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The Birthday of the Church

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THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH

HOWARD ERVIN

John believed – Peter believed – the degree of that is still perhaps problematical, even though the text says: “He saw and believed...” because the response we get a little later may suggest that the real faith in the resurrection came later.

Now, after they had gone, then Mary came and she was standing outside the tomb, John 20:11 weeping, remember, when our Lord appeared to her. She thought at first that he was the gardener and when he addressed her she recognized that it was the Lord and she uses the very interesting term: “Rabone”... not Raboni, but Rabone, and this is simply a diminutive from of the word “rab” which means “great one”. It is used among the Jews for teachers of the law – exceptional sanctity or exceptional ability, and so it is a term that would be understood as one of deep respect.

Jesus said to Mary in John 20:17: “Stop clinging to me....” Remember the old King James Version said: “Do not touch me”.. something like that, or “Touch me not”, which raises the question – why not? For John, that would be one way of authenticating the reality of the resurrection in the face of the Gnostic speculations, but perhaps better to translate it as this version does: “Stop slinging to me, I have not ascended to my Father.” In other words, My presence here is temporary.

Then we come to John 20:19, and this is why I made the initial remarks that I did about Peter and John’s response. Verse 19 would read: “When, therefore, it was evening on that day, the first day of the week”. Now this is, of course, our Sunday. In the Hebrew calendar it is the first day of the week and we are told that when it was evening on that day: “When the doors were shut” – the Greek text says: “When the doors were locked.” In other words, we have a group of dispirited, frightened, confused disciples who had lost their hope and were hiding out. They are hiding out behind locked doors. Why? The text tells us “for fear of the Jews.”

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Now, remember that in John, his remarks about the Jews are always addressed to the rulers of the Jews who opposed him and who opposed his mission. These are his adversaries; these are not the Jewish people at large. It says that they were hiding out for fear of the Jews, and let me say that, in my opinion, it does not stretch the context to suggest that they were aware that the same Sanhedrin that had arrested Jesus and had brought about his crucifixion, had warrants out for their arrest; that they were “at risk” if caught, and so they are hiding out for fear of the Jews.

Jesus came to them and said: “Peace be with you.” Now, what follows next is, in my opinion, profoundly important. When he had said this he showed them his hands and his side. Why show them his hands and his side – to authenticate for them the reality of his resurrection. Please note again that, in John’s concern, this would be a preeminent concern with him, to authenticate the reality of the incarnation, the death, the resurrection of Jesus. As I have, on occasion, pointed out in class, from day one, the doctrine of the Christian faith that has been under constant attack, and is still under attack, is the authenticity of the incarnation. In my opinion, the fundamental doctrine of Christianity is not resurrection, but incarnation: God in Jesus became man. He is the “God-Man” and John would be the one who would note a detail like this and who would stress it, as over against the Gnostic heresies of the first and second centuries that would have attacked the incarnation and the reality of Jesus coming in the flesh, as he said in the first Epistle of his.

Now, why then did he show them his hands from their personal perspective? Well, he is not interested in rebutting Gnostics in their midst. John is, in recounting it, but you remember in Romans 10:9-10, there is a profoundly important statement of Paul. What does he say: “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus Christ and believe in thine heart that God has raised him from the dead thou shalt be saved.” So whether Peter believed or not, he was not really a candidate for the new birth until he was convinced of the resurrection. No one has ever been saved by a dead Messiah. Salvation comes by Jesus Christ and one must be convinced of the validity of the resurrection.

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To say that this was simply a spiritual resurrection is to deny what is essential in the Christian faith and that is the incarnation and, as I say, that doctrine has been under attack from day one, because the adversary is aware that if that particular trust can be discredited, the whole Christian faith falls with it. There is no Christian faith apart from it, from the incarnation!

All right, so he showed them his hand and his side and the purpose was, of course, to convince them of the reality of the resurrection, and then we have a statement that I never understood until I went to Jerusalem for the first time. It says: “And the disciples therefore...” did what? “were glad.” My text says “rejoiced”. That’s kind of pedestrian English but as I say, I never really understood it until I went to Jerusalem the first time and on a “Shabot” evening walked down to the Western Wall where the old Temple stood and watched some of those old Jews as they rejoiced. I mean, they were ecstatic. At the end of the Feast of Tabernacles which is called the “Rejoicing of the Torah” I’ve seen men who must have been 80 or 90 years of age take a Torah scroll that’s about three feet high and about that big around, in a heavy wooden case and take it in their arms and literally try to dance at the Temple wall. It was then that I understood for the first time what was happening.

Let me try to give you a paraphrase ‘and then when the disciples ecstatically, hilariously, rambunctiously, joyously,’ and I think that comes much closer to what actually happened in the Upper Room, and this is what leads me to believe that whatever measure of faith Peter had at the empty tomb, it really came into fruition in the Upper Room and, of course, the others, who did not believe Mary and the women who had been at the tomb and, incidentally, we know from the Synoptics that Mary Magdalene was not alone at the tomb. We are told it was Mary, and the other Mary was with her, perhaps the Mother of Salome. Mark tells us that when our Lord appeared to the disciples, he rebuked them because they refused to believe the witness of the women who had been at the tomb.

Things come together at this point. Then something profoundly significant happened, and when he had said this, what did he do? He showed them his hands and his side. The disciples, therefore, rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them: “Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, I also send you.” And when he had said this he did what? “He

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breathed on them.” Now, the word in Greek literally means to inflate, to blow into. It is a word that’s used in secular profane Greek of the period for inflating. What does it suggest to you? He breathed on them – or he breathed into them – what does it suggest – from what passage in Scripture? Genesis! “God created man from the dust of the earth...” And what did he do? He “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” Is this consistent with what John’s theme is? Yes! Go back to Chapter one. Where does John begin his gospel? “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.” “He was in the beginning with God.” “All things were made by him or came into being by him, apart from him nothing was made that has come into being – he was the light of men, the light shines in the darkness.”

John begins his gospel with the first creation. The consummation of his gospel is the second creation. How many of you have ever heard the old cliché that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church? Oh, good, so I don’t have to disabuse your minds of that. That’s a common cliché, but so far as I’m concerned it is fallacious. Pentecost was not the birthday of the Church. When was the Church “born again”? It was born again on the evening of the resurrection day. According to John, this is the day of the new creation. According to John, this is the new creation, not fifty days later.

I have profound problems, and this, incidentally, is a doctrine that goes right across the Church and back into antiquity, that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. I have a problem with that because I think it is fair to say that the Old Covenant is suspended. The Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. Now, what he was saying, in my opinion, was the Messianic status and Messianic commission given to the Nation Israel, is now revoked so far as the instrument of bringing the Kingdom, he has excommunicated them. A better word would be “interdict” since, technically, excommunication is the exclusion of an individual; interdict is the exclusion of a whole group, but our Lord, during passion week, placed the Nation under interdict and so I have a problem believing that Pentecost was the birthday of the Church because that meant that the Old Covenant ceased to be efficacious at the crucifixion of Jesus and so, for 50 days, the disciples of Jesus would have had to be without covenant relationship with God and that would violate the fundamental premise of

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both the Old and New Testament for, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the people of God had access to God and their relationship to God in terms of the covenant.

For the Patriarchal period it is the covenant with Abraham, for the period of Moses it is the Mosaic covenant; the covenant of Sinai, and in the New Testament, it is the New Covenant of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, that's promulgated at the Lord's Supper, at the last Passover, and I use the term "last" advisedly.

It seems then, to me, an almost insoluble theological dilemma to say that the disciples of Jesus, for 50 days, were without covenant relationship. When I look at the Book of Acts it tells me, from the ascension, 40 days after the resurrection, to Pentecost, they had attended a prayer meeting. What is even more astounding, it says they were of one accord! And I can't imagine 120 Jews, or Gentiles, being in one accord in a ten day prayer meeting, unless they had experienced the new birth. Even with the new birth they can be cantankerous, believe me!

All right, Jesus then "breathed into them" and what did he say? Allow me to paraphrase the text: "Receive right here and now the Holy Spirit." If you will look at some of the good evangelical commentaries, and I can name some outstanding evangelical scholars who want to make Pentecost the birthday of the church, they will say something like this.... That this was just an "earnest" of what was to come at Pentecost; it was the promise of what was to come at Pentecost... and that's a violation of the text. The text cannot say more clearly or categorically "receive" and receive right here and now the Holy Spirit. Now, what's the significance of the breathing? Let's go back to Genesis again: "God created man of the dust of the earth – he breathed into them "receive the spirit" and they received spiritual life. What was lost in the fall was now restored in the upper room on the evening of the resurrection day and we know by comparison with the synoptic passages that it was more than just the eleven disciples who were present – rather a large company was present there. As far as I am concerned, I am persuaded that this is the birthday of the Church.

Now, is it the beginning of the Church. In one sense, no. Here I would agree with some of the old Southern Baptist scholars, and not only they, but many others, who simply said that the

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inception of the Church is in – (I'll use the phrase and then I'll explain it) in the “dominical sayings of Jesus”; that is, the Church, in its inception, is the result of the calling and the election of Jesus out of Israel and so, in that sense, these early disciples who were called, represent the nucleus of the Church but, remember, that until the resurrection, they are an election within the Old Covenant. It is with the resurrection and the impartation of the Holy Spirit on the resurrection day that they pass from the terms of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, that they become the Church in the sense that the New Testament understands the Church.

Now, then, Thomas was not present – and let me just say, I think the Church has given Thomas an awfully bad press! If you will look at any of the episodes in A.D., I guess it was, and the another one that I looked at last night – another dramatization of the biblical narrative, Thomas comes out as “low man on the totem pole.” He is entered as a rather unpleasant character who is very abrasive and very cynical and he would, I suppose, be a little on the flip side. I think he would have been the prototype for the proverbial Missouri mule! But I think we have done him a disservice. I don't see Thomas in that light at all.

Let's look at the text a little more carefully. As I tell my students, the most embarrassing thing about so much theology and about so much preaching is that, when you look at scripture, it isn't there. Now, let's look at the text a little bit more closely. Thomas wasn't there. When he came in the disciples said to him (and now imagine the scene) they are dancing, they are having a high time of it and they said: “We've seen the Lord.” And what is Thomas' response? “Unless I see his hands, the imprint of the nails, put my finger in the place of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Now, that's a statement that has betrayed Thomas to the not so tender mercies of the commentators ever since, but he's asked for nothing more than Jesus volunteered to the disciples on the evening of the resurrection day – precisely what Jesus had volunteered.

Now, stop and think for a moment. Thomas was only asking what our Lord had volunteered to him, that's exactly right. So that ought to have absolved Thomas, at least in part, but stop and go back now to what we read in the beginning: “They were hiding out behind locked doors.” Do you remember the story in Luke 24, the two travelers were on the way to

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Emmaus, on the morning of the resurrection day, when Jesus fell met them and they began to tell him what had happened in Jerusalem and remember how they finished that recital? The did not recognize our Lord. In fact, they didn't recognize him until they entered the house that evening and broke bread together and it is my conviction that the early church broke bread in the sense of communion daily. I think this thing that we have once a month, "That's just about right, every day is too often and once every quarter is too infrequent so, just once a month seems right." That is a totally unscriptural concept.

I am convinced as I read Acts, that communion followed the meal – daily. It was a daily thing. As often as you do this in remembrance of me you do – what? Now let me paraphrase that "You represent". In other words the sacrifice of Christ is eternal, it can never be repeated, but you can represent it, you can make it visible. Now, then, it is in the evening meal when Jesus takes the bread and breaks it and the garment falls back and the nail holes in his write are visible. That's how they recognize him.

Luke says "They recognized him in the breaking of the bread." Whether there's a sense in which he was glorified as he was on the Mount of Transfiguration, the only thing we would say, we would have to speculate about, the only thing we know, is that they didn't recognize him and, therein, I think, lies the key to that story. They summarized their statement on the road, you see, in this fashion: They said, "and we had hoped." Hope was dead for them. They weren't expecting the resurrection. Hope was just dead! This was the attitude, you see, so Thomas was no different. He had experienced that emotion; he was exactly where they were.

But stop and think. He was a man who was willing to leave everything and follow Jesus for three years. He was a man who was willing to take the scorn, the abuse, the rejection that went along with Jesus. In other words, he was a man who had pledged everything on a grand "perhaps." And he had seen the trial, the crucifixion; the entombment of Jesus and, like the rest of them, hope had died for him. So allow me to paraphrase what I hear Thomas saying: 'I will not believe, I cannot believe, but convince me – I want to believe, I want to believe'.

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Now, you know the sequel. Eight days later they were all together, Jesus appeared in their midst and he addressed Thomas directly and said to him: “Thomas, reach here your finger, see my hands, reach here your hand and put it in my side and be not unbelieving, but believing.” And what follows is one of the most triumphant affirmations of the resurrection that we have and, if you will indulge me, let me try to reconstruct it in pious fancy, in what I would think would be a reasonably accurate interpretation of an oriental scene. At first, Thomas is hopeless, he is in despair, it’s not a cynical doubt, it is simply that despair that comes with having been crushed by what seemed to be the irreversible facts of crucifixion and entombment, and as I watch the face of Thomas I see all of that in his face at first and then, very slowly, in the depths of his eyes, I begin to see a glimmer of recognition. The truth is beginning to dawn and, finally, the truth dawns and Thomas, in typical oriental fashion, falls on his knees in front of Jesus and then from his lips comes a kind of trembling, half believing, half unbelieving cry: “Adoni, Adoni” meaning “My Lord, my Lord”. And then I can hear him say it with the full assurance of conviction: “Adoni Eloheni, Adoni Eloheni, my Lord and my God”. Now, if he had stopped and simply said “Adoni” the skeptics could have said: “Oh, that doesn’t mean anything because the word “Adoni” as it is used, could mean simply “Sir”. It could be addressed to a King, to a prince, to a magistrate but, now, if that was all he said, but you see when you put the suffix pronoun on the end of the noun, you obscure the fact that there’s a long vowel there, which would have been used only for deity, but Thomas didn’t stop there: “Adoni Eloheni” (and my God)!

Now, for me, John’s gospel really comes to its climax right there. There’s a crescendo to John’s gospel. He’s been leading up to this one triumphant affirmation, in fact, everything that occurs after this is kind of anticlimactic as far as John’s gospel is concerned. This is the grand finale of it all. He now, on the lips of mortal man, records the affirmation of Jesus’ deity. What is incognito, in a sense, up to this point now becomes manifest and becomes the declaration of the Church. It becomes the witness of the Church, from that day to this. And whenever the Church has lost that witness, it has lost its strength, it has been unfaithful to its Lord, for Jesus is not simply Lord, he is God. “My Lord and my God.”

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Now, Jesus said to them: “Because you have seen me and believed.” “Blessed are they who did not see and yet have believed.” Now, this is a Beatitude that Jesus pronounced on the rest of the Church from that day to this, for the Church is those who have believed in their witness, not having seen Jesus, who whether you knew it or not, you are blessed this morning, and Jesus said it: “Blessed are those who not having seen, yet have believed.”

Now, the text goes on to say: “Many other signs Jesus therefore also performed in the presence of the disciples, but these have been written that you may believe.” Now, notice this, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and I’ve had occasion to say in my class before, that that proposition: “Son of God” is grammatically and theologically convertible. Let me illustrate what I mean. So often you will hear the expression: “God is love, love is God.” That may be grammatically convertible but theologically it cannot. Love is not God, love is the attribute of God and to make one attribute the sum total of God is heretical. God is infinitely greater than the sum total of all of his revealed attributes and what has happened with that phrase “Love is God” is that we’ve got a lot of sloppy agape running around. God is love – but the proposition is not convertible. The proposition that Jesus is the Son of God and God the Son is convertible, for as Son of God he is second person of the triune Godhead; he is God the Son. So what becomes, you see, the confession of Thomas, becomes now the confession of the Church: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; that is, God the Son and that believing, you may have life in his Name.

Now, let’s go back to Thomas for a moment. There’s a kind, almost a poetic vindication. I say it that way advisedly for Thomas. There is a sub-apostolic tradition that Thomas was commissioned to witness in the east – in India. In fact, the earliest Christians in India trace their origins to the witness of Thomas. Thomas was the apostle to India. His tomb is at Medras, the traditional site of the tomb of Thomas. Now in this sub-apostolic tradition of Thomas’ death, it is said that Thomas, in his evangelism of these tribes, was actually executed at the command of a pagan emperor and he was pierced by a pagan lance and killed because of his witness for Jesus. There is a kind of poetic crescendo in that this is the one who said: “Unless I put my hand in his side” that is, the lanced wound – and this is the disciple who died by the lance; in other words, who sealed his testimony, his witness in death, of the lance of a foreign soldier.

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Let me recap just a little bit. I said in the beginning that our text rightly focuses on the first part of the chapter. However, I would suggest that it should have stopped at Verse 18 if that was what it intended to deal with but, by so doing, actually ignored what is, to me, the most important part of the whole chapter. It is not simply the resurrection, but the consequence of the resurrection in the apostolic community, the sequel of it, and its implications for us today, and for all generations that have succeeded it, because we stand now, very much, in the center of what transpired in that upper room eight days after the resurrection and we are very much, as it were, the descendents of the apostles and quite frankly, I like to claim some kind of filial allegiance to Thomas. I think we have given him a bad press and I welcome the opportunity to be his advocate and to try to set the record straight in his behalf. I think he was a man of sterling qualities, a man of uncompromising loyalty to Christ, but a man who had been dealt a severe blow by the death of Christ and yet, one who, when he had recovered, simply went back to where he had been before, a man of absolute yieldedness to Christ and commitment to the commission that he had been given. Now I am going to open up for questions because I think this is a passage that provokes questions.

“If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained”.

I do not believe, and you will read this in evangelical commentaries, that what this means is that when the Church priests preached the gospel they were forgiving sins. I don't mean that at all, but let me tell you a story first of all in an attempt to illustrate what I am trying to say. The story is told of a child that was put to bed and didn't want to go, as most children don't, and the child was only in bed a short time – her mother was in the kitchen trying to wash the dishes and cleanup and there was a cry: “Mommy, I've got to go to the bathroom,” so mama trots up the steps and take the little girl to the bathroom, tucks her back in bed, goes downstairs, starts her chores again and a little later there's a call: “Mommy, I'm thirsty, I want a drink,” so Mommy trots upstairs again and she goes into the bathroom and comes back with a drink of water and tucks her in again and goes downstairs and starts her chores again when she hears: “Mommy, I'm afraid, I'm afraid Mommy”, to Mommy goes upstairs to calm her and pacify her and she

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tucks her in again and says: “Now there’s really nothing to be afraid of. After all, you know God is here and he will take care of you.” “But, Mommy, I want God with a face.”

Now, I tell you that story to illustrate what I want to say. As you know, we become involved in the Pentecostal renewal of the church over twenty-five years ago. One of the first things that happened to me, completely, I think, against my will, was when I found myself involved in a very intensive ministry of counseling. Up to that point I had not been particularly impressed with counseling as a vocation and I had devoted myself to the study of scriptures. I was doing my graduate work at Princeton., I had almost completed my doctorate degree in Old Testament Studies. This is where my interest lay. My interest really wasn’t in people. My interest was more in my studies and yet I found myself faced with the need to meet with people. I would hear the telephone ring and it would be somebody a hundred miles away saying something like this: “We hear your church will pray for people – people who are sick – will you pray for us?”

We would have people who would drive a hundred miles just to be at our Healing Service on Sunday evening. As a consequence of that I found myself, as I said, against my will, involved in intensive counseling service and, to my astonishment, and initially, to my horror, but after that, what is a good Baptist theologian doing in a situation like this. I found myself thrust into what I can only describe as a confessional ministry. I found I could not help people who were deeply burdened with guilt until I allowed them to purge themselves. This is a sound psychological insight. This is, after all, no more than the Psychiatrist does for you. He get you talking until you purge your conscience. The only problem is, they leave you with a monkey on your back because, unless they can introduce to the Redeemer, this is no solution to the guilt. Oftentimes they will give you son “uppers’ and “downers” but that doesn’t solve it, that only placates it.

I found that I had to sit and allow people to confess. I have sat in my study and listened – on one occasion the woman was a lesbian. I never sat with these people alone. If it was a woman I would have another woman with me or, if it was a man, I would have one of my deacons with me. I would never listen to them alone but I remember on one occasion listening to

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a lesbian for over an hour and it was like sitting in an open sewer. I found I could not help people until I was prepared to sit there and allow them to unburden themselves, and do it in non-judgmental way, because the moment you judge them, you can no longer help them. You simply accept them for where they are and then point them to Christ. I discovered that what she needed was a God with a face. It was all right for me to say: “Well, now, you re forgiven, God will forgive you for this” but I discovered that there was a power in this verse I had never known was there and I have done this on occasion. I’ve said to people who were deeply tormented, after they had spent an hour purging themselves,: “As a servant of Jesus Christ, as a minister of the gospel, I cannot forgive you, but I can declare you forgiven in His Name.” I found I could help them.

Now, that’s what the verse means to me and I think that the Church has missed a golden opportunity to help the broken, the hurting, of this world. I would have to keep this in perspective. I cannot forgive, but in His Name I can declare them forgiven. In the Catholic Church it is referred to as the Sacrament of Confession. The Priest does not forgive them but he declares them forgiven in His Name.