

Face to face: Pentecost in an isolating world

by [Andrew C. Thompson](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

Our culture's ever-increasing individualism is about to take a decisive turn. Any day now self-checkout lanes in our stores will outnumber the lanes that lead shoppers to a human cashier. At that point, "going to the market" will become a solitary enterprise.

When I walk into the grocery store closest to my home, I enter an environment designed to encourage me to do my shopping quickly and without bothering the help. Shopping carts stand waiting for me at the front door. Signs above the aisles announce the main products to be found there, and the employees are scarce. There are four check-out stations where I can scan my own groceries, place them into plastic sacks, process my coupons and feed my money into a slot. All by myself. If I do it the right way, I successfully purchase a week's worth of groceries without ever interacting with another human being.

Initially I recoiled at the idea: the world of commerce has become cold and impersonal. Why exacerbate this trend? I caved, however, because the self-checkout option is easier. I usually don't have to wait in line, and I can get out the door and on my way home more quickly.

Perhaps this isn't as successful as I'd thought, however. Lately I've realized that I'm impatient when this "faster" lane isn't as fast as usual. I become irritated when the self-checkout machine has a hiccup and I have to call over a real, flesh-and-blood human to help me.

As we move through the season after Pentecost, it is worth remembering that when Jesus Christ appeared to his disciples in the weeks following the resurrection, he did not speak to them in the disembodied voice of a Kroger self-checkout machine, and he did not beam himself into living rooms where isolated individuals were watching cable TV. He didn't send out a mass e-mail, and he didn't offer a sermon downloadable on iTunes.

Instead, he appeared in two ways. The first type of encounter was with one or two people at a time, as in his appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary near

the tomb, or to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. But when he appeared to one or two, it was not for their solitary benefit. He made a point of asking them to go to others. “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Matt. 28:10). Likewise, the encounter on the Emmaus road seems designed to motivate the pair of disciples to go and witness to the larger group (Luke 24:32-35).

The second way the resurrected Jesus appeared was to groups of his followers, as when he showed up in the midst of the disciples. In each instance, he shared a teaching or command that increased the disciples’ understanding and empowered their witness: in Matthew, it was the commission to baptize and make disciples; in Luke, a greater understanding of the scriptures; in John, the gift of the Holy Spirit itself.

In all his resurrection appearances, Jesus works to create the community that will become the church. This is the case whether he is motivating individuals to witness to the larger whole or encouraging and equipping the group of disciples itself. In all of these instances, he offers himself either *for* community or *in* community.

In October of 2005, just weeks after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, I went with a group of people to do relief work in Pascagoula, Mississippi. We stayed at an Assemblies of God church that was just far enough inland that the flooding damaged, rather than destroyed, the church building. The trip was a lesson to me in the power of the Holy Spirit working in community in almost every way—except in the case of the pastor of the church.

To be fair, this pastor was in the midst of the biggest challenge of his life. But in the process of equipping his community for the work of rebuilding homes and lives, he alienated almost everyone with whom he came into contact. Headstrong and abrasive, he pushed away not only the relief workers who stayed in his church, but as he admitted to me, his own church members as well.

He was undaunted by the adverse effects of his attitude; in fact, he took his troubles as a sign that he was right. He claimed to be carrying on a personal discourse with the Holy Spirit, and his belief in a special calling gave him all the authority he needed for the ministry of rebuilding Pascagoula.

This pastor’s background was Pentecostal, but the Pentecost that he subscribed to was a Pentecost of one. He had no need to test his divine discourse with God against

scripture, the tradition, or the community of faith because God had been revealed to him personally, and that was enough. He had a divine mandate to do anything he wanted to do.

Of course, there is no such thing as a Pentecost of one. Just as the resurrection appearances of Jesus were progenitors of Christian community, so too the Spirit descended on the disciples and drew in a new community from all nations (Acts 2). There is no private, individualistic revelation of the Holy Spirit's power—the Pentecost is an event that can be experienced only by the whole church. It is a Pentecost of all.

Pentecost reminds us that God's redemptive work happens in the context of that corporate body called the church and not in isolated, individual units. That is a pertinent reminder for our day, when individual people and individual congregations separate from larger ecclesial bodies in order to pursue their own tailored versions of discipleship. In a larger sense, it is a lesson for those who remain faithful with the church, as they too must navigate in an isolating world full of self-checkout lanes and self-proclaimed prophets.