller if you give it away, but love grows. When money is received it stays with the person who receives it and leaves that person who gives it, but love does not leave the man who gives it, and if it is not repaid, still it stays with him, and he who receives it does not possess it unless he gives it back.

Sixth Century (Read by Ruthie Goering)

I live in Nursia, Italy. I am the abbot of a monastery in the town. My name is Benedict. The world is in a sad state, and I am convinced we must separate ourselves from the temptations of the world. It is not easy to live apart from the world and I have written some rules to help the monks live together.

The hardest rules are for the man who is abbot and I have spent a great deal of time on this rule. "After he has been appointed, the abbot should always consider that he will have to answer for his stewardship. Let him know that he ought to serve his brothers rather than preside over them. He should be learned in Divine Law, so that he may know when to bring forth things both new and old. Let him always honor mercy above justice. Let him hate vice and always love the brothers."

I am disturbed that people are beginning to call us Benedictine monks. I have not meant to start a new order of monks. I only want to live a more Godly life.

Seventh Century (Read by Natalie Hand)

It is a terrible, terrible time. Forty-five years ago in 633, the Moslems overran the richest areas of the Eastern empire. We have lost the great cities of Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. Many good people have died.

We had to consolidate the Church in the East and now we have only one patriarch. He is in Constantinople. He has to look after more than 400 dioceses. The Patriarch of Constantinople and the Emperor are angry with the Church in Rome. I'm afraid bad blood is forming between the East and the West.

Eighth Century (Read by Randy Pinkerton)

The church has just gone through a bitter fight, which seems to be the worst kind. My name is John. I don't know what started the fight. I live in Damascus where the rancor has been the worst. The issue is icons. We have many icons of the saints as well as Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Some people in the Eastern Church kiss the icons, some put them down dry wells to miraculously bring back water. Others trust the icons to do feats of magic.

I think icons are "books" for the illiterate. The man who cannot read sees the image and his mind is lifted up from the image to that for which it stands.

Finally, the controversy was settled in Nicaea by a Council. We in the East have given up icons that are sculptured and we use only flat images. The Church in Rome will continue to have sculptured icons.

I am afraid, though, that this may be the last time the East and West agree on anything.

Ninth Century (Read by Mike Voth)

I am John Scotus Erigena. I am a Christian philosopher from Ireland. Patrick is our patron saint. My favorite story of Saint Patrick is of the time a king sent messengers to present a bronze caldron to Patrick. When they returned, the king asked, "What did he say?"

"Thank you."

"Was that all he said?" asked the king. "Then go and take it away from him."

They did and when they returned the king asked, "What did he say?"

"Thank you."

"What? Thank you for giving and thank you for taking away? Then give it back to him and give him some land besides." And so it was done.

That story gives me pleasure in these days when the Empire is in shambles and few of us dare travel beyond our own villages. A dark cloud has settled on the land.

The cloud even covers the city of Rome. Many popes have not behaved as true vicars of Christ. I cannot always accept their authority. I have written, "Authority is the source of knowledge, but reason remains the norm by which all authority must be judged."

I am a lonely scholar.

Tenth Century (Read by Scott Luty)

At last there is grace and light breaking forth in the Church! My name is Odo and am the Abbot of Cluny in France. We in France have seen many evil things in the Church. There has been immortality in the cloisters, priests intrigue against each other, and the Church has been too involved in politics.

But now there is change in the Church. It started in the monasteries and began when we were allowed to elect our own abbots. Then we were placed under the protection of the Pope instead of the local bishop. Finally, we have reinstated the Rule of Benedict and it guides us in all our doings.

I heard this reform has swept throughout the Church. Someone even calls this movement, “The Truce of God.” And that is something this warring and violent age certainly needs.

Eleventh Century (Read by Delaine Stolzle)

It finally happened. It is a very sad day in the Church. The East and West have split. Now we are no longer One Church. I weep.

Anyone could see this would eventually happen because the issues were so clear. The Church in the East views Christianity as having five equal places of power but the Church in the West claims Rome as the center. Our theologies are different too. In Rome they say the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. We know that the Holy Spirit comes from the Father alone. Further, we in the East are permitted to marry. The priests in the West cannot. Our priests can confirm the grace of the Holy Spirit on those who have been baptized. In the West it is only the bishop who can confirm.

These differences have become a sharp sword which has split the Church in two. I pray that someday we will be one again.

Twelfth Century (Read by David Schmidt)

My name is Bernard. I am the head of a school in the great cathedral in my hometown of Chartres. The cathedral is not finished but it is beautiful to behold.

The ceiling rises magnificently overhead. It is supported by pillars which are connected to flying buttresses outside the building. Even though the walls are made of stone they carry very little weight. This means we are able to put tall windows in the walls. The windows tell stories of the Creation, the Flood, crossing the Red Sea, and the story of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Around the doorways and on ledges we have statues that almost look as if they are moving. It is thrilling to see. High on the outside of the building the waterspouts look like demons and animals. Someone was telling me the other day that on the South wall one of the waterspouts look like the Chief Builder of the Cathedral. I wouldn't be surprised. He has been almost like a demon. The man is a real tyrant.

The Cathedral is important to all of us, especially the peasants who cannot read. For them, the windows show the story of our faith. I don't suppose will live long enough to see it finished but what we have now is wonderful.

Thirteenth Century (Read by Kim Voth)

I am John Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury. For a while I thought would never become Archbishop because the King of England opposed my appointment. Here's what happened. The Pope wanted to appoint me Archbishop and King John wouldn't stand for it. The Pope tried to put pressure on the King by ruling that England could not spiritually participate in the Church. That made King John even more angry. Finally, the Pope excommunicated the King. At that, King John surrendered to the pressure, and I became the Archbishop of Canterbury. The barons have stepped in and together we have written a Great Charter which defines the King's power.

It was a serious moment as I watched King John sign the Magna Carta.

Fourteenth Century (Read by Joanna Pinkerton)

I was born in Bohemia in 1369. My name is John Hus and I am dean of the University at Prague. It was here at Prague that I first read the works of John Wycliffe which have had such an impact on my life.

My views are not radical. I believe the New Testament should be the law of the church and that Christ-like poverty is the Christian ideal. I believe Christ is the head of the church, not the Pope. I believe that everyone should be served the wine during Communion and not just bread alone.

It is possible that I will be burned at the stake for my views but if speaking the truth shall be cause for my execution, then that is proof it is time for the Church to be reformed.

Fifteenth Century (Read by Mike Voth)

I was just a young boy when they burned John Hus at the stake. Hus saw the same abuses in the Church that I, Savonarola, now see so clearly.

It was a surprise when the people of Florence began to listen to me, because I am just a simple Dominican monk. When I said, "Forsake the images of evil!" the citizens of Florence rose up and destroyed icons and statues in the Church.

I have long criticized the Pope and the Church. I have raised my voice against the abuses of the Church and I will not bend the truth I see. In a few moments men are coming to take me to the gallows. Speaking the truth has cost me my life. May God forgive them their sins.

Sixteenth Century

Reader 1 (Randy Quinn):

My name is Friedrich. I am the beer Meister of a tavern in Wittenberg. My favorite customer is a monk. His name is Martin Luther. Sometimes he is moody and hard to talk to but at other times he won't shut up.

I remember the day he came in after he had nailed his list of ideas to the door of our church. He thought it would cause very little notice. But I noticed and I'll tell you why.

It happened this way: My wife died last year and I wanted to buy some of the Saint's merit to get her out of purgatory and into heaven. I spent a week's worth of my wages on an indulgence for my dear wife. When I went back to the tavern, Martin Luther was there and began to talk to me about justification by faith. When I told him I had just bought an indulgence he got red in the face and looked like he would pop his collar! He said it is by faith alone that we are saved and faith is a gift from God. He said I could not buy God's grace with money, only faith in Jesus Christ can save us.

I thought about what he said and suddenly, I realized my wife was with God and I didn't have to work to get her there. I have been at peace ever since.

People are starting to talk about Martin. I'd hoped they would because what he says makes sense to me. It still does, but I wasn't prepared for the turmoil it would set in motion. It's being called The Protestant Reformation.

Reader 2 (Margaret Wiebe):

My name is Maeyken Wens. One morning in June, I went to Bible study down the lane with other believers following the third way of the Anabaptists, as we are known. I knew it was dangerous, as we are regularly hunted and persecuted by Catholics and Protestants alike. I left the younger children in the care of our oldest, Adriaen. When the sheriff's men drug everyone gathered for Bible study down the lane, I didn't look at Adriaen, hoping to keep the children safe.

Today, I and those who were taken with me, were sentenced after many months in prison. Tomorrow, we are to be burned at the stake. I must write to Adriaen and trust him to share my letter with the other children when they are old enough to hear my words.

“My dear son, begin to fear the Lord in your youth. I commend you now to the Lord. May he keep you. I trust the Lord that he will do it, if you seek him.

Love one another all the days of your life. Take little Hans in your arms now and then for me. And if your father should be taken from you, care for one another. My dear children, kiss one another once for me, in remembrance.

My dear son, do not be afraid of this suffering. It is nothing compared to the suffering which endures forever. The Lord has taken away all my fear. I cannot fully thank my God for the grace which he has shown me.

Goodbye once more, my dear son. Be kind to your father in his distress, and do not cause him any grief.

I have written this after I was sentenced to die for the testimony of Jesus Christ, on the fifth day of October, in the year of our Lord Jesus Christ, 1573.

Seventeenth Century (Read by Connie Luty)

We are one hundred years into the Anabaptist movement now. Some places we are tolerated. Others, not so much, but the violent persecutions are much rarer now. They're calling us Mennonites these days. They meant it to be derisive, but we've embraced the name. Menno Simons was an important voice in bringing order and direction to this third way movement.

Believer's baptism. Following Christ's example. Obedience to Christ. Pacifism. Menno outlined practical guidance and solid examples. He said that true evangelical faith cannot lie dormant but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love. It clothes the naked; feeds the hungry; comforts the sorrowful; shelters the destitute; aids and comforts the sad. It does good to those who would do it harm; seeks those who are lost; binds up what is wounded; heals the sick.

Following Christ's example, doing these things, we show God's love.

Eighteenth Century (Read by Ruthie Goering)

Fellow believers, know that in every language and nation today there are people zealously proclaiming God's kingdom. . . They are even praising our own fellowship and the persecutions it has endured.

We should admonish and encourage one another, and by our example edify one another in speaking and in writing, wherever and however this is possible. . .

This is especially the case because human nature is so depraved it cannot endure good days of ease, for then, generally, the human soul is destroyed by its learning to love this world and the things of this world.

I fear that in the peaceful days we have been enjoying, undisturbed and untroubled by our persecutors even some of us may have grown lukewarm. At such times of ease Satan instigates all kinds of evil counsel and manages in the most subtle ways, with love of self, of the world and money, and such kinds of dangerous devices, to entice believers of truth.

Your brother in Christ, Jacob Guth.

Nineteenth Century (Read by Randy Pinkerton)

My name is Noble Prentis. I write for the Topeka Commonwealth. I have just returned from a tour of the Mennonite settlements to see how things are progressing since my first visit in 1876, just shortly after the Mennonites had arrived from Russia. Here is some of the story that will appear in the Commonwealth at the next printing:

The whole landscape has been transformed. I left bare prairie. I returned to find a score of miniature forests in sight from every point of view. There were hedges, orchards, lanes and alleys of trees.

The quiet serenity of the land was reflected in the very names that marked each group of farms as a distinct settlement. There was Blumenfeld (Flower Field), Hoffnungsau (Vale of Hope), Brudertal (Vale of Brothers), Grunfeld (Green Field), Emmatal (Emma Vale). The Mennonites wove a poetry of their own in the simple beauty of well-planned farms and unostentatious living. They adhered to a rigid code, but they remained intensely human, people who loved life and lived it with a zest that almost contradicted their somber clothing and plain homes. And, as a fellow journalist from Hays has noted: One of the pleasing features of the Russian presence is their singing. All have good voices, and none have any hesitancy in displaying their vocal accomplishments.

Twentieth Century

(To be written and read by founding member, Kendal Warkentine)

Twenty-first Century

(To be written and read by "child of Hope," Allison Boese)

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