

“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”

There are three great festivals that the Christian church celebrates every year: Christmas, Easter, and today’s festival of Pentecost. We are pretty familiar with the first two. Christmas is when we remember how God has come to us. The Son of God became man and was born of the virgin Mary. Easter is the celebration of God’s victory over sin, death, and hell through Jesus’s death and resurrection. Pentecost is the third, but it feels like it is the least well understood.

So let’s begin with what happened. About fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead—ten days after he ascended into heaven—the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem for an Old Testament festival. It was called the feast of weeks. Not only were the disciples in Jerusalem, Jews from all over the Roman world had gathered, speaking many different languages.

Then it happened: the sound of a mighty rushing wind, something like tongues of flame over their heads, and the ability to speak in foreign languages. It was strange. People didn’t know what to make of it. They were hearing the mighty works that God had done being spoken to them in their mother tongue.

Then Peter got up to speak. Interestingly and significantly he did not speak directly about the wind or the fire or even about the Holy Spirit. He spoke to them about Jesus, who was risen from the dead, who was glorified and sits at the right hand of God, and who will come to judge the living and the dead.

Some of the people who were listening to Peter had been involved in Jesus’s crucifixion. But Peter does not say to them, “Too bad for you. I guess you will have to go to hell.” He instead preaches: “Repent and believe the Gospel.” “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.” And many of them did. 3,000 were baptized. They quit believing in other things and believed in Jesus instead.

That sounds simple: “Believe in Jesus instead of anything else,” but it’s harder than it sounds. Already at Pentecost there was trouble. There were problems from the outside. Some of the people at Pentecost didn’t believe. They thought that the disciples were drunk. Immediately after Pentecost the apostles were imprisoned by the Jewish authorities. Many Christians would lose their property, social standing, and even their lives for confessing that Jesus is Lord.

But the problems were not just from the outside, they also happened within. Disagreements broke out about whether the Laws of God needed to be kept in order to be saved. Do Christians need to follow the dietary laws God gave to Moses? Do converts need to be circumcised? Shouldn’t Christians be distinguished so that there are the very good Christians, and there are the not-so-good Christians? Aren’t the followers of Paul better than the followers of Apollos or vice versa?

These are only some of the controversies that came up already during New Testament times. The controversies continued. The history of the Christian Church is largely the story of one conflict after another, one separation after another. Look at the Christian Church today. We are fragmented and splintered into thousands of pieces. Each splinter wants to believe that it is the best, the most authentic, the surest guide to lead sinners into heaven. How is a person supposed to choose between all these

options? It's completely understandable why some people want to give up on the whole thing and say, "If Christians—or even just Lutherans—can't agree among themselves, then why should I want to have anything to do with them?"

Here we see the truth that enemies within the church are just as damaging as the enemies outside the church. Isn't it terrible that there are people and forces within the church that turn people away from repentance and faith in Christ just as effectively—or perhaps even more so—than those who would mock, intimidate, or kill? Unfortunately, there is no safe space within or without. Already in the first generation of Christians, Paul warned the Corinthians that the devil likes to dress up as an angel of light. The devil makes a show of being very devout, very religious, to deceive and mislead those who had been relying upon Christ so that they believe in something else.

But all is not lost. The work of Pentecost goes on. In fact, the situation is not so different today than it was at the time of the apostles. At that time, also, people had all kinds of different notions. People thought this or that about Jesus. Some people regarded him as but a man, others as a false prophet, others as a martyr. There were many Jews who thought that their church was the best, that there was no salvation for anyone unless they were somehow connected to their persons.

The message of Pentecost cuts through all these things—as it always does—leading people to what is true and reliable: Do not believe in anyone or anything except the Lord Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter how beautiful, pious, old, wise, or authoritative those other things might be. They will let you down. They cannot save. Only the Son of God saves those who trust in him. The Holy Spirit, poured out at Pentecost, continues to cause this Gospel to be spoken by Christians all over the world. By the power of the Holy Spirit there are people who repent and believe in Jesus.

A person might object and say: "If I were the Holy Spirit, I would do it differently. If I were the Holy Spirit, I would have an outward church organization that is grand and united instead of one that has been fragmented into thousands of pieces. If I were the Holy Spirit, I would make it so that people would have no other choice than to believe in Jesus. I'd make it so powerful that even the devil would call it quits."

Those are nice dreams that might or might not work. Regardless, they remind me of things that Peter liked to say. For example, when Jesus told the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, be crucified, die, and rise, Peter said, "**Far be it from you, Lord, that such things should happen to you.**" Likewise, on the mount of Transfiguration, Peter thought it would be a good idea to make this vision of glory more permanent. Perhaps three tents—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah—but God interrupted with his own teaching: "**This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!**"

Although Peter would still need to go through many difficulties, he does arrive at that wisdom. The preaching that Peter did at Pentecost was not filled with speculations or visions of grandeur for the outward success of the Christian Church. He told the people to drop all that stuff and believe in Jesus. Not the visions, not the systems; listen to Jesus.

Listening to Jesus is what, in fact, unites all Christians. Listening to Jesus is what unites Christians inwardly even though they might be divided into thousands of different groups outwardly. What makes a person a Christian is not being a Lutheran or a Methodist or a Roman Catholic. What makes a Christian a Christian is the work of the Holy Spirit such as it is described at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit causes the truth of Jesus to be made known, and by his almighty power he causes those whom he has chosen to believe it. All Christians are bound together with a divinely worked conviction that there is no Savior except the Lord Jesus Christ.

Which brings us back to the importance of the Christian festivals with which we began. At Christmas we celebrate God becoming one with us. At Easter we celebrate God's redemption of sinners. At Pentecost we celebrate that the redemption Christ won is not locked in the past. It is preached. It is heard. It is believed. The Holy Spirit still brings sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus. He still cuts through confusion, division, and doubt with clear speaking like: **"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."**

That is Pentecost—not a past memory, but a present reality. The Spirit drives Christ's Word into the ears and hearts of sinners, even now. And where that Word is heard and believed, there is the Church, there is life, there is salvation.

Christ is risen. Christ is Lord. Christ is coming again. Repent, believe, and live eternally.

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