

The Εκκλησία (Ecclesia) is born...

Acts Chapter 2

Introduction

Of the seven feasts of Moses, three occur in the first month (Passover, Unleavened Bread, First-fruits), three occur in the seventh month (Trumpets, Yom Kippur, Tabernacles), leaving one that occurs between, 50 days after First-fruits: the Feast of Weeks or 'Pentecost' (which simply means 50th – see Leviticus 23 v 9 to 22; Numbers 28 v 26). Besides the ceremonial role, each feast had a historical commemorative role, and also a prophetic role (e.g. the Passover foreshadows the Crucifixion). First-fruits is celebrated the day after the first Sabbath after Passover – this happened to be the day of the Resurrection! Pentecost foreshadows the Church – note that it is measured not from the Crucifixion but the Resurrection. Every able-bodied Jewish man was expected to be in Jerusalem to celebrate the three festival seasons.

In this chapter the city is crowded with Jews celebrating the Feast of Pentecost, and it is on this occasion that the Εκκλησία (*Ecclesia*, 'called out ones' i.e. the Church) is born...

The Coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2 v 1 to 13)

- What three signs were given in connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit? What do they symbolise? What purposes of God was the Spirit given to fulfil?
- What was the reaction of (a) the apostles; (b) the crowd; (c) the mockers to the coming of the Holy Spirit? Notice the pattern of amazement, perplexity and then cynicism among some. What would your reaction have been?

“Suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind” (v 2) – the association of wind with the outpouring of the Spirit relates to the fact that in both Hebrew and Greek the word for 'Spirit' is the same word for 'breath' or 'wind', and would make sense to men and women who knew the Scriptures: in Genesis 1 v 2 the Spirit is the breath of God blowing over the waters of the newly created earth; in Genesis 2 v 7 the Spirit is the breath of God blowing life into newly created man; in Ezekiel 37 v 9, 10 the Spirit is the breath of God blowing over the dry bones of Israel bringing them life and strength.

“Divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them” (v 3) – these 'tongues as of fire' should be connected with John the Baptist's prophecy that Jesus would baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3 v 11). 'Fire' symbolizes purification, as a refiner uses fire to make pure gold; or fire can burn away what is temporary, leaving only what will last.

“They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues” (v 4) – in response to the filling of the Holy Spirit, those present (not only the twelve apostles) began to speak with other tongues. These were languages that they were never taught, and they spoke these languages, speaking “as the Spirit gave them utterance”.

“Devout men, from every nation under heaven” (v 5) – crowds from many nations gathered in Jerusalem because of the Feast of Pentecost (see map attached). Some may have been the same people who had gathered in Jerusalem during Passover, when an angry mob demanded the execution of Jesus.

“We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (v 11) – this is what the crowd heard the Christians speak. From this remarkable event, all were “amazed and perplexed” (v 12), and some used this as a means of honest inquiry and asked, 'What does this mean?'; but others used it as an excuse to dismiss the work of God and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

[MORE OVER]

Peter's sermon at Pentecost, and the fellowship of the believers (Acts 2 v 14 to 47)

Peter's gospel message follows this outline: (i) You crucified Jesus (v 23); (ii) but God raised Him from the dead, and exalted him (v 24, 33); (iii) Jesus has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and has "poured out what you now see and hear" (v 33); (iv) Therefore repent (turn away from your sins) and be baptised (v 38); (v) and you will receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit (v 38)...

- What question does Peter's sermon set out to answer? Who is the primary subject (see v 22)?
- In his message Peter uses three Old Testament passages to illustrate his points: (a) Acts 2 v 17 to 21 = Joel 2 v 28 to 32; (b) Acts 2 v 25 to 28 = Psalm 16 v 8 to 11; and (c) Acts 2 v 34 to 35 = Psalm 110 v 1. How might the Joel passage have seemed bizarre and even offensive to the Jews (see v 17 and 21)? How much of the Joel prophecy has been fulfilled, and how much still lies in the future?
- Was Jesus death a mistake (v 23)? Do you think that the Jews were primarily to blame for Jesus' death (v 23, 36)? Be careful on this one! (A famous preacher once said, "If you want to blame someone for the death of Jesus Christ, blame me, because it was my sins that put him on the cross.")

Peter's point in the Psalm 16 passage is that it could not possibly apply to David, because it speaks of his body not seeing decay. David was writing prophetically about the resurrection of Jesus, and that as his descendant Jesus would reign from David's throne. The Psalm 110 passage makes more sense in Hebrew: Yahweh (God the Father) said to Adonai ("my Lord" i.e. Jesus)...

- Verse 36 is the climax of Peter's sermon. How is "Jesus of Nazareth" described here? What offers are being made in v 38, and under what conditions? To whom are the offers made?
- What features marked the lives of the new believers, and the life of the new-born Church (v 41 to 47)? In what practical ways can we emulate their behaviour in our church fellowships today?

"Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v 21) – Peter used this passage from Joel for an evangelistic purpose. This outpouring of the Spirit meant that God now offered salvation in a way previously unknown – to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, whether Jew or Gentile. It would be many years until the Gospel was offered to Gentiles, yet Peter's sermon text provided a Gospel invitation.

"Now when they heard this they... said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" (v 37) – this was obviously a significant work of the Holy Spirit. The great crowd listening to Peter was deeply moved by Peter's bold proclamation of the truth, and asked how they should respond. Their response helps us put the events of Pentecost into perspective: the exercise of the gift of tongues produced nothing in the listeners except astonishment and mocking; it was not until the Gospel was preached that conviction from the Holy Spirit came. This was the work God really wanted to accomplish!

"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" (v 38) – responding to the question, 'What shall we do?' Peter told them to do two things: to repent and to be baptized; God then promised two things: forgiveness of sins through Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v 42) – the sound of rushing wind, the tongues of fire, and the conversion of 3,000 were all remarkable events; but the activities described in verse 42 were the lasting legacy of God's work. We too can devote ourselves to the 'apostles' teaching' – the New Testament record.

The Greek word *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*, translated here as 'fellowship') has the idea of association, communion, fellowship, and participation; it means to share in something. The Christian life is meant to be full of fellowship, of sharing one with another – see verses 44 to 47...



Source: Lawrence, P (2006), *The Lion Atlas of Bible History*, Lion Hudson Plc