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## ACTS 2:37-41 : THE GOSPEL OF THE APOSTLES

No. EE42

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On the day of Pentecost the great promise of the Old Testament was fulfilled. The risen Christ received the mandate from His Father to pour out the Holy Spirit on the little church He had left behind - and this is what He now did!

Peter then starts preaching. It is a very special sermon, full of persuasive power. As a result many ask what they should do - and Peter's reply is loaded with meaning (Acts 2:37-41).

### The effects of Peter's sermon (37)

The crowd's reaction is dramatic. The hearers are "cut to the heart". With this expression Luke wants to bring home two things:

- Firstly, Peter's words had an effect in the *hearts* of the people. This refers to the centre of their personalities and convictions.

Undoubtedly this was the work of the Holy Spirit, which had radical and lasting effects on them.

- Secondly, it is accompanied by *deeply felt emotions* on the part of the hearers. The verb, "to cut" (Gr. *katanusso*) is a combination of the word to stab with an *intensifying preposition*.

The true gospel about Christ was therefore like a stab through their hearts. It penetrated their innermost beings. Clearly, the people became conscious of their guilt before God. Hence the question about what they should do.

### Peter's reply (38-39)

#### A two-fold command

- *Firstly, the people have to repent.* This verb (Gr. *metanouo*) implies a radical paradigm shift, a complete change in their way of thinking, a totally new outlook. John the Baptist (Mt 3:2) and the Lord Jesus (Mt 4:17) preached the necessity of repentance. The apostles followed them in this (Acts 3:19; 8:22; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20).

Because we cannot but act in accordance with our convictions, true repentance inevitably comes to expression in an about-turn in our way of living. This hundred-and-eighty-degree change has two sides.

Negatively it is a *turning away from sin*. This involves turning from the demands of the flesh, the luring of the world, and the temptations of Satan.

Positively it is a *turning towards Christ*. This has at least three components. It involves *appropriating* God's truth and promises in *Christ as God's great Prophet*. It involves *entrusting* yourself to *Christ as God's great High Priest*. It involves *committing* yourself single-heartedly and unreservedly to *Christ as God's great King*.

Biblically speaking this total about-face is also - at least to some extent - accompanied by shame and sadness because of one's failings and rebellion in the past. And this, if at all real, will result in confession of sin. It is most interesting to note that the Greek word *metanouo* is almost without exception used in the Septuagint (the pre-Christian translation of the Old Testament into Greek) to translate the Hebrew word meaning to comfort yourself (Hb. *naham* in the Nifal-form).

- *Secondly, the people have to be baptised.* Previously they rejected Christ. Now they have to humble themselves by formally, openly and irreversibly committing themselves to Him as disciples - by being baptised in His name.

This means at least four things: One, it happens in obedience to His command and therefore on His

authority. Two, it is an endorsement of His teaching. Three, it is a confession of total trust in Christ's merits. Four, it is a public and irreversible surrender to His Lordship.

#### A two-fold promise

Those who obey the two-fold command also receive a two-fold promise: *forgiveness of sins* and *the gift of the Holy Spirit*.

- These two promises are coupled to both commands. Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that the mere formal undergoing of baptism per se guarantees forgiveness of sins and the receipt of the Holy Spirit. But equally so we cannot, on any Biblical grounds, lay claim to the promises if we disregard these two commands.

- The promise is not only for the people listening to Peter (39). The apostle goes to some lengths to emphasise that the promise extends historically and universally far beyond them. It applies to all those who hear him (who meet the conditions), and their "children" (their Jewish descendants), and "all who are far off" (non-Jews).<sup>1</sup> The promise therefore applies without distinction. But it does not apply without exception, because Peter immediately adds a most important qualification: it applies to "everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

### The Lord's new community

In verse 40 Luke makes it clear that this was not all that Peter said. He warned them with "many other words" - the essence of which is this summons: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation."

It is important to note that Peter did not simply plead for an individualistic repentance - something

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1. The Jews sometimes referred to non-Jews as those who are far-off (Is 49:1, 12; 57:19; Eph 2:13, 17).

that can be settled quickly and worked out in the privacy of one's own little world.

No, no! He insists on an *emigration* out of the "crooked generation" - the fallen world seriously warped by the Fall. It is a call to flee from mankind under God's wrath.

This necessarily implies *immigration* into another humanity - the new mankind in Christ Jesus. Submission to the Lord Jesus Christ entails devoting oneself to His people - His true body and bride.

As a result of Peter's summons there is an amazing response (41). Three thousand people accept the gospel message. They come to faith, undergo a complete change in their way of thinking, receive baptism and join the church in Jerusalem.

## A few conclusions and implications

Pentecost was a unique event - and a giant step forward in God's plan of salvation. But the uniqueness of the event does not mean that it holds no lessons and directives for us today. On the contrary! Peter's sermon and approach at Pentecost should certainly serve as the normative guideline for our approach to evangelisation.

- Firstly we should note the apostle's Christ-centred approach. In his sermon Peter places great emphasis on the *crucifixion* and *resurrection* of the Lord Jesus. He relies on a two-fold evidence to prove the historicity of the event.

Firstly there is *the evidence of the Old Testament*. The crucifixion and resurrection were the fulfilment of many prophesies (Peter refers to Psalm 16, Psalm 110 and Joel 2).

Secondly there is the evidence provided by the apostles themselves (2:32).

That is how we too should preach. But as we ourselves were not present when it all happened, we have to rely completely on the evidence of the apostles. We have to echo what they had to say. True preaching is to expound the Word of God!

- Secondly Peter also proclaims the promises of the Lord to those who come to Him in all sincerity - the *forgiveness of sins* and the *gift of the Holy Spirit*.

- Thirdly these gifts are subject to certain conditions. Inwardly God demands *repentance*; and outwardly this has to be confirmed by *baptism*.

Together these two things are an expression of a new disciple's faith.

Repentance and baptism hold enormous implications. It involves the adoption of a new King, a new nation, a new citizenship and a new culture. It is an intentional and radical transfer of loyalty, faithfulness and dedication. It means to openly side with the disciples of Jesus Christ - moving from that which is old and corrupt to that which is new and in the process of being saved (2:47).

Baptism is something like taking the oath during the naturalisation ceremony in a new country. It is a public and formal identification with Christ and His church. The one being baptised should therefore realise that from that moment on he or she is an alien and stranger in this world. That is why it has always been the experience of believers throughout the ages: while you remain unbaptised you are tolerated to a certain extent. But the moment you formally and publicly declare your allegiance to Christ and transfer your loyalty to His true church, you suffer rejection and even persecution. It is as if people sense that you are still in two minds before the time, but that you irreversibly cross over the stretch of no man's land to the other side the moment you are baptised.

- On the day of Pentecost Peter preaches a fourfold message. It involves *two events* (Christ's death and resurrection), as confirmed by *two witnesses* (the prophets and the apostles), on the basis of which the Lord makes *two promises* (forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit), on condition that a person obey *two commands* (repentance and baptism).

*We have no right to cut this fourfold apostolic gospel into shreds. What God has joined together, let no man separate. God's message of salvation is an integrated unity.*

We dare not sever *cross and resurrection*. Without the former the latter could never have taken place; without the latter, the former would have been a futile exercise (1Cor 15:12-20).

We dare not sever *Old and New Testaments*. Without the former, the latter is without foundation; without the latter the former comes to nothing.

We dare not sever *forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit*. Without the former the latter is impossible; without the latter we cannot enjoy the privileges of the former.

We dare not separate *repentance and baptism*. Without the former, the latter may not happen; without the latter, the former is not complete.

- We may not throw overboard or even neglect any single component of the apostolic proclamation. The true gospel is a *historic message* (it deals with factual events of the past); it is a *theological message* (as expounded by the full Word of God); it is a *message of redemption* (it bears the promise of salvation); it is an *authoritative message* (it demands single-minded and unconditional obedience).

*Do you hold to and proclaim the full gospel?*

## Nico van der Walt

- Nico van der Walt subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession - like most Reformed Baptists worldwide - as well as the Confession of Sola 5, an association of God-centred evangelicals in Southern Africa.
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