



Growth through the Holy Spirit

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

(ACTS 2:41, 42)

The work of the Holy Spirit in the new dispensation gives us reason to set our scopes wide and far. I mentioned how the outpouring of the Spirit marks the beginning of world-wide preaching and gives us a broad and panoramic view from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. It is the view of which Psalm 87 speaks: many tongues, one God, one faith confessing. The macrocosm is filled with God's praise.

But the work of the Holy Spirit also has to do with what happens deep inside the heart of a person, in the microcosm of the human soul. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us. We need to pay proper attention to this in-depth work of the Spirit of God.

On the day of the outpouring of the Spirit, as described in Acts 2, there is a miraculous growth in the numbers of the church. In Acts 1:15 we can read that the church before Pentecost numbered about one hundred and twenty persons. That is not a great amount, when you look at the power of the ministry of Christ during his stay on earth. His many sermons and miracles led to a little more than one hundred members. But in Acts 2:41 we get quite a different picture: there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Imagine, three thousand persons are added in one day. If that happened today in any average sized church, the elders probably couldn't handle the influx. Just the idea of baptizing three thousand people on one day

is phenomenal. We are not told how this was done or if this was done right away.

Now we are not concerned with numbers as such. We are not fixated on numbers, as is the case with exponents of the church-growth movement. A church does not always increase in numbers and sometimes in fact decreases in membership. Still we do appreciate church growth. What is more important is how this growth comes about and to what this growth leads.

Repentance and Faith

It is remarkable how the work of the Holy Spirit is always connected with proclaiming the Truth and hearing the Word. Where the Spirit is, there is always preaching and hearing. It is by these two means that the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts.

In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter makes no bones about the real situation: the hearers have crucified Christ, but he has risen from the dead, and has poured out his Spirit. The demand of the Gospel is rather simple (verse 38), “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The preaching is an exposition of the riches in Christ and an exhortation to receive these riches through repentance and faith. The exhortation to repent and believe is very urgent and strong. See verse 40: with many other words Peter exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”

Save yourselves? We should not misunderstand this saying of Peter. He is not suggesting at all that our salvation depends on any prior act of ourselves. Every Christian should know that he can not save himself. Salvation is the result of the powerful working of God’s sovereign grace in our lives.

The responsibility to respond

But this truth does not do away with our responsibility to respond to the call of the Gospel. We are confronted with the Word and we are called to heed carefully what is said. This involves the activity of the mind and the will. The word *repent* indicates a complete mental and emotional (spiritual) change. Preaching always addresses both the mind and the conscience of the hearer.

We can sit in church and listen to the preaching of the Word, but all this must lead to action from our side. This action is called in this passage *receiving*: “So those who received his word were baptized....” The same verse notes that many did receive the word. It also shows us that not everyone received the word. We do not know exact figures here, but three thousand out of a rather large population is not a huge number. In itself it is huge but in the context of possible numbers, it was probably not so large.

Many were converted. But others, who heard the same preaching, did not repent and receive the Word. This again demonstrates that preaching always leads to a two-fold reaction, either faith or unbelief. When confronted with the Gospel, some do receive it, very consciously and joyfully, while others reject it, also very consciously and with grim determination.

Receiving the Word

It took much effort from the side of Peter and the other disciples to persuade people to receive the Word. Verse 40 gives evidence of this struggle. People do not immediately accept what they are being told. It takes persuasion and repetition to lead hearers to faith and acceptance.

But there are those who do receive the Word. Receiving means to take up and into oneself what it being said. It has the notion of carefully weighing what is said, approving it as being true, and then admitting it into one’s mind. Whatever questions or doubts may at this point still remain, these are not sufficient to reject what is being said. These people basically understand the message, agree with it, and are satisfied that this is the truth. That is the sense here of the verb to receive.

We must acknowledge that this receiving of the Word is a great miracle, even on the day of Pentecost itself. Whenever anyone receives the Word, it is miraculous, and this holds true also for the day of Pentecost. It means that a powerful change has taken place and is taking place within these people.

Made receptive

The verb to receive indicates that people have been made receptive by the Spirit and Word of Christ. God has convinced and convicted them. Receiving the Word is not a natural thing for people to do. As we noted, the first reaction of people is generally to reject what is being said. In Acts 2:13 we already learned that some people were very quick and easy with their judgment over what was happening. They said that the disciples were filled with

new wine. Some were perplexed, while others were amused. But no one will of himself really accept what is being said.

Paul wrote about this later in his first letter to the Corinthians, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (2:14).” You need the working of the Holy Spirit to receive and discern spiritual things (cf. also John 3).

There are those who on the day of Pentecost do receive what is said. This is then precisely because the Spirit worked in these people a powerful change. The Spirit of God opened minds and hearts, and so these people were able to receive and to internalize what was being expressed to them.

Receiving is done by faith

Now the Bible does not here explain the inner working or the mechanics of this receiving. It simply notes the fact. The receiving of the Word is done by faith. People believe that what Peter is saying is true. The evidence is in the Pentecostal signs, and even more so in the Scripture which is properly opened and applied. Perhaps many of these hearers still vividly remember what Jesus taught and how he had died. Many of them may even have seen the Lord in the flesh as he ministered among them. What they now hear and see on Pentecost strikes a responsive chord, and they receive the Word by taking it into themselves so that it becomes a part of them. It is now a compelling and controlling factor in their lives.

For that is the consequence of this receiving. The Word becomes a part of you. The Word is so powerful that you start to think differently about very important matters. You begin to act accordingly. Receiving the Word means a decisive change in thinking and doing.

It is important to note this carefully. We can attend church Sunday after Sunday, week after week, and we may constantly hear the preaching of the Word, but do we really receive the Word? Does it become a part of us as a compelling and controlling factor in our lives? Does it change our thinking and in this way influence our action? Or do we just continue to do as we were doing, without showing any particular, visible effect?

Word and sacrament

The people described in Acts 2 did understand that receiving the Word has certain consequences. It says: those who received his word were baptized. This is the baptism in the Name of Jesus (verse 38), the very

Name that was officially cursed by the Jewish leaders. Through this baptism, they publicly acknowledged that they wanted to belong to Jesus and to his disciples, to his church. That was in those days certainly a very bold thing to do, not without risk or danger. We see that receiving the Word leads to a very conscious public act of being baptized. Through that baptism one became officially enjoined with the followers of Jesus Christ.

Preaching and sacraments go together. The sign follows the Word, and where people receive the Word, they also desire baptism. In this way the people are called to make a very important decision, and to do so plainly and publicly. They respond in great numbers to that call, for it says, “and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”

Joining an existing body

Notice the word *added*. These people joined an existing body, the church of Christ. They did not on that day institute some kind of a new organization, but they were added to an established congregation, which was clearly associated with Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith do not mean that you establish something new, let's say, a new church, but that you join the church which is faithful according to God's Word.

Now one can say: if there were added that day about three thousand persons, one might just be part of the crowd and not even be especially noticed. You can easily hide in a crowd. Who kept an exact record? That is true in itself. When a movement suddenly becomes a mass-movement, it may even be fashionable to join it. Who would not be attracted to the church on the day of Pentecost? But make no mistake about it: the decision to be baptized would not be without consequence. Everyone close to you or important to you would soon know: you were baptized that day and added to the church of Jesus Christ. It is not just a hidden commitment in someone's heart, but it is a public commitment that is made visible to all.

The growth of the church is a matter of a powerful change and a public commitment in people's lives. Without this change, there would be no growth at all. But when the change comes, it means a complete and radical change. From then on one visibly belongs to and is associated with the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. This has now become the priority of one's life.

Whatever criticism one might have on huge evangelism associations like e.g. the Billy Graham Evangelism Association, it must be admitted that Dr. Graham certainly has seen one important matter very clearly: commitment to Christ must be a public decision, for you can not light a lamp and put it un-

der a bushel. Everyone should be able to see that you have indeed consciously committed yourself to the Lord. That does not necessarily mean an “altar call,” but it must be visible in your association with the church of the Lord. Unfortunately it is not usually specified which church a believer ought to join. One is called to the light but left in the dark.

Receiving the Word and undergoing baptism indicate that the old way of life is gone, and a new way of life has begun. The powerful change leads to a new beginning in life. And it is a very promising start.

Growing in the faith

For what happens here is only a start. All these people have only made a beginning which demands a further activity. We read in verse 42, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Obviously you’re not done when you repent and are baptized. Now you have to grow in the faith. Therefore it says that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. The word that is used here is very strong and emphatic. They devoted themselves to i.e. carefully held to, stayed with, focused on, and abided by the apostles’ teaching.

The apostles’ teaching denotes the authoritative proclamation of the Gospel, of the death and resurrection of Christ according to the verified facts and also as prophesied in the Old Testament. The apostles begin to open to these people the Scriptures, and they accept that teaching. We see that the prime ministry of the church is a preaching and teaching ministry, to equip the saints with the Word for a life of service. Nothing has really changed since then, has it?

Fellowship and celebration

The text also speaks of fellowship. It can mean the fellowship with the apostles, but also includes the new fellowship with one another. These people did not stand on their own, but they sought and found one another in and around the teaching of the apostles.

Fellowship means sharing. The church is a communion of saints. Where the believers gather to hear, that’s where I also want to be. You see here something realized of what Psalm 84 speaks about: the longing for the fellowship with the believers, the joy, the peace, and rest of the new and true Jerusalem. One day in God’s house of praise is better than a thousand days

outside the courts of his salvation. They devote themselves to this new fellowship and they cannot get enough of it.

We also read that they devoted themselves to the “breaking of bread.” Although this can mean simply a normal meal – and they probably did have meals together – it is also an expression which can denote the celebrating of the Lord’s Supper. This is how I understand it here. The preaching of salvation is confirmed in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The atoning death of Christ is fully central. They begin to “cherish the blessed memory of the bitter death of Christ” (Form for the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper, *Book of Praise*, page 599). The cross is no longer for them a stumbling block but a reason for praise and glory.

A promising start

The text also says that they devoted themselves to the prayers. Notice the definite article: *the* prayers. The Jews had set times and contents for their daily prayers. The Christian congregation did not neglect this aspect. Does not the Spirit lead us to say “Abba, Father”? (Rom 8:8) The Spirit is the Spirit of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication. The Christian life cannot function without prayer, for it is the life-line and the thermometer of faith.

If you sum up all the above, you must agree: what a promising start. These three thousand people have a long way to go, but they have made a very clear and decisive beginning. And their devotion must continue, for it is a hallmark of the church of Christ: submission to the Word, seeking of the fellowship of the Church, using the sacraments, and engaging in constant praise and prayer. Here we see the true depth of Pentecost. The Spirit by the Word shapes and forms knowledge, fellowship, and worship.

Can you find yourself in this picture? For this is not merely a description of how it once was, but a normative prescription of how it always must be. The Spirit brings about an in-depth change, and this change is visible in joyous and sincere participation in the fellowship and worship of the church of Christ. Pentecost is the beginning of growth, but then an in-depth growth, a sharing fully in the life and joy of the congregation.

All these elements still stand central: preaching and teaching (the apostolic doctrine), worship, sacraments, and public prayers. Is this not what the church services are all about? Here beats the heart of the Pentecostal experience. Only in this way can the promising start continue and find solidity.

Continuation in the same line

These people need this ministry or they will stagnate spiritually and cease to grow in Christ. Otherwise they will soon drift back into their former way of life. Christ will not be in the centre anymore. Devotion becomes indifference. We see it also today; it still goes the same way. When people no longer are devoted to worship and fellowship and do not seek the apostolic teaching of the church, you can see them slowly disappearing beyond the horizon of Christendom.

There are also today those who make a promising start. But somehow they do not stick with it. Some may even present what they consider to be legitimate excuses and good reasons to leave, but the point is that their heart was never in it. There was no real change within and soon it shows to the outside. If you do not truly receive the Word, you will not devote yourself to the communion of saints. It's as simple as that. Personal faith leads to communal commitment, and where the one is lacking, the other also fails.

Personal not individualistic

People today like to speak much about the experiencing of the power of the Spirit. A lot of this is presented in individualistic terms. It is true, as we have noted, the working of the Spirit is very personal. No one should deny that at all. But the personal element is not loose from the togetherness, the communal devotion in worship to the Word of Christ, the preaching, praise, and prayers of the gathered congregation, as described in this passage.

Personal faith must be shown in a life of holiness and in devotion to worship in the fellowship with the church. In this way the church grows in faith and works. Pentecost is all about growth. We grow together in Christ to maturity of faith and the fruits of faith.

We may echo the sentiments of the Apostles' Creed, as summarized in Hymn 1B:3 (*Book of Praise*)

“In God the Holy Spirit I believe.
Through whom we are a new creation.
And I believe a catholic Church,
One holy Christian congregation.
The true communion of all those
Whom God once as his people chose....”

Personal faith and fellowship with the saints are gifts of the Spirit and fruit of Pentecost.