

IX *The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit*

No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants both men and women, I pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

(ACTS 2:17, 18)

A book on the Person and work of the Holy Spirit would be incomplete without dealing with the meaning of Pentecost. I dealt with the meaning of Pentecost in my publication *Celebration Salvation* (Premier Publishing), but I now deal with the meaning of Pentecost as prophesied by Joel and explained by the apostle Peter in his sermon recorded in Acts 2.

Some of the people of Jerusalem, who witnessed the effect of Pentecost, thought that the disciples were drunk. They heard these plain men speaking in other tongues, praising God joyfully, and they mocked, “They are filled with new wine.” They are just a bunch of drunks, that’s all, noisy, rowdy, and creating a public disturbance. Seeing the fact that in verse 14 a general plural is used, I think that many people immediately accepted that explanation: of course, they’re drunk. These fellows are plastered. People readily accept the first plausible, negative explanation.

When the apostle Peter stands up to explain to the gathered crowds what really has happened, he’s in a bit of a pickle. Damage control is required. He quickly puts down the idea of drunkenness, “These men are not drunk, since it is only the third hour of the day.” Peter says: it’s only nine o’clock in the morning, and who is then already drunk? At this hour the real

drunks are still sleeping off last night's binge. It is foolish to suggest that the disciples are drunk.

What follows now? Peter still has to explain what has really happened, but how do you explain something like the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which has never happened before? How do you explain a totally new phenomenon?

The apostolic method

The apostolic method is always first to go to the Scriptures. There you recognize true preaching. It begins and ends with the given Scriptures, also on Pentecost. Peter says: people, if you want to understand what has happened here today, you have to go back to the Bible. New events are always part of that old-time religion.

When you go to the Scriptures, there is a wide range of possibilities. Peter could have referred to Moses' wish that all the people would prophesy. We find this in Numbers 11:29, "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" He could have referred to the well-known great prophets, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and even Ezekiel, who all spoke so eloquently of the new era which would dawn with the coming of the Messiah.

Instead Peter quotes from *Joel*, one of the Minor Prophets, and perhaps even from a somewhat obscure book that is very difficult to date accurately. Some of the hearers may have been a bit stunned to hear a reference to Joel.

Have you ever read the book of Joel? The prophet Joel was famous for his grasshoppers or his locusts. What Joel essentially describes in his book is how a plague of locusts comes over the land of Judah and devours everything as an exercising of God's judgment. There is in the book of Joel also a reference to a time of relief and salvation, but it is all against the background of that terrible destruction by these locusts. Joel ends with a general description of the great Day of Judgment. He calls it: the day of decision, D-day.

Pentecost and locusts?

Therefore we ask ourselves the question: what is the connection between locusts and Pentecost? Locusts destroy everything in their way. When they are through with the crops, there is no harvest. Pentecost is the feast of the harvest, of joy and thanksgiving for God's blessings. How can a feast of joy be associated with a plague of doom?

When Peter says: this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel, the whole matter of Pentecost is put in a very serious perspective. For this outpouring of which Joel speaks is preceded and followed by great judgment and leads to a final day of reckoning. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, therefore, tells us first of all that we are in very urgent times, and that God's judgments will commence. These judgments begin always at the house of God, at the temple itself (cf. I Pet 4:17). If anyone still is to be saved, it is now by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have come into a decisive and final stage of history when everything is escalating towards its definite end.

Are these people drunk? No, says Peter, but you will soon be dead, unless you repent from your evil way and turn to the living God. What you see here is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and that is the only way of hope in a world bound for destruction. Think of the prophet Joel. There is your Biblical basis and precedent. Pentecost opens the only avenue of escape in a world that is headed towards its doom. We have entered, as Peter says in verse 17, in the last days, the definitive phase of history. It's now or never. If people now miss the boat, they'll go under in a sea of perdition. Pentecost opens God's last action of salvation in a desperate world.

We see in Joel's prophecy the width, the depth, and the height of this action of salvation.

All flesh?

Notice how Joel prophesies first of the width or the wide extent of God's action of salvation: I will pour out my Spirit upon *all flesh*.

The explainers differ on the exact meaning of these words. Some say that this only means that all Israel will partake of the Holy Spirit. All flesh is then interpreted as the fullness of the people of Israel. These explainers see their interpretation confirmed in the fact that Joel immediately thereafter speaks about "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...." Your sons and daughters would mean *Israel's* sons and daughters.

But it is more simple and logical to conclude that the expression *all flesh* means more than just Israel. All flesh is the term commonly used for all mankind. Pentecost means, as we know from the New Testament, that God's action of salvation goes world-wide. God's work of rescue has global significance.

This world-wide action (all flesh) may in the next words be somewhat restricted (your sons and daughters) but it fits fully in the general scheme of things: the Gospel will now go world-wide, even if the order will still be first

the Jew and then the Gentile (Rom 1:16). The Gospel will go, as the Lord Jesus said, from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and from there to the ends of the earth (cf. Mat 28:19).

Catholic dimension

The prophets of old always had a world-wide, catholic dimension to their words. The Psalms speak of it as well. Jerusalem shall be lifted up, and all nations shall flock to it. Pentecost indeed means that the wall of separation between Israel and the nations is now broken down (Eph 2:14). The Gospel will go to the ends of the earth.

This is in keeping with the whole scheme of Joel's prophecy. Since the coming judgment will be world-wide, the preaching of the Gospel and the sharing in the Holy Spirit will also be world-wide. God will yet open to the world the treasures of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob before he finally closes the file of the sins of this world.

There are many contrasts in Joel's prophecy. One is the width of God's action: from Israel God seeks the world. No longer is one people privileged above another. All elements of race and nationality fall away. Christ Jesus transcends all nations and all tongues. That is why on Pentecost the languages of all flesh are heard, and everyone hears in his own language the mighty works of God.

This also means that Pentecost opens up a hitherto unknown possibility and calling: proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation. Set your scopes wide. Promote and further the work of God wherever you can so that all flesh may hear of the glory of Jesus Christ. Since Pentecost, there is a strongly global vision which permeates the life of the church. That is why, for example, local churches are also members of an International Conference of Reformed Churches, where faithful churches from all over the world meet to help and assist one another. The basis for this catholic unity lies also in the prophecy of Joel, quoted here by the apostle Peter.

Universal proclamation

Notice how the Lord says: I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. It is not so that all people now themselves have the potential to be saved. That is Arminian thinking. God remains sovereign in initiative and effect. It means simply that God will work everywhere through the Holy Spirit, and where he works, people will be saved by his power and grace, and will respond to his Word.

It means that we must have an eye for what the *Canons of Dort* so beautifully call “the universal proclamation of the Gospel” (Chapter II, paragraph 5). The Spirit is poured out over all flesh. The Canons say it as follows, “The promise of the Gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed *universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men* to whom God in His good pleasure sends the Gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.”

“All flesh” is the width of Pentecost. God seeks the world in one last campaign before the great Day of Judgment.

The depth of Pentecost

The Gospel is no longer reserved for one people or one race. But there is another element here, which I call the depth of Pentecost.

Notice how Joel speaks of the fact that the Spirit will be poured out over three categories: sons and daughters, young men and old men, and menservants and maidservants. The Spirit comes over people irrespective of sex, age, or status. Not only do geographical borders fall away on Pentecost, but also other lines of demarcation are removed. It does not matter anymore whether one is male or female, young or old, slave or free; all people may share in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. That’s how deep it goes.

The Jews, who heard Peter quote from this word of Joel, may not immediately have understood the ramifications. As we noted already, under the old dispensation restricted to Israel, the Spirit of God was only given to some special people, not to all the people. These special people were mostly prophets, priests, and kings, men who held a high office in Israel. Call them if you wish the clergy. The Spirit was for the clergy, and not for the common folks or the laity.

There were exceptions to the rule. We know that in the days of the Judges, there was a prophetess called Deborah. But she is an exception who prophesied almost by default, because the men were so far removed from the LORD (Judges 4). Prophesying was generally not done by women.

Age was also an important factor. One did not give important tasks to the young. They lacked experience and wisdom. You had to be of age before you became an elder. In Israel all things were decided in the council of the elders, where the young men had no say.

The menservants and maidservants (literally “slaves”) had nothing to say whatsoever. Most slaves in Israel were foreigners. As aliens they had no

legal position. They had to be cared for and treated well, but they had no real status. Israel would never be led by a slave. Slaves had to be quiet, and simply do their work with no questions asked. Often these slaves were outrightly despised.

A new era begins

Perhaps you know of the famous prayer of the Rabbi's: I thank you, LORD, that you have not made me a woman or a slave. Women and slaves had no status and few rights. The Holy Spirit was associated with the clergy and the aristocracy, and not with the masses who did not know the law.

But Pentecost goes deep. All these social distinctions fall away. The Holy Spirit came over all the church. It says clearly in Acts 2:4, "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit."

It really is the beginning of a new era. Suddenly all members, not just some of God's church, are anointed. The distinction between clergy and laity falls away entirely. All are now prophets, priests, and kings. All may now enter into the holy of holies to worship God there in Christ Jesus. The old temple, with its private priestly quarters and its sections that were off-limits to aliens and women, doesn't function anymore.

The depth of Pentecost is that all members of Christ's church share in the anointing with the Holy Spirit. The youth take in an important place. The church is not a society of elders. The women take in their own place. The church is not a restricted men's club. The slaves have something to contribute, for in Christ everyone is a free person. Paul wrote about this in Colossians 4:11, "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

Not revolution but reformation

Pentecost goes deep. Not one member is passed over. Everyone receives his own place and task in the office of all believers. Gender, age, and status are no barriers for the Holy Spirit, for he mobilizes the *entire* church in the service of Christ.

Does this mean that age no longer plays a role? Of course not, for the enthusiasm of youth must still be guided by the wisdom of the elders (cf. 1 Pet 5:5). Does gender mean nothing? Is here the basis for Christian feminism? Of course not, for men and women retain their own specific place in the church. The offices are not opened to women (cf. 1 Tim 2:11-15). But women are given, besides men, a lawful place as prophets, priests, and

kings. Does status mean nothing anymore? Is slavery immediately abolished? Slavery will disappear gradually in society, but the slave is now as a Christian treated as an equal in the church (cf. Phil:14-16).

Pentecost is not a revolution, but a *reformation*. In a revolution everything is suddenly turned topsy-turvy, but a reformation means steady renewal from the inside out. The youth take in their place beside the elders. The women serve beside the men. The slave has equal rights beside his master. We all are equal before the Lord, as we saw from Colossians 4, for in Christ there is not male or female, slave or free, Jew or barbarian, but we all belong and contribute there where the Lord has placed us. Everyone is a partaker of the one anointing of Jesus Christ.

Long-term ramifications

This does have long-term social ramifications. In the Christian Church children will be cherished in the proper manner. In the Christian Church, women will not be discriminated against or abused, but esteemed. In the Christian Church there will be no partiality for the rich over against the poor, and slavery will be abolished. What is sometimes accepted in society, namely, exploitation, abuse, and discrimination, may never be tolerated in the church.

That's the depth of Pentecost. Everyone belongs, also the youth. From the beginning of our life we all have a place and a task in the church. That's the meaning also of infant baptism. Men and women have a common calling in the church. Do not think that a male may dominate or that a female has nothing to contribute. Both are anointed and are co-heirs of the grace of life. Rich and poor meet together at one table. We have no privileged class in the church, no aristocracy or clergy, for we are all office-bearers for Christ, and we all contribute according to our talents and blessings. This is the only way in which we can properly approach the world: as one people, where we all belong and have our own place and task.

The world will stand amazed, for people have never seen anything like this. The world operates on the basis of self-interest and conflict: young versus old (the generation gap), male versus female (the gender conflict), rich versus poor (the class struggle), but in the church this is overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit. We may not follow the conflict model, but must activate the communion of saints, being one, together in Christ. That's the depth of Pentecost.

The height of Pentecost

Then we also see the height of Pentecost. To what heights does the Holy Spirit lead us? It says: your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, old men dream dreams, and the menservants and maidservants shall prophesy.

That's the height. The church becomes a body that stands on the pinnacle of prophecy. The church will speak out as a professing church. A mighty witness and testimony will sound forth from out of this church to the entire world: Jesus Christ is Lord and King.

We read of visions, dreams, and prophecies by young and old, male and female, slave and free. What does that mean? Visions, dreams, and prophecies are typically in the Bible the ways and means to receive God's revelation. The church, filled with the Holy Spirit, will receive the full revelation of God, and will speak that Word to all nations. That's basically what it means.

I do not have to deal now with the question whether there is until Christ's return ongoing revelation. Some Pentecostal movements interpret the text in this way. Still today, they say, we receive visions and dreams and prophecies. New revelations come daily. But the Bible does not speak in that manner.

The apostolic time is the era in which the revelation of God is fulfilled and completed. That is what Joel means. The emphasis here is on the verb to prophesy. It is used twice in the text. Prophesying is the emphatic, ongoing element. From the complete data in the New Testament we learn that prophesying especially means *to proclaim* the Gospel. Prophesying is not fore-telling, but forth-telling, pro-claiming.

Personal testimonies?

Sometimes we meet people who do claim to have received direct messages from the Lord through dreams, visions, or experiences which they feel compelled to share with fellow-believers. What are we to think of this? It is not wise to call such people liars. They genuinely believe to have received some special message. We might gently remark to them that the Bible does not teach ongoing revelation.

It is of greater importance to inform such persons that whatever message they think to have received is very personal for them alone. We did not receive the same message. There is no way that a personal, subjective message can be properly verified in the church. All that we need to know has

been revealed in the Bible which is our only norm. Therefore such persons do best to keep their private messages to themselves.

This also means that personal testimonies really have no place in the worship services of the church. Promoting such testimonies is contrary to the teaching of Scripture. The Holy Spirit binds us only to the Word of God given in the Scriptures. Whatever impulse or guidance God has given to one person is neither normative for others nor illustrative of God's power. We do not believe on the basis of other people's testimonies, but only on the basis of God's given Word. These remarks are important especially in the light of the prophecy of Joel.

An urgent message

The church of Pentecost will be a prophetic church in this way: it will speak of Jesus Christ, the risen and ascended Lord, who is coming to judge the living and the dead. Remember the locusts of Joel. There is a day of reckoning, and now there is still escape in Zion, in the church of Christ. Pentecost means that the locusts are gathering for the final destruction, and that there is only one avenue open for escape: in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the urgent message which since Pentecost will sound forth from the church, from all its members, irrespective of age, gender, or status. We have one Word for all the world, and we must all speak that word. God places each one of us on this height that we are all confessors of Christ, prophets, who prophesy constantly and urgently of the coming of Jesus Christ.

Read the end of Joel's prophecy that is quoted by Peter (Acts 2:20, 21): the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day. And it shall be that whoever calls upon the Name of the Lord shall be saved. There is still in this age the possibility of salvation. But the time is winding down. We are called to prophesy, even more so as the end is drawing near.

Take the high road

No one in the church may come down from this height. We all have to take the high road. One may not say: well, I'm young, I'll wait till later; leave it up to the elders. One may not say: I'm just a woman; leave it to the men. One may not say: I'm only a hired hand; leave it to the boss. It is the task of everyone to prophesy and to testify in words and deeds that there is salvation. We must embody that salvation and show forth the power of Je-

sus Christ. We are all called to “shine like stars in the universe” as we “hold out the word of life...” (Phil 2:16). There is no higher calling than this.

Christ placed his church on that height. His action of salvation now goes through the church, which is called and enabled to do this by the Holy Spirit. The church of Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, the church with the completed Word, is now the only hope for this world. What an immense height. Elsewhere we read that the church is a light on a candle stick and a city on a mountain (Mat 5). A light and a city are clearly visible, seeking the world with the Word.

The grasshoppers are coming. But the Gospel comes first. Destruction is nigh. But the proclamation of grace precedes it. Peter could not have picked a better text from the Old Testament. Now we know how serious the times are and how high our calling is. It has been Pentecost. Now is the time of decision for all flesh.

Let us speak then of God’s awesome acts of strength that men may remember his goodness (Psalm 145) and that it is experienced by many: whoever calls upon the Name of the Lord in the land of the locusts, will be saved.