

Preparing for your Circle of CARE



Message Commentary

May 11, 2008

The church loves to hear again and again the story of Pentecost, the “birthday” of the church, or what might be described in business terms as her “IPO” - Initial Public Offering. Too often, however, this becomes a day of mere self-congratulations and reminiscences, a moment for being impressed with how powerful the Holy Spirit once seemed in the life of the church, how strong the witness of the new church once appeared.

Only Luke separates the events of resurrection, ascension and Pentecost into three distinct moments. Luke’s version makes the gift of the Holy Spirit that which is bestowed by the fully exalted Jesus - the Messiah and Lord ascended and seated at the right hand of God’s heavenly throne. The moment chosen for the Holy Spirit’s arrival is Pentecost - the Jewish festival celebrated 50 days after Passover. Pentecost, or the “Feast of Weeks,” was a festival of the “first fruits,” where the first of the grain harvest was brought to the temple and offered to the Lord. The very name of this celebration - “Pentecost” or the “50th day” - tied it back to the wondrous events of the Passover/Easter and crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is the one who received the Holy Spirit from the Father, and now pours it out onto his disciples (Acts 2:33), empowering them with talents and initiative they never had before.

The Spirit-powered mission and the message of the church are clearly evident in the outpouring of other languages. God’s saving action through Christ on behalf of the world is a proclamation that must be spread, to all people, in all languages, even to “the ends of the earth.” But the witness of this Pentecost Day is intended not only for the ears of those Jews gathering outside the disciples’ now chock-full Upper Room. In a form that recurs throughout Acts, Luke has a “translator” appear on center stage. The initial proclamation has been made. The crowd is already splintering into those who believe, and want to hear more, and those who cynically attribute all this jabbering to “new wine.” As the crowd gets noisier and more confrontational, none other than Peter himself steps forward to interpret all that is happening in their midst that day.

The words Peter chooses are from Joel - thereby linking once again the Jewish tradition closely with the life of faith now enjoyed by those who have experienced the Spirit. In Acts 2:19-20, Joel’s text and Luke’s focus shift more specifically to the end times, jumping ahead of both the story of Jesus and this current event of Pentecost. Luke includes Joel’s powerful pictures of the last days in order to emphasize the message of salvation he proclaims in verse 21: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” As the rest of Peter’s first speech makes clear, of all people, the Jerusalem Jews should be stunned and ecstatic at this show of divine mercy.

Peter understands that the first mission of the newly formed church is proclamation - Spirit-inspired speech to announce the message of Christ before the world. The Spirit’s gift of languages at Pentecost also makes it clear that this message should be proclaimed in speech that is comprehensible to everyone in their vernaculars. The church is not to hide behind a special lexicon of “salvation-speak” or enclose itself in “churchese,” but is to use the common dialects of the day. To the undeclared or unbelieving, the message must be clearly articulated, not obtuse or archaizing babblings that scoffers can dismiss as the drunken ramblings (“new wine”) of the strange.

Pentecost is what makes the church, if not an accomplished reality, at least an ongoing possibility, a viable new enterprise in the spiritual shopping center. The Holy Spirit is what pushes the church out from behind those closed Upper Room doors and into the marketplace, the public square and corporate boardroom. Because Pentecost happens, the apostles receive the whole store, and the church’s evangelistic mission is born.

adapted from Homileticonline 6/4/2006