

What Converted Multitudes Over the Days of Pentecost and After?

"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or else believe me on account of the works themselves" (John 14:11).

Facing obstacles far greater than those confronting us today, in its first decades, starting in Jerusalem, the Christian Church began growing so rapidly that a mob in Macedonia later decried the reality that Christians were *"turning the world upside-down"* (Acts 17:6). Jewish leaders forbade their flock from embracing Jesus while Roman authorities charged with sedition *all* who worshipped Jesus rather than Caesar (17:7). In both cases believers faced persecution by varied means depending on circumstances. They certainly didn't get permission, let alone approval, from Rome to spread their faith. Further still, printing presses didn't exist for another 1400 years.¹ Yet their movement still grew explosively.² How so? Were the mounting numbers caused by naivete on the part of audiences, or manipulation as a ploy of the proclaimers? The answer to both suspicions is "No!" This wave was *instigated* by the Holy Spirit (HS) *who* at Pentecost **connected** two indispensable facets of the Gospel. At Peter's inaugural sermon, the HS³ inspired Peter firstly to convincingly frame Jesus' deity and saving work in the light of Scripture, and secondly to **underscore the battery of facts that prove⁴ Jesus' saving power.⁵**

The second chapter of Acts provides a vivid illustration of *how* this momentous crusade *began*. The first *Christian* sermon ever delivered was preached by St. Peter on the day of *Pentecost*. Although Jewish believers⁶ (JB) had that day assembled in Jerusalem at⁷ the Temple *for the purpose of* observing the alternate celebration, the *Feast of Weeks* (Lev. 23:16, Luke 22:7); the disciples in obedience to Jesus' earlier command to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), ensured that they too were present. So despite the likelihood of the JB's being *indifferent* or hostile to Jesus, their sight-and-sound experience of the coming of the HS would likely hold them within hearing range of Peter's sermon (Acts 2:38).

However, one thing striking about the Apostle Peter's sermon is that the spectacle of the arrival of the HS *centered* NOT on the HS;⁸ but, as we shall soon see, on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. I am in no way seeking to diminish the majesty and gravitas of the HS. Nevertheless, the marvels narrated in 2:2-13 *literally* served *here* as a **powerful** attention-getter from which Peter (take notice) turned his focus on Jesus Christ in light of His utterly-new **glory**-stage which, at this point, follows after His prior stage of **humility** (Philippians 2:6-11). This is indeed as Jesus foretold by stating, *"When the Spirit of truth comes... He will glorify me [Jesus], for He will take what is mine and declare it to you"* (John 16: 13a, 14). A review of ch. 2 will underscore this reality. The witty aside of Peter in regard to the HS was in part prompted by the crowd's confused notion that those speaking *"in other tongues"* (v. 4) were simply *"drunk"* (v. 15). So to allay their bewilderment, Peter noted to the contrary that it was the HS, as the bringer of renewal and order, as opposed to inebriation or confusion, who filled them (1 Cor. 14:33).

It is at v. 22 that Peter begins the core of his sermon by declaring, *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man **attested to you** (v.22) by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him **in your midst** (v.22), **as you yourselves know...**" (v.22). He then furthered his delivery by stating, *"This Jesus God raised up, and of that **we are all witnesses**" (v.32), and then he adds, *"[God has poured out [his Holy Spirit which] **you yourselves are seeing and hearing**" (v.33). Finally then by his closing words, he directly connected the weight of the above evidence to the urgency of the audience to being personally converted to Jesus who is shown to be *"both Lord and Christ."* Indeed Paul's HS-led sermon ultimately secured the case for Jesus' resurrection to the level of absolute surety by declaring, *"With **certainty** (asphalos, Gk, -- think "asphalt") let the house of Israel **therefore** know that God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified"* (2:36).***

Note then the ramifications from the above points: Peter implies firstly that the miracles he narrated were so public that every listener would concede them to be factual, so that, secondly, they solidify the foundation on which the Gospel of Jesus Christ stands, that it is rock solid (*asphallos*, above)!

Significantly, in addition to the above **boldfaced** passages, Peter elsewhere stated, “*Always be prepared to give a reason* (logos, Gk -- "logic") *for the hope that is in you*” (1 Peter 3:15). This pattern suggests that Peter may have consistently applied evidence-based proclamation across his apostolic ministry. Should that be surprising? The Book of Acts notes that 3,000 people were baptized at his sermon's close (2:41). Also this "success" began a daily trend that included conversions of even priests (6:7). Peter didn't sever Spirit-inspired faith from reason; but reconciled the two for the reason that the HS is “*The Spirit of Truth*” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). One consequence that followed from joining *biblical AND factual* truths was that so many who heard his sermon were “*cut to the heart*” (2:37).

It is likewise, for two reasons, vital in our day that we heed Peter's example by employing his methods in *our* Gospel proclamation. Firstly, claims that can be validated as true must NOT “*be hidden under a bushel*” (Mark 4:21-25). Sadly however, not only non-Christians, but many church-attenders too, are ignorant of the *demonstrable* reality that the Gospel is grounded on facts. I blame this sorry state in part on the silence of Christians who care little about becoming informed. For this reason we secondly need a heightened awareness that our message is under attack by opponents on every side whose determination is mounting with increasing intensity. Even if we don't sense a need to have our *own* faith bolstered, we still need to provide reasons to weaker Christians that the scientific and historical facts are both on the side of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Statistics indicate that atheism today is growing in numbers that are perhaps comparable to the growth of the early Church as referenced in my opening paragraph. The challenge we face as Christians today is indeed real. At the same time however it is our high privilege to be light-bearers of truth in the midst of an ever-darkening culture (Romans 1:22). I am convinced that **only** the Gospel of Christ has the capacity to reverse this decline. There is every reason why we can prevail; but only if we avail ourselves of both God's Word and the truthful reality that flows from His Lordship. I must warn readers that unless we appeal, as Peter did, to the *factual* foundation of the Gospel, we will witness an accelerating decline of both *our* generation and those that follow, and also loss of individuals to damnation.¹¹ Is this indeed not exactly the trend that is occurring right before our very eyes?

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¹ Elton Trueblood writes, “*That the Christian movement could have succeeded so that the humble men who fished on the shores of the Sea of Galilee today are better known than the very Caesars who ruled the world...is so amazing it would be incredible if we did not know it to be the case.*” (*Philosophy of Religion*. (Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 140).

² Estimates range between 100,000 to 300,000 believers by the end of the 1st century. See Kaari Ward, ed. *Jesus and His Times*. (Reader's Digest, 1987), p. 298, ** and U. of Wash. Prof. of Sociology, Rodney Stark. *For the Glory of God*. (Princeton, 2003), p.27.

³ As the Third Person of the Holy Trinity God, the Holy Spirit inspired the contents of Peter's sermon along the lines of 2 Timothy 3:16.

⁴ By "prove" I mean that which is beyond a reasonable doubt. Legal scholar Dr. John Warwick Montgomery writes, “*Legal reasoning operates on probabilities, not possibilities: preponderance of evidence in most civil actions; evidence beyond reasonable...doubt in criminal matters*” *History, Law, and Christianity*. (Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc., 2002), p. 91 (boldface mine).

⁵ As Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated, “It is in fact more important for us to know what God did to Israel, in God's Son Jesus Christ, than to discover what God intends for us today.” *Life Together*. (Harper and Row, 1954).

⁶ **Not associated** with the Jesus-followers, they gathered from all across the Roman Empire to celebrate a festival that looked **backward** in time.

⁷ For an observant Jew to be “at” the Temple at Pentecost could legitimately entail anywhere in the vicinity of the Temple area.

⁸ That is the Holy Spirit who is the 2nd person of the Holy Trinity.

⁹ The “heart” in the metaphorical sense is not the seat of emotions but the center of convictions which, includes both our intellect and volition.

¹⁰ For further reading: Gary Habermas's broad listing of articles at <https://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/articles.htm> ** Lee Strobel's, *The Case for Faith*. (Zondervan, 2000), ** and my article, “Hoax? Myth? Or Literally True,?” at my website: christianityontheoffense.com/articles

¹¹ See my paper, “The Elephant Standing Between Secularists and their Receptivity to the Gospel,” at my website, Ibid.