

The NT Perspective

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The early Christian believers of the first century church understood their entire existence in the light of all that God had made them to be "in Christ". Because of what Christ accomplished through his life, death and resurrection a new era had begun in God's plan of salvation for mankind. With the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost the "firstfruits" or "first installment" of their future inheritance in God's promised kingdom had *already* been received - "in Christ". The following verses make these truths clear:

And you also were included in Christ when you the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:13-14).

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These things are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Col. 2:16-17).

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (II Cor. 1:20-22).

In short, for the first century believers the resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost meant that the "life of the coming age" had already begun; not in its fullness, but as the "firstfruits" of the final "harvest" that was still to come. According to the Old Testament scriptures, the resurrection of the dead and the

giving of the Spirit were both foretold to take place in "the last days" or in the "end-times". This was to be a time when God would establish a "new covenant" with his people and set up a righteous kingdom - a kingdom that would never end - under the rulership of the promised Messiah (Dan. 7; 12; Isaiah 9; Jer. 31:31-; Ez. 36:26-27; Acts 2:17-; etc.).

From Pentecost onwards the entire outlook of the first century church was governed by the truth that the "last days" as foretold and foreshadowed in the OT Scriptures had finally arrived. Christ's resurrection from the dead marked *the beginning* of the resurrection of the end-time because he was the "firstfruits" of those who slept or, to put it another way, the "firstborn" from the dead. In the same way, the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost, which was "poured out" by the resurrected and glorified Messiah, marked *the beginning* of the new covenant era as prophesied by the OT prophets. This Spirit was the "firstfruits" or "first-installment" of the glorious inheritance of God's kingdom that was still to come. The whole out-look of the first century church was governed by this "already" but "not yet" mind-set. The "first-fruits" of all that the OT had promised had "already" been given, but the final harvest "not yet" arrived.

This way of understanding the events of the "end-times" was something that had not been understood until Christ himself "opened the veil" that had previously been over the reading of the Old Testament scriptures (II Cor. 3:12-16). The "sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow" (I Pet. 1:10-12) had not been previously understood; especially, in the sense of them being two separate events. But this "veil" was removed by *the events* of Christ's life, death, resurrection and the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. And, it was only *his own explanation of these events* - in light of the Old Testament scriptures - that made them understandable to his disciples. This can be seen in the events recorded in the last chapter of Luke's Gospel:

He [Jesus] said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:44-49; cf. 24:25-27).

This explanation by Jesus threw a whole new flood of light upon the understanding of Jesus' apostles. And it was an understanding that guided their attitudes, lives and writings from that point on.

It is for this reason that if we are to properly understand the scriptures today we must allow the interpretation of the New Testament apostles of Christ to be "our interpretation" as well. We simply cannot read the NT texts as though they were written *directly* to us today and as though they used the same vocabulary, thought-patterns and idioms that we use in our own late 20th century environments. Instead, we must put ourselves in the "sandals" of the first century believers and learn to think as they thought and hear as they heard. This is true with *every* subject in the Bible - whether it is about the oneness of God, baptism, the Lord's Supper, biblical prophecy, etc. Yes, the truths of the Bible are certainly the same today as then, but they must first

be understood correctly in their original context before they can be properly applied in our own historical and cultural situations today.

All of the terminology and way of thinking of the new covenant believers that we find in Acts and the NT letters must be understood in the light of the "already" but "not yet" perspective that so dominated their thinking. With the resurrection of Christ and his giving of the gift of holy Spirit on Pentecost the "end" has already "begun". Christ is "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." He is "the firstborn among many brethren" and the gift of the Spirit is "the firstfruits" or "first installment" of our glorious inheritance in the kingdom of God to come. "Already" but "not yet" - this is the dominating perspective of biblical Christianity. May it become our perspective as well. The apostle John sums-up:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

*Dear friends, **now** we are children of God, and what we will be has **not yet** been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:1-2).*