

Born to Win

Fifty Days to Pentecost

by: Ronald L. Dart

I wonder how many of our listeners know what this weekend is. It's Pentecost Weekend. The surprising thing to me about Pentecost is that it isn't a much bigger deal with Christians than it is. The listeners to our one station in the British Isles will know Pentecost as "Whitsunday" (White Sunday, that is.) from the custom of the newly-baptized wearing white. I was surprised on a visit to London a few years ago to find that Whit Monday is also a holiday there. They get a two-day weekend, the Brits do, based on an ancient Jewish holiday. Go figure that. The Jews know it as *Shavuot* or the Feast of Weeks.

Now when you understand what Pentecost is, it is a wonder it isn't a much bigger thing among Christians. Pentecost was the day the Holy Spirit was poured out in power on the early church. It was the day they baptized 3,000 souls in one day. I don't think the church has ever done that since. It has been called the birthday of the church and you would think it would be celebrated in fine style. But for most of protestant Christianity it passes unnoticed. It's just another Jewish holiday and many don't even notice that. Pentecost is the Greek word that means "Fiftieth." In Acts Two, verse one:

Acts 2

KJV

¹ And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.

Okay. But what it's saying is: when the *fiftieth day* had arrived they were all together in one place. But the fiftieth day from what? Well to answer that question we have to go back a-ways. The Jewish holidays, as we're apt to call them, are all outlined in the book of Leviticus, chapter 23.

Leviticus 23

NIV

¹ The LORD said to Moses,

² "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'These are my appointed festivals, the appointed festivals of the Lord, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies.

And there are seven of them throughout the year. But the one we're talking about is spoken of in Leviticus 23 beginning along about verse nine:

Leviticus 23

NIV

⁹ The LORD said to Moses,

¹⁰ "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest.

¹¹ He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.

Now there's not a lot of information there. Even time of year would not be known to us, possibly, except for one thing. It turns out that we're talking about the very first ripe grain of the new year. And historically we know that that is barley in Palestine and we know that that day is very close to the First Day of Unleavened Bread. "When you enter the land," he said. Now presumably during the forty years in the wilderness this could not be done because they didn't plant nor harvest during that period of time. Later in verse fourteen, Leviticus 23, verse 14:

Leviticus 23

NIV

¹⁴ You must not eat any bread, or roasted or new grain, until the very day you bring this offering to your God. [...]

Now in a way it's like saying, "None of this crop is yours until first of all you acknowledge that I gave it to you. First thing you got to do: don't eat any grain in any form. Harvest a sheaf — just one. Bring it in before me, have the priest wave it back and forth, admitting I gave you this and thanking me for it. After that, you can eat the crop to your heart's desire." Now he says:

Leviticus 23

NIV

¹⁵ "From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks.

¹⁶ Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD.

¹⁷ From wherever you live, bring two loaves made of two-tenths of an ephah of the finest flour, baked with yeast, as a wave offering of firstfruits to the LORD.

Now this is done on Pentecost which is also called the Feast of Firstfruits. Now what on earth does any of this have to do with Christianity? Well, more than you might think. Take that word "firstfruits." The idea at first seems to be merely a requirement that before you indulge yourself in the fruit of the ground, you have to put God first. Now that lesson alone is worthwhile, and so the ceremonial acknowledging of God as the source of every good and perfect gift is a good thing. But the concept of firstfruits took on special meaning to the early church and you might wonder, if you read through the New Testament and it crops up: where did this come from? How did they arrive at this? For example, here is 1 Corinthians, chapter 15 (for people who know their New Testament well will call it "The Resurrection Chapter".) The Apostle Paul says in verse 19:

1 Corinthians 15

KJV

¹⁹ If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

²⁰ But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

²¹ For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

²² For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

²³ But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.

So we immediately see something here — that there is this connection with the resurrection from the dead; that Jesus Christ was the first one resurrected from the dead and, since it calls him the firstfruits, it is suggestive that there is more to follow.

James draws the same meaning from this. In the first chapter of the Epistle of James he says this:

James 1

KJV2000

¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

¹⁸ Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

So we know Christ is the firstfruits. Now we learn we also are a kind of firstfruits. And then there is an enigmatic cohort of people that you find in the book of Revelation, often referred to as “the 144,000”. In Revelation, chapter 14, John is standing and he looks and he sees a lamb standing on Mt. Zion. And with the lamb are 144,000 having his father’s name written in their foreheads. He said:

Revelation 14

KJV2000

² And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps:

³ And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty-four thousand, who were redeemed from the earth.

Now this 144,000 has been given many, many interpretations down through the years and I’m not going to try to touch that today, but it does tell us this about the 144,000:

Revelation 14

KJV2000

⁴ These are they who were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These were redeemed from among men, being the first fruits unto God and to the Lamb.

So the early church, even the Gentile church, was strongly connected to what you and I call the “Old Testament”. They called it the “Holy Scriptures” because it was all the scripture they knew. What we call the “New Testament” didn’t exist, even in part, for some 20 to 30 years of the history of the church. But the Gentiles of that era were what people called God-fearers. That is, they believed in and worshiped the God of the Old Testament before they ever heard the gospel. Instead of accepting a Greek god or a Roman god, these Gentiles accepted the true God and served him to the best of their abilities and listened to the law being read in the synagogue every Sabbath day so they would know what God’s will was. Now for these people, Jew and Gentile, who were Christians, the imagery of the firstfruits was inexorably tied to the resurrection of the dead. Paul makes this very clear in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Colossians. He says:

Colossians 1*KJV*

¹² Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light:

¹³ Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son:

¹⁴ In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:

Then he begins to outline who this Jesus is. He said:

Colossians 1*KJV*

¹⁵ Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:

¹⁶ For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

¹⁷ And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

You know, Paul really gets his hammer out and drives this nail in. And then he says this so you'd be sure to know who he's talking about:

Colossians 1*KJV*

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

Christ is not only the firstborn of all creatures; he is the firstborn from the dead. And this idea of a harvest of souls from this Earth at the time of the resurrection; of them being born from the dead as Christ was born from the dead is what this is all about. Now keeping all that in mind, we're going to walk back fifty days from that first Pentecost of the Christian church and we're going to see what we find there.

Walking back 50 days from that first Pentecost of the Christian church brings us to the day when the High Priest would normally be waving that sheaf of the firstfruits before God. That sheaf, that one omer of grain — that they couldn't eat grain until they actually presented it to God. That curious ceremony is normally considered a Jewish ritual. However, when you look at this, the harvest begins on that day when he takes that basket of first-ripe grain and waves it before God. The harvest begins that day and for 50 days thereafter they worked six days, rested the Sabbath, worked six days and rested the Sabbath for seven Sabbaths until Pentecost.

But something else was going on here though on that same morning. No one saw the moment of Jesus' resurrection, so we have no testimony as to exactly when that took place. What we do know from the Gospel accounts is that Mary Magdalene came to the sepulchre while it was still dark and found the tomb open and Jesus gone. So here we are: Jesus is risen, he's not there, and Mary Magdalene is standing there puzzled and hurt and confused. You'll find this now in the 20th chapter of the Book of John.

John 20*KJV2000*

¹¹ But Mary stood outside at the sepulcher weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulcher,

¹² And saw two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.

¹³ And they said unto her, Woman, why weep you? She said unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.

At this she turned around and she saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize it was him. Now I don't know why. It may be his appearance had been altered, but also it may still have been dark.

John 20*KJV2000*

¹⁵ Jesus said unto her, Woman, why do you weep? whom do you seek? She, supposing him to be the gardener, said unto him, Sir, if you have borne him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.

¹⁶ Jesus said unto her, Mary. She turned, and said unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Teacher.

¹⁷ Jesus said unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

Now there's something important to understand here. Jesus would not actually ascend from the earth to the Father permanently for another 40 days. So what does he mean when he says "Go tell my disciples I'm returning to my Father and your Father?" Well, between the time he appeared to Mary Magdalene and the time he later saw his disciples the same day and let them touch him, hold him and handle him, he had ascended and presented himself to the Father in the intervening time. Probably at the same time the priest was waving that sheaf of the firstfruits in the temple before God, Jesus was appearing before the Father in heaven. You know, the striking thing about some much of the Old Testament ritual is it is all about Christ. Now this happened on a singular day of the year. It is the first day of the seven weeks of harvest leading up to Pentecost, also called the Feast of Firstfruits. And this underlines one of the most common errors people make about the New Testament.

This was on a Sunday morning to be sure, but the Jewish manner of speaking of Sunday was to call it "the morrow after the Sabbath". Or I think in the NIV, "the day after the Sabbath". They did not call it the "first day of the week." It's a term unknown really and not used in either Old Testament or New Testament by Jews. So what are the disciples saying when they describe this day as the "first day of the week"? Well, it is the first day of the seven weeks of harvest. Day One of the 50 day countdown to Pentecost. Literally, in Greek, it is "the first day of the Sabbaths" and the word is plural. There's no word here for "week". The Jews basically used the term "seven" for that. But this is the first day after the Sabbath. Now it's odd how strong the idea of the "first day of the week" has entered into Christian tradition when it is really not in reference to a day of the week, but a day of the year when the wave sheaf was offered.

But never mind that for now. Let's walk back down those 50 days to the first Christian Pentecost. Jesus had told his disciples:

Acts 1

KJV2000

⁴ [...] that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, said he, you have heard of me.

⁵ For John truly baptized with water; but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

[...]

⁸ But you shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Now they weren't entirely clueless what this meant. The Holy Spirit came upon men of old, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and usually the result of it was they prophesied. They had a word from God that they passed on to men. So, as I say, they weren't clueless, but there was no way that they could have anticipated what was about to happen and what it was going to really mean. Now they didn't have long to wait. A mere ten days after Christ's ascension when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all together in one place. Which, of course, is exactly what you would have expected the disciples to do. They kept this day, the Feast of *Shavuot*, the Feast of Firstfruits, what we call Pentecost, all their lives. It was one of the appointed times of God. They knew that God acted in history on these appointments and, therefore, they must have expected that the fulfillment of what Jesus had promised in terms of being empowered by the Holy Spirit would come at this time.

So they were all together in one place and (I have very little doubt) in some anticipation. And suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting and they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each one of them. I think you could call this a hair-raising experience. Having an incredible roar and all of a sudden this stream of fire coming across the ceiling and a little stream of it descending on each one of them. My, what a moment! And there's no way that they could have anticipated the physical manifestations of the Spirit they saw and felt on this day.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now this underlies a long-standing belief that people have of speaking in unknown tongues as they call it; *glossolalia* as it is otherwise called. Speaking in tongues is thought to be a manifestation of the Spirit. Kind of a proof of the Spirit — a baptism of the Spirit, if you will. On this occasion it was a manifestation alright. But it was not merely that. Listen to what followed:

Acts 2

NIV

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.

Mind you, these were not unknown tongues; they were known languages. The men who ran together recognized, probably from the garb of the disciples, they were local to Palestine.

Acts 2

NIV

⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?"

⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?

Now much is made of the question of the precise miracle here. Was it in the speaking or was it in the hearing? There is no doubt when you see the whole picture. The disciples were speaking in languages they had never learned, when they were enabled to do so by the Spirit. There is more to that. These languages are named.

Now how did this differ, what happened on this day, from what happens, I guess, from Sunday to Sunday in some churches around the country; charismatic churches where the preacher may be speaking and all of a sudden he starts saying things nobody understands. He lapses into speaking in tongues. Or people in the congregation may start speaking in tongues that no one knows or understands. I don't know, but I can tell you in pretty clear terms what happened here and you can judge whether it's the same or not. First of all, every one of these people start speaking. People come running together because they heard the noise and they hear them speaking *in languages*. Now here's what they say:

Acts 2

NIV

⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome

¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!

Now depending on how you take this, there were 14 or 15 known, named languages being spoken by the disciples which basically covered the entire known world. Not only that, but it was a concrete, recognized message. “We hear them speak. Hey I'm from Arabia and I hear these people speaking in my language, in Arabic, the wonderful works of God!” It's recognized.

Now here's a question, didn't all the Jews speak Hebrew? Well, apparently not. But even if they did, the miracle becomes all the more significant. Why did the disciples need all these languages if their sole mission with the Gospel was to Jews? Now I can't think of anything that should have pressed on their minds the universality of the Gospel more than this. But many of them, including Peter, would not really get this through their heads for many years after this. And yet not long before this, just before Jesus left them in fact, he told him what they were to do. It's a short passage of scripture called the Great Commission. You'll find it right at the end of the 28th chapter of Matthew. Jesus came and spoke to them and said this:

Matthew 28

KJV2000

¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

¹⁹ Go you therefore, and teach all nations[.]

Literally disciple all nations. The Greek word for nations, *ethnos*, which elsewhere in the New Testament, in fact everywhere you find the word Gentiles in the New Testament, it is the Greek word *ethnos*. Go you therefore and teach, make disciples of, the Gentiles...

Matthew 28

KJV2000

¹⁹ [...] baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:

²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

So where were they suppose to take the Gospel? There were supposed to take it everywhere. And you don't have to be too swift to realize that if you're going to take the Gospel everywhere, somebody is going to have to be able to speak some languages that people elsewhere have spoken. It's clear. But now, on this Pentecost, everyone is trying to make sense of what happened.

Acts 2

NIV

¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.

¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!

¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel [*see Joel 2:28-29*]:

¹⁷ 'In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.'

They will all prophesy. What Peter goes on to say in this sermon on this first Pentecost of the Christian church is: we're seeing a fulfillment of prophecy that is in a direct line between where we have been and the last days. Something new has happened on earth. Peter still doesn't understand fully. And what door was opened on this day, was the door and the empowerment to go through that door to take the gospel *everywhere*. And it happened on Pentecost, the fiftieth day of the harvest of God. Which basically boils down to — these people who were being baptized began to form part of the firstfruits — 3,000 of them in one day. On this weekend.

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