

WHY CHRISTMAS IS THE WRONG HOLIDAY FOR FRUITCAKE

or

HOW TO LIVE LIKE A PENTECOSTAL

Numbers 28: 26; 1 Corinthians 15:20; James 1:18; Acts 2:1-6

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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SCRIPTURE

On the day of the first fruits, when you offer a grain offering of new grain to the LORD at your festival of weeks, you shall have a holy convocation (Numbers 28:26 NRSV).

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died (1 Corinthians 15:20 NRSV).

In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures (James 1:18 NRSV).

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. {2} And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. {3} Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. {4} All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. {5} Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. {6} And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each (Acts 2:1-6 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Pentecost is the “Rodney Dangerfield”¹ of Christian holidays. It doesn’t seem to get any respect. When asked, “What are the three major Christian holidays in the year?” a majority of American churchgoers will say, “Christmas, Easter, and Mother’s Day.” Many others will say, “Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving.” But Pentecost is hardly even mentioned.

A possible exception to this would be those Christians who are part of the branch of Christianity known as Pentecostalism. The Assemblies of God would be an example of a Pentecostal denomination. The word “Pentecostal” comes from Pentecost. Pentecostals are especially interested in the events surrounding the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as described in Acts 2, which took place on Pentecost.

¹Rodney Dangerfield (November 22, 1921 – October 5, 2004), was an American comedian best known for his catchphrase "I don't get no respect."

But before the word “Pentecostal” became a name for a branch of Christianity, it simply referred to practices associated with Pentecost. In this sense, every believer is supposed to be a Pentecostal. Every Christian is to live out the meaning of Pentecost.

In order to better appreciate the meaning of Pentecost we must recognize our own needs. The three greatest spiritual needs of humanity are: worship, forgiveness, and goodness. Pentecost addresses each of these needs. To live like a Pentecostal is to seek to live a spiritually fulfilling life. Here’s how:

1. OFFER BREAD (ACKNOWLEDGE THE CREATOR)

First of all, we need to acknowledge that God made us. All that we have and all that we are comes from God. This is affirmed in the origin of the festival known as Pentecost.

The word Pentecost is from a Greek term that means “fiftieth day” and it was called that because it took place 50 days after the start of another festival known as Passover. The Hebrew form is Shavuot (shuh VOO oat) and means “weeks,” referring to seven complete weeks (50 days) after Passover.

The Bible also calls it the festival of “First Fruits” and this gives us a better idea of what it is about. Pentecost or First Fruits was originally an Old Testament festival that celebrated God’s gracious provision during the spring harvest. By the fiftieth day, the wheat was ripe. The very first to ripen was harvested, baked into loaves and offered to the Lord. This offering was a tangible way to express grateful worship to God.

The practice of First Fruits involves giving the first of whatever we produce over to God. If you were a farmer this would involve the first of the grain to ripen. If you raised livestock this would mean the first born of your animals. When currency became commonplace, money, since it represented production, was often used as an offering; a practice that continues to the present day.

Many people have difficulty associating money with spirituality and worship. Yet not only is this the message of the prophets it is also precisely what Jesus teaches us. Sixteen of Jesus’ thirty-eight parables refer to the faithful management of finances. He repeatedly portrayed our approach to money as a primary determiner of our heart’s spiritual condition. He said:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21 NIV).

Human beings were designed for worship. Our need to worship is another way of saying we

need God. C. S. Lewis explains it this way:

A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing (C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*).

We were made for worship and it is almost impossible for us *not* to worship. But this is part of the problem. If we are not worshipping God then we inevitably worship something else. Survey the history of God's people in the Old Testament. Seldom if ever were they condemned for *not* worshipping. But they were repeatedly condemned for worshipping anything but the God who made them – with wealth being a frequent alternative. But as Jesus warns us:

"You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other...You can't worship God and Money both" (Matt 6:24 MESSAGE).

Practicing First Fruits giving does not guarantee healthy worship but it is a step in the right direction. It is a practical, time-honored, and God-inspired means for making sure our hearts are in the right place. When you give back to God a portion of what he has allowed you to produce then you are reminding yourself that God is on the throne. Not you. Not your money. It is a tangible way of putting God first in your life. It is living like a Pentecostal.

2. DRINK MILK (RECEIVE THE REDEEMER)

To live like a Pentecostal is to acknowledge the Creator. To live like a Pentecostal also means experiencing forgiveness by receiving the Redeemer. Pentecost speaks to this.

Pentecost was not only a harvest festival but it also became associated with the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses. This is based on an estimate that this would have happened about 50 days after the very first Passover. At the very first Passover the Angel of Death “passed over” the Israelite slaves but did not spare the Egyptian oppressors and so the slaves were set free. Once free they were led to the Mountain of God known as Sinai and there Moses was given the Torah or Law of God as represented by the Ten Commandments.

The Law of God is good but it has a tendency to remind us we are not. As such it drives us to a Savior. It does this by showing us as we really are - our shortcomings, our failures, our sinfulness, our need for help. The Law constrains us to find someone who can redeem us. Paul writes:

“So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24 NIV).

The term that Paul uses here is that of a servant whose job it was to take children to the Headmaster of the school. The Law is a servant whose job it is to take us to the Master who is Jesus Christ.

We all need forgiveness. Consciously or unconsciously we struggle to find peace for our souls. We may not even realize at first that it is forgiveness that we need. But our restlessness, confusion, and fears reveal our longing.

Marghanita Laski, the humanist, debating on television with a Christian, made an amazing confession. She said, "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness." Then she added, rather pathetically, "I have no one to forgive me."

In contrast, Tony Dungy, former Head Coach of the Indianapolis Colts and native of Jackson, Michigan, has said, “A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the only way I’ve found true peace, joy and forgiveness.”

Christ died to remove our guilt, to set us free from bondage, fear, and ultimately death. Through Christ we can know we are forgiven, our guilt is removed, we have a new life. To live like a Pentecostal is to know the great Forgiver; to be redeemed from spiritual bondage, and to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us.

3. SHARE FRUITCAKE (PROMOTE THE SPIRIT)

Thirdly, we live like a Pentecostal if we seek to be filled with the goodness that the Spirit can bring into our lives. Billy Graham puts it this way:

God does not want us to come to Christ by faith, and then lead a life of defeat, discouragement, and dissension. Rather, He wants to “fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, in order that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified...” (2 Thess 1:11,12). To the great gift of forgiveness God also adds the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is the source of power who meets our need to escape from the miserable weakness that grips us. He gives us the power to be truly good (*The Holy Spirit: Activating God's Power in Your Life*; xi, xii.).

Goodness is the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in those who follow Christ. It does not happen automatically, we need to cooperate with the Spirit. It does not happen overnight, we need to be patient.

I have heard said that growing in goodness is like learning to sail a sail boat. When you sail a

boat there is work to do: hoisting the sails and steering the rudder. But you also have to rely on the wind. Without wind you can go nowhere. But even if there is wind you must learn to cooperate or the results can be disastrous. So it is with goodness. Steering the rudder represents a commitment to going in the right direction - following the Lord. Hoisting the sails represents the practice of prayer - making ourselves available to the power and presence of God. And the wind, of course, represents the Holy Spirit, without whose power we would be helpless. To live like a Pentecostal is to live in reliance upon such power.

I have also been thinking about how neglected Pentecost is and what we can do about it. Have you noticed that popular holidays have certain kinds of food associated with them. Look at Christmas, for example. There are all kinds of foods associated with Christmas. But by far and away the least respected Christmas food is fruitcake. I am told that there are only ten people in the whole world who even eat fruitcake (five of whom go to First Pres!).

If fruitcake is the “Rodney Dangerfield” of holiday foods why not liberate it from Christmas and associate it with Pentecost, the “Rodney Dangerfield” of Christian holidays? Doesn’t it make sense to associate fruitcake with the holiday known as “First Fruits?” Christmas is not about First Fruits. Pentecost is!

All kinds of ingredients can be found in fruitcake – fruit, nuts, spices and much more. Isn’t this consistent with the message about Pentecost in the Book of Acts? All kinds of people receive the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ! God does not discriminate:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV).

CONCLUSION

Now I am not suggesting that living like a Pentecostal is defined by what you eat. Nor am I under any illusion that Pentecost is going to suddenly become a popular holiday. But next Christmas when someone gives you fruitcake, why not hang on to it for six months and share it at Pentecost? It will likely taste the same but will have a much deeper meaning. The God who made you and, in Jesus Christ, has mercifully redeemed you, wants to fill you with goodness by the power of his Spirit. Let him.