

We celebrate the birth of Jesus & all the world pauses to celebrate Christmas with us. We celebrate His resurrection, & most of the world recognizes Easter as a very special day on the calendar. But today is Pentecost, & hardly anyone realizes it. Yet, this day is important, because Pentecost is the birthday of the Church, & God has given us the wonderful opportunity of being a part of it. As you heard, it is in the 2nd chapter of the Book of Acts that we read about the beginning of the Church. The first chapter tells us of Jesus meeting with the apostles on the Mt. of Olives before his ascension. Luke writes, *Acts 1:4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about."* Jesus continues saying that once they have this gift, they will be His witnesses to all the world. Verse 8, *Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Then, Jesus ascends out of their sight. So they go to Jerusalem to wait & pray. And as you heard our first lesson, the Spirit breaks forth upon them *and the world was never the same.*

Alvin Schmidt a professor of sociology gathered information to demonstrate what a powerful influence Christianity has had on Western Civilization in his book: *How Christianity Changed the World*. He claims the Christian faith has contributed enormously to the overall well-being of mankind. Schmidt says looking at the way of the world before, and then looking at the world after the Church began, the world is a better place for all.

Consider the issue of health care. Prior to Christianity, the Greeks and Romans had little or no interest in the poor, the sick and the dying. But the early Christians, following the example of Jesus, ministered to the needs of the whole person. The first hospital was built by St Basil in Caesarea in 369. And by the Middle Ages hospitals covered all of Europe and even beyond. Nursing also sprang from Christian concerns for the sick, just think of Florence Nightingale, for example, and the formation of the Red Cross.

Education was transformed by the Christians. While important in Greek and Roman culture, it really took off under the influence of Christianity. The early Greeks and Romans had no public libraries or educational institutions – it was Christianity that established these. And Christians offered education for both males and females as well as individuals from all social and ethnic groups. Christians also led to the rise of the modern university.

Another example of the Christian influence, consider the issue of work and economic life. The Greeks and Romans had a very low view of manual labor, and so it was mainly the slaves and lower classes that were forced to toil with their hands while the non-slave population lived primarily for personal pleasure. But the Church changed all this. Jesus of course was a carpenter's son. Paul was a tentmaker. Thus work was seen as an honorable and God-given calling. The value of hard work, and the sense of vocation, soon changed the surrounding society; the development of a middle class being one of the outcomes. The development of unions is another result. As well as the protection of workers and workers' rights. All leading to a profound effect on modern day capitalism.

There are many, many other great achievements mentioned in this book from politics and democracy, to modern science, as well as the arts. The bottom line is many of the benefits we enjoy in our modern day culture is directly due to the influence of this one man, Jesus Christ and his disciples who formed the Church. And neither intimidation nor persecution was able to destroy this Church. Why? Because the Church is not an organization, but a living organism that lives on today through you and me. However let's be careful to note that it's power is not yours or mine, it's God's.

That's the focus of this text. Acts 2:1-4 <sup>2</sup>When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.<sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.<sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.<sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Fire is the Biblical symbol of transformation. In the book of Malachi the prophet speaks of a coming messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord and when the Lord arrives, he will purify the Israelites with a

refiner's fire. Malachi 3: The Coming Messenger "3See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple..For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; <sup>3</sup>he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. <sup>4</sup>Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years."

Fire changes whatever it touches. Be it silver, gold, the Israelites, anything really. And God's fiery Spirit changed the disciples too. Before Pentecost the disciples were scared. They lacked faith. They did not fully understand God's plan. After Pentecost's fiery transformation, they were united and everything began to change for good. Acts 2:43 "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles."

We are vessels and conduits for the same. And when we welcome the Spirit's fiery transformation in our lives, look out! Because there will always be a before and after for you, for me, for this church.

Today we welcome youth who went through confirmation class and we have asked them to share their witness of what life was like before and after they went through this class, growing in their understanding of this faith. One said her before was not really understanding the work of the Holy Spirit until she felt it when they worshiped at another UMC, the Journey, in downtown Harrisburg. Now she knows what to watch for, and is open to receiving the Spirit in her daily life. Another said she though Christianity was about being perfect, but she learned God does not expect us to be perfect, that's why we have Jesus. And she learned God loves her for who she is, no matter what. A young man experienced his growth and understanding of God's will for his life too, and will be sharing that as well. And today we celebrate their before and after, as we welcome them into membership of this church. But we not only welcome them, we welcome what God's Spirit is doing in and through them. Just as we welcome God's Spirit to work through each of us, to continue to make the world a better place.

#### Prayer:

Holy are you God who breathes the Holy Spirit on us. Holy are you, and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Son. As we remember his life, his death, his rising, as we celebrate the fulfillment of the Spirit he promised, pour out the Pentecostal Spirit and enflame our hearts so that we may be one for encouragement, healing, and development of your world that so desperately needs it. We ask this as the Spirit leads us to affirm our faith and discipleship to Jesus Christ, Amen.