

Acts 2 The Birth of the Church

Acts 2—The Birth of the Church

Jesus had been crucified the week of the Passover, and then He was resurrected and appeared for 40 days to His disciples “presenting Himself alive by many convincing proofs over a period of 40 days”. After the 40 days, Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mt. of Olives after telling them once again that “not many days from now” you shall all be “baptized with the Holy Spirit”. By this He meant that they would permanently be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This actually happened as recorded in Acts 2:1-4 on the Day of Pentecost about 8 days later. This was an annual feast that was commanded by God for all Jews to celebrate on the 50th day after the Feast of Firstfruits. If you want to figure it out for yourselves, study Exodus 12, Leviticus 23, Numbers 28, and Deut.16, but basically Passover was on Nisan (Abib on the Jewish calendar) 14, then Unleavened Bread began the next day and lasted a week. Firstfruits was the day after the Sabbath of Passover week, and Pentecost was the day after the 7th Sabbath (49 days) after the Day of Firstfruits. Thus Pentecost (which means 50), was the 50th day after Firstfruits. In Deuteronomy 16:16, all male Jews were commanded to go to Jerusalem for this feast. Therefore, thousands of pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world were in Jerusalem. A list of all the different nationalities and languages is given in Acts 2:9-11. In the first century, the Feast was called the Day of Pentecost.

The Dramatic Descent of the Holy Spirit

Perhaps all of us would like to experience the dramatic indwelling of the Holy Spirit like the Apostles did in Acts 2, but we must remember that it was the moment of great transition, and it was necessary that God make it obvious and well known what was happening. The transition was from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from the Law to Grace, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and from Israel to the Church. Without God’s dramatic intervention they would have never figured that transition out. Jesus had repeatedly promised this event and the Old Testament prophets had spoken of it, but they did not understand until the dramatic events of the Day of Pentecost. Today, we must take the indwelling of the Spirit by faith because the Word of God says that all who believe in Jesus as their Savior receive the Spirit of God.

In Acts 4:1-4, we see the evidence of the coming of the Holy Spirit. They heard, saw, felt, and manifested the Holy Spirit’s coming. They were all together, probably in the Upper Room of Acts 1:13, because it says they were in a house when it happened. They heard a noise from heaven that sounded like a great rushing wind, then they saw what appeared like tongues of fire, and each tongue of fire settled on an individual. The filling of the Holy Spirit was manifested through each of them as they went out into the streets of Jerusalem near the Temple, and spoke languages previously unknown to them. All the foreigners were hearing the disciples of Christ speak in foreign languages with perfect accents. What was even more amazing was that these were uneducated Galileans who were accomplishing this feat. Because of the great sound from heaven and the amazing “tongues” being spoken, a large crowd was coming together to see and hear what was happening. Peter explained this phenomenon as being a great fulfillment of prophecy. He quoted Joel 2 that in the “last days” God would pour forth His Spirit upon mankind.

It was significant that this happened on the Feast of Harvest (Pentecost) when Israel presented the “first fruits” of the crop to the Lord because on this day all the new believers that formed the church were the first fruits of the full harvest of the church to come. With the outward signs of the Holy Spirit came the inward invisible reality that demonstrated its presence by the effects on the believers. They went out boldly in public and began praising God in such a way that would draw attention to themselves. Before, they had been fearfully behind locked doors praying for their safety, but now they went out fearlessly to manifest the truth.

Tongues

The Greek word translated tongues is “glossa”, and is the word for languages. Clearly in this story what was spoken was known languages as the crowd heard and understood what they were saying. In each case of speaking in tongues in Acts, it is about the transition from Judaism to the church. 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 says the purpose of speaking these languages was that it was a sign to unbelievers, and that is exactly what happened here in Acts 2. Hebrews 2:3-4 indicates that these miraculous gifts ended with the passing of the Apostles and the establishment of the church.

The First Preaching to the Church

In Acts 2:14, we read that “Peter took his stand” and “raised his voice” to address the Jews who assembled near the Temple to celebrate Pentecost. I take it Peter elevated himself and spoke loudly above the crowd noise. My opinion after being there is that this occurred at the southern steps of the Temple because this was a large open area where all the people had to come to enter the Temple. It would have been the perfect place for Peter to step up on the steps there like a platform to address the crowd. Also, there were hundreds of baptismal pools there. This style of preaching would be emphasized in the church from then on. In Greek, this is the “Kerygma” or proclamation of the Gospel.

Peter began by refuting the critics there that said they were drunk. He pointed out that it was before 9am, and it was against the Law to drink before 10am during the feast. Peter began by explaining that the sign they were witnessing was prophesied by Joel. The prophet had predicted the coming of the Spirit during the end times, but Peter used it to say that the final era to provide salvation for mankind had begun and this was the beginning of that New Covenant of grace that would end with the Kingdom of God. This is the era in which the Messiah would come, and the prophets predicted that God would pour out His Spirit upon believers. All the Apostles saw the church age as “the last hour”(1 John 2:18), or the “last times”(1 Peter 1:20), or “these last days”(Heb.1:2). The complete fulfillment of Joel 2 awaits the second coming of Christ, but the coming of the Holy Spirit was the beginning. If the Messianic times had come, then Messiah must have come, so beginning with Acts 2:22 Peter would establish Jesus’ credentials.

The Plan of God

Jesus was a common name, so Peter distinguished “Jesus the Nazarene, a man proven by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed in their midst”. Two undeniable truths emerge here that they had seen Jesus, and that God had performed many miracles through Jesus. Consider the overwhelming evidence of His miraculous birth, the many miracles of His public ministry, and His resurrection. Remember the testimony of one of their religious leaders Nicodemus in John 3:2, “no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with Him”. Perhaps many in the crowd were remembering what Jesus said in John 10:37, “If I don’t do the works of My Father, do not believe Me, but if I do, believe Me because of the works”; or maybe they remembered the report from the crowd who had witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:46-47, “the crowd who had witnessed the raising of Lazarus went away to Jerusalem to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.”

Acts 2:23 is a key passage for trying to understand the age old dilemma about free will versus the sovereignty of God. Amazingly, Peter said that the injustice of the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus was all according to the predetermined plan of God, but the responsibility of the injustice lay with the “godless men who put Him to death”. I will leave this to you to figure out the paradox of how both could be true at the same time, but the point is that God out of love had sent Jesus into the world to live a sinless life, and then die a substitutionary death that would atone for our sins. The Jews were no doubt wondering, “If Jesus was the Messiah, why was He a victim? Why did He not use His power to avoid crucifixion?” Peter was saying that it was God’s plan to deliver up His Son to die for their sins. God’s plan involved allowing evil men to do what they wanted to do to try and block or prevent Jesus’ ministry. Thus God let Judas betray Him, let Jesus be falsely arrested, and God let the Romans execute Him, and it all accomplished His purposes. In Luke 22:22, Jesus made the same type of paradoxical statement when He said, “The Son of Man is going as it has been determined (by God), but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed”.

In Acts 2:24-32, Peter preached about the resurrection of Christ which vindicated that He was the Messiah, proved that God accepted His sacrifice on the cross for us, and proved our future victory over death through our resurrection. Then Peter quoted from David in Psalm 16:8-11 that this was foretold about a thousand years before and was therefore also the predetermined plan of God. In Acts 2:33-36, after Jesus ascended to heaven, He was greatly exalted to the place of honor, authority, and power. Then just as He had promised, He sent His Spirit to “help” them. Peter quoted Psalm 110 as predicting all this as well. The point is that God knew it, planned it, and it was accomplished accordingly. When the Jews in Jerusalem heard Peter’s conclusion in verse 36, “that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah—this Jesus whom you crucified”, they were “pierced to the heart” and asked “what shall we do?” This is the most important question that all people need to answer when confronted with the truth about Christ. On that great day the church was born, as 3000 souls believed in Jesus as their Savior and were baptized. That day they changed their mind, changed their purpose, and changed their belief system. They turned from sin to God’s grace, and turned from self to God.

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