

“The Meaning of Pentecost

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This is the Feast of Pentecost, the day that marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles in Jerusalem. For centuries it was one of the outstanding festival days of the Church. Ranked in importance not only above Christmas but, in some quarters, even above Easter. But something has happened to it in the United States. We look forward to Christmas Day with eager anticipation; on Easter Sunday churches are frequently filled to overflowing; but for many church members, Pentecost is scarcely more than a name.

What is the reason for this? It is, for the most part, because people don't know what to make of it. The descent of the Spirit at Pentecost is incomprehensible to them and far from the reality that they know. Divided tongues as of fire, sounds like the rush of a violent wind, peoplespeaking unexpectedly in other languages- it is all strange, perplexing, and incredible. If what used to be a high day in the Church Year now goes uncommemorated, the reason is that people cannot relate it to their everyday experience. In some circles the tendency is to regard the term "Holy Spirit" as just a way of talking about a spiritual atmosphere.

The question is, What happened at Pentecost? It is plain that something phenomenal happened. Any historian, whether a Christian or not, who studies the New Testament is bound to recognize that the Church came into existence at Pentecost. The disciples of Christ, who had supposed that with his crucifixion all was over and every hope they cherished for his cause was dead, on that day experienced an illumination of spirit and a sense of power that transformed them.

It was power at three levels: physical power that filled them with energy, stamina, and

courage; mental power that gave them insight, initiative, and confident decisions; and spiritual power that radically changed their own lives and made them life-changers wherever they went. If it were not for those physical, mental, and spiritual endowments- and how the disciples used them- it would be hard to account for the dramatic rise and phenomenally rapid expansion of the Christian Church.

It is a remarkable story: a movement, at the outset numerically insignificant and socially obscure, becoming, in a few short years, a force that even the might of Rome had to reckon with- the Gospel of Christ, in an age when there were no means of communication like radio, television, or jet planes, spreading from city to city and country to country until, starting from Palestine, it had swept all over the Roman Empire.

An explanation is called for. The disciples of Christ provide it, and it is now an integral part of the documentary record of Christianity. This is their explanation. On the day of Pentecost they made two great discoveries. They discovered, first, that the Divine Presence, which they had become aware of while Jesus was with them, had come back to them and was continuing with them, but in a far deeper way than before, in a way that was independent of his actual bodily presence. It was the same Presence and yet different, because it was as though their Master had now drawn them into something of that union and fellowship with God which had been his own secret, so that, as never before, they knew God for themselves. God had taken possession of their lives.

The second discovery they made was that this experience, which depended entirely on Jesus, was not confined to those who had known and followed him in Palestine. It could come to anybody anywhere. They went out from Jerusalem telling what had happened to them, and time after time and in country after country they saw the same thing happen to others. Through the preaching of the Gospel, men and women--regardless of race or class--had a new experience of God, received new power from God, were lifted out of themselves, and were introduced to a spontaneous goodness which they didn't claim any credit for but which they attributed to the presence of God within them.

This is what they meant by the Holy Spirit. The term is not just a figure of speech for a spiritual atmosphere. It denotes the Divine Presence--the Spirit of God--entering the mind, energizing the will, and ennobling the feeling: the Divine Presence indwelling the whole personality, heightening all its powers, and the source of everything that is good and virtuous, every quest for truth, every creative impulse, and every effort to achieve personal and social righteousness. The Holy Spirit is none other than God directly reaching into people's lives and firing them up with "His" purposes. It is God present and at work in the human spirit.

When we say that we believe in God, what do we mean? We are affirming our faith in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. We are affirming our faith in God the Son, who was made in human likeness, in whose life on earth we see the divine breaking into the world of time and history. But--can we stop there? Is that all we mean when we say we believe in God--God above us, God one time among us? Do we have any experience of God at work within us? Are we unitarian, binitarian, or trinitarian Christians?

Does the first Pentecost have any relevance for today? What do we know at firsthand about the Holy Spirit? Are the numerous references to the Spirit in the New Testament totally out of the orbit in which we live and do business? The wording of the second chapter of Acts may be very different from our experience--cloven tongues as of fire, sounds like the rush of a violent wind, people speaking in tongues--but what about the fact behind the

wording? Do we have any awareness of a Divine Presence around us and within us? What about tingling sensations all over our body or experiences of ecstasy that might be attributable to God? What about sudden onrushes of joy, or the joy of elevated thoughts? Are the common ways of life ever interpenetrated for us by another dimension, the dimension of the Eternal? Have we discovered in the here and now any form of a super-human quality of life?

Many people inside and outside the Church would answer "No" to those questions. They would say that they have never had any such experience. Paul Tillich often dealt with such people. He believed that nobody can say that he or she is without the Spiritual Presence. He compared the Holy Spirit with the air we breathe, which surrounds us, is nearest to us, and brings life to us. He listed the manifestations of the Spirit and asked his readers whether they could recognize their own experience somewhere in that list.

Let me quote him at length. "The Spirit can work on you with a soft but insistent voice, telling you that your life is empty and meaningless but that there are chances of a new life waiting before the door of your inner self, to fill its void and to conquer its dullness. The Spirit can work in you, awakening the desire to strive toward the sublime over against the profanity of the average day. The Spirit can give you the courage which says Yes to life, in spite of the destructiveness you have experienced around you and within you. The Spirit can reveal to you that you have hurt somebody deeply, but can also give you the right word which reunites him with you. The Spirit can make you love with the divine love someone you profoundly dislike or hate or who has no interest for you. The Spirit can give you the strength to throw away false anxieties and to take upon yourself the anxiety which

belongs to life itself. The Spirit can awaken you to sudden insight into way you must take and can open your eyes to a view of your world which makes everything new. The Spirit can give you joy in the midst of the ordinary routine, as well as in the depth of sorrow. The Spirit can give you the power of prayer which nobody has except through the Spiritual Presence. Who can assert that he is without the Spirit?"

See what Tillich is saying? In the language of our day, he is saying what the New Testament and the whole Bible say. God is not only above us--our Creator and Sovereign. God not only came among us--in Christ our Lord and Savior. God can work within us--Life of our life, Source of our love. We may "quench the Spirit." Is that the unpardonable sin? But if, by persistent self-will, we have not made ourselves insensitive, stubborn, and callous, there is always within us the spark given to us in Baptism which can be fanned into a flame. In all of us there is a shrine or sanctuary, the meeting place of the human spirit with the spirit of God. Even if we have spent our days selfishly and our years in worldly ambitions, our deepest and truest self is a reflection of Christ, and the Holy Spirit can ignite a spirit of

Christ within us.

This is fundamental in what the Church affirms when it celebrates Pentecost: God with us, the Source of light and truth, of love and power. This is what is deepest and profoundest in Christianity: the life of God in the human spirit. Christianity began with the fellowship between Jesus and his disciples. It went on after the triumph of Easter in the fellowship with the risen Lord-occasional meetings, mysterious and awesome. It is available to us in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, like Christ in all his dealings with us, yet without limitation of time or space, communing with us, transforming our ideals, and strengthening our wills to choose the highest. Only in that fellowship can we hope to reach God's purpose for us. Here at last; you and I, made by God, made for God, the friends of God, lifted by that friendship to new levels of character and service, can fulfill in everyday life the part for which we were made.