

## PENTECOST CONFIRMED

*“And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness”.*

(Acts 4: 31)

I have been explaining to you from Scripture how the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is a one-time event, which cannot be repeated and is not repeated. When the Spirit was poured out, He came to stay, permanently. You might say that this is the classic, Reformed position.

But there are various passages, also in the Book of Acts, which clearly state that the apostles and others were filled with the Holy Spirit after Pentecost. I think of what we read in our text, “and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” Just compare that with Acts 2: 4 (the Pentecost story) and you find the same words. Does this not indicate that the “Pentecost experience” has been and can be repeated?

Now we will not deny that in various places after Pentecost we can read about people being filled with the Spirit. In Ephesians 5: 18, we even read the command, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Holy Spirit.” You should note, however, that in Ephesians 5 the apostle does not say: be filled with the Holy Spirit for the first time, for he uses the present imperative tense: be constantly filled with the Holy Spirit. Instead of constantly getting drunk, he writes, be constantly filled with the Spirit. Paul there does not say that we have to repeat Pentecost, but that must always live through the Holy Spirit who was once poured out and now dwells in the church.

## REMARKABLE DIFFERENCES

Back to Acts 4. When you compare what happens in that chapter with what is reported in Acts 2, you notice some remarkable differences. First of all, the signs of Pentecost (tongues of fire, the sound of a mighty wind, speaking in other tongues) are not repeated. There is no massive gathering of people from everywhere who come to see and hear what is going on. There *is* a sign, the place where the disciples are gathered is shaken, but that is restricted to this one place. No one else notices it. Pentecost showed us mighty signs for the whole city, but Acts 4 gives us one sign for the small church. As much as Pentecost was a public affair meant for all, so Acts 4 is a private affair, restricted to the congregation.

And when it says in Acts 4 that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, it means that the Spirit again powerfully came over them, but for a specific purpose, as we will see. That happened more often, earlier with Peter, later with Stephen, always in a special situation. May we rightly call these events a repetition of Pentecost?

We really see something different. Throughout the Book of Acts, on particular occasions, we see how the Lord Jesus *confirms* that it has been Pentecost, and that the Spirit will never leave the church by blood once bought. But confirmation is not the same as repetition. The situations, the signs, and the events described are all different from what happened at Pentecost. They are related, but not the same.

## A CRITICAL SITUATION

Here in Acts 4 there is good reason for the Lord Jesus to reassure His church. For the situation is serious. The Jewish Sanhedrin has for the first time officially

forbidden the apostles to speak in the Name of Jesus. It has underlined this with threats. The counter-attack is now beginning. And the question is: will that small church be able to withstand the pressure of a growing intimidation, yes, even the prospect of persecution?

What do we read in this text? Christ reassures His church that the Holy Spirit will not leave the church. He will enable His church, through the indwelling of the His Spirit, to withstand the opposition from the world, so that the progress of the Gospel is not impeded. So it will go, despite the cost and suffering, from this time forth, until the last one has been gathered in. That is the message of this text, which we will explore in a little more detail. We will see how this confirmation of Pentecost is a response to prayer, is revealed in power, and results in progress.

## **A TURN OF EVENTS**

On Pentecost, we can say, the Lord Jesus Christ opened up a mighty evangelical campaign: the Gospel was preached everywhere in Jerusalem, many signs and wonders were done by the apostles, and on the first day there were tallied about three thousand souls. And so it continued, day after day. The new congregation showed that it was motivated and guided by Christian love, people kept coming to the church, and we read in 2: 47 that they experienced “favour with all the people.”

A young, enthusiastic, growing church, and a very popular movement had sprung up. The apostles, we’d say, are really on a roll here. And we can be sure that they were excited about what was happening. It was a time of optimism and unexpected opportunities. No one offered any opposition to the church and its ministry.

Then comes the turn of events. After the healing of the lame man at the gate of the temple, Peter and John address a jubilant crowd. But suddenly the temple police, under the leadership of the priests and the Sadducees, come and arrest the two apostles. Since it is already evening, they are put in prison until the next day. And we read in chapter 4 how the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, meets to deal with them. It becomes clear to everyone present that the Name of Jesus is the focal point, Jesus, whom they had crucified.

The Jewish council is rather stuck with the whole matter. They could not deny that a miracle had taken place. They did not dare at this time (yet) to take drastic measures, because the Christians were too popular with the general populace. What did they do? They came up with their first counter-measure: a prohibition to speak again in the Name of Jesus: “speak no more to anyone in this Name.” And they threaten that further measures will be taken if the apostles continue with this preaching. Then they let the two men go.

## **CONCERN FOR THE FUTURE**

This is a serious matter. The apostles could have expected that the repressive regime of the Sanhedrin would act sooner or later. They also know that the threats

are not idle boasts, for the Sanhedrin has earlier demonstrated their determination and cunning. They turned the people against Jesus, and can also turn the people against the apostles. For the first time since Pentecost a major crisis has risen which will affect the ministry and life of the church.

We read in verse 23 that the two apostles went “to their friends” to report what the chief priests and elders had said to them. These friends, fellow-apostles and others, will have been gathered together, awaiting the outcome of the trial. They were under much stress, of course, as they waited to hear what had happened. And when Peter and John tell them about the prohibition to speak in Jesus’ Name, everyone realizes how serious this is. There is gladness that Peter and John are released, and they praise God for this. But at the same time, there is great concern about the future. They know: if we continue to preach the Name of Jesus, and we must, then we will come to clash with the Sanhedrin. There’s a storm brewing on the horizon. It may take some time yet to arrive, but it is coming.

## **A CONGREGATIONAL MEETING**

We get the impression from verse 24 that some kind of a “congregational meeting” was held. The congregation did not shrug off the threats of the Sanhedrin and take a light-hearted approach. They did not build on their current popularity and momentum. They built only on the promises given in God’s Word.

They all gathered for a special prayer meeting. It says in verse 24: they lifted their voices together in prayer to God. They felt the crisis. They sensed their need and peril. There was no triumphalism here, as if they would easily overcome all adversity. They humbled themselves before God.

There is a strong connection between this prayer and their “being filled with the Holy Spirit.” Our text says: and when they had prayed, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit, as we confess also in Lord’s Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism, is given only to those who with hearty sighing unceasingly beg for Him. We can only receive the ongoing strength of the Spirit upon sincere and heartfelt prayer. But if we pray in that manner, we will be answered. We might even translate, “While they were yet praying, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” The prayer is immediately answered, according to need.

## **PENTECOST LEADS TO CRISIS**

We should therefore take a brief look at this prayer, and note its main features. First, they call upon the Lord as Sovereign. His power and Word surpasses all power and edicts of men. Second, they base their prayer on the Scriptures, by quoting from Psalm 2. Why Psalm 2? Because this Psalm speaks about the great conspiracy against God and His anointed, His Messiah.

And while the Psalm itself speaks of a battle between the LORD and the nations, the disciples see the Jewish leaders as siding with these ungodly nations against the Lord Jesus. They mention specifically Herod and Pontius Pilate with

the Gentiles and the people of Israel. The apostles see things in a broad perspective. The fallen world and the false church rise up together against God and His Christ.

Now that's all they quote: the rebellion against the Christ of God. They indicate: the battle which has been going on for ages has now reached its final stage. Now the last persecutions will begin. Now the great tribulation will commence. Psalm 2 will find its ultimate fulfillment in the last showdown between Satan and the seed of the woman. And they all realize that this matter is too much for them.

You see, Pentecost brought about a great crisis in this world. Get away from the idyllic scenes of the first Christian church, whose members had everything in common and lived in the favour of all. The first shots have already been fired. Soon there will be the first casualties, Stephen and James, followed by many others. The church can not cease preaching and the world will not cease its destruction. This is the first confrontation which will lead to many, even more violent and widespread confrontations. The earth will turn red with the blood of the martyrs.

## **THE ULTIMATE COMMITMENT**

There is a strong temptation here for the church. The apostles can still back off. The Sanhedrin has made it clear that they will not cease and desist. Now the disciples must make the ultimate commitment. This is the point of no return! Do you see what is taking place here in our text? No repetition of Pentecost, but the church facing the consequences of Pentecost.

It is not easy to remain a Christian when the tide is turning against you and when the ultimatum has been issued. This little congregation does not make light of the matter or exude any self-confidence. As they turn to Psalm 2, they also plead with the Lord to fulfill that Psalm in their lives and to grant them victory in the evil hour. Is it not the Lord God who precisely for this situation gave the promise and comfort of Psalm 2:

Lo with a rod of iron Thou shalt break them  
Dash them in pieces like as potter's jar?

Turning to the Scriptures, they realize that it is not their fight, but the Lord's. Not their honour is at stake, but His glory. And they can stand in that battle only in the Lord's strength. Now that the final hostilities break loose, they ask, "Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak with all boldness. . . ."

## **A POWERFUL CONFIRMATION**

What the church will need in the last days is assurance, certainty, that the Lord Jesus, Who has all power in heaven and on earth, will thwart the evil designs of the ungodly and enable His people by the power of the Holy Spirit to persevere and remain faithful. If we ever need the comforting presence and the motivating power of the Holy Spirit, it is now.

The disciples are disturbed, but they are not dismayed. They open the Scriptures, and plead on God's own promises. And while they are still praying, "the place in which they were gathered together was shaken." When Pentecost is confirmed, it is confirmed in a very powerful and unmistakable manner! What is more powerful, humanly speaking, than an "earthquake," when the very building you are in is shaken?

Now the Greek text does not use here the normal word for earthquake. The word denotes more a strongly noticeable shaking and rattling. The ground did not really shake but the "place where they were gathered" (that is: the building) shook! This underscores that the sign was limited. Whoever was not in the building did not notice it. It is not a sign for all of Jerusalem, but only for the congregation. God does not want to shake up the city, He wants to strengthen His little church.

For that is the meaning of the shaking: God confirms His presence and power. The disciples knew that God's presence was often demonstrated in earthquakes, in the shaking of the environment. It is therefore a direct sign to them that the Lord has heard their prayer and responds to their needs. The shaking demonstrates, as it were, that God has come into motion from the throne in heaven.

He Who sits in the heavens laughs,  
The LORD has them in derision (Psalm 2).

They pray: look upon their threats! The enemy is trying to close us down and shut us up. But God says: they can never turn back the clock. It has been Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has been poured out. I will not be stopped by them. And the whole house begins to move and shake.

## **EQUIPPED FOR THE CHALLENGE**

And we read, "and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." What? Had they not been filled with the Holy Spirit before? Yes, they had. Was that, then, not sufficient? Yes, it was. Did that filling with the Spirit "peter out"? No it didn't.

Why then this "filling with the Holy Spirit" now? Well, the Lord Jesus simply equips them to meet the challenge of the day, in the crisis of the times. Pentecost is confirmed. The disciples are enabled to face this new challenge in the assurance of the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is what they had asked for on the basis of God's Word, is it not? They had prayed, "grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness." They had spoken with boldness before, even to the Sanhedrin (see how it says in verse 8, that Peter, *filled with the Holy Spirit*, addressed them). They asked: grant us in this new situation, now that we are under an express prohibition to speak, that we continue speaking with the same boldness, yes, even with more boldness than before.

It is the Lord Jesus who in this way at this precise moment makes clear to His

church how true Psalm 2 really is. The Lord will not back down, but neither will His church. He will grant strength according to need, and so He will always confirm to His people the reality of Pentecost. When we need it, we will be filled with the Holy Spirit who dwells in the midst of His people and in our hearts.

What we need, also today, is not Pentecost redone, but Pentecost confirmed. We need to believe and experience the help and power of the Spirit of God in all the challenges of the last days. We need strength in trials. The trials differ from age to age and from time to time. The temptations and persecutions are not always of the same nature and intensity. But we need to be filled with the Spirit *always* to speak with boldness; to be confessing Christians in word and deed, regardless of opposition or consequence.

We have to pray for this, of course. There is a strong connection between prayer and being filled with the Spirit. We must bring our *specific* needs before God's throne and ask for ongoing spiritual strength to meet the challenges of the times, the trials of our life. When this is our constant prayer, we will be able to continue in our time, as the disciples in their time.

## **THE NEW ELEMENT**

For notice the last words of our text: and they spoke the word of God with boldness. Here we see that it is not a repetition of Pentecost, for this is really nothing new. It was "new" on the day of Pentecost, but it is the order of the day since Pentecost. The new element is that they did not cease speaking. What was not forbidden on Pentecost is forbidden now, but they continue speaking with boldness.

That is the progress about which this text speaks. The church will not be muzzled. God's work must continue. Even if Jews and Gentiles band together against the LORD and His Anointed, the church will not be silenced.

They spoke the word with boldness not just in that house, but in the temple and in the streets, see verse 33. The disciples continue to preach that Jesus is truly risen from the dead. The order "do not speak anymore in the Name of Jesus" leads to the exact opposite: even more speaking in the Name of Jesus.

The word "boldness" literally means: speaking everywhere with courage. For courage is what the church needs in the latter days, in critical situations. It must be strong in Christ, firm in conviction, unceasing in testimony and preaching.

## **COURAGE TO CONTINUE**

You see how in Acts 4 we are one step further than in Acts 2? In Acts 2, on Pentecost, the church moved from behind closed doors into the streets to speak of the risen Lord and Saviour. And in Acts 4 we read that this church will not be pushed back behind closed doors, but receives the courage and conviction to continue even in the face of prohibition and persecution.

The church prayed: Lord, let the initiative of Pentecost not be snuffed out. And

Christ assured His church on the spot: do not worry, they can never turn back the clock, the Spirit is here to stay. As the ages unfolded, even until today, that courage is still Christ's gift to His church. It has been all progress since then.

Do not ask the Lord Jesus to repeat Pentecost. Ask Him to confirm His promises to you, to confirm in your life that it has been Pentecost and that the Spirit is also with you in your circumstances, to give you courage to face the challenges of life in a fallen and apostate world. And believe, also because of this text, that Christ will never desert you in the battle of faith.

And you will discover, as the church did in Jerusalem, that Christ will complete also in you what He has begun. He brings His people through the crises, by the power of the Holy Spirit. So that we do experience it: the Spirit is greater than any crisis which we face in life.

God is our refuge, He will shield us  
And to our foes He will not yield us  
He is our strength in troubles nigh  
Our Help is He, the LORD most high (Psalm 46: 1, *Book of Praise*).