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Bethlehem, Calvary and Pentecost: God With Us, For Us, In Us

Holy Trinity at Play, to Set Us Free

Reflections [Covenant and Doctrine](#) 17 May 2016

[Acts 2:1-13](#)

[Acts 2:38-39](#)

[Romans 8:2](#)

[1 Peter 1:2](#)

[1 Peter 1:3](#)

[John 16:8](#)

It is said, and rightly so, that the average Christian and the average church are somewhere bogged down between Calvary and Pentecost. They have been to Calvary for pardon, but they have not been to Pentecost for power. If Bethlehem, representing the birth of our Lord, means 'God with us', and Calvary, demonstrating the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus, means 'God for us', then Pentecost means 'God in us'. Last Sunday we commemorated Pentecost. It was on this day that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the hundred and twenty followers of Christ who were gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem, as we read a while ago from Acts 2:1-13. It was on this day that the Church was born in a blaze of glory. It is necessary for us to recall briefly, and with reverence, this mighty act of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, fulfilling His promise of help to us, so that we may understand today's theme, 'Come, Holy Spirit, set us free'. It is worth noting that this theme flows directly from what we considered last Sunday, on the Christian life led by the Holy Spirit.

I want to argue that Pentecost is not a denomination, but an experience through which every child of Jesus, redeemed by His blood, ought to pass. Many of us have allowed sin, and religious tradition and ritual, to rob us of this power of Jesus. The promise of the Holy Spirit is for all who receive the call to repentance; God continues to call His people to salvation, as an ongoing work. The promise of Pentecost is not a restrictive, time-bound promise, but one that holds true for all people, at all times. It is an experience following redemption, called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When someone is saved, the Holy Spirit places them into the Body of Christ; besides this, Christians ought to be filled with

the Holy Spirit, that special soul-winning power. Therefore our cry to God the Holy Spirit is, come, fill us, and set us free.

Believers often become complacent, imagining that because Jesus died for us, and in His sacrifice we are saved, nothing further is required. From a broad perspective, this cannot be faulted; but does it mean that we are rid of the sin that originally distanced us from God? Certainly not, for sin remains within us by nature. We therefore have a covenant commitment to keep, to be free from the bondage of sin, and to live our lives reflecting Jesus in all we do. If that is so, we need to examine the particulars of our part in that covenant with Christ. What, then, do we need to do?

It is this very question that Peter answered in his first sermon, after he had received the gift of the Holy Spirit in abundant measure on the day of Pentecost:

"Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the LORD our God shall call." — Acts 2:38-39 (KJV)

The sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross put an end to the curse of eternal death, and His resurrection promises a life eternal, in His glorious presence, for the whole of humanity. This, in short, is the economy of salvation in the new covenant, which is internal to us. As part of this covenant commitment, we must first accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, and then deal with our sins, purging them out of our system, as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. As we begin our new life, justified and led by the Holy Spirit, we receive the baptism of the Spirit, a thorough cleansing of our hearts, of which God the Holy Spirit is the sole occupant.

The message of the Gospel, the good news, as Paul puts it in Romans chapter eight, is that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Paul's statement begins with a 'therefore', pointing back to our union with Christ, and to His great achievement in delivering us from the guilt and power of sin; but Paul then moves on, and gives a further, specific reason for our justification:

"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." — Romans 8:2 (KJV)

You come to know true emancipation, because through Jesus and His Spirit you have been set free. There is a law of sin and death, and our

whole sick civilisation operates according to this very law — the brutality, the violence, the abuse, the overflowing prisons, are all proof of people living under the law of sin and death. It is so real that Paul takes it for granted, without any need of explanation. Let us examine it for a moment, though the very thought of the evils of this world sends a shiver down the spine. The law of sin and death is cruel; it says to you, 'Go on! Do it! It cannot be wrong when it feels so right,' and then, when you have done it, it says, 'What have you been doing? What a wicked person you are!' It encourages you to sin, and then condemns you for sinning; and we go about, weighed down by the burden of guilt throughout our lives.

It is called the law of sin and death, because it results in spiritual death. Those bound by this law do not have the Spirit of Jesus in their hearts. Jesus once said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,' yet our hearts have not been purified by grace, and we have not seen Jesus with the eyes of faith. We are dead in trespasses and sins, and are heading towards an eternity of spiritual death, which the Bible calls 'the second death'. This results in our locking Jesus out of our lives, and living as though no God existed; and we are then condemned to be forever without Him. This is not merely a metaphor, but a frightening reality, one that stares every person in the face, unless they are delivered from sin, and are in Christ Jesus, through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit.

Then there is the law of the Spirit of life, a law that comes from the Holy Spirit. Do you see the contrast? There is the Spirit, and there is sin; the Spirit's law brings forth life, sin's law brings forth death. What fearful alternatives! Let us look now at the law of the Spirit at work, producing life, and freeing us from every bondage — the bondage of compulsive behaviour, of addiction, of sin in all its forms, and especially of the sins we refuse to acknowledge, or seek to justify. How does the Holy Spirit accomplish this in our lives?

The first work the Holy Spirit performs in us is to sanctify us. He sanctifies — blesses, purifies, sets apart — the chosen people even before they repent and believe:

"Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." — 1 Peter 1:2 (KJV)

Jesus justifies us as we come to believe in Him, and this is followed by the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying us. The most important fact for us to grasp is that Jesus knew us in eternity; even before His act of

creation, He foreknew us. How wonderful it is that we have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of Jesus Christ, and that He has chosen us for sanctification by the Spirit. The word 'obedience', as used in Scripture, has two facets: first, our obedience to Jesus implies our repentance, and second, it implies our faith. Repentance can come only through faith in Jesus Christ.

The three parables of Jesus — the good shepherd finding his lost sheep, the woman seeking her lost coin, and the loving father receiving back his prodigal son — all point towards the Triune God; here we see the Trinity at work. God the Father waits for the lost sinner to return; God the Son is the good shepherd who cares for them; and God the Holy Spirit works upon them, and sanctifies them, bringing all this to pass.

Jesus has told us of the Holy Spirit that, "when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). The Spirit convicts us by seeking us out; as we receive Him, we are stirred within our own spirit, and empowered to discern good from bad, right from wrong, righteousness from unrighteousness. We are then no longer like the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the prodigal son, but joint heirs with Jesus in the sonship of God.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." — 1 Peter 1:3 (KJV)

The expression 'begotten us again' signifies our rebirth in Jesus Christ. We were His creation when we chose to separate ourselves from Him, and now, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are once again joined to Him, never to be separated again. We must also understand that a believer may not remain free after this regeneration; there is always the possibility of falling back. The Holy Spirit, therefore, continues His work within believers, as an ongoing task.

In conclusion, let us consider ten points to take away from today's reflection.

First, the promise of Pentecost is not a restrictive, time-bound promise; it is for all people, for all time. Second, Jesus fulfilled His side of the new covenant by His matchless sacrifice on the Cross, and by sending the Holy Spirit to help us. Third, we are required to fulfil our side of that covenant, by casting off the bondage of sin. Fourth, to achieve this, we must first accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, and then deal with our sins, as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. Fifth, there is a law of sin and death, which the world seems to follow; it encourages sin,

and then condemns us for sinning. Sixth, there is also the law of the Spirit of life, which comes from the Holy Spirit, and promises eternal life. Seventh, Jesus knew us in eternity; even before His act of creation, He foreknew us, and justified us by His redeeming work. Eighth, the Holy Spirit sanctifies us even before we repent and believe, and convicts us concerning sin, righteousness and judgement. Ninth, obedience, in biblical terms, means receiving and accepting Jesus in faith, once we have repented of our sins. Tenth, God the Father waits for the lost sinner to return; God the Son, as the good shepherd, cares for them; and God the Holy Spirit works upon them, and sanctifies them.

Let us pray to our merciful Master, Jesus Christ, that His Spirit may remain within us throughout our lives, and work continually to sanctify us, helping us to remain a new creation, justified according to His abundant mercy. Amen.

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