

Pentecost: What Difference Did It Make?

By Dr. Mark Ross

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39 ESV).

For the Christian Church, the feast of Pentecost occurs 50 days (counting inclusively) after Easter, and thus always falls on a Sunday. This year it is on May 11. It marks the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in fulfillment of what the prophets, and especially Jesus, foretold. The prominence given to this event, and its importance for the Church, has led to some misunderstandings about the presence and work of the Holy Spirit prior to the first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection. Some have supposed that the Holy Spirit was not present or active in the world prior to the day of Pentecost. But in previous ROC articles we have examined the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and have found His work to be extensive. Indeed, the Holy Spirit was active in the Old Testament in all the variety of ways in which He acts in the New Testament. The question therefore arises, "What difference did the coming of the Holy Spirit make?"

As we consider this question, it is helpful to quickly summarize the Spirit's work as we find it in the Old Testament. He was present at the creation of the world (Gen. 1:2), not merely as an observant bystander, but actively implementing the divine commands by which the world was formed and filled. He was also present in the work of salvation, leading Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land (Is. 63:7-14). It was by the Spirit of God that the "judges" received their power to deliver Israel from enemies (e.g., Judg. 3:10-11). The Spirit of God also gave gifts for ministry, so that Bezalel and Oholiab could do the fine works of craftsmanship required for building the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1-5), and by which the prophets "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (II Pet. 1:21). The anointing of God's Spirit transformed Saul so that he too prophesied, and could deliver Israel from the Philistines (I Sam. 10:1-8). David likewise received such power from the Holy Spirit (I Sam. 16:13), and feared that like Saul (I Sam. 16:14), he too would lose the presence and power of the Holy Spirit because of his sins (Psa. 51:11).

These are just samples of the Holy Spirit's work in the Old Testament. Clearly, He was present and active during those days. How then are we to understand the New Testament's emphasis on the importance of the day of Pentecost and on the change it brought to the Church? How are we to understand New Testament comments about the time before Pentecost in such words as "for as yet the Spirit had not been given" (John 7:39)?

Since all Scripture is true, we must begin by recognizing that the Spirit is certainly present and active under the Old Testament, but in some sense there is something very different about the world, and especially the people of God, after Jesus has been glorified and after He sent His Spirit to the Church. How are we to express that difference?

I believe the clarification we need was provided many years ago by the theologian B. B. Warfield, a Kentucky-born minister who served at Princeton Seminary at the turn of the twentieth century. In an article on "The Spirit of God in the Old Testament" Warfield argued that the contrast is best understood in a comparative, not an absolute sense. That is, the contrast between the Old and New Testaments is not between a time when the Spirit was not at work in the world and the time when the Spirit did work in the world. Rather, it was a comparative contrast, and the comparison is made in the very language used for speaking about the day of Pentecost. For on that day, the Spirit was not merely given to the Church, but "poured out" (Acts 2:17) on the Church. What had merely been a sprinkling of the Holy Spirit among the people of God became a drenching shower. What had been a restrictive gift of the Holy Spirit to the one nation in the world chosen and favored above all the rest, became unrestricted and poured out upon Jews who were "devout men from every nation" (Acts 2:5). The empowerment of those who were filled with the Holy Spirit on that day to speak the word of God in the various languages of those who were present signified that the good news of salvation was now to be proclaimed to all people throughout the world (Acts 1:8). Indeed, the gift of the Holy Spirit in such power now marks a great change in goal of the Holy Spirit's work in the world. Before this time, the Holy Spirit worked among God's chosen people to *preserve* true religion in the world, that the world's darkness might not extinguish its light. Now, however, the Spirit's task is to propagate true religion throughout the world, bringing into submission people from every tribe and tongue and nation, that the light of salvation might dispel the darkness. The change is very great indeed, and we who belong to this light must align ourselves with the Spirit's work, so that all the world shall see the salvation of our God.



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