

Billy Graham once wrote a piece on the subject of Jesus’ incarnation. In this article he made a strong argument concerning proof that Jesus Christ *was* God in human form. And the question he raised was: “What proofs did Jesus himself offer that he was truly God come in human form?”

First: There was proof of his perfect life. He asked the Pharisees in John 8:46, “*Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?*” No one could answer him!

Second: There was the evidence of his miraculous power, to heal, to feed, to forgive. His power was the power of God Almighty and of the Holy Spirit.

Third: There was the evidence of fulfilled prophecy. Hundreds of years before his birth, the prophets of the Old Testament spoke precisely of his life, death and resurrection.

Fourth: There was the evidence of his resurrection from the dead, given witness by the apostles in messages like Peter’s sermon that we just heard.

Fifth: There is proof of *changed lives*. Christ alone, the divine Son of God, has power to change the human heart. And he does. Faith in Christ is not a “leap in the dark.” It is based on the solid facts of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, so says Billy Graham, one of the greatest Christian leaders of the 20th century.

“What book of the Bible should I read before bungee jumping?” asked Tom. “Luke” replied the quick-thinking minister. “You should always *Luke* before you *leap*.” “Luke Part II” is called the Book of Acts in the New Testament. We will be spending the summer months taking “Acting Lessons,” as I call them, from the book of Acts. Peter’s sermon in Acts chapter 2 is where we turn today, which places the record of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and public execution in an entirely new light, says New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce. He says if Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah, vindicated by God in resurrection and exaltation, then the Pharisees and chief priests made a huge mistake by failing to recognize him. And the guilt was not only theirs. They also managed to implicate the people of Jerusalem as co-conspirators for putting Jesus to death by the occupying Romans. What were they to do now?

Peter's answer to their question was reassuring. God had not cast them onto the trash heap of history. God had no wish to visit them in judgment. Quite the opposite: Let them repent and be baptized in Jesus' name and not only would their sins be forgiven but they would receive the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit, bestowed in fulfillment of God's ancient promise, was not to be confined to a small group. It was intended for very many people—people the world over, not just Jerusalem, but many other people in distant parts of the world; and for men and women of that generation and of generations yet unborn. The prophet Joel said that on the day of the Spirit's outpouring all who called on the name of the Lord would find salvation (see v. 21). The hearers of Peter's sermon were invited to prove the truth of his claim by their own lived experiences (v. 40). Many of them did so and on that day 3,000 people believed the gospel, received baptism in Jesus' name and became members of the new community which confessed Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

The first Christian Pentecost is aptly called the "birthday" of the Christian church. God worked through his people in Old Testament times, but his *ekklesia* (the Greek word for household or church) had to die with the Messiah, so to speak, and then be reborn with him in resurrection life if they were to be the new community of the new age that was ushered in through the power and fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

The first days were marked with enthusiasm and joy. The believers were taught by the apostles the basic principles of the gospel, as the apostles themselves had learned them from Jesus. Their sense of unity was expressed in fellowship meals and prayer, and also, notice in verse 44, the pooling of their resources. They met for public praise and witness in the temple precincts.

The mighty works and wonders and signs that had marked the ministry of Jesus were now done *in his name by the apostles* and other Christian leaders. They are called "*wonders and signs*" (v. 43) because, as throughout Jesus' ministry, they signified the presence of the kingdom of God, the dawn of a new day of salvation. Of course, they also signified the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Messiah, time and again endures our apathy, denial, and betrayal only to come back compassionately to restore us to an even more meaningful loving relationship with him. On the eve of his crucifixion his disciples showed no staying power when pressure was applied by the accusing Romans who came to arrest him in Gethsemane. They became instant mutineers. They betrayed, denied, and abandoned him. They were a disgrace to their declared devotion as they ran for their lives.

But before we become too judgmental, we would do well to review our own record. When was the last time we passed the test of stick-to-it-a-tive-ness? Has there been a social setting when Christ's modern day accusers were so in control of the moment that we, feeling the heat, betrayed him? Have we been caught in a circumstance where as a believer we were the minority and rather than lose social acceptability we forsook Jesus? The disciples who deserted him previously made impressive prior promises to him. Only hours before, Peter had said, *"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. And all the other disciples said the same"* (Matthew 26:35).

What an enormous commitment! What a shallow commitment! Commitment is essential in order to achieve anything meaningful. However, behind public commitment must be the tenacity and perseverance to fulfill the intent of our promises. I have seen many people make life-changing commitments. Some have made dramatic commitments resulting in radical lifestyle changes. I am inspired each Sunday morning to look into the faces of people who dare to be different, that is, people of commitment. Don't be reluctant to make a wholehearted commitment to Christ because someone else does not live up to their commitments. Many do persevere. Others fail miserably and are motivated by their failure to resolute renewal of their commitments that change them into Christian people who are incredibly deeply faithful.

The disciples of Jesus are excellent examples of this. Let's review for a moment the aftermath of the disciples' disgraceful debacle in Gethsemane and immediately thereafter. Peter, the bold spokesman for the group in the upper

room, left Jerusalem after the crucifixion and went back home to Galilee. Critics of the big fisherman say he gave up and quit. We know that this was not true. The resurrected Christ told the women to whom he appeared to go tell the disciples that he had risen. And then in Jerusalem, fifty days after the day of Resurrection, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, was unleashed. A sound like the mighty rush of wind came from heaven and filled the house where the disciples were sitting in the early-morning hours of Pentecost.

Like then, the church today is in desperate need of God's Holy Spirit. I once heard someone say *that* "The giving of the Holy Spirit changes the monotonous into the momentous!" Peter claims that through repentance and baptism, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We need the powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit because we do not have the power to change ourselves. The giving of the Holy Spirit provides power that we all need for faithful service to Christ.

Jackie Robinson was of course the first black man to play major league baseball. Breaking baseball's color barrier, he faced jeering crowds in every stadium. Players would stomp on his feet and kick him. While playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, NY he made an fielding error. The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the fans jeered. Then, shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie Robinson and faced the crowd. The fans grew quiet. Robinson later remarked that Reese's arm around his shoulder saved his career.

We are sometimes like Jackie Robinson, feeling shame. Sometimes, our shame is from nothing we've done. Sometimes our shame is from our own sin and guilt. And like Pee Wee Reese, God in Christ comes and slips his arm around us and bears our shame for us. That's what the Holy Spirit came to do...to *make a new man* of the disgraced Pentecost preacher, Peter...to *change the lives of every one of Jesus' disciples*...and to *change the lives of anyone* who would repent and be baptized—and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit!

May God bless this simple witness to his word. Amen.