

In Acts chapter two we find Peter entering a new phase. As Jesus had predicted, the former fisherman is now casting his net in a new way; he is fishing for people using words. It is the day of Pentecost; the Holy Spirit has been poured out as promised; and Peter is preaching a brilliant sermon to a group of people, mostly of Jewish origin, who either lived in Jerusalem to begin with or who had travelled there specifically for the festival service of Pentecost, which was a kind of thanksgiving service. But this service has taken a turn. Peter stood up and was building a case for Jesus being the Promised One; the One to whom all Old Testament Scripture had pointed; and then he drops the truth bomb. In verse 36 he says, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now that is extraordinarily bold. It’s bold for a couple reasons. One is the claim, “God has made him (Jesus) both Lord and Christ.” Those are loaded terms. Lord means Master—the One in charge. Christ means Anointed One. It’s the Greek version of the Hebrew term Messiah. Peter proclaims Jesus as the one in charge and the promised Messiah. Equally bold is the accusation: “You crucified Him.”

The response is just as extraordinary. Verse 37: “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” As a group, Peter’s listeners were not offended; they were grieved. It was awful that this should happen to Jesus—it was terrible that the Promised One had come and instead of being celebrated he had been crucified, and not only that, Peter was saying they had something to do with it! They were cut to the heart. So, they ask the question; our question; “What should we do?”

It is rather incredible that the crowd responded this way. I mean, put this in a modern setting for a moment. If you walked into a room full of average people and delivered a speech that ended with the words, “You crucified Jesus,” what kind of response would you expect? I think you’d get a lot of blowback; you’d get a lot of denial; you’d get a lot of, “well, I wasn’t there, so I don’t know how you could accuse me of doing anything.” Not a lot of hearts being cut. Now, some of the people Peter was talking to that day may have had some direct involvement with Jesus’ crucifixion—that’s entirely possible—but the majority probably didn’t have

much to do with it at all. They may not even have been in Jerusalem when it happened. And still, they were cut to the heart by this message and grieved over what Peter was telling them. They wanted to know, “What shall we do?” What is there to do to get out from under this burden? It’s painful to even think about, that I should have something to do with this man’s death. Again, what is extraordinary is that they didn’t reject Peter’s message outright. They accepted that they might have something to do with it. How is that possible? I think we have to credit the persuasive power of the Holy Spirit, poured out in dramatic fashion, accompanying Peter’s preaching of the Word. The Holy Spirit drove the point home and did the cutting of the heart and conscience that was necessary, before Peter’s next words could bring hope and new life.

So, what if you were in the crowd that day, and heard those words, “God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified”? Or maybe it would be simpler—it’s certainly more direct—to just ask, what do you do with these words today? God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. You. Not the Jewish travelers to Jerusalem this time. This Jesus whom you crucified.

Of course, you weren’t there when it happened. You didn’t shout “Crucify Him” or drive the nails into Jesus’ body. The event happened thousands of years ago. And yet, if you have not been moved to grieve over Jesus’ death, and not just Jesus’ death, but your role in Jesus’ death, if that has not cut you to the heart, then you don’t yet understand the central message of the Bible. If you’re not sure what I mean, here’s a little test. When you think about the death of Jesus on the cross, is your reaction, “Oh, that’s terrible what they did to him;” or is it, “Oh, that’s terrible what I did to him”? Because the message of Peter and the message of all the Bible is, you are culpable. You are responsible. You are part of this; this Jesus whom you crucified. I didn’t lift the hammer to drive the nails on Golgotha, not physically, but my debt of sin caused it; our cumulative sin debt made Jesus’ death a necessity. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us. He went to the cross to settle things for you and me. Knowing that our shame, our pride, our self-centeredness, our worship of other things besides God sent his Son to the cross, there is a new urgency to ask, “Brothers, what shall we do?” What should we do?

Peter tells us. “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” “Repent,” meaning ‘turn around.’ Have a change of mind. Return to the Lord. Stop trying to be the god of your own life. Own the fact that you’re not in charge, and you never have been. Let go of the idea that you’ve got to be good to get God to bless you. Instead receive this truly good news: God already loves you, period. He wants to give you every blessing, not as a paycheck for your good behavior, but as a free gift. Yes, we sent Jesus to the cross, but he went voluntarily, to wipe out our debt, to make the exchange: his life for ours. Jesus died your death. Jesus was raised to new life. In baptism, your old self, the sinner, was drowned and was buried. A new self, connected to Christ’s risen life, takes over, giving you supernatural strength; a poise and a balance in the face of great challenges. Forgiveness of your sins is yours. The gift of the Holy Spirit is yours. The Holy Spirit clears the way for the message to hit home. With the Law, he cuts to your heart, causing you to ask, “What should I do?” With the Gospel, he presents the solution: “Return and receive.” Receive the gifts Jesus bought and paid for. Let the focus of your whole life shift from yourself to Him. And as the apostle Peter said, these gifts are for everyone. The promise is for you and your children, for all who are far off.

What should we do? It’s kind of the ‘question of the moment.’ With respect to our souls, the answer is ‘Repent, return to the Lord, draw on the blessing of your baptism, and believe that Jesus has granted you forgiveness of sins and new life in connection to Him. Embrace the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is continually leading you to find your worth and value in Jesus. Lean into this truth: that you stand on solid ground with God, and that status is his gift to you. And let this transform you into a person who is often like the One who redeemed you; a person who is often like Christ.

What should we do? Repent, receive God’s gifts of forgiveness and faith by the Holy Spirit, and follow Jesus in being servant helpers. We need it; the world needs it; it is our way forward.