

PENTECOST: THE COMMAND AND THE PROMISE

“And Peter said to them: repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”.

(Acts 2: 38)

When the people in Jerusalem hear the sermon of the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost, they are moved and disturbed, and they ask, “What shall we do?” (verse 37). It says that they were “cut to the heart.” The sermon makes a strong impact on them so that they begin to ask about the way of salvation.

Now it has been suggested that this is the model for all preaching. Every sermon must lead the hearers to this question. Preaching has to make people concerned and restless, so that they begin to examine themselves and their lives and ask what they should do to be saved. And then, of course, the answer is always the same: repent and be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“What must I do?” We can, in fact, come up with seven or more steps which must be followed – the seven steps of the evangelical Methodists – but they all come down to this: repentance, baptism, receiving of the Holy Spirit.

However, you will understand that preaching is more than leading people (time and again) to the initial question: what shall we do? We may not overlook the context in which these words were first spoken. We must be led by the Word beyond this question to a deeper understanding of the wondrous way of salvation in Christ.

We see something of this in the apostolic response to the question what people must do upon hearing the Gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. This response includes a great command and a great promise.

REPEATING OR UNDERSTANDING?

Pentecost has been seen as the most mysterious happening in the Christian church, for who can fathom the work of the Holy Spirit? As we have noted before, many people have misunderstood it and sensationalized it. Just as Rome constantly repeats Golgotha – Christ’s death – in the mass, so Pentecostals constantly attempt to repeat Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But merely repeating something does not mean understanding it. Exactly what happened on that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem?

Well, the Spirit of God was poured out – once for all – over the church of Christ. That is the basic fact. The next question is then: what is the result of this outpouring? I mean, after all the signs have been taken away, what is the net result?

The result is that the apostle Peter preached a sermon. Yes, Pentecost ultimately leads to preaching. And a sermon has to have a text. Peter took as text for the sermon a word from the prophet Joel, from the well-known second chapter which speaks of the time when God would pour out His Spirit over all flesh, and when all Israel would be renewed. It was, according to Joel, the time that preceded the great judgment, the time of the “latter days.”

A CHRISTOLOGICAL SERMON

The apostle Peter explained that text in a *Christological* manner. He said: this text of Joel is fulfilled today, because Christ has risen from the dead, and He “has

poured out this which you see and hear” (verse 34). The outpouring of the Spirit, then, leads to a sermon about the resurrection and ascension, the glory of Christ Jesus. That is the heart of the preaching of the church, both in the Old and the New Testament: the mighty works of God in Jesus Christ.

Of course, you understand that for the hearers in Jerusalem this was a very disturbing message. For Peter ends this part of his sermon with a no-nonsense accusation: this Jesus whom you crucified! Most if not all of the hearers of that sermon remembered quite well what had happened during the previous Passover when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. And now to hear that this Jesus had risen from the dead and had ascended into heaven? Now to see these miraculous signs of Pentecost and to hear these signs connected to the Man who had before already worked so many miracles? Indeed, it was a very disturbing message. And we can well understand that they were cut to the heart. For they shared a corporate responsibility for what had happened. It was the Jews who had said: His blood come over us and our children.

DIFFERING RESPONSES

What shall we do? It was the same question which the people asked when they heard the preaching of John the Baptist at the Jordan, some years before. Severe preaching it was, which led to a convicting of the consciences and to the question: how can we escape the pending wrath of God?

Now this was the *general* mood of the hearers. Do not think that everyone thought this way. We read in verse 41, “So those who received his word were baptized, about three thousand souls.” Yes, a lot of people responded positively, but not all. The general mood, however, was indeed one of being touched, frightened, and disturbed, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

And it is in this situation that the apostle Peter responds with the words of our text: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.” This is the great command which always accompanies the preaching of the Gospel, first to Jews, and also to Greeks: repent and be baptized.

NO FREE CHOICE

We learn here that the Gospel does not leave us a free choice. It always comes with a serious command. We are called to choose for Christ. This must be a conscious act of ours which is made with our mind and our heart. Everyone who hears the Gospel has a tremendous responsibility. Everyone is called to make a positive response.

The apostle Peter does not say, when confronted with the question: well, don’t worry, go home, think about it, and see what you come up with. But he says: repent, and the implication is: do it now, while you hear the Word. Repentance is not something to be postponed until tomorrow, it must take place today.

The word that the apostle uses here for “repent” means in the first place a change of thinking. There is also another word for repentance in the Greek which means a complete turning around, but here it is: a new way of thinking. Repentance is not merely an emotional reaction to a stirring sermon; it is also a new way of looking at things, which implies a change in attitude. The Jews must re-interpret the events surrounding Jesus in the light of the Scriptures and the subsequent facts. Those who hear the Word must, in the light of that Word, change their minds.

A CHANGE OF MIND

This is a hard thing to do. Usually when we have made up our mind, that’s it. We will not change it. Some people are even proud of the fact that they never change their mind! They always think the same, so they say. They are stable and firm, or better: stubborn and hard. No change of mind, not ever! Is it wrong, is it weakness to change our mind about something, especially when the Scriptures cast a different light on it?

Of course not. The Gospel comes with the command: Get a different look on things. Start to see with the eyes of the Holy Spirit, in the light of the Scriptures. Re-evaluate God’s work of redemption in Jesus Christ. Look again at His mighty deeds of salvation. And in that light, turn away from your sins.

For repentance always has to do with sin. It is always a turning away from sin to God. We know of the expression in Lord’s Day 33 of the Heidelberg Catechism that we must have “godly grief” – that is, a grief worked by God – over our sin. And so we turn to Christ, our only Mediator, to be cleansed from all sin by His redeeming and atoning blood.

BE BAPTIZED

That is the significance of the next words: “be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” The Jews of Jerusalem were not unfamiliar with the meaning of baptism. It meant a total cleansing. It meant a new start in life. It signified a transition from a former way of life to a new style of life. Only, they had never heard of the baptism in the Name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. This was the new element. If they were baptized in this Name, it meant that they acknowledged Him as their only Saviour and placed their lives under His dominion. It meant that they broke with the sins of their people – which were their own sins as well – and were gathered into the church of Christ. It meant a breaking with the old ways and a transition to the new covenant.

In that light we can understand the words of verse 40: save yourselves from this crooked generation. Save yourselves from the generation that has rejected the Christ and which is destined for judgment. Step out before it is too late. Make the transition now. Pentecost marks the ultimate separation between believers and unbelievers. I think here of what we find in Psalm 12, “O LORD, protect us from this generation, Forever save us from their ways of sin.”

A PERSONALIZED COMMAND

This is the preaching of the New Testament Church: do not go under with this ungodly world, this crooked generation, but step over from the realm of darkness to the Kingdom of light. And baptism is a visible sign and seal of that transition. By that sign we are distinguished from unbelievers and incorporated visibly into the church of Christ.

It is hard to persuade grown men and women to make this choice. It is not something that you can give your children, not even through much instruction. Do not think that the people in Jerusalem gave themselves without any resistance to the apostolic preaching. Look at verse 40: he testified with many other words and exhorted them. . . . Office bearers need patience and perseverance in testifying from the Scriptures, in persuading and exhorting, and even then they must leave the fruit to the Spirit of God.

Notice also how the apostle makes this command a very personal one: be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus. Everyone has to make his/her own decision. It is a deeply personal commitment. We have a corporate responsibility as members of the human race, yes, but also an individual responsibility when the Word of God comes to us. Whoever hears the Gospel cannot hide away in the crowd, for the Lord comes with His Word to each one personally and says: what about you? And you? And you? And one day we shall all stand individually before the judgment seat of God and be judged personally.

INFANT BAPTISM HERE?

Do not conclude here now that this text is proof against infant baptism, since children cannot yet face up to this personal responsibility. Peter speaks here in the first place to adults, to mature Jews who knew the Scriptures and had seen many signs. All non-baptized adults who come to faith in Christ must be baptized as sign of their separation from the world and their incorporation into the body of Christ. But Peter also says that this extends to believers *and their children* (verse 39). The line of the covenant stands firm also in the New Testament: when adults come to faith and are baptized, their children share in the same promise and so receive the same sign. And as the children grow up, they themselves are faced with the command of the Gospel to be born again, to repent and believe, and so to respond to their baptism, to accept it joyously that God set them aside already in their youth and made them His children.

Repent and be baptized. Do you see how the Gospel demands of us a totally new life? Completely dedicated to God, fully separated from this world? This command comes to us with even more clarity and depth today that it did on that day in Jerusalem. We are not strangers to the Gospel. We have for the most part been taught it from our youth. To be baptized means for us: to be a living member of the Church of Christ. This is the calling that comes to us every Sunday again: look alive out there, be living members of Christ and of His church. But the

command also has a rich promise. If we obey, we will more and more receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

THE SURE PROMISE

For Peter adds, “. . .and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Those who repent and are baptized will receive the Spirit. This is the promise of the Gospel. And the Gospel must always be preached with this specific and sure promise, as once on Pentecost.

“You shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” It is quite clear what the apostle Peter means. The disciples have manifested in their actions that they have received something special, but that gift is not for them only; it is for all believers. Pentecost is for all God’s children. Those who repent and are baptized will receive the *same* gift as the apostles and the disciples.

We must read here carefully. It does not say: you shall all receive in the same measure the gifts (plural) of the Holy Spirit, but the gift (singular). This means: the gift which consists in the Holy Spirit Himself. Repent and be baptized, and you will receive the Holy Spirit. He will come to dwell in your hearts and in your lives.

Now someone may say: is this not turning the order around? Do we not teach in the Reformed Churches that we can only repent through the Spirit? Is it not first the Holy Spirit and then repentance? Or must we say – as do Arminians – first we must make our own free-will choice to repent and then the Holy Spirit will come to live with us? Is that what the apostle says? You do your bit first, and then God will do the rest?

A SPECIFIC ORDER?

Let us not make any problems here. The apostle does not prescribe a specific order. No one can repent except by the power of the Holy Spirit. No one can profess Jesus Christ except by the Spirit. In Acts 10, for example, it is the other way around: first they receive the Holy Spirit and then they are baptized. No order is established here. The point is that the initial work of the Holy Spirit in working repentance and faith is continued mightily when one places himself/herself in the communion of the church.

The Holy Spirit has been poured out over the church of Christ, which manifests itself according to His norms in its worship, office bearers, and members. By baptism, through profession of faith, we are placed in that church, we share in that communion and so we also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is given to us there where He is poured out, namely in the Church which Christ has purchased with His precious blood. It is in the church-gathering work of Jesus Christ that we receive and experience the gift of the Holy Spirit and nowhere else.

When we place ourselves faithfully under the preaching of the Word and give ourselves diligently to the service of the Lord, when we say, “I love thy saints, with

them I am united” (Psalm 16), we will experience the renewing power and guiding strength of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost means: the Spirit of God has been poured out over the Church of Christ. Therefore, when I in obedience to the Word of God maintain the unity of that church, I share in the gift of the Holy Spirit. He will then also live and work in my heart, in my life.

DO NOT SEPARATE WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

People often separate what God has joined together. Also Spirit and Church. Or Spirit and Word. Or Spirit and faithful office bearers. And they suggest that the Spirit works everywhere. But the promise of Pentecost is this: where the apostolic church is, there is the Spirit of God. Where the fountain is, there is the water of life.

No, we do not bind the Spirit in any way. The wind blows where it wills, and so it is with the Holy Spirit, and by His power fountains can appear suddenly in the driest deserts. But the Spirit of God binds and calls us to the place where He will fill our lives with the Word and the mercies of Christ, to the church which by God’s grace is faithful to His Word.

“You shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” This means that whoever comes to Christ and publicly professes Him before many witnesses in the midst of the saints will be confirmed in the faith, confirmed and strengthened every week, every day again. For that is what this gift of the Spirit means: God Himself will dwell in us, God Himself will lead us and perfect us, keep us and preserve us, so that we may cross the finish line in His strength.

THE GREAT PROMISE OF THE GOSPEL

This is the great promise of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit will apply to us all the riches of Christ and cause us to persevere in the faith, the faith that all things come to us out of God’s sovereign grace in Christ Jesus, by His perfect work alone.

This does not mean that there will not be trials and temptations. There may be times even of great doubt. We may still fall deeply into sin. We confess in the Canons of Dort, “Scripture testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various doubts of the flesh and placed under severe temptation do not always feel the full assurance of faith and certainty of persevering.” Life remains a discipline in living in God’s grace (also after we have professed our faith). But the gift of the Spirit remains, for we also confess, in the same Canons, that God will “by the Holy Spirit again revive in [the believers] the certainty of persevering.” So that in their deepest need believers may know: all my trials, Lord, will soon be over.

THE ONLY WAY OF SALVATION

The people asked Peter: what shall we do? And the answer was: repent and separate yourselves from this crooked generation. Be joined to the true Israel, the spiritual Israel, and the Spirit of God will abide with you forever. “The Spirit and

the gifts are ours,” said Martin Luther. This is still the command and the promise with which the Gospel is preached to everyone, indiscriminately, no matter what his place or standing. It is the only way of salvation, for the Jew and also for the Gentile, for us and for our children today.

When Peter preached his sermon on Joel 2, the church was not as far yet as it is today, when we may preach on Acts 2. Pentecost is not to be repeated; the new era is here, the last days have arrived. The reality of Pentecost is to be experienced, every day. Now we look forward to the day when Christ in glory will shine on the clouds of heaven, in the faith that “From heaven He sent His Spirit down, Christ keeps us by His power secure. We’ll never be forsaken” (Hymn 31: 5, *Book of Praise*).

We will never be forsaken, for we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit.