

**CALLED TO PROFESS
THE MIGHTY WORKS OF GOD**

*“ . . . we hear them telling in our own tongues the
mighty works of God” .*

(Acts 2: 11B)

Since Pentecost, as I explained earlier, is the feast of the great harvest, it is no wonder that this day was filled with public profession of faith and the administering of holy baptism. We read in Acts 2: 41 that those who on that day received the Word of God confessed their sins, sought refuge in Christ, and were baptized. If the Holy Spirit had not been poured out that day, would we in our time still witness and experience wonderful events such as baptism? The answer is clear to all of us.

Once when I was preparing myself for a church service on Pentecost, I came across a rather interesting description of what Pentecost means. A Reformed professor of theology referred to it as “the birthday of the Christian congregation” (H. Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*, page 374). If that is a proper qualification, and I believe it is, then we may say to each other on Pentecost: Happy birthday, congregation!

On the day of Pentecost the Christian congregation was born. Now you may say: no, that is not true. The Christian congregation existed long before that day. It existed when Christ called and sent His disciples, even before His death. It existed, in the old dispensation, in the people of Israel. Actually, if you really want to be accurate, you have to say that the Christian congregation was born in Paradise, when God gave to Adam and Eve the promise of the coming Christ.

Yes, the Christian church was born already in Paradise, where the Gospel was first revealed. I will not deny it. But still we can say with our professor that on Pentecost such a decisive step forward is taken that one can speak here also of a “birthday.” For on that day the Church of Christ fully comes out of the shadows and begins its public ministry that will reach beyond Israel to the nations abroad. On that day, when the Spirit is poured out, a new life begins for the Church of Christ, a new phase is entered, a major transformation takes place which will have world-wide consequences. Therefore, indeed, Happy birthday, congregation!

For Pentecost is the fulfillment of the promises of old that the Holy Spirit will be poured out over the entire church of Christ, and that all the church will prophesy and testify of the mighty works of God to all the world. The Holy Spirit existed and worked before Pentecost. But on Pentecost it becomes clear: they were *all* filled with the Holy Spirit. This leads to a new day. Indeed, we see in this passage how the Christian Church is called and enabled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit publicly to profess the mighty works of God. We will note the promising manner and the rich content of this profession.

A UNIQUE EVENT

I have on more than one occasion called Pentecost a one-time, unique event. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost is special and not repeated in the history of salvation. Yes, there are passages in Scripture which speak of the congregation or of individuals being greatly moved by the Holy Spirit after Pentecost (see Acts 4). These events, however, as we will see later, are

not a repetition of Pentecost but merely a confirmation that the Holy Spirit has truly come to stay with the church of Christ.

The event itself was unique. You can see that, as we noticed in the previous chapter, in the two signs indicating the outpouring: that of the sound as of a mighty rushing wind, and that of the appearance of tongues of fire which descended upon all members of the congregation. There was also a third aspect, which was as miraculous and wonderful as the first two signs. When the Holy Spirit had taken hold of all those present, these people, we read in verse 4, “began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” This “speaking in other tongues” is an additional sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The difficulty is how we must understand this speaking. As you know, the apostle Paul later (in his first letter to the Corinthians) discusses what he calls “speaking in tongues.” From I Corinthians 14 it is clear that Paul means by this a language that is not understood by other people, unless there is an interpreter. This gift, probably a matter of ecstatic utterances, was perhaps nice for the speaker, but nonsense for the hearers. Therefore Paul’s conclusion is: such “speaking in tongues” is not something that convicts unbelievers or outsiders, who will instead conclude that the Christians are mad, crazy. They don’t know what you’re talking about and cannot be edified.

PEOPLE DO UNDERSTAND

I mention this to demonstrate that at Pentecost something quite different happens. The point in Acts 2, evident in this text, is the opposite: people do understand, and are convicted. Therefore, the speaking in Acts 2 is not the same as what is described in I Corinthians 14.

Luke is, in fact, very careful in choosing his words. The disciples did not “speak in tongues” as such, but he says, “they spoke in other tongues.” And it appears from verse 6 (“each one heard them speaking in his own language”) and from our text (“we hear them telling in our own tongues”) that not some unknown language is meant but concrete languages of that time. The people could hear and understand. This is where the miracle lies.

Now some explainers, who insist on identifying this speaking on Pentecost with what Paul later describes, say that the miracle lies not so much in the fact that the disciples speak in tongues, but rather in the hearing of the people. They say: the disciples spoke only in one tongue but the people heard it as if it was spoken in their own language. So they shift the emphasis from the speakers to the hearers. But this is clearly not the meaning of the passage. The text says that the disciples began to speak in other tongues (various, plural), and that the assembled people heard them speaking in these languages.

MANY NATIONALITIES

That is why we also have in this chapter a list of nationalities, each with its native language. You cannot but think here of Psalm 87: on the roll of nations He

will count all these as born on Zion's holy mount, in *many* tongues one God, one faith confessing. Many tongues. One God, one faith. There lies precisely the promise of Pentecost.

People from everywhere could hear the Gospel in their native language. And there must have been quite a variety of tongues spoken by the disciples: there were people from Mesopotamia in the east, to Rome in the west, to Egypt and Libya in the south. Notice how many continents are included here in the "roll of nations": Asia, Africa, and Europe. It includes the whole expanse of the vast Roman Empire and goes even beyond it.

You cannot but ask yourself: why did this happen? Why all these languages? Some scholars have pointed out that actually it wasn't strictly necessary for the disciples to speak in all these different tongues and dialects, for the people described here were mostly religious Jews or proselytes who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, and they all spoke either Greek or Aramaic. Greek was the official language used by most people in the Roman empire, and Aramaic was spoken in the Middle East. One of those two languages was all one needed to know really, and if you threw in a little Latin, you were all set. Indeed, why all these different languages?

It cannot be otherwise than that this speaking in many other tongues holds a promise. The Gospel will be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. The church, which is called to this great mandate, will be enabled to speak to people everywhere in their own language. For it is in their own languages that people need to be approached with the one Word of God. Pentecost is thus placed in the context of a world-wide mission! The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem is not a happening of local, restricted significance, but an event of universal, cosmic magnitude.

THE PROMISE OF PENTECOST

This is the promise of Pentecost, made clear in that speaking in tongues: people everywhere will hear the Gospel proclaimed in their native tongue. There will not be any "special Gospel language" – some holy language which all have to learn first – but people will be approached in their own language with their own historical background and in their own cultural context. It is through this direct preaching in the local languages that people everywhere will come to faith. The preaching will not "transcend" languages and culture, but will use languages and cultural settings to bring people to faith.

Now, of course, this was in Jerusalem a miracle. The disciples were identified as Galileans (verse 7). They were by and large uneducated people, who spoke Aramaic or Greek with a Galilean accent. They had no degrees or university training. It was the Spirit who caused them to speak in these languages to demonstrate the power of Christ.

The text does not suggest that it will always go this way. Today our missionaries must undergo extensive language training. They must also learn to

understand the culture in which they will work. This takes time and effort. But the fact remains: the Gospel *will* be made accessible to all nations through the work of dedicated men and women who come to speak to people in their own tongues.

This happened also in our lives. The Word of God has been proclaimed to us in our language, which is English. It was made clear to us in concepts and examples which relate to today, to our cultural and social setting. I do not say that we did not have any problems here. Perhaps our teachers threw in the odd Dutch word, maybe even a Greek or Latin one. Some of us learned to speak the Queen's English in Australia, and sometimes we noticed a bit of a cultural gap. There are those whose background is different from that of the majority; some even have a non-church background. But did all this not fall away when we could speak with each other from the Word of God about the mighty work of God in Christ?

The Gospel must be made accessible to us in our language, so that we can hear it, understand it, and receive it. So the Holy Spirit works personally and intimately in our hearts with words that we can follow. In our own language we learn to receive the Gospel and cherish it. Pentecost holds this promise which is fulfilled time and again.

MIGHTY WORKS

We want to take a look yet at the rich contents of this profession of the church at Pentecost. These people, who hear the disciples speaking, say, "We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

The mighty works of God, that is what the disciples were talking about on Pentecost. The original has here only one word, *magnalia*, a word so rich in meaning that we need two words to translate it. The question is: what is meant here by "the mighty works of God"?

Notice that it says *works*, in the plural. The disciples are speaking on Pentecost not just about one work of God, but of all His works. For God has been working ever since the creation of this world to bring people to the knowledge of salvation. Notice how these works are qualified as being mighty. The works of God are great and splendid, actually beyond adequate description and understanding. In these works God reveals Himself as unique, the only living God of heaven and earth who alone is to be praised for ever and ever. The Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost so that people everywhere, through the ministry of the church, would come to know how God worked salvation in this world in Jesus Christ.

MANIFEST IN CHRIST

For is it not in Him that God's mighty works are manifest? Does not the invisible God become visible to us in Jesus Christ? Is He not the One who has wrought for us so great a redemption? When you hear the expression "the mighty works of God," you may think of many wonderful things, but all these works find their core and focus in Jesus Christ! All God's efforts from the beginning of time,

the Bible tells us, have their climax and completion in Jesus Christ, in His death, resurrection, ascension and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit.

The public profession of the Church is an *all-embracing* profession. It is about all God's mighty works, as demonstrated in history, as revealed in the Scriptures. But it is also a concentrated profession: it is about God's work *in Christ*. You can see this clearly in the sermon which the apostle Peter delivers on the day of Pentecost. See verse 32 and following: “. . .this Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God. . .He has poured out this which you see and hear.” Jesus had been promised; He was born; He died and was raised; He ascended and was glorified; He sent His Spirit; and He is now preparing to come again to judge the living and the dead. These are the mighty works of God by which He glorifies Himself and redeems His people. This is the rich content of our profession.

This was the profession and proclamation of the disciples on Pentecost. And this very same profession is still made today. We believe all the mighty works of God, from creation to re-creation. It is still asked today, as it was then: do you believe that you receive the remission of sins in His blood and that by the power of the Holy Spirit you have become a member of Jesus Christ and His Church? Do you seek your life outside of yourself in Jesus Christ? And we say “yes”!

THE SPIRIT STILL WORKS

Is this not proof that the Spirit of God, who was poured out in Jerusalem, still works today? How do you think we would ever have come to this confession? On our own? Never! Through our own insight? Not a chance! It happened only because it has been Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit worked faith in us by the teaching of the Gospel in our own language.

We see here that the church – and all its members – have a great calling: they must speak of “the mighty works of God.” The apostle Peter later wrote in his first letter (2:9), “You are . . .a royal priesthood. . .God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him Who called you out of darkness unto His marvellous light.” The mighty works. The wonderful deeds. You have to speak of this, declare it to others by word and deed, show it in your life!

For this calling was not just given to the disciples in Jerusalem, but was placed on the entire church and on every member. In our profession of faith we committed ourselves to this before God and His church. We did so, believing that He who brought us this far in His immeasurable grace will also bring us further.

Do you know what the purpose is of our life? To rejoice in the mighty works of God, to praise Him, to let Him work in us more and more the life of holiness, which is a pleasure to Him and a blessing for our neighbour. The mighty works of God must become evident in our life. The church does not just *confess* a doctrine, but *lives* it! It is a doctrine which includes all time, past, present, and future, and a lifestyle which is directed by the Spirit of Christ.

You know, the people of old already sang of the mighty works of God, the one covenantal work in Christ. You see that in Psalm 111:

Praised be the LORD! I shall impart
My thanks to Him with all my heart
Among the righteous congregation
Great are the doings of the LORD,
And all to whom they joy afford
Will study them with dedication.

We today, after Pentecost, have even more reason than the Old Testament Church to praise God for His mighty works of redemption. For we know Him who is our eternal Saviour and who has anointed us with His Holy Spirit.

Let's go back for a moment to our professor. If Pentecost can be termed the "birthday of the congregation," we may congratulate each other. We may congratulate all Christians who professed their rebirth through the Holy Spirit and who, in response to God's promise, committed themselves to the Lord. It all started at Pentecost. We still see the reality of it today. It will be seen until the church is gathered out of all nations. The blessings come to us. The glory goes to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.