

THE HOLY SPIRIT Poured OUT OVER THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance”.

(Acts 2: 4)

It is good and important that we remember the event of Pentecost and constantly reacquaint ourselves with its significance. Of all the christian feasts, besides Ascension perhaps, this one, as we saw in the previous chapter, is maybe the most neglected and the easiest forgotten. What really did happen on Pentecost? How are we to interpret the occurrence in the broader context of the Bible? And what does Pentecost imply for us today, who live in a much different time and age? These questions have our attention in this section.

Pentecost is the last feast on the christian calendar. The festive calendar starts with advent and Christmas, and ends with Pentecost. We may therefore say that Pentecost closes off a certain period of history (the ministry of Christ on earth) and marks the beginning of a new era, the final and concluding phase of world history until the glorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ. This makes a correct understanding of Pentecost very important for the church of Christ.

In the previous chapter we looked at the specific day on which the Holy Spirit was poured out. We now focus on the wondrous signs in, and the amazing results of this outpouring, so that we may get a more complete picture of what happened on that day.

THE HARVEST

We have seen that Pentecost is inseparably connected to the harvest of the crops. We are not going to “allegorize” or spiritualize this, but it is clear that the New Testament speaks in a special way about the harvest. Our Lord Jesus Christ in His parables spoke at various times about it as the gathering in of believers, the gathering of the church. He said, for example, that the harvest was plentiful, but that the workers were few. And we can read in the letter of James, written to Jewish Christians: “Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures” (1:18). Here the idea of “first fruits” is indeed concretely tied to believers brought forth by the Word of God.

This is the prophetic significance of the day of Pentecost. That is why the Lord waited for this day. Good Friday and Easter mark the great victory over sin and death; Pentecost marks the beginning of the great and final harvest of those who are redeemed from sin and saved from death. Here is the fulfillment of all the preceding feasts. For now, more than ever before, it is evident that the harvest is from the Lord. He will ensure that His church is gathered out of all peoples and places and times in the unity of the true faith. Because of Pentecost we can say today, “I believe a holy, catholic, Christian church.”

WONDROUS SIGNS

Explainers have always been fascinated by the signs which accompanied the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost: wind and fire (verses 2 & 3). In the next section I want to devote more attention to these signs, but let us now already take a general look at what is reported in this passage. To be sure, there was no wind

and there was no fire, for the Bible says: a sound *like* the rush of a mighty wind and tongues *as of* fire.

The sound of the wind fills the entire “house” where they were sitting. It could have been the upper room where they celebrated the last passover. It could also have been a corridor in the temple. The fire appears first as a ball of fire, from which individual tongues or flames separate themselves, spread out over the gathered disciples and resting on each one of them. They all get their own tongue of fire.

So we have here an audio-visual presentation which was not only apparent to the disciples, but noticed also by outsiders. This at least was true of the sound of the wind, for it caused others to come and to see what could be the cause of these manifestations (verse 6).

SIGNS ARE MERELY INDICATIONS

Now signs are never important in themselves, they always direct us to something greater. And we need not speculate on what these signs may possibly mean, for they simply indicate the presence of the Holy Spirit. From the signs it becomes clear that the Holy Spirit has descended and stays in the midst of the church.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself already compared the presence and the work of the Spirit to the wind, when He said to Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

The wind is symbolic of renewal. It brings the clouds that give the rain. The wind is also symbolic of separation, for it blows away the chaff that clings to the grain. The wind is free and sovereign, and goes where it wills. So the wind is here an indication of the sovereign and free work of the Holy Spirit who renews as He wills and separates believer from unbeliever. In Hebrew the same word is used for “wind” and “spirit.”

Fire was already in the Old Testament a sign of the powerful presence of God. Remember the “burning bush” at which Moses first met the LORD. Think of the fiery cloud which guided the people of Israel out of Egypt. Think of the fire and smoke which filled the temple when Solomon dedicated it to the LORD. Therefore John the Baptist could speak about Christ as the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Fire is also symbolic of renewal and purification. It burns away the unfruitful branches so that the fruitful branches have more room to grow. You are either warmed or burned by it. It purifies or destroys. And nothing is able to stop its force and power.

GOD HAS COME TO STAY

These two signs convey one message: God Himself has now descended to His people. He has come in the Holy Spirit, in a sovereign and free manner, to live with His people spiritually. Wherever these signs were manifested before, the

LORD God was present, either to bless or to judge, and now on the day of Pentecost God has come to His people in order to stay. For notice how it says of the tongues of fire that they *rest* on each one of them. Rest. Stay. It denotes a position of permanence. As we sing in Hymn 36: "Praise the Spirit who will never leave the Church by blood once bought."

The signs indicate that the Holy Spirit comes in the peace and fellowship which Christ has earned on the cross. He will be a light within the believers and a fiery wall round about them. God is prepared to live with His people for Christ's sake. The distance is gone and the gap has been bridged at Golgotha. We see here the union of God and His church.

At the same time, wind and fire remain powerful, separating, purifying forces! The outpouring of the Holy Spirit brings with it a time of decision. It is the beginning of the last phase, the critical phase of world history. Now the thoughts of men throughout the world will be made manifest by the power of the Spirit. Now the last offensive of the Gospel has begun.

A TIME OF GRACE

Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke of this period of time as a time of grace, as the acceptable year of the Lord. It is the time when repentance is still possible, the time when judgment is held off until the great day of Christ's return. It is also the time when because of Christ there will be division: parents against children, children against parents, brothers against brothers. And out of a man's own family shall come his enemies, for the sake of the Gospel.

The wondrous signs in the outpouring, wind and fire, are very comforting. God dwells with us, for Christ's sake, in the Holy Spirit. We have fellowship with Him by faith. Yet the warning remains: the time of the last decision has come. We will all have to unite in the truth and submit to the true apostolic preaching which began on the day of Pentecost.

THE EFFECT OF THE OUTPOURING

Let us consider yet what is the effect of this outpouring. The immediate effect is that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (verse 4). All of them, not one excluded. All the disciples experience the same gift. There is no distinction between clergy and laity, as if the one has more than the other.

The effect of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is that the church as a body becomes a prophetic and witnessing church. Some may have a more prominent task in this respect than others, and the apostle Peter will deliver the first Pentecostal sermon, but all are involved and activated by the Spirit to witness of the great work of God.

For we read, "and [they] all began to speak in other tongues." This is the immediately audible effect of the outpouring: the disciples in the house, or now spilling out, as it were, on to the streets, begin to speak "with other tongues."

THE SPEAKING IN TONGUES

There has been much discussion about the significance of these tongues, and whether it is the same thing about which the apostle Paul speaks later in I Corinthians, the ecstatic tongue-speaking which is sought after in Pentecostal groups. I believe that the two are not the same. The tongue-speaking of the Corinthians was not intelligible; no one could follow it unless there was an interpreter. Paul therefore concluded that it was not really edifying for others and that it did not have a prophetic meaning.

But here on the day of Pentecost everybody understands. They all say: we hear them speaking in our own languages, and that means known languages, not some incomprehensible gibberish.

We cannot fully explain this. We do not know whether it lay in the speaking of the disciples or in the hearing of the multitudes that everything could be understood. But the point is: the people heard about the great works of God.

The speaking of the church begins. This means: a new and public ministry of prophecy commences. The normative proclamation of the Gospel and the authoritative apostolic preaching find their starting point on Pentecost in Jerusalem. The church, made bold in the Spirit, comes out to proclaim the Word of God.

“As the Spirit gave them utterance,” it says in verse 4. Which means: the Holy Spirit determined exactly what they were going to say and how they were to say it. The speaking of the church is firmly controlled by the Holy Spirit. The disciples, so to speak, are under the quality control of the Spirit; they speak as He wishes. He binds them to the Gospel while they bind the people to the Gospel.

They hear about the great works of God. What else can this be than the work of salvation in Jesus Christ? What else than the redemption and the renewal of life? That is the message of the church since Pentecost. There is life in the Son of God. And it comes with the serious call to repent, to break with a former way of life, and to live from now on according to God’s will. The apostle Peter will work these elements out in his subsequent sermon.

AN OFFICIAL BEGINNING

Pentecost then marks the official beginning of the proclamation of the apostolic doctrine. These men in Jerusalem are the first missionaries, the first labourers in the great harvest. And on that day already many are brought in, at least three thousand souls (verse 41). For the Word of God is powerful, “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,” Romans 1:16.

Do you see how on this day there is already a rich harvest for the Lord? That harvest continues, because Pentecost means an ongoing harvest, until the last has been brought in by the preaching of the Gospel through faith. Our worship, our preaching and baptizing also today are proof that the Spirit is poured out and that the harvest is being gathered.

And when the full harvest is ready, the Son of man Himself shall come and take His harvest home (Hymn 57: 3, *Book of Praise*). That is what Pentecost calls for: the final harvest feast, which is also the marriage feast of the Lamb, when death and sin have been cast away forever, and we receive perfect joy, the eternal ecstasy of full blessedness. That is the one feast which still must come and will come, the feast which will never end.