

## SPECIAL PENTECOSTAL SIGNS

*“And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them”.*

(Acts 2: 2, 3)

Pentecost has been characterized as the unknown feast. Maybe that is true to an extent also among us. What does Pentecost mean? What decisive change did it bring about? I read somewhere that the basic reaction to Pentecost today is the same as it was on the day itself. Verse 12 tells us that “. . . all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, What does this mean?”

Pentecost brings the church of Christ into a new situation, and in order to understand that situation, we must know what went on that day. It was the day of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and it is very significant for us to see how the Holy Spirit was poured out. Therefore, I want to concentrate on the signs which indicated or accompanied the outpouring. For the unique character of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the special Pentecostal signs. We will look at the meaning and the underlying message of these signs.

## **SIGNS AND SPECIAL EVENTS**

We know that the major events in the history of salvation, Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and the Ascension, were accompanied by signs. At Christmas there was a special star in the heavens, and a choir of angels sang in Ephratah's fields. On Good Friday there was an earthquake, and the curtain of the temple tore into two parts. At Easter and on the day of Ascension angels appeared to advise the disciples. These signs were not common occurrences, but happened to indicate a new situation.

That is why you do not keep seeing these signs. They are reserved for special occasions. Let this be our first conclusion: whenever we have these signs, God has brought about a new situation. That is why we do not have to have the signs repeated: they stand only at the beginning of that new situation. This is our answer to all who would like to see the special signs, like the speaking in tongues, repeated today.

## **SIMPLE AND CLEAR SIGNS**

At the same time it must be said that when the Lord uses signs, He does not use arbitrary ones, but signs which have a clear meaning. For why use a sign that no one would understand? The signs are marked by simplicity and clarity.

Here I can immediately add: the signs that God uses to point to special occurrences are not entirely new; they have been used before, although under different circumstances. If people know the history of the church well, and if they know the Scriptures, they will immediately understand the significance of certain signs. God uses old signs to herald a new day.

The signs on the day of Pentecost are wind and fire. I will deal later with the exact description of these signs ( it does not say that there *was* wind and fire, but something *like* a mighty wind and tongue *as of* fire). First, however, we will seek to determine the meaning of wind and fire in the Scriptures.

## WIND AND FIRE

On the day of Pentecost the people, about 120 in all, had gathered in the house with the “upper room” or perhaps in one of the corridors of the temple. While there, they heard a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. It was a very loud and heavy noise, for it brought people running from all directions (verse 6: “. . .at this sound the multitude came together”). The word “rush” indicates the swooping in, swooping down of the noise, like that of an approaching hurricane or tornado, or a gale force suddenly hitting a house. Such winds have the tendency to develop quickly and strike swiftly. That is how we must imagine it here: the sudden, loud rushing in of the wind, a noise so heavy that it drowns out everything else. And you can imagine that people instinctively duck and cringe. No gentle breeze, but gale force one. That is the first sign.

The second is no less remarkable. The disciples see “tongues as of fire, distributed. . .” (verse 3). This description would indicate that these tongues of fire were first together as one ball of fire, which then broke up and distributed itself. It is certainly not something to gaze at without apprehension. If a ball of fire came our way, with the individual flames breaking away toward us, would we not rather step back and get out of its path? This is the second sign.

## THE PRESENCE OF GOD

I am firmly convinced that the disciples who had been taught by the Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, knew the meaning of these two signs. They may have been surprised by the sudden and unexpected appearance, and there may have been an initial shock, but they quickly understood what was happening.

For these two signs, wind and fire – especially in combination – clearly denote the presence of God. They can mean only one thing: God is now descending into their midst. They witnessed the *ascension* a few days ago; now they may witness – hear and see – the *descending* of God.

When God came down to His people in the Old Testament it was always with wind and fire, or in thunder and smoke, which are accompanying signs of wind and fire. Let me just give you a few examples. When the LORD God appeared to Moses in Midian, it was in a burning bush. The fire was the visible indication of God’s immediate presence. And when Israel was led out of Egypt, they were guided by a “pillar of cloud” by day, and a “pillar of fire” by night. During the day the pillar was like a cloud, smoldering, but at night it glowed a fiery red, and it made clear that God was personally and visibly with them.

And when the people of Israel gathered at Mount Sinai, and the LORD descended on that mountain, we read of “thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud”; yes the whole mountain “was wrapped in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire, and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln. . .”(Exodus 19: 18). A ball of fire descending, leaving in its wake a trail of smoke, accompanied by thunder and storm: this is how the LORD descends!

Can you understand then why Israel so strongly associated occurrences like thunder and lightning with the almighty power and presence of God? Psalm 29 – a good Psalm to sing on Pentecost – speaks of lightning and thunder, storm and fire as signs of God showering peace upon His people. Think also of Psalm 78, where we read how God guided His people with fire and supplied them with food by means of the wind. And note Psalm 18:

He rode upon a cherub bright and splendid, on wings of storm and wind the LORD descended. . . . Light was His crown and brightness went before Him, Red fire and hail broke through the clouds that bore Him, His thunder roared and echoed through the sky; His mighty voice shook vale and mountain high.

Wind and fire upon the earth, with an all-pervading noise, what else could the disciples think but that God was descending into their midst?

## **CHRIST'S OWN INSTRUCTION**

These signs may have spoken even more clearly to the disciples because Christ, when referring to the Holy Spirit, had spoken of wind and fire. He said: the wind goes where it wills. . . so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3). Wind and Spirit. He said that the disciples would be baptized with the Holy Spirit, and did not John the Baptist speak of being baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire? The Old Testament signs had already a New Testament meaning for the disciples. They knew it on the day of Pentecost: now is being fulfilled what Christ has promised, the outpouring of the Spirit of God. For this we have been waiting ever since the ascension, and the moment has come.

There are, to be sure, secondary meanings of the signs of wind and fire. Commenters have drawn attention to the fact that the wind refreshes and fire purifies. Wind and fire are signs, then, of the regenerating power of the Spirit of God. There is also the explanation that wind and fire make a separation between true and false Israel, between the real believers and the unbelievers, between synagogue and church. They are signs of the great antithesis which has come upon the earth since Pentecost, of the critical nature of the latter days, when God will make manifest what is in the hearts of men.

All this is undoubtedly true. But the meaning of the signs is first and foremost that God comes to live with His people, in the Holy Spirit. He makes a dwelling in His Church, and so Christ Himself comes to live in the midst of His Church. We have a heavenly Head, for the ascension remains a fact, but it is equally true that our Head is now through His Spirit in our midst, to lead and to guide us, together and individually, as His people. This is the clear meaning of the signs. And when we have seen this, we also have an eye for their deeper message.

## STAND BACK?

For there is something else here to which we must give attention. When in the Old Testament God descended in person to His people, these signs were meant as a warning, as a means of separation. It was the wind and the fire, the thunder and the smoke, which made Israel keep its distance.

Did not God say to Moses at the burning bush, “Do not come near. . .”(Exodus 3:5? Stay back, for you might get killed! And when the LORD was to descend on Mount Sinai, the LORD strictly charged Moses to tell the people, “Take heed that you do not go up into the mountain or touch the border of it, whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. . .” (Exodus 19: 12 ff). The same message: stay back, or you’re dead!

It was real fire and real wind, which could kill you; real fire and real wind which made you keep your distance. And why was this distance required? Because of the sinfulness of the people. No one could get near to gaze upon the LORD. Even when there was a form of consecration, still none could get through to the LORD. The holy God could not allow sinful people in His immediate vicinity. The wind and cloud were at a distance, the fire burned further away: do not come near.

We are in the Old Testament still in the dispensation of the shadows, the dispensation which symbolized the distance between God and His people, a distance that existed despite the unity in the covenant. Old Testament Israel had a tabernacle and a temple with a curtained-off area where no man could enter, except once per year the high priest. The dispensation of shadows was a dispensation of distance: pillars of smoke, walls of fire, forces of wind and thunder said that God is near and yet unapproachable, close and yet distant.

And this was true in spite of all the sacrifices, in spite of the priesthood of Aaron and his sons, in spite of all the blood of bulls and goats that flowed every day. God was near, but He kept His distance. His Spirit was present, but not in full measure. For the one sacrifice had yet to be made. The great priesthood according to Melchizedek had to be fulfilled. The blood of the Lamb of God had to flow. Then the distance would be terminated. Then the gap would be closed. And then the presence of God would be fully with His people. Then the Spirit of God would be fully poured out over the new, the spiritual Israel, the true sons of Abraham according to the faith. That was prophesied by Joel and Isaiah and others. And that is what happened at Pentecost.

## NO MORE DISTANCE NOW

At Pentecost there is no real wind. Remember, I already pointed out that it says: a sound from heaven *like the rush* of a mighty wind. A real wind, a tornado, would have blown them away. If a real typhoon had filled the house, it would have collapsed and they would all have been dead.

There is also no real fire here, but tongues *as of* fire. Had it been a real fire, a burning hot ball of fire with flames leaping out, they would all have been scorched. The whole house would have gone up in flames; no one would have survived.

The same signs appear: God is present! But the signs have lost their destructive power. The signs no longer maintain a distance, but bring about a closeness and display a unity which was absent before. That is the deeper meaning of these Pentecostal signs.

Notice how indeed the noise of the rushing wind fills all the house. Not a part of the house, let's say where no one is sitting, but all the house where they were sitting. This is expressly mentioned. Not: the disciples are here, and the wind is over there. No, the disciples are here, and so is the wind. God and man are together. Notice also how it says of the fire that it was distributed and rested on each one of them. Not: here are the disciples and there is the fire. No: here are the disciples and here is also the fire. God and man are together. There is no separation now.

## **THE GREAT STEP FORWARD**

This is the great step forward. And this was possible only because of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Here is the union of a people with God who have been reconciled because of the death of the Son, Jesus Christ. Pentecost is possible only because of Golgotha. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is a direct result of the outpouring of Christ's blood on the cross. See here the unity of the works of God.

We may never isolate the outpouring of the Spirit from the other great facts of salvation. Never make this the ultimate feast, one that stands on its own, as many so-called Pentecostals do. But see the line in the history of redemption. See the fulfillment of the promise that God will live forever with His people. I think here of Psalm 132, "For Zion by all men admired, the LORD has chosen and acquired, and for His resting place desired. . . For evermore I there will dwell." But this is even richer and truer for us than it was for David. David still looked toward a temple of stones. But we may see here the temple made up of living stones, the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, His Church which He acquired with His own blood. There He will dwell in the Holy Spirit. There He will shed His abundant blessings. Of this people it is really said, "Her saints will shout in happiness."

And all this directs us forward to the day when Christ will physically descend in glory with His angels. For then God will be forever in person with His people. Pentecost is already a great step in that direction, but not the final step. The last promise must yet be fulfilled.

## **THE SPIRIT CAME TO STAY**

But see how far we have come! The tongues of fire, it says here, "rested on each one of them." Literally it says: they sat. That means: permanently. The Holy Spirit is here to stay. There is no distance anymore between the Father and us, through Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. You must understand this, for it is the essence of Pentecost. We all, who are ingrafted into Christ by faith and are living members of His Church, have the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

We do not always work with this properly, and we may even resist the Spirit, but the Spirit is here to stay in the Church. Do we not confess in Lord's Day 20 of

the Heidelberg Catechism about the Holy Spirit that “He is also given to me, to make me by a true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, and to remain with me forever”? Yes, Pentecost is for real. It is for keeps. The Spirit is here to stay, to lead us through this life to the life to come, through this world to the world to come.

Let us believe this and work with it every day. Let Christ work in us by His Word and Spirit. Enjoy the reality and fruits of Pentecost daily. We do not need the signs anymore. But we must appreciate the new situation, the grand reality: we who have been reconciled to God by the blood of Christ may live close to Him, for by His Spirit He has bound us to Himself forever.