The significance of Pentecost in the Books of Luke-Acts is particularly a Christological, ecclesiastical, and experiential event. In Luke 3:1-20, John the Baptist says that he baptizes with water, but that the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. When Jesus came to John at the Jordan, he was baptized by John as the representative of his people (Messiah represents a people; cf. Mt. 3:13-17). The heavens opened (Luke 3:21-22), and the Holy Spirit descended on Christ to install him into his Messianic office as representative of his people (Christ’s baptism was a representative baptism on behalf of those for whom he died).

This baptism “with Spirit and fire”, of which John had spoken, is to be understood as one baptism with two facets (Holy Spirit: 1) Blessing, 2) Curse; and Fire: 1) Purification, 2) Judgment; Read Mal. 3:1ff; 4:1ff; Isaiah 4:2; 11:1ff; Joel 2:28). Jesus had the Spirit since his conception (Luke 1:31-38), but the Spirit’s equipping power and presence was escalated and heightened throughout his life.

Ultimately, he was equipped at his baptism in the Jordan to prepare him as God’s Anointed Messiah so that he might accomplish the task to which the Father had sent him (Luke 3:22: “Thou are My beloved Son…”; 4:18ff; cf. Luke 4:1, 14; 5:17; 8:46; 9:1-9). The baptism that John’s water baptism ultimately pointed toward was Christ’s circumcision and baptism of fire he himself was to undergo as Messianic representative on behalf of his own (Luke 12: 49ff; cf. Col. 2:9-15; Dt. 30:1-6; Jer. 31:31-34; 32:38-40; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:24-28).

3:23ff. Based upon the lineage of Christ going back to Adam, Luke shows us that the Spirit “carried” or led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted for forty days. Luke wants the reader to understand in chapter 4 of his gospel that Jesus is the “last Adam” or the “true Israel” who was overcoming the temptations of the devil in the wilderness (Christ as the “last Adam” was not only doing what Adam failed to do, but to undo what Adam did; as the “true Israel” Jesus is undergoing suffering as Israel did in their “wilderness wanderings” on behalf of the Israel of God, the people he came to redeem).

By the power of the Spirit, Jesus overcame Satan’s temptations and proceeded to inaugurate his Kingdom into the world as the Messiah (notice how Luke 4:18ff follows immediately upon the wilderness temptations). Throughout Jesus’ life there was an increasing of the Spirit’s activity to equip him as the Messiah.

The Baptism with Spirit and fire which “Jesus the Baptist” would baptize with was still to come--but not yet! This one baptism with Spirit and fire, would come on the Day of Pentecost as well as the baptism of judgment. Not only was Christ in his crucifixion baptized with the Father’s wrath and judgment (on behalf of his people as their representative or Messiah), but the Spirit that was on him without measure, sustained him in the wrath as the God-Man underwent intense suffering as the sins of his people were laid upon him.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he proclaimed the Kingdom that had come in him (Luke 5:1-9; 8:1-2; 9:1ff; 9:27; 9:60-62; 10:8-12; 11:20; 12:31-32; 17:20-21; 18:29-30; 19:1ff; 22:14-30; Acts 1:3; 2:28ff; 28:23-31). Jesus on the cross underwent the baptism of wrath and expiated the sins of his people and propitiated God’s wrath (cf. Rom. 3:24-26; 1 John 4:10). The Father was pleased with his Son’s perfect work and raised him upon the third day. He spent time explaining to his disciples for 40 days that the suffering and resurrection of Christ was what was foretold in the Law, Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44-49). God raised Christ up to his right hand in his ascension where he was fully
vindicated, or justified and glorified as the God-Man (Acts 1:6-11; cf. Rom. 1:3-4; 1 Tim. 3:16). Because of Christ’s completed work, he was given the fullness of the eschatological Spirit in order to pour it out on “all flesh” - - he was glorified! (John 7:39; cf. Acts 2:14-36 (particularly verses 32-36); also Joel 2:28ff).

Prior to his ascension, Christ gave his “Missiological-Pneumatological agenda”: “Wait here for the promise of the Spirit…for I will pour out my Spirit on you and you will have power to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth” (my paraphrase of Luke 24:49; Acts 1:6-8). When the Day of Pentecost came, his disciples were gathered and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1ff).

Because Christ had experienced judgment on their behalf, tongues of fire rested above their heads because God’s righteous wrath was taken in full by Christ. The fire would have consumed them, but the fire rested above their heads to purify them to be like Christ ultimately. Peter on that day, preached that this was the promise of the Law, the prophets (particularly Joel), and the writings (David). Later, Peter would remember this event and speak in his epistle about “judgment beginning with the house of God” (1 Pet. 4:17ff- note: this is a “judgment” of being identified with Christ in our discipline and suffering with him, see context of 1 Peter 4:12-5:11).

Because of Christ’s perfect work, the Spirit’s descension on Pentecost was the writing of God’s law on their hearts and this was a one time event in history. There was a once-and-for-all accomplishment of Christ and a once-and-for-all pouring out of the Spirit in history. This Pentecostal experience was to have ongoing implications however. Although it was a one time event, the promise of the baptism of the Spirit would be extended and expanded.

The pouring out of the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9-11; cf. 1 Cor. 15:45-49; 2 Cor. 3:17-18) on the Day of Pentecost was a Christological event of great proportions.
The Spirit was poured out just as Christ had predicted in Acts 1:8. It was poured out in Jerusalem (to Jews in Acts 2); Samaria (to “half-Jews” or Samaritans in Acts 8); “God-fearing Gentiles” (to “non-Jews” in Acts 10), and to the whole earth in Acts 19:1ff in Ephesus (remember the promise of “the nations” being a part of Abraham’s seed). In fact, Luke ends the book of Acts with an adverb. He says that Paul, who was in Rome, was preaching the Kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered (avkwluj twj). From Jerusalem to Rome, the Spirit had been poured out and it continues to this day as long as Christ tarries.

The significance of Pentecost in Luke-Acts and for the Christian life can be appreciated as a “Christological Pentecost” because of the work that Christ accomplished in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. It was a once-and-for-all event of ecclesiastical proportions because of the spread of the Kingdom of God and the building of the Church throughout the book of Acts. From Acts 1:8 to 28:31 the gospel of the Kingdom spread from Jerusalem to Rome. This great work of Christ, this musterion or mystery was that which included Jews and Gentiles (the goy/ ethnoi or “nations”) in the promise to Abraham and “to his seed” (Gen. 15:1-7; cf. Gal. 3:15-27; Rom. 16:25-27- the mystery that had been kept secret, yet revealed in the prophets, but misinterpreted and kept hidden in God’s wisdom, cf. 1 Cor. 2:6ff).

The experiential dimension of the significance of Pentecost is that the Word of Christ, founded upon the Apostles and Prophets (Eph. 2:20) is still being preached to the “ends of the earth.” When anyone by faith alone turns to Christ alone for salvation he receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit as he is baptized into one body by one Spirit; this is our union with Christ.

The Holy Spirit unites the believer by faith to partake of all the benefits of Christ that was gained in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Pentecost’s significance was a once-and-for-all, historical event (historia salutis), not a
repeatable or normative experience (ordo salutis) such as those who teach some kind of “second blessing” (whether our Pentecostal friends or Roman Catholics with Baptism and then confirmation). [One footnote: there has always been a problem for some in the church of interpreting a descriptive portion of Scripture as if it was prescriptive or normative for all ages.

We must be careful to distinguish between descriptive portions of Scripture which tell of a historical event, and those which are prescriptive or normative and involve didactic or teaching for every age of the church.

Example: Is the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 24 descriptive of how Isaac sought his wife Rebekah or is it prescriptive of the way all of us should seek a wife? This narrative teaches us about something that happened in history, not the way it should always happen in history. In the same way, Pentecost is an historical event of expanding and extended proportions but it is not to teach us how every Christian is supposed to be converted through “knowing Jesus” as the apostles did, then to later be baptized by the Holy Spirit as they were.

We should remember never to see descriptive, historical events as a pattern for our teaching or theology, there are much clearer didactic portions that God has graciously provided. Sorry for the long excursus, but this is a big problem with why we have differences between our Baptist, Lutheran, and Pentecostal friends - keep these guidelines in your mind when interpreting or explaining Scripture to someone else and you might bring understanding to yourself and other, if the Lord allows!]

Believers are continually sustained and filled throughout the Christian life (Eph. 5:18), but to speak of one being a “Pentecostal” is in reality to speak of one who has by faith been baptized by one Spirit into one Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 8; 12), and has partaken in real space and time of the benefits of “Christ the
Baptizer” that was the promise given on the historical day of Pentecost. In other words, Pentecost is no more repeatable than Christ’s resurrection and ascension. Our death and resurrection with Christ and being seated with him (Eph. 2:4; Rom. 6:3-6; Col. 2:12; 3:1-4), in our union with him is once-and-for-all and when this happens, the experiential dimension of the historical event of Pentecost becomes a life-giving reality for the Christian life!!

Therefore, in the Christological, ecclesiastical, and experiential dimensions, Pentecost is ultimately significant because we taste not Christ’s baptism with God’s wrath, but we taste the blessed and eschatological hope in the first fruits (aparche) and earnest (arrabon) of the Spirit NOW- - these are the blessings of the Christian life: knowing God and being led by His Spirit because we are in union with Christ.

CRB