

The Day the Christian Church was Born

I. What happened?

II. What does it mean?

III. What does it mean for you and me?

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them. **5** Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **6** When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. **7** Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" **8** Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? **9** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,^[b] **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome **11** (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" **12** Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" **13** Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." **14** Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. **15** These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! **16** No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:¹⁷ "In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

18 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

19 I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

20 The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

21 And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Did you know that Mount Olive is celebrating a very special birthday today? In fact, you might say that today's service is sort of a birthday party. So maybe we should do a little decorating for this birthday party. The question is, whose birthday are we celebrating today?

Even though there are a number of Mount Olive members who were born on this day in history—and they know who they are—we’re actually not going to celebrate their birthday today. Instead, we’re going to celebrate an even more important birthday. A birthday that impacts the life of every one of us. Today we are celebrating what we might call the birthday of the Christian Church. For you see, on this day in history, more often referred to as the Day of Pentecost, God in effect, gave birth to his New Testament Church with special outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Today we turn our attention to the inspired account of that first Pentecost day, as we consider this theme:

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As we study this section of Acts, chapter 2, we’ll seek to answer three simple questions:

I. What happened?

II. What did it all mean (for the people back then)?

III. What does it mean for you and me today?

First, what happened? Tell me, do any of you remember exactly what happened on the day you were born? No, the only way you could know what happened on your original birthday, is if someone told you what happened. Recently I was talking with my mom and she recounted for me the details of my birth. She told me how I was 12 days overdue, so Dad had her drink castor oil to try to kind of move things along, so I would be born before the end of the year, so that they could still claim me as an exemption on their tax return. Well, I arrived with one day to spare. But I wouldn’t have known any of those details if someone didn’t tell me what happened.

Well, so it is with the birth of the Christian church. We know what happened because St. Luke records the remarkable events here in Acts, chapter 2. The scene is Jerusalem, during one of the big three Jewish festivals, called the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of First Fruits or the Festival of Pentecost. The word Pentecost means 50 because this festival took place exactly 50 days after the Jewish Passover. And it brought into the city of Jerusalem hundreds of thousands of Jewish pilgrims from countries across the Mediterranean world. In the midst of all those crowds there was a gathering of Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as the promised messiah. In fact, many of them had seen Jesus alive after his death and burial. A handful had seen Jesus visibly ascend into heaven. And now they were waiting in Jerusalem, in obedience to the command Jesus had given them, namely, *“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:4-5)*

Well, ten days after Jesus’ ascension, the Spirit showed up with 3 major signs. First, the sound of a violent wind. It wasn’t that a tornado hit the house where these Jews were staying. It just sounded like a tornado hit the house, even though the curtains weren’t even rustling. Secondly, there was this ball of fire that broke into little flames that landed on the heads of all the people in the room, without even to singeing their hair. And sign #3: Luke tells us, *“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” (Acts 2:4)* Now don’t misunderstand. These men were not suddenly speaking some kind of ecstatic gibberish. They were not speaking in the tongues of angels, as the charismatic churches like to claim. No, these men were speaking actual foreign languages that they had never learned before, languages that likely had their origins back at the Tower of Babel. And how do we know they were speaking real languages? Because of the reaction from the crowd. Luke tells us, *“Utterly amazed, they asked: Aren’t these all Galileans? How is it that each of us hears them in our own language? We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts.*

2:7-8)

Notice that the crowds are not only amazed that these local yokels are suddenly speaking all kinds of foreign languages (I mean, that's the connotation of the word, "Galilean"). But they're also amazed at what these men are saying: "They are declaring the wonders of God." Is it any wonder that the crowds were left feeling amazed and perplexed and asking themselves, "*What does this mean?*"

That's a good question. In fact, it's the second question we want to answer today. II. What does all this mean? I mean, what was the significance of all these events for the people back then? Did the people who were there realize why this was happening? No, probably not. In fact, we know that some people tried to explain it by saying the disciples were drunk. Maybe they figured they'd been on an all-night bender. But it's actually Simon Peter who stands out to explain what's going on. He basically says that all the things that people have seen and heard are all in fulfillment of a promise that God made through the prophet Joel hundreds of years before. How does Peter put it? "*This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."* (Acts 2:16-17)

Now, to understand these words of the prophet, we need to take note of three things. First, notice the prophecy begins with the words, "*in the last days.*" With those words, the prophet is looking ahead to a very special time. He calls it the Last Days. We'd call it the New Testament era. That time between Jesus' first coming and his second coming. In fact, from the prophet's perspective, those two events kind of blur together. He can't see how much distance is between them. That's why, in the space of 2 verses, the prophet speaks about both the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the moon turning to blood on the Last Day. But Peter, who is there as it's happening, can identify this day of Pentecost as the beginning of a new era. This day will mark the birth of the New Testament Christian Church.

But now someone might ask, "Wait a minute. Is this really a new era? Wasn't there a Christian Church before Pentecost?" Well, kind of, in a sense. From the time of Adam and Eve, there have always been people who believed that a Savior was coming. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they were led to put their trust in that Messiah. In a sense, they were Christians, before Christ was born. But we have to say three things about those Old Testament believers. 1. They were almost exclusively from one nation of people, the nation of Israel. If you were a believer in the Old Testament you almost had to be a Jew.

And secondly, their knowledge was limited. They knew little bits and pieces about the coming Messiah from what the prophets told them. They knew, for example, that the Messiah would be a descendant of David, born of a virgin and crushed for our iniquities. They knew enough from the Holy Spirit to work faith in their hearts. But God hadn't yet revealed the whole picture to them. And thirdly, what the Old Testament believers knew all came through the writings of just a handful of prophets. Granted, the Spirit was still working through those prophets, but it was like God was using an eyedropper to distribute his Spirit. A little bit of information to a few specific prophets in one specific nation.

Well, on Pentecost, all that changed. What does the prophet say? "*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit.*" We're not talking eyedropper here, we're talking pitcher. "*I will pour out my Spirit, with special signs of fire and wind and speaking in tongues.*" And not only are we going from dribbling the Spirit to pouring out the Spirit. We're going from one nation to all nations. God says, "*I will pour out my Spirit on all people.*" In other words, God is moving from a national church to an international, a multi-national church. And what better way to kick

off this church for all nations, than to have the apostles suddenly speaking the languages of all these different nations gathered in Jerusalem on that day? I mean, just before he ascended into heaven, Jesus gave his disciples the marching orders for the Christian church. He said, *“Go and make disciples of all nations.”* That's exactly what God's church was beginning to do, starting right on the day of Pentecost.

But there's one more thing that would be different about this New Testament Church. God says through the prophet Joel, *“Your sons and daughters will prophesy.”* And again, *“Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy.”* What does he mean by that? Well, remember I said that in the Old Testament, God spoke to His people through specific prophets like Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah. But once Jesus arrived, he became the mouthpiece for God. How did the writer to the Hebrews put it? *“In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days (there's that term again), he has spoken to us by his Son. (Hebrews 1:1-2)* You think of all the things that Jesus said and did while he was here on earth, that are recorded in the pages of God's inspired scriptures. Well, Jesus says that when Christians tell other people what Jesus said and did, it's as if Jesus is talking to them. What did Jesus say to his disciples? *“Whoever listens to you, listen to me.” (Luke 10:16)* In other words, when Christians share the good news about Jesus, as recorded in the pages of Holy Scripture, we are, in effect, speaking for God. That is, we are serving as God's prophets.

That's exactly what Joel is referring to here in our text when he looks ahead to the day when he hears God say, *“Your sons and daughters will prophesy.”* He's talking about how in the New Testament, there will be an army of men and women, young and old, who have been equipped through the Holy Scriptures, to speak for God, to prophesy, to tell people the good news of what God has done for sinners through his Son Jesus Christ, no matter what their race or language or nationality. In fact, isn't that where you and I come into the picture? On the day of Pentecost, day the Christian church was born, III. What does all this mean for you and me?

I mean, is the day of Pentecost just ancient history that has no significance for our lives today? Absolutely not. Think about it. When on Pentecost God established his Christian Church that was to be for all nations, he was already thinking of each one of you, people who do not live in Israel, and are not of Jewish descent. When God said that in his Christian Church there would be sons and daughters who would prophesy, he was already thinking of the pastor or teacher or grandmother or friend who first told you about a savior who loved you enough to die for you. And you realize that the same tools that God used to work faith in the hearts of 3000 people on the first Pentecost day, God is still using today. I'm not talking about the ability to spontaneously speak in tongues. I'm talking about God's Word and baptism. God's still using those tools to pour out the Holy Spirit into our hearts and lives today. In fact, if you think about it, isn't every service here in Mount Olive a little re-celebration of that first Pentecost? Week after week, God keeps filling us up with his Holy Spirit, as we feed our faith with God's holy word and holy supper. And the Spirit gives us the courage to live out our faith in the face of opposition. He gives us the boldness to speak the truth in love and share with others the wonderful things that God has done.

In fact there's one more parallel between that church and this church. It's found in God's promise, *“Your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.”* You realize what he's talking about, don't you? He's talking about what God allows believers to see through the eyes of faith. To see that we have a God loves us, who's compassionate and who doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. God gives us a vision of what it means to be one of God's precious children,

cradled in the arms of our Good Shepherd and bringing us through the valley of the shadow of death. Through the eyes of faith, God lets us dream about what life in heaven will be like without pain or sadness or sickness or sorrow. St. John had a vision of those believers in heaven when he wrote in the Revelation chapter 7, *I looked and saw a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.* (Rev. 7:9)

My friends, the bottom line is this: by God's grace, through faith in his Son, the Holy Spirit has made you a member of that multi-national, intergenerational, Bible-believing, Christ-proclaiming, Spirit-empowered, body of believers called the New Testament Christian Church. On this Day of Pentecost we're celebrating that God gave birth to that church, and by his grace, he's invited us to the party! In Jesus' name. Amen.