

INTRODUCTION

Jesus had come and lived among us, but there was no church. Jesus had died and been raised again from the dead, still there was no church. Jesus had appeared in risen power to many of His own, but still there was no church. A small community of those who loved Jesus waited together in Jerusalem in prayer for seven weeks - still there was no church.

There was no church - in the New Testament meaning of that term - until the day of Pentecost was come. The Church is not an achievement of devout people. It is a gift of God. It is not a secular accomplishment, but a divinely ordered entity. It is not in its essence meetings and minutes and memos. But rather, it is uncontrollable winds. Inextinguishable fires. Irrepressible tongues. When the day of Pentecost was come, there was a church!

PENTECOST

The tendency is to see Pentecost as the occasion that got those earliest believers off their cushions and out into the world of their day. When the Spirit came, it exerted a centrifugal force. Those early believers understood then that they were not a Jewish sect, but that they had a story to tell the nations.

When the Spirit came they understood that their faith was portable, that it was meant to travel - ticketed for the world and not simply marked for cold storage and safe keeping in Jerusalem.

ACTS / HIGHLIGHTS

The Book of Acts is really a story of high adventure involving the crossing of one boundary after another. It's the definitive work on church extension. Consider with me some of the highlights of this expansionist period of the Faith.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter gets up to preach the Gospel and discovers that even though multitudes come from different places they all perceive the truth he is speaking. He understands that the Gospel is for all the world. A little later on, Simon, a magician of Samaria is converted. Then Philip, on the Road to Gaza, opens the spiritual eyes of a minister of the Queen of Ethiopia.

In Lydda, a man eight years an invalid is made to walk again. In Joppa, Tabitha is converted. In that same town, Peter has a vision that compels him to include the Gentiles within the Gospel orbit. His eyes are opened to see that Gentiles have a place in Christ's family. As he himself was to put it,

"Truly, I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him".

Presently Stephen is martyred. This leads to persecution that scatters disciples into Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. In Lystra, a crippled man is healed by Paul and Barnabas. The barrier to health is thus broken. A seller of purple is led to the Lord in Thyatira. In Thessalonica, the disciples are accused of un-Roman activities. In Athens, Paul goes out to engage the Sophists at Mars Hill. In Ephesus, he takes on a silversmith who has made much money fashioning replicas of a pagan God. One journey after another is recorded in the book. Eventually the infant Church is in deep trouble. Their leader, Paul, winds up before the likes of the governor, Felix, and King Agrippa.

The Book of Acts gives us a good view of the ever-widening circumference of the Church.

EVER-WIDENING CIRCUMFERENCE

Those early believers were not raised in a hot-house where the humidity was high and where protection was afforded them against the exposure to the outside world. As time went on, the Christian Church understood that this same Spirit which had touched them at Pentecost was busy in all the world. This is suggested in that long list of "whatevers" that Paul gives us in the letter to the Philippians.

"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious if there is any excellence...think about these things".

in other words, make them your concern. They began to see their mission included more than plucking brands from the fire, or rescuing individuals from some imagined judgement. They saw themselves more and more as agents of God's spirit for the conservation of the earth. Values in society, institutions in society, laws, politics and culture - the whole of life was within the purview of the Holy Spirit. Not only was the Holy Spirit present in the Church; it was also active in the world. The Book of Acts suggests the "ever-widening" circumference of the Christian Faith.

REMEMBER, TOO...

What needs to be also remember is that the Holy Spirit is reported in that same book as working also to "build-up" the center of faith. The CENTRIFUGAL force of which we have been speaking was countered by a CENTRIPETAL. Logically - without a center - there can be no circumference - only chaos.

There are places in the Book of Acts where we learn that God sought to deepen and intensify the life of the early Christians. For example, we read,

"And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Or again,

"Then they left the presence of the Council in Jerusalem, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

And again,

"And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith."

And finally,

"So the Church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied".

The New Testament letters show how zealous the Apostles were to "build-up"

the circumference of the church's mission. If we make any one of them a center around which to seek another circumference, we're edging into possible trouble. The circumference has validity only in relation to the center. Get the center right and the circumference will take care of itself. Christ is the center.

SUMMARY To sum up the emphasis of this message on Pentecost, it would be something like this. There are twin pressures always bearing down upon the Church. There is the pressure of the centripetal, which would pull us in. There is the pressure of the centrifugal, which would drive us out.

In any congregation now-a-days, there are those who are "circumference-minded", and those who are "center-minded". Each of us can be either at any given time. Some of us go out to the outer edge...become spent...and desire to come back to the center to get our bearings. Some of us were possibly reared in such a sheltered center that we are looking for a church that will "go out". The problem is that the people who are seeking to break out will not always appreciate a church that is trying to get back, and people who are trying to get back will not always appreciate a church that is seeking to break out. The Holy Spirit sends us out and the Holy Spirit calls us back.

When the Spirit came at Pentecost long ago, it came to extend the branches of the Church and also to deepen its roots. Pray that it may do as much for us here in this fellowship of the faithful. The Spirit sends us out and the Spirit calls us back.

PRAYER Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.
Do thy mighty works within this fellowship. Make Christ real to us. Lay upon our hearts the vision of a caring church in the service of a needy world. Amen