

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

Contemporary views of the church today are anything but complimentary. One of the nicer things said about the church is that it is irrelevant as far as saying anything to today's world is concerned.

There are many who look upon the church as nothing but a collection of religious creeps who are colorless, sterile, and dull, and who come to church only to sit with blank stares on their faces. They have no life to them at all. They remind me of the remark by the pagan philosopher, Nietzsche: "If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, then you'll have to look a lot more redeemed."

Others think of the church as a group of religious bureaucrats who are forever issuing pronouncements to which no one pays any attention.

Some think of it as a group of plastic hypocrites who are forever trying to play waterboy to the game of life; whenever real issues are faced the church is there to say, "Me too."

Some view the church as a group of "good time Charlies" who never have a serious thought and are little concerned about life. They do not care enough even to get their hands dirty. I know a former hippie (now a Christian) who resisted accepting Jesus Christ for years because he thought he also had to buy Pat Boone.

In all honesty, we do have to admit that the church has often been guilty of these things. There is much justification for these charges. But they are true only because the church so easily forgets what it really is. When the church acts as what it really is then it is not like these distorted views at all. The church, operating as it was intended to operate, is the most important body of people in any age -- far above and beyond anything else. It is actually the secret government of earth. It radically alters the status quo wherever it is found. As Paul the apostle says, it is "the pillar and the ground of the truth" {1 Tim 3:15 KJV}, i.e., the source and support of all realistic knowledge of life. That is what the church is supposed to be.

In our present study of the book of Acts, we are privileged to become eyewitnesses of the birth and growth of this amazing phenomenon which is still present in the twentieth century. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he employs two symbols for the church, two major figures, that help us in understanding what the church is like. At the end of the first chapter he says that the church is a body. He speaks of Jesus Christ as "the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all," {Eph 1:22-23 RSV}. So the church is a living organism; it is part of the life of Jesus Christ present on this earth. At the close of the second chapter, the apostle says the church is like a building; "members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, which grows into a holy temple designed by the Spirit for the habitation of God," {cf, Eph 2:19b-22 RSV}. So, in some sense, the church is like a building; in other ways it is like a body. But there are certain things in common to both those ideas:

- A building is inhabited by a person, and a body also is inhabited by a person.
- The central thing about the church therefore is its relationship to a Person.

That is what we shall see developing in the book of Acts. These two figures of the church, (a building and a body) are going to help us now as we consider the closing portion of chapter one, along with the first four verses of chapter two. In the last part of chapter one the foundation is laid for the building; in the first part of chapter two is recorded the birth of the body.

The scene is set for us in Verses 15-16 of Chapter 1:

In those days Peter stood up among the brethren (the company of persons was in all about a hundred and twenty), and said, "Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus." {Acts 1:15-16 RSV}

For years I believed that these hundred and twenty believers met in the upper room, and that the Holy Spirit came upon them there. But notice that there is a break here. The previous paragraph does mention the upper room, but that is part of the introduction to the book of Acts. The introduction ends at Verse 14, and, at Verse 15, Dr. Luke starts to tell his story. If you link Verse 15 with the last verse of the Gospel of Luke, you will see clearly where Luke takes up his narrative again. In the Gospel, Luke tells us that the disciples came back from the Mount of Olives after the ascension of Jesus and continued meeting in the courts of the temple. That is where this Pentecostal event occurred. These one hundred and twenty people were much too large a group to meet in an upper room. They are now gathered in the courts of the temple, probably in Solomon's Porch, and it is there this takes place.

Now, the concern of Peter is that there be a replacement for Judas in the apostolic band. Judas had fallen from his place as an apostle by his betrayal of the Lord Jesus, and Peter now feels impelled by the Spirit to replace Judas. We have already seen from Paul's letter that the church is like a building, and that building, says the Apostle Paul, is "built upon the foundation of the apostles," {Eph 2:20}. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first thing we read about in the book of Acts is the completing of the band of the apostles. There must be twelve apostles. In the book of the Revelation, John sees the city of God coming down out of heaven, (a beautiful picture of this magnificent church), portrayed as a city. There is a wall around it, with twelve gates and the names of the gates are the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Clearly Israel is linked to this new city. The wall also has twelve foundations and the names of each of the foundations are the names of the apostles of the Lamb. So there must be twelve apostles. There are some who think that the Apostle Paul should be counted among these twelve. But Paul himself never says that. He never links himself with the twelve. Though he was a genuine apostle, yet he was not one of the Twelve. Peter makes clear that the Scriptures had predicted there would be a replacement of Judas, and he quotes for us two of the psalms to prove this. In Verse 20, he says:

**"For it is written in the book of Psalms,
'let his habitation become desolate,
and let there be no one to live in it'; [Psalm 69]
and
'His office let another take.'" [Psalm 109] {Acts 1:20 RSV}**

This gives us a clue as to what these disciples were doing during the ten-day period after Jesus had ascended into heaven and while they were waiting for the Holy Spirit -- they were studying the Scriptures! They were poring through the Old Testament to see what was predicted for these days. They discovered that the Scriptures had predicted there must be a replacement for Judas. So Peter, led by the Holy Spirit, stands up and announces that they must replace Judas in the apostolic band.

We are also given a glimpse, in this parenthetical verse, of the tragic end of Judas. We learn how he forfeited his apostolic position,

"For he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in the ministry. (Now this man bought a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)" {Acts 1:17-19 RSV}

There is gathered up for us here a concise and encapsulated summary of all that happened to Judas in his last moments. When it says that he bought a field with the reward of his wickedness, it does not mean that he took the thirty pieces of silver for which he betrayed the Lord, and went out and bought a field. We know from the Gospels that he took those thirty pieces of silver and threw them down at the feet of the high priest, refusing to have anything to do with them. Then in what way was this Scripture fulfilled? If we put together all the references to Judas in the Gospels we shall learn what happened.

We are told that Judas was the treasurer of the disciples. He was appointed so by Jesus. Luke tells us "he bore the bag" {cf, John 12:6, 13:29}, i.e., he carried the common treasury. But Luke also tells us that he was a thief, and that he kept stealing money out of this common treasury. What for? Well, evidently Judas had accepted the idea that was current among the Jews that, when Messiah came, he would overthrow the Roman government and establish a kingdom of power and authority, with Israel at the head. Judas was feathering his nest in anticipation of this event. He had already picked a plot of ground on which he wanted to build a lovely home, and he was buying it little by little with the money that he stole from the bag. Whether he was making payments on it, (and this was the first appearance of installment plan buying, and it is interesting that Judas was the one who would take advantage of it) or whether he was simply saving it up in order to give a cash payment at the end, we are not told. But, nevertheless, this is likely what he was doing.

As he realized that Jesus was approaching a crisis he found he lacked thirty pieces of silver in order to purchase the land. So he made arrangements with the high priest to betray the Lord for those thirty pieces. But, when he did the deed, and led the soldiers to the garden of Gethsemane, and kissed Jesus to betray him to the soldiers, his eyes apparently were opened to the terrible implications of what he had done, and, wrenched with remorse and in an agony of conscience, he took the money back to the high priests and threw it at their feet saying, "Behold, I have betrayed innocent blood," {cf, Matt 27:3-5}. Then he went out and hanged himself. Hanging there, on the very ground that he had hoped to buy for his home, his body bloated and swelled till the rope broke and he fell headlong, as this Scripture says, and his bowels gushed out. Then the high priests took the thirty pieces of silver and finished paying for the property. They bought it from a potter and thus was fulfilled Zechariah's prediction that this money for which Jesus would be betrayed (Zechariah actually had predicted it would be 30 pieces of silver) would be given to the potter. Yet because it was the scene of the suicide of Judas, a place marked by the blood of a guilty man, they called it "the Field of Blood." To this day you can visit it in Jerusalem. That was the tragedy of Judas.

Now he must be replaced in order that the church might be built upon the apostles. The qualifications necessary to that replacement are given:

"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us -- one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." {Acts 1:21-22 RSV}

There were only two qualifications: The man had to be one who was there from the very beginning, from the baptism of John, and he had to have accompanied Jesus all through his ministry. There were many more than twelve disciples who went around with Jesus. He chose twelve of them to be in a special relationship to him, but there were others also who accompanied him. Out of that larger band there must be one chosen who had been there the whole time and saw everything Jesus did. Furthermore, he had to have witnessed the Lord's appearances after the resurrection. He had to give witness to the authenticity of the resurrection.

Why these requirements? Well, they underscore what the New Testament is forever telling us, that our faith is not based upon myths, or legends; it is based upon facts, events, which men have seen, felt, heard, and been involved in. This is not a "holy history," a heilegeschichte as the theologians like to call it, a kind of pseudohistory which takes place only in the realm of ideas but not events. No, no! These things actually happened, and our faith rests upon the fact that they happened. Therefore the apostle chosen must be one who was there, and saw them, and could give witness that these things were true.

Now the choosing took place in an interesting way.

And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was enrolled with the eleven apostles. {Acts 1:23-26 RSV}

Evidently there were only two additional men out of that band of one hundred and twenty who were qualified for this task. Only two had been there the whole time and had also seen Jesus after the resurrection. So these two men were put forward. The others had to decide between the two of them, and they did it in the Old Testament way: They cast lots for them. This is very much akin to what we do in flipping a coin. They may have literally used a coin, and cast for heads or tails. It came up heads, and Matthias won. They called it casting lots, though we might call it shaking dice.

Now do not misunderstand. This was not a casino atmosphere; this was a dignified performance. It was used to decide only when men were otherwise qualified and equal. It indicates a recognition that God is in even the smallest things. That is why the book of Proverbs says in Chapter 16, Verse 33, "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord."

It is not wrong to flip a coin or to cast lots when it is a matter of two things being equal in value. We are to exercise discernment and judgment in other areas, but here were two men equally qualified, so they chose them by the casting of lots. The lot fell on Matthias and he was numbered with the eleven, i.e., he became the twelfth apostle. The fact that he was accepted by the early church with no questions raised, and was a genuine apostle is indicated by a subtle change which occurs from here on in Acts. Up to this point the apostles are called "the eleven;" but from here on they are called again "the twelve," so that it is clear Matthias was accepted among them and was a genuine apostle.

Now with the choosing of Matthias the ground was laid for the church to be built. The foundation is poured, all the apostles are there. These mighty apostles were men who could give witness to the historic foundation of Christianity. They were sent forth with a three-fold task:

They were to be pioneers, going out where the name of Jesus had never been named, and planting churches there. Every one of the apostles fulfilled that task. Church history tells us that Thomas went to India, Peter went to Europe (as well as Paul), and others to North Africa. So these apostles became the pioneers of faith by which the ground of the church was laid.

Then the Scriptures were given by them, or by those intimately associated with them. This is the foundation upon which the whole church must rest. They were there to be proclaimers -- not only pioneers, but proclaimers. They uttered what God said. Remember Jesus said to his disciples, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them yet," {cf, John 15:12}. Now, he never said those "many things" in the days of his flesh. His words concerning them were uttered just before the cross. When did he say these "many things" unto them? It was after the Holy Spirit came and taught these men God's mind. That is why these apostles have authority. When they speak they are not speaking as mere men, but, as Paul says, "The word which came unto you through us came not as the word of men but as it is indeed the word of God," {1 Tim 2:13}. They were proclaimers.

Finally, they were patterns. They were intended to be examples of how the Spirit of God operates through men, how God penetrates a community, how he moves to change his people and transform them. They were to be examples and patterns of what a Christian ought to be. They did not live far above us; they are on the same level with us. We are to live like the apostles lived in every way. It is thus these men form the foundation of the church.

Now, as we turn to Chapter 2, we find that the figure is changed. Here the church is no longer a building, but a body. Here in this exciting chapter we have the story of the birth of the corporate body of Jesus Christ.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. {Acts 2:1-4 RSV}

This passage has been subjected to much examination, but also much abuse and distortion. We need to look very carefully at it. Here is the story of the birth of the body of Jesus Christ, the church. There are three things in this passage which call for attention. I shall reserve till next Sunday a more detailed study into the subject of tongues which will come before us as we go further into the chapter. But for the present I want only to comment on three things:

First, a comment on the day on which this occurred. Do not miss this. It was on the day of Pentecost. Well, what is Pentecost? Pentecost is a Greek word that means "fifty." The day was called that because it was fifty days after the Passover feast. Pentecost meant a Jewish feast which is given to us in the Old Testament under the title, the Feast of Weeks, i.e., seven weeks were to be numbered from Passover, or forty-nine days; then on the fiftieth day they were to have the Feast of Weeks, or it is called also the Feast of the Wave Loaves because it consisted of two loaves of bread that were baked of grain from the new harvest. Pentecost came at the end of the wheat harvest in Palestine, and they were to take this new wheat, freshly harvested, the first fruits of the harvest, and bake of it two loaves.

Now, these are highly symbolical. It all shows how the New Testament has its roots in the Old. These two loaves were symbols of the two bodies from which the church was to be formed: the Jews and the Gentiles. Jesus said he came first to the lost sheep of the house of the Israel, the Jews. But he said, "Other sheep have I which are not of this fold; them also must I bring that there may be one flock," {cf, John 10:16}. He was referring to the Gentiles. Here, on the day of Pentecost, God took the Jews and the Gentiles and brought them together and baptized them into one.

Furthermore, these loaves of the Old Testament were to be baked with leaven. Leaven is yeast, and is a symbol of sin. The wave loaves is the only sacrifice in all the Old Testament that ever had leaven included in it. Why? Well, it is God's wonderful way of telling us that the church is not made up of perfect people. It is made up of saints, but they are sinful saints. They yet have sin in them. It is not made up of those who have reached perfection, but of those who are in the process of becoming what God wants them to be, who have a divine authority and life at work within them changing them. Thus the loaves are baked with leaven.

Now in that beautiful symbolism lies the heart of the church. On the day of Pentecost, right in line with this Old

Testament prediction, the Holy Spirit came. And what did he do? As we are told here, he took one hundred and twenty people who were gathered together into one place, and made one out of them. Here were one hundred and twenty isolated individuals who had been living their lives quite separately, held together only by a mutual interest in Jesus Christ. But now they are baptized by the Spirit into one body. That is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that, when the Holy Spirit would come, they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with any outward demonstration. It is not necessarily associated with tongues, or fire, or wind. These were the incidentals. The essential was the making of a body, one body. This was the birthday of the church.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, there came shepherds and wise men, and there were angels and a star. But all these things happened only once. They never occurred again. So the wind, the fire, and the tongues only occur together once in Scripture. It is foolish to want always to have these incidentals occurring when the Holy Spirit acts today. These are connected only with the beginning of the body. The only time in the Scripture that we find the phrase, "baptized with the Spirit" after this event is in First Corinthians 12:13. There the Apostle Paul says,

For by one Spirit we were all, baptized into one body -- {1 Cor 12:13 RSV}

That is the true baptism of the Holy Spirit. It was nothing felt, there was no sign of it, no outward evidence, but they all became one. And from then on they were part of the life of Jesus Christ and members one of another. What would happen to one would affect the others from then on. They could not be separated, they could not live their lives in isolation any longer; they were one body.

Now associated with this event are these symbols. There was the sound of the rush of a mighty wind, there was the appearance of tongues of fire dancing on the head of each individual, and there was the strange phenomenon of languages spoken by men who had never learned them -- tongues. What is the meaning of these symbols? They are the key to the function of the body. This is God's pictorial way of telling us what this body is going to do, and how it is to be characterized.

The first thing is wind: "... suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting." Wind is the symbol of invisible power. Remember that Jesus said to Nicodemus, he that is born of the Spirit is like the wind which blows wherever it desires and no man can tell where it comes from or where it will go {cf, John 3:8}. It is sovereign, mighty, powerful, irresistible, invincible. But it is also invisible, you cannot see it. And this is to be a characteristic of the church. It is to be a band of men and women bound together by the life of Jesus Christ who, when they operate in the invisible power of the Spirit, will accomplish great things. You cannot put your finger on their source of power. It is not spectacular power; it is quiet. It is resurrection power, as we said last week, which does not need props of any kind, and cannot be stopped in its operation. It is mighty and moves to change and transform.

The second symbol was fire. Fire is used in two ways in the Old Testament. It is that which purifies, which burns up dross, garbage and waste, and thus purifies; and it is used as a symbol for enthusiasm, passion, purpose, a hunger within. Jeremiah says, "As I was musing, the fire burned." These two symbols indicate that the church is to be characterized by purifying passion. There is to be within it a strange hunger for God which will purify the lives of those who are affected by it.

Many of us were challenged anew last night as Ethel Barrett related the story of D. L. Moody walking down a street in New York City and thinking about a sentence he had heard; "The world has yet to see what God can do with a man who is wholly yielded unto him." There came into his heart a great hunger, and he cried out, "O God, make me that man!" He was so filled with a sense of the overwhelming love of God that he had to go to a friend's house nearby, and ask for the use of a room. He went into that room and for an hour or more was caught up by this purifying passion. That was not a single experience; that was but a manifestation of passion that entered Moody's heart when he became converted and which broke out from time to time with tremendous power to cleanse the evils of his life and to move him toward a unifying purpose, a relentless drive to a single goal.

That is what Luke is talking about here. When John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, he meant that there would be an unexplainable passion about the church. Every Christian has felt it. We sing of it thus.

O Love that wilt not let me go,

I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

The third symbol was the use of tongues. Certainly this was not gibberish, they were not strange fanciful languages; these were known languages, spoken in that very region as well as in other places of the earth. Those who were there understood them. They were, therefore, edifying proclamations, i.e., they instructed, they were intelligent utterances on the part of these men. They were praising God with these languages, and the men around heard them telling forth the mighty works of God.

Now that is the purpose of the filling of the Spirit. It is always to enable us to speak with boldness, clarity, sincerity and earnestness, telling forth the mighty works of God in languages that are known. There is a miracle here, no question about it, and next Sunday we will go into the nature and character of this miracle more fully. But the important point is that these men and women were seized by the Holy Spirit and filled unto utterance, unto proclamation. Several times in this same book of Acts we will find that it says the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. But they did not then speak in other languages, they spoke in their own language. But it was always unto utterance. They were filled that they might speak. "Filled with the Holy Spirit, they spoke ..." {cf, Acts 4:31, 19:6}. That is what the filling of the Spirit is for. It is that Christians might speak with boldness, clarity and unction -- but not always in tongues.

Now there are symbols of the church.

Here is what the church must be today. It is what it has been in any age when it has been what it ought to be. It is to be filled with power, passion and proclamation. It is exciting today to see the Lord reviving his church. All over this country, and around the world, there are breaking out such manifestations again. They are not spectacular, miraculous demonstrations, but outbreaks of resistless power, like a mighty wind blowing no man knows where:

- Leading out into new ventures, new methods, new approaches;
- Filling men with a passion and hunger for God and reality which consumes the dross, the garbage and waste of our lives; and
- Setting men to speaking to others about the glorious reality of a God who lives within, who is mighty and adequate in all that he does.

That is the church.

What an exciting thing it is to be a member of it!

Prayer:

Father, we are so often confused and mixed up. We see things which are superficial, extraneous and mechanical, and we take them to be the real thing. We do not even understand very much about ourselves, but we thank you for your word which clarifies, which opens our eyes to make us see things the way they are. Help us, then, to understand your church, and our part in it as members of the same body, stones in the same wonderful building. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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