

Pentecost – What is That?

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Of course we all know what Pentecost is. The event commemorating the outpouring of the Holy Spirit hasn't quite been forgotten among us. At least we know what it is, even though we often forget its significance. But many present day churches outside the orthodox church world have intentionally misrepresented or unconcernedly forgotten this mighty event. And before we congratulate ourselves on having remembered and celebrated Pentecost, we must frankly admit that it holds a far less prominent place on the church calendar than does Christmas or Easter.

This is evident if you but compare the “spiritual” enthusiasm and fervor on Easter or Christmas morning with that at Pentecost. It would seem that the overwhelming popularity of Easter and Christmas within the church as well as in the world is the result of the commercialization of these festivals and not because of an increase in genuine spiritual interest. Before Pentecost could receive its due emphasis in the Church one almost would conclude that the world would first have to commercialize it. We can be thankful that Pentecost is not so debased but it is difficult to decide which situation is the better—the glory of Christ's resurrection subordinated to spring finery; or the power of Pentecost being slighted by many in the Church.

It is quite plain to see why the world is not moved to celebrate Pentecost, even commercially. The story of the Resurrection can thrill them and prompt them to express a fond “hope of immortality.” But Pentecost is an event so deeply spiritual that only the Christian can comprehend it. (We might ask ourselves if our lack of interest in the coming of the Holy Spirit is because we are not spiritual enough). The world cannot understand the power of Pentecost because it has not that Spirit. The Spirit is He “whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him.” John 14:17. And again in 1 Cor. 2:14, “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” If the world received the indwelling Spirit in any sense it would no longer be the world but the Church; which is drawn to Christ by His life working in it. By its very nature, the Spirit of Christ dwells in the body of Christ, the Church. The descent of the Holy Spirit from Christ, dwelling in His body the Church, is the very presence and rule of Christ Him- self. We err when we sometimes speak of the “Kingdom of the Spirit” in this new dispensation as if the day of Christ had passed with His Ascension and the Holy Spirit has superseded Christ's authority. We think that Christ has completed His work of salvation and has meantime retired from activity in the Church, and has left us to develop thru the impulse of the Spirit but otherwise undirected. Then the authority is not Christ's but in our foolish and rebellious hearts. But Christ reigns in our hearts and it is His kingdom. The Spirit is given us by Christ to put us in living touch with the glorified Head so that He may control us as His body. The Spirit brings no message originating from Himself, conveys no thought that is not the mind of Christ. “He shall glorify Me; for He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you.” John 14:14.

That Christ who now dwells in us set all things in order for the Church before His Ascension. The Word was given, John 17:14; the way of prayer was established, John 16:23 & 26; the sacraments were instituted, and the ministry was prepared in the apostles. The body was prepared for the life-blood to stir it to action. Power was needed to quicken the waiting, faithful,

silent disciples into fiery exponents of the gospel. In contrasting the actions of the disciples before and after the Comforter was sent we can see what power there really was in that event. They were in immediate contact with Christ and influenced by His personality, example and teaching. They knew as truth that He was “the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” They were the objects of His care so that what was spoken to others in parables was explained to them in simplicity. Yet they remained incapable of comprehending Him; not because of unwillingness but because they could not. Christ became wearied of their continual misunderstanding and often reproached His disciples. At the Last Supper He says to Philip, “Have I been so long time with you and yet hast thou not known Me?” And after the Resurrection, “O fools and slow of heart to believe,” etc. Luke 24:25. Even the events preceding Pentecost did not change their outlook. When He was arrested the twelve scattered from Him. The Crucifixion broke all their expectation in Him. The Resurrection renewed their faith but still did not help them to understand Christ’s work. Just before Christ’s Ascension they still reveal their ignorance of His true mission when they ask, “Lord wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom of Israel?” Acts 1:6. Only the coming of the Holy Spirit opened their eyes to the meaning of all that they had witnessed. What a change it wrought! Instead of men who forsook Jesus and fled, who denied Him, who were doubtful of His Resurrection; they now confess Him boldly. They suffer the loss of all things gladly for the precious name of Jesus. They are changed from timid, fearful followers into inspired preachers of the truth in the face of the contempt of the whole world. This transformation is wholly subjective. It is like that work of God when He breathed into Adam the breath of life. So too, the Church was inert and powerless until the Spirit was given. Then the dumb mouths were opened and they spoke as did Stephen, before the council stoned him when they could no longer endure the truth of the gospel. That same power, given at Pentecost, continues to strengthen us to this moment. Christ came in His Spirit then “that He may abide with us forever.” John 14:16. Pentecost teaches us what a blessing is ours today even though the gift was given long ago. It teaches us what we are in ourselves—a helpless, lifeless body. We are but the instrument of a power not our own. This Spirit fits us for all our needs and qualifies us for whatever our vocation in Christ requires. He is conscious of the often difficult path which those consecrated to God must travel before they reach the rest prepared for them and so gives us the strength to walk it. The same Spirit fills us with such zeal for the kingdom of God and the glory of His name that we count all things but loss for Christ’s sake, and are willingly made conformable to His death; Phil. 3:10. Having the Spirit, we have the “mind of Christ” and with it the assurance of all the things that are prepared for them that love God.

We can never endure the tribulations that shall be in the last days except we have the Comforter to uphold us. The calamities which are to be the lot of the elect foretold by Christ in Matthew 24 seem so far removed from our daily lives today that we sinfully think the minister is being naive when he speaks of being killed for Christ’s sake; Matt. 24:9. Who of us will be bold enough to confess the name of Christ in that day? Without the power of the Spirit of Christ there would not be one. But we have the assurance that we shall stand and witness then, for in Mark 13:11, “But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost.” Nothing less than that will meet our need. We are called to a life that demands a supernatural energy if we are to live it. Only by God’s grace do we become capable to live it as witnesses of His righteousness.

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