

## ***The Community of the Forgiven***

By Dr. Dave Neale

Last year, during these weeks of Easter, we did our 6-part series on the Creed. Time flies doesn't it? You can find it on our website under sermons if you want to hear it again.

### *Recitation of the Creed*

For the coming weeks I will be speaking on the Book of Acts, as is customary following Easter. Following the resurrection, we turn to the story of the church in the days after that great event. I encourage you to read the entire book of Acts over the next while.

### **Behind the Text**

I have a great love of the Book of Acts. It is the second half of a two-part work by Luke. ***In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day he was taken up to heaven...*** (Acts 1:1-2a).

The ***first book*** refers to the Gospel of Luke.

The second book, Acts, records the early days of the Jesus movement. It spans about 30 years of history.<sup>1</sup>

Two years ago we had our first series on Acts. You may recall me saying that were it not for Acts' *priceless* account of those early years, we would have no window into the development of the movement, save the mail of Paul to his churches, which began about 20 years later.

The importance of this record is beyond expression – Acts is the Pearl of Great Price indeed. Read it!

Our passage this morning, as we will see, is about the *response* of the crowd to the first sermon of Peter on the occasion of Pentecost (***...when the day of Pentecost had come...*** Acts 2:1). Pentecost is the Greek word for 50<sup>th</sup> (πεντηκοστή). It is 50 days from Jewish festival of Passover to the Feast of Weeks, *Shavuot*. In the Christian calendar we call this from Easter to Pentecost.

### **In the Text**

As for the small group of 120 followers of Jesus who remained in Jerusalem following his death and resurrection: ***All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*** (Acts 1:14)

It's almost two months since the resurrection. The first thing that happened was... nothing. Well, they were hiding actually, because it was quite dangerous to be associated with the events of that time. I wonder if anyone gave up and went home?

And then this. At their prayer meeting there is an extraordinary outpouring of spiritual power. And Peter addresses people who had gathered at the scene.

***Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."*** (Acts 2:38-39)

Here is my first point. What does the Creed say about the Spirit? Well, not a lot, but the very few words are important for our reading today.

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.*

We need understanding of this most profound assertion for our unpacking of the phrase **baptism of the Holy Spirit** in Acts.

The Holy Spirit is God. God is the Holy Spirit. When we are talking about the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives we are talking simply about the presence of God in our lives. So, first and foremost, the baptism of the Spirit, this somewhat opaque expression, is simply the *experience of God in us* here and now in the wake of the resurrection. That is *all* it is, that is *everything* it is.<sup>2</sup>

Someone said to me recently, ‘we need to talk more about the Holy Spirit.’ And my response is no, we don’t need to multiply words about it, thinking that this will draw God out among us. What we need is to be open to the *experience God in us*.

My second point is this. *The Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets*, so here is the question, ‘What is different here in Acts from the presence of God in the lives of the prophets and others if the days of old?’

It is the vast *extravagance* and *diversity* of the distribution of the gift of the Holy Spirit at this point in history. **Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem** from fifteen language groups. They spanned every conceivable ethnic, political and cultural and economic representations of people in the Ancient Near East.

The great cities of the day were vast cosmopolitan centres with people of many nations and persuasions. See vs 5-12. This is the most striking thing about this. It is the opening of the arms of God, the “outpouring” as we say.

One of the things that I was most proud of in my days as the executive director of Campus Manitoba was the open textbook initiative. Has anyone here paid \$150 for a science or psychology textbook at university? In the open textbook movement government pays scholars to write textbooks that could be downloaded for free under the Creative Commons Copyright – making education accessible to all.

What was closed and available to only the few was now open to all! That’s Pentecost.

Thirdly, notice that the focus of our text today is the *response* to the message. **Now when they heard Peter’s sermon, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”**

Each of the gospels begins their story with the promise that John baptizes with water for the forgiveness of sin. Even Jesus took this baptism. But that one who comes after will “baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

So when it comes to the church in Acts and in this sanctuary, *this is it*. This is what they said it was all about. This is the time for response to the whole drama of the advent.

**From the Text**

***“Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”***

This is a hortatorical conditional sentence with the classic if/then.

- The “if” is to *change your mind in humility and be baptised in Jesus’ name.*
- “Then” your sins will be forgiven and you will receive the ***gift of the Holy Spirit.***

The Scottish tradition of New Years is called Hogmanay (hog-muh-ney).

“...before midnight on the 31st December: these include clean the house and take out the ashes from the fire, there is also the requirement to clear all your debts before “the bells” sound midnight, the underlying message being to clear out the remains of the old year, have a clean break and welcome in a young, New Year on a happy note.”<sup>4</sup>

Think of your heart as the house. ***If*** we humbly change our mind before God, God cleanses the house of all its dirt and debris. All the debts are cancelled. You have a clean break and welcome a new life. In Christian lingo we call this forgiveness.

***Then... we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit***

The language of “gift” is really beautiful.<sup>5</sup> I will translate it as “the indescribable bounty of God.”

Here at Pentecost and in chapter 10:45: ***Peter was astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.***

Or as Paul puts it ...***the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.*** (Romans 5:15)

The concept is axiomatic in this sense, those who form the community of the forgiven in the name of Jesus form the community of the Holy Spirit. Put the other way, those who form the community of the Holy Spirit is comprised of those who are forgiven in Jesus’ name.

It isn’t up for debate. It isn’t to be made complicated. Let’s not confuse the matter with theological debates about the *evidence of or experience* of the Holy Spirit. To speak biblically, it is the community of the forgiven.

Well then, what do those who are in the community of the forgiven do? The community stands in a redeemed relationship to God, and in a beautiful relationship to one another. We can look to the others and see them as members of that community.

This is a powerful way to contemplate who we are.

I have been reflecting this week, ‘What is the opposite of a community of forgiveness?’ Might it be that the culture of grievance and superiority is the other side of the coin? This right/left divide based on grievance and superiority? You’ve got theologically conservative and the theologically liberal. These polarities stand apart in suspicion and distaste rather than a shared sense of redemption. We are called to be a holy people beyond such petty perspectives.

What are we who constitute the community of the forgiven to do?

We ought to do is exactly what the first followers did, before Pentecost – before all heaven broke loose!

***All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*** (Acts 1:14)

But look at what the community of the forgiven did ***after*** the big bang and 3000 were added in one day! <sup>1</sup>

***They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*** (2:42)

The same thing! And ought we do likewise. You were expecting fireworks maybe? It is enough.

Thanks be to God and Amen

<sup>1</sup> The first seven chapters are devoted to those one or two years immediately after the resurrection in Jerusalem. In chapter 8 we find the conversion of Saul and the timeline stretches out much longer from that point in the narrative until its conclusion in Rome, 28 chapters in whole.

<sup>2</sup> There are those traditions which have always advocated a return to the church as it was in Acts; to that time when it was a movement, not a religion. There is the feeling among some that we need to shed the hierarchies and denominationalism that accrued over time – those forces that turned a charismatic movement into a religion.

These folks say we need the experience the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit was in that time. That would be nice I guess, but it's not going to happen. That is kind of naïve to think we can go back in time.

But to that I say, that was then (what I call the Resurrection Zone) and this is now; quite a different time in so many profound ways, but also we are still just the ordinary people of God without whom the Spirit's presence reduces us to a club, or even worse, entertainment.

On the other end, some say that the structures of the church (even its many forms) constitute the presence of the Spirit. That is, the church universal is the Spirit among us. To that we observe that there are and have been so many problems and scandals in the church in the recent past that the public has lost confidence in formal Christian religion.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-History-of-Hogmanay/>

<sup>5</sup> This word is most prominent in Acts (4x): Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:22; but also John 4:10 and Romans 5:15.