

How Much Did They Know?¹

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.

Acts 2:37-41.

I’ve heard it said on more than one occasion that those three thousand who obeyed the gospel on the day of Pentecost needed to hear only one sermon before they obeyed the gospel. However, that idea is a thoughtless and shallow misunderstanding of what really happened. That perception is misleading because it fails to comprehend the natural process of sowing the seed of God’s word and cultivating it before an eventual harvest is reaped. That understanding implies that people do not now need to know much to obey the gospel and that we need not make much preparation for presenting the gospel to others. It presumes that local evangelism and mission work in our times ought to produce quick results, and that if they don’t, then the presumption may be that the problem lies with the stubbornness of unbelievers, or with the inefficiency of evangelists and missionaries.

A better understanding of how much those 3,000 believers knew before they obeyed the gospel on the day of Pentecost can be acquired by looking at their historical background. (We don’t know their individual names or situations, but we do know the general historical situation out of which they came.) First, those 3,000 believers had probably already heard much about Jesus. For several centuries, the Jewish people had been expecting the coming of a Messiah. Moreover, John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the coming of Christ (Matthew 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-3; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:15-28). John specifically identified Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. (John 1:29-36). When Jesus came, many of the people either thought or wondered if he was the Christ (Luke 3:15; John 4:29, 42; 7:26, 31, 41; 11:27). The teachings and the miracles of Jesus made him famous throughout all the region of Galilee, Syria, and Judea (Matthew 4:23-24; 9:26, 31; Mark 1:28; Luke 7:16). Would not the fame of Jesus have also spread to other lands? Had not Jesus openly taught for several years among large crowds and multitudes? (No less than 39 times is Jesus declared to be among the multitudes in the Gospel records.) Was not the strange events surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion in Jerusalem the talk of the town? (Matthew 27:51-54; Luke 23:44). Would not nearly everyone in Jerusalem have known about him? (Luke 24:18). In view of all these facts, it seems incredible to think that those who believed and obeyed the gospel on the day of Pentecost had not previously known about Jesus!

Second, many of those 3,000 may have personally known Jesus, or at least had some association with him? Surely many of those who accompanied Jesus in his travels – such as those

¹Copyright © by author, Robert L. Waggoner, 2000; revised, 2003. Permission is granted to duplicate and distribute this manuscript, if unchanged, for non-commercial educational purposes. All other rights reserved.

How Much Did They Know?

women who supported him (Luke 8:3) and others, like Nicodemus (John 3:1-9; 7:50; 19:39), and Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43, John 19:38) – may have been among the 3,000 who were obedient to the gospel on the day of Pentecost. Surely there were also some of the relatives and friends of Jesus (John 7:3-10) and his apostles who would have been among the obedient on the day of Pentecost. Many of those whom Jesus had healed during his ministry – such as the man at the pool of Bethesda, (John 5) the blind man (John 9) or others, who in some way would have been blessed by his ministry, such as the father or an epileptic son whom Jesus had healed (Matthew 17:14-18) – would possibly have been there. Some of those who had been astonished by his teachings, such as heard his sermon on the mountain (Matthew 7:28-29) or his refutation of the Jews in the temple (Mark 12:35), etc. may have been among the 3,000 believers.

Third, many of the 3,000 believers may have already believed that Jesus was the Christ before Peter's sermon was given on the day of Pentecost. Certainly some, perhaps many, had already come to believe in him as a result of his teachings and his miracles (John 8:30; 10:42; 11:45; 12:42).

That many were already well informed about Jesus and had already come to believe in him as the promised Christ is evident from the gospel records. Even those who came from other countries to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost could easily have heard about Jesus and his teachings and miracle working because of their trips to Jerusalem in previous years.

New proof that Jesus is the Christ was given at Pentecost, however. That new proof was that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. This was substantiated not only by eye-witnesses, but also by the miracle of cloven tongues on the apostles' heads and their speaking in foreign languages. Moreover, on the day of Pentecost, there came to be a new understanding about the nature of the Messiah's kingdom. Whereas it had formerly and commonly been thought of as a temporal, physical and earthly kingdom, it would now come to be recognized as an eternal, spiritual and heavenly kingdom.

All these things indicate that probably most, if not all, of those who were baptized on the day of Pentecost had previously known much about Jesus. All they needed was the divine assurance that Jesus was indeed the Christ. This was given to them by the miracles preceding Peter's sermon and by Peter's reasoning from the scriptures that the Christ was prophesied to arise from the dead.

What this means for us is that if we would be fruitful in evangelism, we need to make Jesus Christ known to people. When people realize they are sinners needing salvation, and that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who came to redeem people from their sins, many of them will commit themselves to him just as did those on the day of Pentecost.

An older man once made the observation to me that most preachers have many excellent commentaries in their libraries on the New Testament epistles, but few on the Gospels. He also observed that most preachers spend much more time preaching from the epistles than from the Gospels. He implied that was a mistake. Maybe so! In any case, we generally need more teaching and preaching from the Gospels. People must be strongly committed to the Lord before they will be inclined to feel a strong attachment to his church.