

THE YOUNG CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

There has been a remarkable awakening sweeping across college campuses in our country today. There is a report in one of our Christian magazines of a most remarkable week of meetings that began in the chapel of Asbury College, in Wilmore, Kentucky, a few weeks ago, and went on continuously for six or seven days and nights. People would come in and fall under a deep conviction of the brokenness and the fragmentation of their lives with other Christians. Their hearts were melted and opened toward one another, and they forgave each other, confessing the things they were doing that were offensive to one another, and restoring each other in love and grace. News of that was reported in chapel at Azusa Pacific College in California, and an awakening of this nature broke out there. I just received word yesterday that it has started in Taylor University, in Indiana, where a team from this church will be going next month. Also something similar now is reported in Malone College, in Ohio.

Just this morning Ron Ritchie and John Fischer left for Malone with a team of men to minister there this week. So let us be in prayer about this, and also expecting some wonderful things to happen, as God is moving in a remarkable way in our day.

It is noteworthy that this ties in directly with the very passage we are looking at in the book of Acts. The response to Peter's message on the day of Pentecost was similar to what is happening today.

In fact, I was struck by the report on the Asbury College awakening, where the wife of the president of the school got up in chapel and confessed that she had been very, very antagonistic toward both the school and the town, that she had not enjoyed her years there and had held it against the town and the school. She confessed this, said that God had dealt with her and had given her a warm love and acceptance toward both the town and school. When she finished her testimony, the reporter said, it was like the day of Pentecost. People were cut to the heart with conviction by it.

That is exactly what happened 2,000 years ago -- all of which is confirmation that we are living in the same age of the Spirit as these did at the beginning of the church on the day of Pentecost. For, in Acts 2:37, you remember, at the close of Peter's tremendous message in which he explained the remarkable experience of tongues of fire and of wind that occurred on that day -- explained it as marking the fact that Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified in this city some fifty days before, had now ascended to the Father and was seated at the right hand of all power in all the universe -- we read,

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" {Acts 2:37 RSV}

To be cut to the heart is to be deeply convicted, to have a sense of personal involvement in what has been said, and an awareness of the tremendous impact of the fact which has been revealed. These people had their eyes opened. They began to realize that life was not what it appeared to be, that behind all the normal events of everyday life was the power of God. And this God, they now understood, was none other than the man they had nailed to a cross some fifty days earlier! You can imagine the effect upon them as they cry out now in concern and fear and perhaps even despair, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

This is always what happens when the Spirit of God is at work. He makes us aware of the Lordship of Jesus, the fact that Jesus is Lord. Whether men know it or not, Jesus is Lord. The very forces which hold them together, the very forces which enable us to breathe and to think and to eat and to plan and to live, are forces held in hand. As Paul says in Colossians, "by him all things consist and are held together," {cf, Col 1:17}. And when we understand that Jesus is the Inescapable One, that he is the Lord, and that we are very much concerned with him whether we like it or not, there comes this deep sense of conviction and being cut to the heart.

In answer to these people's question, the Apostle Peter tells them how to be converted, how to become Christians, what to do when they are aware of the fact that their lives are out of harmony with the life of the One who rules and owns the world and their very being. He tells them in a very clear passage how to become a Christian:

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation [Or, to put it bluntly, as he did: 'this generation of crooks']." {Acts 2:38-40 RSV}

The Apostle Peter is answering this question, "What shall we do?"

And he acknowledges that there is something to be done. When you come to the place where you understand that Jesus is Lord, and that you are out of harmony with all his purposes and his life, then there is something to do. There are two things you need to do, Peter says, and then one thing God will do.

You need, first, to repent. "Repent" is a word that is greatly misunderstood. Most people think repentance means that you feel sorry, and you begin to cry and weep. That has nothing to do with repentance. You may feel sorry, and you may begin to weep and cry, but that is not necessary, and it does not mean that you have repented. Repent is a word which means "to change your mind," to change your thinking. In the Greek that is exactly what it means: *metanoi* -- "change your mind." We get our English word from the Latin -- *pentir* means "to think," and the prefix *re* means "again" -- "think again." You have been thinking that everything was all right with you; well, "think again." You have been thinking that Jesus is nothing but a great teacher, or a great prophet, but that he is not the Son of God, and he is not the Lord of glory, the Lord of all the earth; well, think again. Repent -- "change your mind, get in tune with reality, line up with things the way they really are," is what Peter is saying. "You have been kidding yourself, you have been deluded, you have been fooled; well, change your mind." That is the first thing. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God -- repent and put him where he belongs in your life.

Then, the second thing, be baptized. Now, baptism does not add anything to your repentance. It does not make you better. It does not do anything magic for you so that you are suddenly forgiven of your sins. (I will take up that problem in a minute.) But baptism is the outward declaration, by symbol, of the change of mind that you have experienced within. Baptism is an open identification with Jesus Christ. To be baptized means that you are telling everybody, "I belong to him. I follow him. I am one of his." It is a cutting off from the old way of thinking, and a beginning of a new life.

There are several ways of being baptized, and I do not think the issue hinges at all upon the mode of baptism. The two general ways both symbolize the beginning of a new life, and that is what baptism is all about. And among these Jews it was a very clearly understood process. They knew that when a Gentile became a Jew, his body was washed all over, and they called that a baptism. It was a symbol that he was beginning a new life, starting all over again. This is what baptism basically means. This is what it meant to John the Baptist. It is not important what the mode is. But it is important that it be the indication of a new beginning. This is what it is intended to be here in Acts.

Someone says, "Wait a minute. Peter says, 'Be baptized in the name of Christ for the forgiveness of sins.'" A great number in the church have taken that passage to mean that when you are baptized your sins are forgiven. I do not want to go into the technicalities of this, but the Greek construction here is somewhat more loose than the English, and it allows for another perfectly proper translation which would make it read, "Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ because of the forgiveness of your sins." That is the way it should be read. A little later in this same book, the Apostle Peter is speaking to another crowd of people in the house of Cornelius, and he says to them, "Repent, and you shall receive remission of sins," {cf, Acts 10:43}. He does not say anything at all about baptism there. So baptism is not the essential here. It is repentance that obtains remission of sins. It is changing your mind about Jesus Christ that enables God to wipe out all your guilt and all the sins

of your past. But baptism is the sign that this has been accomplished, and is the mark of the beginning of new life on your behalf.

"When you repent," says the apostle, "you will receive the Holy Spirit." That is, God, the third person of the Trinity, will come and live in you. And his work will be to make Jesus Christ real, visible, plain, and close to you, to impart his life to your own. This is what happens when you repent.

You notice that Peter did not say to these people, "When you repent you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and you will speak in tongues -- or have flames of fire on your head -- or hear a mighty sound of wind." No, he does not promise any of these, because that is not part of receiving the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit initially came with these as symbols of what the whole age of the Spirit would be like. But these are not promised to every individual. The Spirit of God comes into the human heart without any demonstration or sign at all on the basis of a change of mind about the Lord Jesus and a willingness to receive him into the heart. On that basis, these 3,000 people received the promise of the Father.

Notice, also, that the apostle says this is available to anyone: "For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" -- that is, to the Jews and to their children, and to the Gentiles -- those who are far off. Jew and Gentile alike, when you repent and receive the Lord Jesus, the promise of the Holy Spirit is given to you.

And, notice, it is accorded to those whom God calls. That is a remarkable statement, because it indicates that we do not really find God; he finds us. If you have in your heart right now a hunger to know God, and you think it is a desire you have to find answers to your questions or to seek a new relationship, and you think that it started with you, it did not. It started with God. God the Father is working in you, drawing you, calling you. Jesus said on one occasion, "No man can come unto me except my Father draw him," {cf, John 6:44}. God is drawing people to himself all over the world.

Yet, you notice that Peter goes right on here and links this with the decision of the human will also: "And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.'" We do not have his entire message recorded here; it is summarized in these words: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." That is, you have to do something. It is not just the call of God that is going to do it. You may feel the drawing and the pulling of the Father in your heart, but now you have to respond to that. You have to make a decision. You have to act, to decide, to step over, to change your mind, to repent and become identified with Jesus Christ. The minute you do that, then God gives you the gift of the Holy Spirit. Quietly, silently, without any demonstration, the Holy Spirit comes to live in you, never to leave you, and to give you the life of the Son of God.

Well, that is what happened on the day of Pentecost, and we see the results immediately in Verses 41-42:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. {Acts 2:41-42 RSV}

In that brief paragraph you have set forth the four fundamentals of Christian growth, after you become a Christian. You become a Christian by being related to Jesus Christ. He is the Lord of glory, and you become part of him when you receive him into your heart. But then what? Is that all there is to the Christian life? No, that is just the beginning. If you have received Jesus Christ into your heart, then you have begun a Christian life. But the whole of it lies ahead for you to experience. Now it is time to move on, to move out and begin to experience this exciting and vital new life that God has given you in Jesus Christ.

Four things are necessary to do that:

First, as these new Christians in Jerusalem, be baptized. Baptism is a clear identification of your life with Jesus Christ.

We plan to have a baptism service two weeks from now, because there are about forty young people from the

high schools of this area who have become Christians in the last few weeks, and they are eager to declare themselves as members of the body of Jesus Christ. For that purpose we plan to have a public baptism where they can tell before the world that they belong to Jesus Christ. In fact, we want to make it so public that we are trying to get permission to use the Stanford University fountain for the baptism.

I hope we can, because these 3,000 people were baptized this way on the day of Pentecost. What do you think was the effect on the city of Jerusalem when these 3,000 people openly identified themselves with the despised Nazarene who had been crucified by the rulers of this city only fifty days before? What do you think was the effect when this crowd, so moved and stirred by all they had seen and could not deny, publicly identified themselves with Jesus Christ? No wonder a great awakening broke out in Jerusalem.

So that is the first thing -- a clear declaration, a clear step to indicate that you have identified yourself with Jesus Christ.

The second thing is, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. This teaching was the Scriptures, the Word of God. These mighty apostles were commissioned by the Lord Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to tell us the truth about life. And we will never learn to understand ourselves, or the world around us, or the society in which we live, or what is happening in the world and why it is happening, unless we begin to understand the apostles' teaching. That is the only hope you have of working out your problems in this world and in this life. All the vast ecological issues which are pressuring us today are explained in the apostles' teaching -- why they occur, and what is going to happen because of them. So if you want to understand the world, then you, like these early Christians, must devote yourself to the apostles' teaching.

The third thing they did was to devote themselves to fellowship. As you know, fellowship means holding all things in common -- in other words, sharing together. They began to know and to love one another. Here are 3,000 people suddenly added to a little band of twenty. Most of them probably were strangers before this time. Many of them had come from other parts of the world into Jerusalem for that occasion. They did not know each other. But now they are one in Christ, and they begin to love each other and start to talk to each other, to find out what each other has been thinking and how each has been reacting, and to share their problems and burdens and needs, to talk about these together and pray together about them. There was a wonderful sense of community, of commonality, of belonging to each other. That is the fellowship which is the intended life for the body of Christ.

You see, God has designed that his life should be manifest through a body. If the body is not operating, then the life is not manifest. And that means there is no power, because the life of God is always power. The reason the church has been so powerless lately is that it has been so fragmented and broken. We have estranged ourselves from each other. In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul says, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God," {Eph 4:30 KJV}. Then he lists the things that grieve him:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. {Eph 4:31-32 RSV}

If that is not happening, then the Spirit of God is grieved. And when he is grieved, he does not act. There is no life. The church becomes dull and dead and sterile and mediocre. All this is manifest in an empty ritual, with no vitality in it. God intends that Christians should have fellowship, should share one another's lives and thoughts and problems -- bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. It is not an option; it is an essential. This is why, when the Holy Spirit of God begins to move in any congregation, or in any assembly of Christians, he starts at this point. He begins to heal the brokenness of their lives and their relationships one with another, to get them to admit to each other their malice and their anger and their frustration and their grudges, and to forgive one another. This is when life begins to flow once again through the body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The fourth element is worship. They broke bread and prayed together. The breaking of bread is undoubtedly a reference to the communion service, not merely to their eating food in their homes. They were sharing together in that symbolic testimony to the basis of Christian life -- the life and death of the Lord Jesus. That is the basis

of our living and of our union and of our power. In the breaking of bread and praying together, we are related to God, and speaking to God, and identified with him. This is always the source of Christian power.

There are the four fundamentals of Christian growth. Without them you cannot grow. With them you cannot keep from growing.

In the last paragraph of this chapter we have a beautiful picture of the practical effects of Christianity upon the world around, upon the church within, and even toward God himself:

And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. {Acts 2:43-47 RSV}

The first effect was upon the world around: "Great fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles." Why this fear? Well, suddenly everyone who was in that city at this time saw that God was working through these people. An element of the supernatural was very visible, and it baffled them. There was obviously something more than human power at work.

As the text tells us, this power was manifest in wonders and signs, in miracles. Many today feel that this is what is necessary, that we have to recapture this wonderful age and reproduce again these marvelous miracles and signs. But what they do not understand is that these are always only the place where God begins when he meets with men. Because unregenerate men, by and large, are shut up to a world of visible things, believing only what they can see, God, in his condescending grace, begins at that level. But this is not where the most important work is done. The Lord Jesus made clear all through his ministry that the healing of the body was not ever as important as the healing of the soul. That which is done in the realm of the spiritual is far greater than that which is done in the physical realm. The physical miracles are often the mark of an immature church. And as they grow, God moves from that physical level into the deepest level of humanity -- the realm of the spirit. What happens in the spirit of man is the mightiest manifestation of God's transforming grace. This is why today the presence of the Holy Spirit most usually -- not always, but usually -- manifests itself not on the physical level -- though God certainly can move on the physical level today if he wants, and in some cases he does -- but it is most usually manifest in what happens in the inner life of individuals. There is still this same mark of supernatural power at work, the manifestation of lives which baffle other people.

Now I want to show you what I mean. You may not be aware of it, but in the last few weeks here in Palo Alto there has been just such a work of the Spirit going on. In one of our local high schools there has been a tremendous moving of the Spirit of God to open up lives, and win souls, and change them from within. I want to share with you some testimonies from four young men who have just recently become Christians at this school. One young man says:

Before becoming a Christian, I was a very lonely and insecure person. I hung around with guys who cared only about themselves. We all put on a big front, being what some people termed "hard guys." There wasn't any real love between us. I wanted comradeship because I didn't want to have that empty feeling you get from being alone. I couldn't really be myself; I had to be someone else, one of the group, the gang. So I acted as they acted, and did as they did. I certainly wasn't an individual; I was a follower. I wasn't too happy the way my life was going. There was a void in my life, and I hoped there was some way I could fill it.

He goes on to tell how he met a friend on a camping trip who told him about Jesus Christ and how to become a Christian.

Well, I thought this over for awhile, and then I sat down by the fire. I bowed my head and I asked Christ to come in and lead my life for me, to help fill that empty void in my life. Ever since that day, I have been born over again. I'm like a new baby. I kissed my Mom, whom I hadn't kissed in five years. I will never be alone again. I've had fellowship with other Christians and learned what the real meaning of love is. Not only that, I

have learned now to love a person just for being that -- a person. It is the most phenomenal, unbelievable feeling on earth -- having Christ in you, never to leave you.

Here is another. This boy was raised in a Jewish family. He tells about his conversion; then he says,

As the next days flew by I found my new relationship with my new friend, Jesus, growing into something very special. From my reading in the Bible and talking with others I learned more and more about Christ, and I could already feel the new life he had given me. My life was already turning rapidly around. I began to develop new, deep relationships with old friends and new ones. At home I felt compelled to talk more with my parents, and even though I haven't come right out and said I've accepted Christ, I feel that they do sense a tremendous change in me, and I hope that when the time comes they will understand. [He is to be baptized two weeks from now.] Now it seems like there is not time to do everything. More than everything else I feel compelled to share this wonderful experience with the world. There are so many people for me to talk to, and so much to learn, that time seems like my only enemy. The love I have felt, I want to share. If everyone could only realize that it takes no more than faith and desire to meet Jesus Christ, they could all feel the true love which is present in the world. I can only thank the Lord for making it all possible for me.

Another boy says,

I saw old friends recently whom I hadn't seen for a long time. Actually, the old friends were always there. I was just ignoring them. From that alone I can see Christ's real work. Christ has made me think more clearly, become more aware, feel better inside. I still have quite a bit to learn. For one thing, there's the Word of the Lord. Yet I feel that now with Christ's love, that all these new ideas can be understood and used to strengthen my love for Christ. Now that I know Christ is really there, I feel that a great and beautiful thing has happened to me. That thing is a change in me, and it is a change for the better. I've changed to see Christ's love for me, and to receive it. I've changed to love Christ.

Then one more. This boy has had great troubles with drugs and other problems. He says,

I've had highs from both alcohol and marijuana, but never have I reached the plane of this new spiritual high. I felt like hugging everybody, and indeed, I nearly did! I prayed incessantly for people to find Christ as I have. I talked to people who have been praying for me for years, and it has brought us much closer together as brothers and sisters. I thank God every day for the life he has given me, and I pray for those I love who have yet to find the Lord.

Then he closes with a quotation from John 2:17:

The zeal of thine house has eaten me up. {John 2:17 KJV}

Well, the Spirit of God is working, and he is doing the same things as he did on the day of Pentecost.

The first effect upon a community is the awareness of a force which baffles explanation, which is doing something no other force can do.

The second effect is within the church: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need."

A lot of nonsense has been written about that passage. There have been those who said that the early Christians gave up their "capitalism" and became "communists," sold everything they had and put it all into one pot, and divided it up among themselves. But that is not what this passage says at all. They retained their right to private property. They bought and sold as they had before. This is not a new government or a new economic system. All this is saying is that they established a common fund, from which the needy among them were helped. To do it, some of them sold some property and gave up some of the things they owned in order to have an adequate fund. And that is Christianity in action, always -- to be concerned about the needy.

We learned from the Christian World Liberation Front in Berkeley that they take an offering on Sunday evening and announce beforehand that anyone that wants to give can give, and anyone who has a need can take out enough to meet that need. Last Sunday night we started this here at PBC as a regular policy, and our

offering was the biggest we have had in a long, long time! This is the right attitude for a Christian to have.

Then the last thing is the glory all this brings to God. Notice how this paragraph closes: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" -- God at work, glorified in the midst of his people, worshipped and praised by them. That is Christianity at work in society. That is what it is intended to be.

Praise God, that is what it is becoming again in our day.

Maybe you have never received the Lord Jesus, have never known him, and you need to change your mind, your thinking, about him. You can ask him into your heart right where you are. You can say, "Lord Jesus, come into my heart and be my God, my Lord."

Or perhaps you who need to settle some problem with one another, to forgive him, to clear up some grudges. Settle those things, will you? Call up the person, go to the one you have offended or who has offended you, and straighten this whole matter out, so that God's Spirit may move in unhindered power and glory in our day, as he has begun to do. We do not want to hinder the working of God.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, open our hearts toward one another and toward you. Break down and melt within us the resistance that we erect against each other and against you. Make us to be of one heart and one mind and one accord, generous in giving, glad to participate in anything that advances this marvelous work going on in the midst of a world which is rapidly drifting into darkness and emptiness and coldness. We thank you, Lord, for the warmth of your Spirit, and for your power and your grace among us, and we ask that you will strengthen us in it, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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