# What is Christianity?

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## II. The Principles of the Pentecostal Church.

IN our investigation of the essential characteristics of Christianity we must begin with the Acts of the Apostles rather than with the four Gospels. This may look like an inversion of the natural order—like putting the teaching of the disciples before that of the Master. It is true that our Lord is the Founder of Christianity, which derives all its authority from Him. But it is also true that the Apostles were, by His commission, the founders of the Christian Church. We must, therefore, take as our starting-point the Day of Pentecost, not the commencement of our Lord's ministry. But we must never forget that the Apostles, in all they did, were governed by their Master's teaching—indeed, much of their own teaching is intelligible only by reference to His. So we shall not hesitate to interpret their words and practice by what we read in the Gospels.

The object of this paper is to consider what were the leading principles of the Christian Church during the earliest part of the Apostolic age—which may be called the Pentecostal period. This extends from the Day of Pentecost to the commencement of St. Paul's public ministry, probably in A.D. 46. It thus covers a space of from thirteen to seventeen years, according to the date which we assign to the Crucifixion. During this period the Christian Church was entirely Jewish and Syrian. Its leaders were Palestinian Jews whose native tongue was Aramaic, and who were Hebrews in their whole training and mode of thought. Though St. Peter and St. James the Just, under Divine guidance, afterwards adopted a liberal attitude towards Gentiles, they were never otherwise than Jewish in their own sympathies. The scene of Apostolic activity during the Pentecostal period did not extend beyond Syria, though no doubt there were persons from a great distance—even from Rome and Cyrene—

who took home an account of the wonderful event of the Day of Pentecost.

For this period our primary authority is the first part of the Acts of the Apostles. Some light is also thrown on it by scattered passages in St. Paul's Epistles, especially in that to the Galatians and the others of the group to which it belongs. These frequently refer to the Pentecostal period, and show St. Paul's thorough knowledge of, and entire agreement with, the principles of his predecessors. This is important, because these Epistles are acknowledged as genuine even by critics who reject almost all the rest of the New Testament. Our present task is to discover what this contemporary evidence tells us as to the teaching, the worship, and the discipline of the Pentecostal Church.

## I.

As to the first of these we at once observe two very remarkable characteristics of the teaching of the Apostles in its earliest stages.

1. The first is the almost entire absence of reference to our Lord's earthly ministry. Very little is said as to His works,[1] and next to nothing as to His teaching. This feature is also observable in St. Paul's speeches and Epistles and it is a striking characteristic of the preaching of the Apostles. They put forward as the essence of Christianity, not the acceptance of our Lord's teaching, but union with Himself. That union involves, as we shall presently see, belief in certain truths, and membership of a certain society. But the belief which it involves is belief in facts concerning Christ rather than in teaching given by Him. These facts are mostly supernatural and mark Christ as more than man. Some of them are things which He did, and are, therefore, in a sense, part of His work. But they belong to that work in its Divine and eternal aspect rather than to His earthly ministry.

2. The second characteristic of Apostolic teaching during the

[1] Acts ii. 22, and x. 48, seem to be the only such references in St. Peter's speeches.

Pentecostal period is the marked absence of *doctrine*, as distinct from *statement of facts*. The difference between these two is most important, and is not always sufficiently remembered. Doctrine is the authoritative explanation of fact—generally its only adequate explanation. But it is in itself an expression of opinion, and its authority depends on that of those who propound it and on its own inherent reasonableness. In the case of inspired writers the authority is absolute and their doctrine stands on the same level with their statement of facts. Still, the two things are different, and the distinction between them is important. In the teaching of the later Apostolic age doctrine holds an important place—in St. Paul it is conspicuous, in St. John it becomes predominant. But in the Pentecostal period there are only suggestions of it—which are significant enough, and are clearly seen to be its germ.

Instances of these are the references to the remission of sin —generally in close connexion with the anticipated return of Christ (Acts iii. 19, v. 31, x. 43) and a possible, though rather doubtful, reference to a future life (iv. 2). There are allusions to the Messianic character of Christ and to the fulfilment of prophecy in Him (*e.g.*, iii. 22, and vii. 37). These are in accordance with the thoroughly Jewish character of this Pentecostal teaching. There is a hint at our Lord's Divinity in the use of the title ὁ κύριος, Ἰησοῦς (i. 21, iv. 33, xi. 20), but it is somewhat significant that there is no reference to His relation to the Father or to His pre-existence, such as is conspicuous in St. Paul and St. John. And it is also noticeable that the distinctively Jewish title, "Jesus of Nazareth," is more frequently applied to Him in these early chapters of the Acts than anywhere else in the New Testament.

## II.

These and similar passages show that it would be quite wrong to regard the Pentecostal Church as in any way indifferent to doctrine. On the contrary, that Church not only provided the soil on which Christian doctrine was to grow, but sowed some of the seed. But it is most significant that the

staple of its teaching was the proclamation of facts. For these do not admit, as doctrines do, of being "re-stated" in such a way as practically to alter their meaning—they must be fairly faced, and either accepted or rejected. So it is necessary to be quite clear as to what these facts were which the Apostles proclaimed, and on the acceptance of which they insisted as essential to membership of the Church.

1. By far the most important of these is their emphatic assertion of the Resurrection of Christ, and their claim to be the witnesses of that fact. There are eight set speeches in the chapters of the Acts with which we are now concerned, and the Resurrection is the prominent topic in six of these. So the leaders of the Pentecostal Church put the Resurrection in the forefront of their teaching, and insist on it as being an undoubted fact. Nor can there be any doubt as to the sense in which they understood it. They knew nothing of the fanciful distinction between the "Easter faith" and the "Easter message" to which reference was made in our last article as a recent product of German theology. The Apostles certainly taught that our Lord rose from the grave, and that they and others had seen His glorified Body. Even if we could for a moment imagine that they knew nothing of the Gospel narrative, St. Peter's explicit language in the house of Cornelius (Acts x. 40) is decisive on this point. And in this connexion the frequency and purpose of their references to Christ's Death is worth notice. The fact is plainly asserted, and great importance is attached to it. But it is asserted as a prelude to the Resurrection and a guarantee of its reality, rather than as a satisfaction for sin. The exposition of its propitiatory character comes at a later stage. It is instructive—*e.g.*, to compare the way in which St. Peter refers to this subject in the speeches recorded in the Acts and in his first Epistle (see especially 1 Pet. i. 18, 19, iii. 18, etc.). Much the same may be said of the Ascension. The testimony of the Pentecostal Church to this great event is unequivocal. St. Peter refers to it at least three times, always in close connexion with the Resurrection, as if it were

the natural and necessary consequence of that event. It is very significant that the Resurrection should be the fact from which, in the view of the Pentecostal Church, the Death and Ascension of our Lord derive their great importance.

2. The second great fact on which the Pentecostal Church lays stress is that its members have received the Holy Ghost. As to this, their testimony is explicit as to two points—first, that the gift was bestowed on two definite occasions, and was attested by visible signs; and, secondly, that it was a power permanently bestowed on them, which they could and did transmit. The two supernatural outpourings of the Holy Ghost were on the day of Pentecost (Acts ii. 4) and at the conversion of Cornelius (Acts x. 44). The former was the foundation of the Church, the latter the admission of Gentiles to its pale. Each of these occasions called for a sanction whose genuineness and supernatural character could not be called in question. The outward sign was the same in both cases—the power of speaking unknown tongues. The character of this gift has been much debated, but its nature does not affect our present argument. The important thing for us to notice is that it was a perceptible sign of the gift of the Holy Ghost, which was recognised not only by those who received it, but by those who witnessed its exercise. There is no reason to think that the gift was restricted to the Apostles; indeed, the narrative is inconsistent with such a supposition. It is clear from Acts ii. 1-4 that all the believers were present, and that each received the gift. But it is by no means so clear that all had the power of transmitting the gift to others. Such a power was certainly exercised by the Apostles, and accompanied by a particular ceremonial act, which will come under our notice presently. But the power itself seems to have been inherent in the community, though its exercise was ordinarily restricted to official persons.

Now, these facts on which the Apostles insist are of a nature which precludes the possibility of a mistake. They came within the personal experience of those who testify to them, and only

two alternatives are possible: either the testimony is true, and these supernatural events occurred, or the Apostles deliberately invented a story which they must have known to be false, and whose falsehood could easily have been exposed. In the latter case they put themselves out of court as the preachers of a true religion. But the purpose of this series of papers is not to discuss whether what the Apostles taught is true, but what they did teach. And no one who reads the record of the Pentecostal Church can doubt that its whole claim to attention was based on these two facts. So they, at all events, must be regarded as an essential part of its belief.

## III.

We thus arrive at some conclusion as to the teaching of the Church in the first part of the Apostolic age. We have next to inquire as to the essential features of its worship. This was, no doubt, in the main, the ordinary Jewish worship of the Temple and the synagogue. The Pentecostal Church was, as we have seen, entirely Jewish in its mode of thought, and its members remained Jews throughout their lives. At this time they found it hard to imagine that a Christian could be anything else, and at no time had they any idea of being anything else themselves. So they gave up nothing of the ceremonial to which they had been accustomed, but they added to it a good deal, partly by infusing a new spirit into existing Jewish rites, and partly by introducing an act of worship which was unknown to the older covenant.

1. First, they insisted on Baptism as a condition of admission to the Church. This was not a new ordinance. It had long been required of proselytes, and a few years before John the Baptist had pressed it as a sign of repentance. Still more recently, on the eve of His Ascension, Christ had commanded its use in the making of disciples. The importance assigned to it in the Acts of the Apostles, without direct reference to the Divine command, is one of the many undesigned coincidences between that Book and the Gospels which go far to establish

the genuineness of both. Throughout the Pentecostal period Baptism is regarded as a sign of repentance and of admission to the Church rather than as a means of grace. But here, again, we see the germ of a doctrine which was formulated later, but is foreshadowed in the teaching of the Pentecostal Church. St. Peter once, at least, sees in Baptism a means of the remission of sins.[1]

2. Another rite to which the Pentecostal Church attached great importance was the laying on of hands. This, too, was a Jewish ceremony, going back to the time of Moses, and was well known as a sign of blessing and as a mode of ordination. It was adopted by the Apostles as a means of conveying the gift of the Holy Ghost. In fact, we do not read of any other way in which this mysterious gift was conveyed. Its administration was generally confined to the Apostles, who attached great importance to it. But it is clear from Acts ix. 17 that the efficacy of the ordinance did not depend on its administrator. For Ananias was certainly not an Apostle, and there is no evidence that he held any official position in the Church.

3. Besides adapting these two Jewish ordinances to Christian worship, the Pentecostal Church had another rite, which was peculiarly its own. This was the "breaking of bread." It is mentioned among the works of the Church at its very origin (Acts ii. 42), and was held to be of the highest value. In fact, it is placed on the same level with the worship of the Temple, and was thought of sufficient importance to be a daily practice. And the fact that it was carried on "at home" (v. 47, R.V.) shows its distinctively Christian character. It was one of the ordinances the Apostles had received from their Master, not one to which they had been brought up as Jews. As in the case of Baptism, its sacramental character is not mentioned in the Acts, and it is not expressly connected with our Lord's institution of the Holy Communion. But with the synoptic Gospels and the First Epistle to the Corinthians before us we cannot doubt its identity with that holy Sacrament.

[1] Acts ii. 38, and *cf.* 1 Pet. iii. 21.

## IV.

We thus find that the Pentecostal Church had definite, though simple, principles of faith and worship. But to constitute a man a Christian in these early days it was not sufficient that he should believe, or even that he should do, certain things. It was necessary that he should belong to a community, known as the "Church." This is not the place to discuss the meaning of the interesting word thus translated in the New Testament. It is enough to say that it would convey to Jews, as it did to Greeks, the idea of a definite, organized society, distinguished from the mass of mankind by marked characteristics of its own. Our present task is to consider what these characteristics were during the period under review.

1. We see, first, that the Church was a society whose objects were spiritual and moral, not worldly. It demanded *repentance* of all who joined it, and placed this in the very forefront of its requirements.[1] Nor can we doubt that it understood this great word as John the Baptist and our Lord Himself had used it, as indicating an entire alteration of life. To its members the Church offered *salvation*, which is represented as a continuous process, closely connected with membership of the Church (Acts ii. 47) and union with its Divine Head (iv. 12). The comparison of these two passages is most instructive. In the earlier one the tense of the Greek verb denotes a process not yet complete, in the latter it indicates some decisive act, which the context shows must be the formal acceptance of Christ. The meaning is not altered if in the former passage we adopt the reading of the Revised Version—*ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό*, "together"—instead of *τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ*, "to the church." For in either case the meaning is that salvation came to the individual by reason of his membership of the society.

2. We find, secondly, that this society had definite rules and discipline, to which its members were expected to conform. This is implied in the emphasis laid on the Apostles' "fellowship" (*κοινωνία*) amongst the marks of the Church (Acts ii. 42). It is

[1] Acts ii. 38, iii. 19, xi. 18.

no less clearly indicated in the evidence of common life and worship which this same passage affords.[1] If this stood alone it might be supposed to refer to the experiment in communism which, as far as we know, was confined to the Church in Jerusalem, and which even there did not last long. But there are several references to corporate life in the Pentecostal period which show that the organic unity of the Church was realized and insisted on from the very beginning of its history. It is true that there is little evidence of a settled ministry, such as appears in later times, and if we had no precedent, save that of the Pentecostal Church, to follow, it might be difficult to claim authority for such a ministry. The distinction between clergy and laity has not yet made its appearance. This is probably because the authority of the Apostles was universally recognised as paramount, and the Church was not yet too large for their personal supervision. In this, as in other matters, they laid down the lines which later ages were to follow. Their work was as yet in its experimental stage—they probably little foresaw what its future development would be. Like all beginnings, it was necessarily incomplete, but unlike most, it left little or nothing to be undone. The Apostles of the Pentecostal Church were architects rather than builders. Their task was to provide the plan, not to rear the structure. It is no small proof of their inspiration that the lines they laid down have never since been altered, and that their design may still be seen in the enduring fabric of the Catholic Church.

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P.S.—In the last article, April number of THE CHURCHMAN, the following corrections should be made: P. 228, l. 6, *for* "motives" *read* "moods"; p. 228, footnote, *for* "1899" *read* "1889"; p. 233, l. 19, *for* "*new*" *read* "*true*."

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[1] Verses 44-46; compare iv. 32.