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1900 Years Later is Pentecost a Dream or Reality?, 1936

O.P. Kretzmann

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1900 YEARS LATER

Is Pentecost a Dream or a Reality?

In a few brief days the church will turn again to the annual commemoration of the festival of Pentecost. Nineteen hundred years ago the spirit of God was poured out on a small group of men in Jerusalem and the Church of Jesus Christ was placed into the world of men. Nineteen centuries have come and gone. They have been years of victory and years of defeat. At times men have taken the church and broken her on the wheel of ambition and pride. At times men have poured a vicious stream of mockery over her scared soldiers and broken walls. Today after nineteen hundred years we may well pause to examine her position and her power in the world of the twentieth century.

On Christmas Day, the year 1935 a group of Anglican clergymen, laymen, and two women released a statement to the press which created a slight sensation. The burden of their statement was that the Protestant church had become the greatest failure our recent history has known. It was morally and spiritually bankrupt. It had lost all influence over the lives and thoughts of men. In itself the incident may not be important, but it is a striking example of what has been going on for many years. Today it is hardly possible for any one to read a newspaper or a journal of opinion without finding something concerning the failure of the church. Men tell us that it has failed to reach down and out into the lives of men. It has failed to bring peace to the heart. It has failed to weld our chaos of pathetic, scattered fancies into a single great moving spirit gathering up all wandering and wayward souls everywhere and bringing them into final harmony with the eternal purposes of God. Today the life of the 20th century flows by closed doors and forgotten altars. Men point to the bride of Christ with a swelling chorus of mockery. How much of this is true? Undoubtedly there
1900 Years later

lies in these bitter indictments an essential grain of truth which causes them to strike home. It is true that large sections of the so-called Christian church have lost the sense of their divine mission and are today floundering in an aimless litter of transient hopes. It is not true, however, that this failure is universal. The church still brings to the disjointed, restless souls of men something on which they can live and die. It still offers to substitute for their deep dismay a peace and an understanding which the world can never give. It can make them glad and sure again. In order to do that, however, with the full power of the spirit of God it must return to the fire and flame of its first Pentecost. The strength and success of the church is always in direct proportion to its nearness to the conquering Christ. He founded the Church on that first Pentecost nineteen hundred years ago and has been the only source of the power. With the first day of Pentecost when the church was founded, life was suddenly moved for the Galilean fishermen from the dark ways of time to the radiant roads of eternity. All their lives they had looked down had seen carried doubt and could see only difficulty and despair and defeat. On the day of Pentecost God gave them the power to look up and they saw the imperial hand of the Almighty placed on the destinies of men. At that moment the last reality of God behind the illusions of men was brought into the world and men were given the power to see behind the shadows of our day by day existence the everlasting Kingdom of God.

The church is still the most important institution in the lives of men. It breaks down the walls between nation and nation, between man and man. In the streets of the cities of the world the same endless procession which wandered over the streets of Rome and Jerusalem two thousand years ago. Outwardly these men and women look much alike. And yet, if for a brief revealing moment God would give us eyes to see -- eyes to cut through the ghastly sameness of men and women into the inner citadels of the heart -- we would suddenly find a vast difference among them. Some of them belong
together. They are citizens of a far and better country. They are men and women whose feet may strike the pavement of our cities but whose hands touch the pinions of the seraphim. They are the Church of Jesus Christ, the living stones of the temple of God, the men and women whose feet have shaken the world. For more than nineteen hundred years they have come down through the centuries, a blessed and mighty army, bound together by a common faith, a common hope, and a common love, moving like a Gulf stream in the history of the race, a part of the sea of humanity and yet set aside forever and ever from the ways of men. They are the Church of Jesus Christ. There can be no failure for them. As another day of Pentecost dawns it is particularly important for youth to remember this great fundamental truth in the ways of God with men. It must know her all her yesterdays and love all her tomorrows.

Youth is the future of the church. In the Congressional Library at Washington there is today a mural painting of two human figures worshipping before a crude stone altar on which a fire is burning. One form, clothed in dirty rags, is deeply bowed in the shame of the penitent and contrite heart. The other form clad in purest white is but slightly bowed in the attitude of adoration and surrender. If the painting is a symbolic representation of the life of the church, it is incomplete. There must be another figure. It must be the figure of a young man or woman standing erect, sword in hand and lamp burning, crying with Isaiah: "Here am I, send me, send me!" With that figure standing close and warm before the altar of God the church may well have a sense of new dawns that sleep before her, of greater victories and of blessed hope. Pentecost in the year of our Lord 1936! As the church stands before the rising generation with the power of that first Pentecost -- not as a whining beggar asking for the crumbs of their time and talents -- not as a hard, cold schoolmaster trying to sandbag life with a series of frantic don'ts -- but as the blessed company of the redeemed of God in Whose life and work there is even today a magnificent and unparalleled opportunity for the splendid energies of youth. If this generation, so lost in its own way, will go that way, the future of the Church even in
the eyes of men must be radiant with promise. She has never lost when she has come to her Lord and Master. Today as never before we need that long lost vision of the conquering Christ. We need the vision of Him as the risen and exalted Lord of the Church, moving in the glory of heaven, receiving the glad hosannahs of the spirits that surround the throne. We need the vision of Him with a name above every other name, on His head the crown of universal kingship, and in His hands the sceptre of the universe. Only then will the work of the church be lifted out of the dull, deadly routine of organizational life and away from the small narrow ruts of habit and custom... The spirit of Pentecost is the spirit of high adventure and great courage. After more than nineteen years it becomes desperately necessary for youth to catch again the vision of power which enabled the lowly men of Galilee and Judea to bring the Roman empire crushed and broken to the foot of the cross. We know that men may turn away from the church today. Men may see at times only her visible manifestations, her faults and vanities, the awful gap between the faith she professes and the faith she lives. But her glory is everlasting and eternal. Beyond all her faults is the shining figure of her great Head Whose cross is even today her only glory and her surpassing hope. The deepening of the world's twilight means only that His cross must shine more clearly. In one of His striking London fantasies Robert Hichens seems to sum it up. Two men were driving late on a wet winter evening through the vice and noise of London. Suddenly a huge red cross on a black background starts out of the gloom above a theatre. One of the men shudders. "I can see things tonight much more clearly than usual. I know London, but tonight it seems as though my eyes are open for the first time. How ironical that cross looks up there, as if it were silently laughing at all the noise and tumult in the rain!" Not ironical — but tragic! It is the forgetfulness of men over against the uplifted cross held as it is heard by the church of God that makes the tragedy and pain of the world. Only when this forgetfulness is transformed into the Godgiven memory of Pentecost
1900 Years Later

-5-

and all it means for the souls of men, then will men come again to bring their time and talents to the continuing affairs of God.

O. P. Kretzmann