

## A Pentecostal Church

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If we use the word Pentecostal, most people have an image of what we mean. A Pentecostal is one who believes in tongues speaking. In fact they normally claim that speaking in tongues is the proof that one has the Holy Spirit. Speaking in tongues is not only a part of their worship, it is a major part. That is what we think of when we speak of a Pentecostal church. But should it be? What ideas and activities should we associate with the term Pentecost?

This is not an academic question. Our Lord chose the day for the birth of his church. He chose the day on which the gospel message would first be proclaimed. It did not happen to fall on Pentecost by chance. What significance was there to this day that caused him to choose it? What was he saying about the nature of his church in bringing it forth on this day?

### The Significance of the Day

Our study of the New Testament is often impoverished by our ignorance of the Old Testament. Our understanding of Acts two, is an example of this. We do not see what the Lord is saying about his church by beginning it on this day, because we are not aware of the nature of the day. What kind of a day was Pentecost? The answer is to be found in Leviticus 23: 15-23, where the feast of weeks, which was later called Pentecost, was commanded.

### A Time of Thanksgiving (16-18)

The heart of this occasion was the offering of new grain. Coming seven weeks after the Passover, Pentecost would have been near the beginning of the wheat harvest in Palestine. Israel was to thank God for their harvest and present the early crop to him. In this respect they were no different than most of the nations around them. Harvest festivals were common, and are still common in some parts of the world. In Swaziland, even to this day, it is believed that common people should not eat their maize until some of it has been offered to the King and he has eaten.

Many pagan nations developed harvest ceremonies which are morally offensive. False gods were often given credit for the harvest. Ancestors were sometimes given credit for the harvest. In many parts of the world, Christians are rightfully hesitant to participate in a harvest festival, because there are pagan implications to many of the ceremonies. We must realise the danger of the pagan association, but we must also realise the danger of appearing ungrateful.

By starting his church on a day of thanksgiving, Christ was saying something about the nature of that church. We are to be a people known for giving thanks.

There are about forty passages in the New Testament on the subject of thanks. Let us note two of them.

Romans chapter one is a description of human sin. In describing the depth of sinfulness to which humanity has fallen, Paul says, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Rom 1:21) This statement comes near the conclusion of his catalogue of sins. We overlook it at our peril. We may not be guilty of the gross moral offences that he mentions earlier, but an ungrateful attitude toward God was and is a great offence of his majesty. Failure to give thanks is a sign of human arrogance and human rebellion. It leads to a darkening of the understanding, to futile thinking, and therefore to all other forms of evil.

The Gospel is proclaimed to correct this situation. As the grace of God is proclaimed, it should result in thanksgiving. Second Corinthians 4:15 tells us, "All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God."

Is this happening in our congregations? Are we known as people overflowing with thankfulness? Does our message lead to God's glory, or does it promote our own sense of being right in doctrine and practise? Of course we cannot force people to accept the Gospel. Many will reject it. But if the message we proclaim does not produce an overflowing of thankfulness in those who do accept it, there is something wrong with our message.

The church was begun on a day of thanksgiving. It ought to be known as a thankful body of people.

#### A Time for Acknowledging Sin (19)

A second major function of the festival was to provide a time of acknowledging sin. Israel was to remember their sinfulness even as they gave thanks for the harvest. A sin offering was always to be part of the Pentecost ceremony. Sorrow and joy, confession and thanksgiving, exist together in the best worship assemblies.

Modern psychology has influenced us more than we realise. We see an awareness of sin as depressing. The Bible presents it as liberating. We see sorrow and joy as polar opposites. Instead we should realise that one leads to the other. We cannot be truly thankful unless we feel undeserving. A deeper awareness of our sinfulness is one of our greatest needs. For it is only when we are aware of our sinfulness that we feel truly thankful for Calvary.

The church's birthday was a day for awareness of sin, and Peter made full use of this fact. He minced no words in confronting the crowd with their guilt. They were cut to the heart by his accusation. Acts chapter two ends with grateful praise, but it reaches that conclusion only because sin has been confronted.

It is only when people acknowledge their guilt that they can be freed to live thankful lives. To be a thankful church we must first be a church that recognises, confesses, and repents of sin (cf Psalm 32:3-5).

## A Time for Assembling Together (21)

It is certainly good to give thanks at home. We certainly ought to confess our sins in privacy. But the whole nation was to assemble to face their sins and to give thanks on Pentecost day. Private devotion is critical, but it is not sufficient of itself.

The value of group assemblies is underlined by the fact that the church was begun on a day of national assembly. Thanks given in private is of value, but it cannot replace the public giving of thanks. Sins confessed in private are forgiven, but the community loses a great benefit when public confession is unknown. We should not neglect to meet together (Heb 10:25), for it is in the context of a public gathering that the church was born. It is in the context of public gathering that we have an opportunity to praise God for his goodness and his forgiveness (cf Ps 22:25; 26:12; 35:18; 40:9; 82:1).

## A Time to Think of Others (22)

As the Jews gathered to confess sin and to give thanks for the harvest, they were also to remember the poor. The harvest was just beginning. Linked with the command regarding Pentecost is a reminder that, as they reap, they must not reap everything. They must leave something behind for the poor. While the church today is not bound to follow this particular form of poor relief, we ought to learn something from it.

The church must be known for its care of the needy. No matter how many right opinions we hold, we cannot be right with God if we are not a people who help the needy. The birth of the church on a day when such a reminder was given is one indication of this. The actions of the early church are another, as Acts 2 itself indicates (44f). There are also straightforward New Testament statements of this principle (Eph 4:28; James 1:27).

## Are We Listening?

Timing communicates. If we ask a friend about his drinking problem when no one is around, we have indicated a desire to help. If we ask the same question in public, we have indicated a desire to cause embarrassment.

In choosing Pentecost day as the day to begin the proclamation of the Gospel, the Lord was indicating something of what he wanted his church to be. Are we listening? The church should be a people who assemble to confess sin, give thanks to God, and who lovingly help others. This, rather than tongues speaking, is the measure of our understanding of Pentecost.

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