

PENTECOST--BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH

Fifty days after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and ten days after our Lord's ascension into heaven, an event took place, the equal of which the world has not since seen but the ^{abiding} power of which the world ever waits to see. It is Pentecost--the birthday of the church, the fulfillment of Christ's many promises concerning the Holy Spirit, the endowment with power, and the salvation of 3000 souls.

I. THE PROPHECY OF PENTECOST

Pentecost was no accident; it was a divinely planned event. In Leviticus 23 is recorded a series of seven annual feasts of the Jews which are "a shadow of good things to come" (Heb. 10:1). It is here that we find the prophecy of Pentecost.

The first of these feasts was Passover (vs. 4-5). This marked a new beginning for the children of Israel, for on this day their calendar was changed. It remembered most vividly the deliverance from Egyptian bondage and reminded them that the deliverance was through the shedding of blood (Exodus 12). The antitype is Christ our passover who is sacrificed for us (1 Cor. 5:7).

The second in order was the feast of Unleavened Bread (vs. 6-8). This was closely associated with Passover and lasted seven days during which all leaven was rigidly excluded from the houses of Israel. Since leaven is a type of evil, this feast speaks in the Christian experience of the next step after redemption; that is, the lifelong walk in separation from evil. "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened . . ." (1 Cor. 5:7).

Firstfruits was the third annual feast. No date was set, for the

observance of this feast depended on the ripening of the grain for harvest. When this time arrived, some from the temple would gather a small amount of the grain, thresh it, grind it into flour, and present it unto the Lord. It was a token of the harvest which would be gathered. The antitype is Christ Himself who said, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John 12:24), and of whom it was written, "Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming" (1 Cor. 15:23).

The fourth was the feast of Pentecost (vs. 15-21). This is sometimes called the feast of weeks because it fell seven (a week of) weeks after Firstfruits. Its characteristic ceremony was the offering of the first two loaves marking the close of harvest. So, on the day of Pentecost of the second chapter of Acts the Holy Spirit joined as one loaf Jew and Gentile into one body.

II. THE POWER OF PENTECOST (2:1-13)

The Power of Pentecost is a Person. He is the third person of the Trinity although the designation third does not imply in any sense that He is any less important than the others in the Godhead. He is a Person, not an influence (and hence should not be designated it) as proved by many passages of Scripture (1 Cor. 12:11; Rom. 8:2; John 15:26; 16:13-14). In a very special sense, this which began on the day of Pentecost is His age.

A. The Evidence of His Coming (2:1-4)

1. Wind. A sound as of a rushing mighty wind was the first evidence of the Spirit's coming. It came suddenly so that it could not be attributed to any natural cause. It came from heaven which

refers both to the impression given of its origin and to its actual supernatural origin. It was not wind, but a roar or reverberation, for the literal translation of the phrase in verse 2 is "an echoing sound as of a mighty wind borne violently." It filled all the house, for doubtless the 120 occupied more than one room in the house. How fitting this first evidence of the Spirit's coming was, for the Lord had used this very symbol when He spoke of the things of the Spirit to Nicodemus (John 3:8), and the disciples were doubtless reminded of it.

2. Fire. The audible sign, wind, is now followed by a visible one, fire. Actually the tongues which looked like fire divided themselves over the company, a tongue settling upon the head of each one. This too was an appropriate sign for the presence of the Holy Spirit, for fire had always been to the Jews a symbol of the Divine presence (Exod. 3:2; Deut. 5:4). The form of the original text makes us doubt the presence of material fire though the appearance of the tongues was as if they were composed of fire.

The Spirit is not fire, and did not come in the fire they saw. That was the symbol granted; but never granted since, because unnecessary. The abiding fact was that of the Spirit filling these waiting souls.¹

3. Languages. Finally, each began to speak in a real language which was new to him and which was understood by those from the various lands who were familiar with them. This was the third miracle, and although some have assumed that this miracle was wrought on the ears of the hearers, this is certainly a forcing of the plain, natural sense of the narrative. Others have thought that the miracle of tongues on the day of Pentecost is the same as the gift of tongues described elsewhere. Verses six to eight, however,

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, The Acts of the Apostles, p. 25.

clearly indicate that it was not jargon but real languages which were spoken. The imperfect tense, was giving, may indicate that they spoke in turn, one after another.

Sound, fire, voices were the evidences of the Spirit's coming. These were also connected with the giving of the law (Heb. 12:k8-19), but how different were the results on the day of Pentecost.

B. The Effects of His Coming (2:5-13)

1. Crowd. These phenomena could not help but attract attention, and consequently a crowd gathered quickly. On this day of Pentecost Jerusalem was jammed, for it was one of the three great festivals at which the law required attendance of all Jews at the temple. From all parts of the city they came to the place where the apostles were assembled. The fact that they are called "dwellers" (vs. 5) does not necessarily imply that they were permanent residents of the city (cf. Heb. 11:9); rather, the striking fact is that there was such a wide geographical representation. There were Eastern or Babylonian Jews, Syrian Jews, Egyptian Jews, Roman Jews, Cretes and Arabians. Each heard testimony to the wonderful works of God in his mother tongue.

2. Comment. First, the people were amazed. Literally the Scripture says they stood out of themselves with wide-open astonishment (vs. 7). This is a mental reaction showing that the phenomena of Pentecost arrested them mentally. Second, they were perplexed (vs. 12). This is a strong compound word from an adjective which means impassable and hence comes to mean to be wholly and utterly at a loss. This is mental defeat. "The amazement meant that they did not know. The perplexity meant that they knew they did not know."² But ignorance is always an overwhelming blow to man's

² Morgan, op. cit., p. 39.

pride; consequently this crowd, thus driven to find an answer to what they had seen and heard, was driven to criticism (vs. 13). This was mental activity but with wrong conclusions in this instance. And yet on the basis of the evidence they had, it is not surprising that these Satanically-blinded minds should conclude that the disciples were drunk.

Thus was the impression made by the first church. Today such reactions from the world not only are not forthcoming but are avoided. But why? Should not a Spirit-filled church whose works should be supernatural expect that the world to whom these things are foolishness (1 Cor. 2:14) shall be amazed, perplexed, and critical? This would bring opportunity, as it did for Peter, to proclaim the message of salvation, and though the means and methods may differ today, God help us to create such an impression on the neighborhood, city, and world that men will take notice of what we have to say.

III. THE PREACHING OF PENTECOST (2:14-47)

A. The Sermon (2:14-36)

As spokesman for the eleven Peter seizes the opportunity which had been given for a witness by answering the charge of drunkenness which had been levelled at the apostles. Peter takes a pertinent theme and ably develops it. The sermon is not only doctrinally sound but homiletically perfect. Thus, before considering the content of the sermon we should notice a few things about Peter's homiletics.

First of all, he stood, a new method in itself among these people and a proper posture for a herald of salvation (vs. 14). Next come two important requirements for a good message--he spoke loudly enough and enunciated clearly enough (vs. 14). He spoke to the people and not merely before them as is too often the case these days (vs. 14).

He wisely introduced his sermon by seizing upon the local situation. Taking that which is uppermost in his hearers' minds, he formulates his introduction as an explanation of that which they had just seen and heard (vs. 15). He does not tell any jokes or funny stories. Nothing in the situation or no one in the audience reminded Peter of a certain story, etc.,etc. Peter's mind was full of Scripture, not stories; Peter's concern was for people, not pleasantries. The amount of Scripture he used in his sermon is startling by contrast with the current trend, for his message is a simple unfolding and exposition of the meaning of the Word. It was not a topical or textual sermon but strictly an expository message. Notice further that Peter applied the message (vs. 23, 38). He does not say "someone", but "ye." Finally, the message brought conviction of heart which led to change of heart and life. Such was the method of the message of Pentecost.

1. Introduction--Explanation (2:14-21). The message itself begins with an explanation to the assembled crowd of what the phenomenon they had just witnessed is not. It is not what they had supposed it to be, drunkenness, for it was only nine o'clock in the morning. Pentecost was a feast day, and the Jews who were engaged in the exercises of the synagogues of Jerusalem would have abstained from eating and drinking until 10 a. m. or even noon. Furthermore, only the lowest class of revellers and debauchers would be drunk so early any day. Even the Scripture recognizes this fact as a general rule (1 Thess. 5:7).

From this categorical denial of the charge of drunkenness, Peter passes easily and naturally to the explanation of what the phenomenon is. It is not wine, he says, but the Holy Spirit that

is producing this phenomenon (and, of course, this is not the only instance of such a comparison, Eph. 5:18). It is not intoxication; it is inspiration.

To prove this Peter quotes from Joel 2:28-32. This is a very definite prophecy of the Holy Spirit's being poured out when Israel is reestablished in her own land. The question is not the interpretation of the passage but the use Peter makes of it. Was it fulfilled then? If words mean anything at all, then obviously it was not. Some, recognizing this, say that Joel's prophecy was partially fulfilled at Pentecost, the complete fulfillment awaiting a later day. This may be so. However, it seems that all Peter is saying is that the Holy Spirit, not wine, is responsible for what they had seen. The quotation from Joel is simply to point out to these Jews that they should have recognized this as being produced by the Spirit, not because He was fulfilling Joel but because He was doing a similar work. In other words, their own Scriptures should have reminded these Jews that the Spirit is able to do what they had just seen. Another has well said:

And so, on the day of Pentecost, Peter does not say, "then was fulfilled that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;" but, this is that which was spoken" --for, although the outpouring of Pentecost finds its only explanation in Joel, the fulfillment of that prophecy is yet to come, when the Spirit, then poured out on all disciples, shall be "poured out upon all flesh."³

Although Peter explains the source of the distinctive occurrences of Pentecost, he does not actually explain what was accomplished on that day. It remains to the apostle Paul to do that, but we must understand what it was before continuing with his message. Peter has

³ Arthur T. Pierson, Stumbling Stones Removed from the Word of God, p. 50.

explained that the Spirit is the agent of Pentecost; Paul tells us that the church, the body of Christ, is the product. This is the primarily distinctive accomplishment of the Spirit's work on that day.

One of the last things of which our Lord spoke before He left the earth was the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). It is clear from His words that this was something hitherto unexperienced by His disciples--even those to whom He had said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost" (John 20:22). The baptism of the Spirit at the time of the ascension was still something new in the experience of men. Although it is not specifically recorded in Acts 2 that the baptism of the Spirit occurred on the day of Pentecost, it is recorded in Acts 11:15-16 that this happened then, and Peter states that this was the fulfillment of the promise of Acts 1:5. However, it is Paul who explains what the baptism of the Spirit accomplishes. This he does in 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been made to drink into one Spirit." In other words, on the day of Pentecost men were first placed into the body of Christ and that by the Spirit's baptism. Since the church is the body of Christ (Col. 1:18), the church could not have begun until the day of Pentecost. It is correct to speak of Old Testament assemblies, but it is not correct to speak of the true church, the body of Christ, in its technical New Testament meaning until the day of Pentecost. Hence Pentecost is truly the birthday of the church. Furthermore, since no reference to the baptism of the Spirit is found in the Old Testament, since all references in the gospels are prophetic, and since in all prophecies of the future kingdom there is no reference to the Spirit's baptism, it may be concluded that it is a work "found

only in the present dispensation, a work peculiar to the Church, and constituting the work of the Spirit by which the Church is formed and joined to Christ forever."⁴

2. Theme--Jesus is Messiah (2:22-35). To the English reader it does not mean so much to say that Jesus is Messiah or Christ. To the Jew on the day of Pentecost this was an assertion which required convincing proof. This was the theme of Peter's sermon. He seeks to prove that the Jesus of Nazareth whom they knew well is their Messiah of the Old Testament Scriptures whom they also knew well. From Old Testament prophecies Peter presents a picture of the Messiah. From contemporary facts he presents a picture of Jesus. He superimposes these two pictures on each other to prove that Jesus is Messiah. The foundation of the proof is the resurrection.

First, there is the proclamation of the resurrection (vs. 22-24). Peter declares who was raised from the dead, and, of course, that one is Jesus of Nazareth. He was accredited by the miracles of His life (vs. 22); he was crucified by the assembled company (vs. 23); He was gloriously raised by almighty God (vs. 24). In life, death, and resurrection Jesus is Messiah. The picture is complete, but only because of the resurrection.

Second, Peter reminds them of the predictions of the resurrection (vs. 25-31). Here he declares who was not raised, that is, David. Peter quotes the psalm of resurrection, Psalm 16:8-11 and applies it to Messiah. He defends the application by demonstrating that the psalm was not fulfilled in the experience of David, for "he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us unto this day."

⁴ John F. Walvoord, The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, p. 162.

Of whom, then, was David speaking? It could only have been of the seed promised him who would sit upon the throne of David eternally (vs. 30, cf. 2 Sam. 7:13). This was the Jews' Messiah and obviously He had to be a resurrected person. For Peter's present purposes the picture of Messiah from the Old Testament is complete. He has established the fact that He must be a risen person in order to sit on the throne of David forever.

Third, Peter states the proofs of the resurrection. Now he declares who He is who was raised--this Jesus who is your Messiah. The connection of this with the preceding has well been stated as follows:

It was not enough to show, as Peter had done, that the prophecy could not relate to David, or that it might relate to one long after him, or even that it did relate to the Messiah, unless he could identify that individual. The importance of distinguishing between our Lord's personal name and his official title is peculiarly apparent here, where the neglect of it converts into a mere tautology the last link of a concatenated argument. What he said in the preceding verse was, that David spake of the Messiah's resurrection. What he here says is, that this Messiah was no other than the Jesus whom they crucified.⁵

This important point is first proved by reminding the crowd that there were many eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. It is important to notice that there is no debate or challenge of this statement. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was that well attested to the minds of these thousands of people who were in the very city where it had occurred less than two months before.

It is further proved by the fact that this Jesus is now exalted (vs. 33). This implied negative answers to two questions: Can a mere

⁵ Joseph Addison Alexander, The Acts of the Apostles, I, 78.

man occupy the place at the right hand of God? and can a dead man be exalted?

The third proof of the resurrection is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (vs. 33). This again would remind them that a mere man could not possibly do this; rather, this One must be risen and Divine.

3. Conclusion--Application (2:36). Peter now puts it up to his hearers to decide, and yet there really is no choice so conclusive has been his argument. How gracious of God to appeal once again to the very people who had crucified His Son. How strange of Peter to have no lengthy invitation! He needed none, for the Spirit of God had used the Word of God to bring deep conviction to the hearts of the people. So should it be whenever the message of the Cross is proclaimed.

B. The Results (2:37-47)

For the word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12).

So it was on the day of Pentecost.

1. A Conviction (2:37). First of all, there was conviction of heart. The word translated "pricked" is a rare one which means to pierce, to sting sharply, to stun, to smite. Outside the Scriptures it is used of horses dinting the earth with their hoofs. What a graphic picture of the Spirit's work in the hearts of those people. This conviction of heart brought a question, "What shall we do?" and that in turn led to the second result of the sermon.

2. A Change (2:38-41). To the question Peter answered, "Repent and be baptized." This summarizes the two-fold change that was

was wrought. First, there was a change of mind (this is the basic meaning of repentance), and yet in understanding this matter two extremes must be avoided. The one is that repentance does not mean mere sorrow which is related to the emotions, for one can be sorry for sin without being repentant. The other is to guard against the idea that repentance is a mere mental process. Though the word does literally mean a change of mind, Scriptural repentance is more than mere mental assent to facts. Notice Romans 2:5 where lack of repentance is linked with the heart in the phrase "imp~~ent~~ent heart." This is the negative of the root word repentance. Hence, Peter was telling his inquirers that they must have a genuine change of mind about Jesus of Nazareth. This involved no longer thinking of Him as merely the carpenter's son of Nazareth, an imposter, but now receiving Him as both Lord and Messiah.

The second part of the change was to submit to water baptism as the visible proof of their repentance. This was not merely baptism, rather Christian baptism was the order of the day, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. This was entirely different from Jewish baptisms and the baptism of John the Baptist, and it had a special significance for Peter's Jewish hearers. Even today for the Jew it is not his profession of Christianity nor his attendance at Christian services nor his acceptance of the New Testament but his partaking of water baptism that definitely and finally excludes him from the Jewish community and marks him off as a Christian. This explains why such an emphasis is put on the ordinance here and elsewhere where Jewish converts are especially in view. The language of verse 41 implies that the 3000 converts were all baptized on that same day. There were numerous pools and reservoirs in Jerusalem which would provide the facilities

for this even by immersion. If all of the 120 disciples assisted in administering the ordinance it could easily be done in a very short time. In a modern instance 34 men baptized 3381 converts in four hours.⁶

⁶ "Life," August 14, 1950.

⁷ Dr. A. T. Robertson explains well the meaning of the words "unto the remission of your sins" (vs. 38), and I quote him lest any misinterpret the words of Peter to teach baptismal regeneration. He says: "In themselves the words can express aim or purpose for that use of eis does exist as in I Cor. 2:7 But then another usage exists which is just as good Greek as the use of eis for aim or purpose. It is seen in Matt. 10:41 . . . where it cannot be purpose or aim, but rather the basis or ground, on the basis of the name of prophet, righteous man, disciple, because one is, etc. It is seen again in Matt. 12:41 about the preaching of Jonah They repented because of (or at) the preaching of Jonah. The illustrations of both usages are numerous in the N. T. and the Koine generally One will decide the use here according as he believes that baptism is essential to the remission of sins or not. My view is decidedly against the idea that Peter, Paul, or any one in the New Testament taught baptism as essential to the remission of sins or the means of securing such remission. So I understand Peter to be urging baptism on each of them who had already turned (repented) and for it to be done in the name of Jesus Christ on the basis of the forgiveness of sins which they had already received." (Word Pictures in the New Testament, III, pp. 35-36.)

3. A Church (2:42-47). Note first its commencement (vs. 41). On the very first day the Lord (cf. vs. 47) added about 3000 souls. How wonderful that the record says "souls" and not "names."

Note, second, its continuance (vs. 42). The power of the early church was due largely, humanly speaking, from the facts recorded in this verse. There was no rapid falling away from the newly-embraced faith. Indeed, it was just the opposite, for membership in the early church meant persevering adherence. It was, first, to the teaching of the apostles. "The church is apostolic because it cleaves to the apostles" ⁸ Teaching had always had a prominent place among the Jews, and it is not strange to find the Christian society appearing first as a school. The apostles were the first teachers, and the bulk of their teaching we now have in the gospels. It consisted of the facts of our Lord's life, His doctrine and teaching. The church today could well afford to emulate the early church in this. Instead of capitalizing on new converts and exploiting them, we would do better to teach them even if it means keeping them in the background for a while. It is always striking to notice how much of the truth the apostle Paul taught his converts in every city.

Second, they continued steadfastly in fellowship, and this evidently is to be considered in its broadest sense, for the text says "the fellowship." This means partnership with God, with others in the common salvation, and in sharing of material substance.

Third, they continued in the "breaking of the bread." The reference is no doubt to the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, but it

⁸ Richard Belward Rackham, The Acts of the Apostles, p. 33.

was also doubtless connected in these early days with the Agape or Love Feast forming the climax of this common meal. At the very first this was evidently done daily (vs. 46) though afterward it seemed to form the great act of worship on the Lord's Day (20:7). Concerning the frequency of the observance of the Lord's Supper today, another says:

It is true that there is no command to keep this remembrance every week, but there is this appeal, "This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup ye do show the Lord's death till He come" (1 Cor. 11:25,26). To a loving heart an appeal is as effective as a command. Thus our practice in the frequency of breaking bread becomes a test of affection for the One we remember. Young men leaving home for war are asked by wives or mothers to write often. The test of true love is found in how often they do write home.⁹

It is certainly evident that the early church remembered her Lord with great frequency and great freedom. The ordinance was celebrated in homes; its administration was certainly not limited to the "ordained clergy," for there had not even yet been a service that resembled an ordination. God give us more of that same liberty in the Spirit today.

Fourth, they continued in prayers. Again the definite article is with this word and probably indicates that there were definite times for prayer. Furthermore, this is a word that is used exclusively for prayer to God and indicates the general offering up of the wishes and desires to God in the frame of mind of devotion.¹⁰

There is no doubt, is there, that if these four aspects of the life of the early church were adhered to today that there would be

⁹ A. S. Loizeaux, The Weekly Celebration of the Lord's Supper, p. 5.

¹⁰ J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, p. 160.

stronger Christians and stronger churches? "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

Note, thirdly, the characterizations of this early group. They are three; fear (vs. 43), favor (vs. 47), and fellowship (vs. 44-46). Fear kept on coming on this new group as signs and wonders kept on being done (both verbs are imperfect) through the apostles. This fear was not alarm or dread of injury but a prevailing sense of awe in the manifest presence of the power of God. Favor was also their portion with the people at this time although things changed very soon. Finally, their fellowship in spiritual things demonstrated itself in fellowship of goods and worship. No doubt many of the pilgrims to the feast of Pentecost lingered in Jerusalem to learn more of their new-found faith in Christ, and this created a pressing economic need. Providing for them through the sale and distribution of goods was God's way of meeting this expediency. After the incident of Ananias and Sapphira there is no further record of the use of this plan, for its necessity was probably short-lived. However, the saints in Jerusalem always remained poor as evinced by the collection Paul made for them.

Pentecost is past. The church is born. The human agent was Peter; the Divine, the Holy Spirit. The church today must learn many lessons from the church of Pentecost days, the chief of which is that the same Power is available today. The church does not need another Pentecost, for the Holy Spirit is the same and the message is the same. What about the man?