I. INTRODUCTION

A. Pentecost – the Renewal of the Church

Welcome to Pentecost! Pentecost is a significant event in the life of the church. At Pentecost Jesus is forever present to his church in a unique and powerful way. We are used to hearing that Pentecost marks the birth of the church.

II. BODY

A. The Reformed Tradition

Our Reformed Tradition has a different take on Pentecost. We see Pentecost as the renewal of the church. This is a perspective that provides an extremely valuable insight on the church.

Our Reformed Tradition is one of the four branches of Protestantism. It arose in the sixteenth century with such leaders as Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. The heart of its influence was Geneva, Switzerland. From there the tradition spread throughout Europe and the British Isles. It was brought to America by the British, Scots, and Scotch-Irish.

B. The Church Existed from Creation

John Calvin and others after him believed that “from the creation of the world there was no time when the Lord did not have his church,” (John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV.i.17; see in The Book of Confessions, The Scots Confession, 3.05; and the Second Helvetic Confession, 5.124,126,128). In other words, we believe that the church began as God created and entered into relationship
with Adam and Eve. Throughout history, then, God has raised up a particular people for covenant relationship, and for the purpose of bringing blessing to the world. (Genesis 12:1-3).

What I find extremely valuable about this is how it holds together both the Old Testament and the New Testament, both Judaism and Christianity, and sees them as one. It affirms something so important, namely, that Jesus was Jewish and that he understood his life and his ministry from within the Hebrew Scriptures. This does not devalue Jesus’ centrality in God’s revelation, but rather acknowledges Jesus placement in God’s scheme of things. This understanding forces us to see the Hebrew Scriptures, not just as some prologue to the Gospel, but as part of the Gospel message. It means that we must read Scripture as a whole and not permit a significant part of it to be ignored or undervalued.

C. The Spirit Is Seen Throughout History

If God’s church existed from the beginning, then it is also true that we have seen God’s Spirit at work from the beginning. We are told that before creation itself, “a wind [or Spirit] from God swept over the face of the waters,” (Genesis 1:2).

The spirit from God is the “breath of life” that animates us as living creatures (Genesis 2:7; 6:17). Ezekiel was once brought by God to a valley, a valley filled with dried bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Ezekiel was told to prophesy to the bones. When he did, the bones came together and flesh covered them. A field of dead bodies appeared. But there was no life in them. Ezekiel was then told to “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live,” (Ezekiel 27:9). (Here we recall that the Hebrew word for “breath” also means “spirit” or “wind.”) When the Spirit entered them, suddenly all those people arose and stood up, filled with new vitality.

The Spirit of God is the gift that equipped Israel’s leaders, such as Joshua (Deuteronomy 34:9), the judges (e.g. Othniel; Judges 3:10; and Gideon, Judges 6:34), Saul (1 Samuel 10:6,10; 11:6; but see 16:14-16,23), David (1 Samuel 16:13-16), and the prophets (Elijah/Elisha, 2 Kings 2:9,15).

The Spirit of God did not make a premier appearance at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has been present throughout history, empowering God’s people.
D. Pentecost – the Church’s Renewal

If that is so, then what happened at Pentecost? We thought we were coming to a birthday party, only to be told that there is no birthday. What happens, then, to the party? The party continues and, in fact, is intensified. Pentecost is vitally important because we see it as the church’s renewal.

Jesus during his ministry called together his body, the church (for this section, see Thomas F. Torrance, Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ, pages 353-354). At one point, he commissioned his body to enter the world and be his presence. The disciples went out, endowed with the gifts of the Spirit, to preach Jesus’ name, to pronounce forgiveness in Jesus’ name, to heal and to cast out demons in the name of Jesus. With the crucifixion, not only was Jesus laid in the dust of death, but so was his body, the church. We recall the stories of the disciples between the crucifixion and Pentecost. One story tells of the disciples huddled together behind locked doors out of fear that the same authorities who crucified Jesus would now be searching for them (John 20:19). Jesus was resurrected to new life by God. But what about Jesus’ body, the church? On Pentecost God breathed into the church God’s own breath, God’s Spirit, that brought the church back to life. The church on Pentecost was revived, renewed, restored.


1. God “Pours Out” the Spirit

The first thing God did at Pentecost was to “pour out” the Spirit. Whereas previously, God’s gifts seem to have been carefully measured and doled out, drop by drop, at Pentecost the floodgates are opened and God’s gifts are poured out upon the church. What this signifies is the abundance of gifts that God’s gives. God’s gifts abound. They are so many and varied. There are in the New Testament many times these gifts are listed, but each of the lists vary (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; 12:27—13:1; 2 Timothy 1:7). We are given the impression that they cannot be delimitated. These gifts abound so that the church’s life and ministry can be equipped. God gives whatever gifts
the church needs at the time and for its circumstance. Whatever gifts we need are there; they are given in abundance by God.

2. God Pours out the Spirit “Upon All Flesh”
   The second thing that happened at Pentecost was that God’s Holy Spirit was poured out “upon all flesh.” Previously, God is said to have given the gifts of the Spirit to only a few persons: to judges, to the king, to prophets. But on Pentecost, God’s gift of the Spirit is given without distinction. We are told that, not just the twelve (Judas now replaced by Matthias; Acts 1:15-26), but numerous others—in all about one hundred and twenty believers—were gathered together that day (Acts 1:12-15,21-22). Upon all of them—upon each and every one of them—God poured out the Holy Spirit. Distributed among all of them were the spiritual gifts that they would need as a church to be Jesus’ witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” (Act 1:8).

E. The Person and Work of the Spirit
   The transformation effected by the Holy Spirit could not have been more dramatic.

1. A Gift of Power
   Because Jesus himself is “more powerful” (Luke 3:16), Jesus gives a gift of spiritual power to his church. Jesus described the Spirit’s gift as being a gift of “power,” (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). The presence on Pentecost of “a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” (Acts 1:2), and “Divided tongues as of fire,” (Acts 2:3), are meant to convey that power.

2. A Gift of God
   The Spirit is a power that comes “from heaven” (Acts 2:2), from God, and is not one generated by Jesus’ followers themselves.

3. The Spirit Is God’s Gift
   The Spirit is a gift, and therefore, not one whom we generate, own, or control. When we hear that the Spirit is “given” us, this does not mean that the spirit becomes our possession. The Spirit given by God can also be removed by God (e.g., Saul in 1 Samuel 16:14; and Samson in Judges 16:20). The Spirit is never ours.

4. The Spirit Is God
   The Spirit is God. The Spirit is God’s “Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4). The Spirit, in other words, is not a human spirit.
5. The Spirit Is Personal
The Spirit is also personal, as God is personal. The Spirit is not a “thing” nor some impersonal “power.” The Spirit is God’s own self.

6. The Spirit Is Christ’s Presence in Our Midst
Jesus is personally present to the church in the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit, Jesus is present in each of our lives. The Spirit, who is deeply personal, addresses each of us in an intensely personal way. The Spirit brings us to faith in Jesus and guides us in our journey of discipleship. The Spirit brings Jesus’ healing to bear in our lives. The Spirit guides us and comforts us.

By the Spirit, Jesus is present most especially to his body, the church. Jesus is spiritually present in our fellowship, in our preaching, in baptism (where Jesus makes us share in his life), and in the Supper (where we are fed and renewed on Jesus’ reconciling sacrifice, his body and blood). We do not just talk about Jesus. Rather, in the Spirit Jesus’ words resonate among us and his presence recreates and renews us.

7. The Spirit Is a Gift to the Church – for the Sake of the Church’s Life and Mission
The Spirit is God’s gift to the church. The Spirit is God’s gift poured out upon the church and only in the context of the church to each of its members. It is not an individual endowment. It is given for the sake of the church’s life and mission.

Each and every one of us has been gifted with God’s spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12). As Paul said, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good,” (1 Corinthians 12:7). It is for the sake of the church—for the sake of its life and mission—that you and I have been gifted by the Spirit. We all have differing gifts, and it is the presence of those gifts that underscores our individual uniqueness.

Yet we are granted those gifts only as we use them to Jesus’ glory, and hence for the sake of the church life and ministry. Though each of us have spiritual gifts, yet the Spirit is God’s gift to the church, not to us as individuals.

8. The Spirit’s Role Is to Empower the Church to Exalt and Serve Jesus
What is most important in the Spirit’s giving is, not so much the Spirit, but Jesus. The Spirit serves Jesus. The Spirit is given for the sake of Jesus. The Spirit empowers the church to live in and act out
of Jesus. The Spirit empowers the disciples to throw off their fear, throw off their timidity, and proclaim publically before all those gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost “God's deeds of power,” (Acts 2:11). The Spirit enables Peter and the other followers to fulfill the mission Jesus gave them, to be his witnesses. The Spirit enables Galileans to surmount even the barriers of language and culture and to proclaim Jesus to all people so that they can hear of Jesus and respond in faith to Jesus. The Spirit is given to serve Jesus and not us. The Spirit allows Jesus to be exalted, not us.

F. The Spirit in the Life of the Church

All of this underscores something extremely important. It is that any uniqueness the church has derives from Jesus, as the Spirit enables Jesus’ presence in our midst. On our own, the church is nothing and has nothing of importance to give the world. On our own, the church is just another social group that may occasionally do good things.

It is only as the Spirit is in our midst, enabling Jesus’ presence among us, that we have an identity and a reason for being. It is only as the Spirit allows us to celebrate Jesus’ presence in our midst, and direct the world to Jesus’ reconciling power, does the church have any value to God. It is not about us. It is all about Jesus. It is all about how the Spirit allows Jesus’ work to continue.

III. CONCLUSION

A. The Renewal of Christ’s Church

Though we may not see Pentecost as the birth of the church, yet we do celebrate today as the renewal of the church. Jesus’ body, once disheartened, fearful, and humbled was revived by God in the inbreathing of the Spirit. It is the occasion on which Jesus equipped us with God’s own self—God’s own Spirit—so that we as the church can experience his presence and give witness to Jesus’ completed work. This is a day for celebration, but it is also a day for humility. For the power is the power of God. The glory is the glory of Jesus. The purpose and the mission is that of Jesus’ Kingdom.