

The birth of the Church

What message was the Church founded on?

In **Acts 1:4-5** Jesus told his disciples, "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."

And true to Jesus' word it was only a short time later - during the Jewish celebration of the Feast of Weeks - that a sudden "baptism with the Spirit" occurred. Three thousand Jews responded to Peter's message urging the crowds gathered in the Temple to repent, believe in Jesus Christ as their Messiah, and receive the gift of the Spirit. It was a startling and very quick beginning to the birth of a brand new People of God.

God chose a very specific time to get this brand new People of God started too. Luke tells us that "there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven," so this was a huge gathering of Jews who'd made the annual pilgrimage from near and far to meet together during the fifty days between Passover and Pentecost.

Josephus, the Jewish historian living at this time, tells us that Jerusalem with its normal population of 150,000 would swell in numbers to well over a million. The city itself was filled to the brim, so were the suburbs, and thousands were camped out on the hillsides as well.

It was then, on the last day of this massive gathering on the day of Pentecost, that a sound like a great blast of wind roared through the Porch of Solomon where the apostles and their friends were waiting for the promise of the Spirit (as Jesus had instructed). It was God's way of summoning the entire crowd to one spot from all over the city and from the hillsides beyond as well.

That was how loud the sound must have been, blasting out like a huge air raid siren with an earsplitting urgency that could not be ignored, just like the trumpet sound that got "louder and louder" on this very same day of Pentecost 1500 years earlier when the Law was given at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:19. And both times the noise announced a new chapter in God's plan.

The howl of the siren sound soon brought people rushing into the Temple court to find out what was going on. But when they zeroed in on where the noise was coming from, things became even more bewildering as their eyes picked out a group of around one hundred and twenty people at one end of the Porch of Solomon who had sheets of flame dancing over the tops of their heads.

Even more bewildering was who these people were. Judging by how they were dressed they were obviously just ordinary peasants from Galilee, but here they were yelling out a message in at least sixteen different, perfectly understandable, languages. How was this possible? How could such uneducated peasants from the sticks speak so fluently and so naturally in the languages of other nations, and especially when no such languages were being taught in Galilee, and these people were clearly from Galilee itself, not from the nations whose languages they were speaking?

Luke even names the localities in which the languages being spoken came from. He begins in the east, with a list of dialects east of Jerusalem: Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia. Then he moves north to include the Roman provinces of Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. Then south to Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene in northern Africa, then west to Rome and Crete, and again to the south to include Arabians. From all these vastly different nations and places people were crying out, "We hear these people (the one hundred and twenty) telling in our own language the mighty works of God," **Acts 2:11**.

What a strange sight it must have been, with one hundred and twenty people speaking in different languages, but all saying exactly the same thing about the magnificence of God. They weren't preaching the gospel, take note, nor were they speaking about Jesus. At this point they were simply speaking about how great God was, and how great he was personally to them, but it had the desired effect of grabbing the crowd's attention.

Luke uses two words to describe the Jews' reactions: **bewilderment** (verse 6), and **amazement** (verse 7). The Greek word Luke used for bewilderment means "hit hard and stunned," which we'd translate in our terms as "staggered." The Greek word he used for amazement was even stronger, meaning "pushed out of their senses," or in our terms today, "It blew their minds." This little group of peasant men and women from the sticks, therefore, had totally transfixed the entire crowd, as if an alien spaceship had suddenly come in to land.

Luke also mentions in **Acts 2:12** that along with the people's amazement they were also "perplexed." In the Greek it meant that all sorts of thoughts were racing through their minds. So the people were really stirred up, their minds whirring as to what on earth was going on, just like our minds might start racing if a loud buzzing sound that got louder and louder suddenly filled a hall we were sitting in, drowning out the speaker. Our immediate reaction might be fright at the suddenness of the sound, but then our minds would race off in all sorts of directions, like should we rush outside before the building collapses, or sit it out and hope it will stop, or go find the cause of the racket to see if it needs to be responded to?

Being suddenly confronted with something new and disturbing creates some interesting reactions in the human mind. Luke actually records two of the Jews' reactions in **Acts 2:12-13**. The first reaction racing through their minds in verse 12 was, "What does this mean?" In other words, there must be some purpose to these extraordinary sights and sounds, because it's not your average day having your head ringing with the wailing sound of a siren, or seeing people with flames dancing over their heads, or uneducated peasants yelling out the glory of God in sixteen different languages.

This first group, then, was typical of people who react to something new and different with an open mind, and they're willing to look into it further before coming to a conclusion. But there was another group whose minds immediately snapped shut, and out popped a typically dismissive attitude, "Oh, they're just drunk, that's all" (verse 13).

But people do that when their minds are blown. Being flippant and sarcastic is like a shock protector on the mind to prevent it imploding into mush. It's a mind that quickly kicks into judgmental mode, however, concluding without a shred of evidence that these idiotic peasants from Galilee were drunk out of their skulls.

It was a ridiculous accusation, of course, but it set the stage beautifully for Peter to launch forth in reply. On hearing the sarcastic scoffing and yells from the crowd accusing them of being drunk, Peter stands up and shouts back in **verses 14-16**, "Fellow Jews and all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk - it's only nine o'clock in the morning. No, what this is really all about is what **the prophet Joel** announced would happen."

Peter grabs the opportunity offered him to respond to the accusation, not by berating the people making it, take note, but by actually finding a way of agreeing with them. In the Greek it comes out this way, that "Peter stood up and said to them, 'Not as you suppose are these men drunk.'" In other words, yes these men are drunk, but not from what you suppose. It's not booze that's making them act like this, it's what the prophet Joel said would happen, that the Spirit of God would be poured out on people, **Acts 2:17**, creating the most amazing reactions in people that could very well make them look like they're giddy and drunk.

Peter is not denying the similarity, therefore, that the Holy Spirit affects a person somewhat like alcohol does. Paul picks up on the similarity in **Ephesians 5:18** too, when he writes, "Don't drink too much wine. Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him" (The Message). So think what affect drink has, and that's the kind of affect the Spirit has too.

And that's what the crowd was witnessing at that very moment. They saw very ordinary men and women speaking freely and easily, who were highly animated about what they were saying too. And how fluently they were saying it as well, just like people who've had their tongues loosened and their inhibitions lessened by a few drinks. So the crowd wasn't too far off thinking the apostles and their friends were drunk. But Peter quickly reminds them that people on this scale don't get drunk by breakfast time, and especially in the temple precinct where they'd be kicked out before they even got through the entrance door. Their appearance of being drunk, therefore, was due to something totally new and different - and amazing: It was, in fact, the clear and noticeable sign of the coming of the Holy Spirit, exactly as Joel had predicted.

But that being the case it also meant it was frightening, because any self-respecting Jew who heard Peter quote these verses from Joel would know the context of them. They'd know, for instance, that **Joel 2:1** spoke about the coming of "the day of the Lord," and how "dreadful" it would be (verse 11), and so dreadful that the question would be asked, "Who can endure it?" It would be a time so awful that the Jewish religious leaders would be crying out in desperation in **verse 17**, "Spare your people, O Lord."

But that's when God replies in **verse 23**, "Children of Zion, celebrate, be glad in your God. He's giving you a Teacher to train you how to live right," so that, **verse 27**, "you will know that I am (still) in Israel."

Well, isn't that exactly what happened when Jesus came? He came as **Emmanuel**, meaning 'God with us', so Jesus was visible proof to the Jews that God was still in Israel. Jesus had also come as a Teacher. So that part in Joel's prophecy had just been fulfilled too, which meant the Jews could expect the next bit in **Joel 2:28** to happen as well, that "Afterward" - meaning right after the Teacher from God comes to live with them - God "pours out his Spirit."

And this is the prophecy that Peter now quotes to this huge gathering of Jews. Imagine being one of them, and hearing that this was the very moment when Joel's prophecy about the Holy Spirit was kicking into action. It wasn't at some future date when God rescued Israel from exile and slavery under pagan rule and made Israel a great nation again to reach out to the whole world; it's right then and there while the Jews are still being ruled by the Romans and they're still a backwater nation. It's right now that this entirely new era of the Spirit begins.

And, what's more, the signs of this new era starting would be obvious, because Joel predicted that God would pour out his Spirit on "all people," meaning **all sorts of people** would receive the Spirit, from all walks of life and social strata. This wasn't like the Old Testament when God's Spirit was only working on rare occasions through a few prophets and leaders. According to Joel, **Acts 2:17**, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions," placing special emphasis on youth, which flew in the face of good old Jewish tradition that favoured the old and wise - and mostly men too. But here's Peter saying that youngsters, including young women, would receive revelation from God through visions and dreams.

Receiving dreams and visions from God was nothing new in Jewish experience, but the idea of young men and women receiving them certainly was. And so was the next prediction by Joel, again quoted by Peter in **Acts 2:18**, that "I (God) will even pour out my Spirit on servants, men and women both." So even men and women of low standing - those tucked away people no one takes notice of (like the ladies who clean out Motel rooms, or janitors cleaning schools at night) - would be recipients of the Spirit, enabling them to "prophesy," or teach, with great insight and wisdom, and with animation, vitality and fluency, just like the one hundred and twenty were already doing on Pentecost.

So something **totally new** was happening - but - was Peter saying that all these predictions would happen immediately, or that all of them would occur all at once in their entirety?

Well, any Jew who knew his scriptures would have noticed the little change Peter made in quoting Joel, because instead of saying "afterward" - like Joel does in Joel 2:28 - Peter changes it to "In the last days." Peter, therefore, extends the time-line of these prophecies from them all happening immediately "afterward" to a longer period of "last days" that would end, as he says in **Acts 2:20**, with "The sun being turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord."

Well, nothing like that happened to the sun and moon on that day of Pentecost. The sun darkening and the moon turning to blood would be signs instead of Jesus coming in power and judgment at the end of this extended period of time called "the last days." Jesus himself had already hinted at this in Matthew 24:27-30 when he talked about "the coming of the Son of Man," the signs of which would be the sun and moon darkening.

Right now, though, **the clock had started ticking** on this new era of "the last days", the clear sign of which was the giving of the Spirit enabling all sorts of people from all walks of life and job descriptions to understand and teach the magnificence of God.

Peter, therefore, is expanding Joel's prophecy to show that this new era of the Spirit would last for some time, but he also provides clear bookends as to when it begins and when it ends. It had actually begun right then, on that very day of Pentecost, and it would end, as Jesus quoted, "after the distress of those days" (Matthew 24:29), just before he returns, the clear signs of which would be amazing things happening in the sky.

But one sign would remain constant throughout, from the beginning of the last days to its end, and that's the last phrase in Joel's prophecy quoted by Peter in **Acts 2:21**, that all during this new age of the Spirit "**everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**"

To a Jew back then the word "saved" would be heard as "delivered." It meant escaping with one's life, which Jesus had already talked about in Matthew 24, when warning the Jews of that day to run for their lives when the disasters he was predicting started happening, and to trust that their lives would be spared if they believed him. Trusting him, therefore, was the key. It wouldn't stop the disasters happening, but calling on him would "save" them. Calling on him would get them through what was coming with their lives intact.

And this was the context of Joel's prophecy too. It was all about God's response to Israel when disaster overwhelmed them, which it was at that very moment in an advancing army of locusts that was devastating their crops (Joel 2:4-11). God's message through Joel was simple: Call on the Lord (verses 12-14) and he would "make up for the years of the locust" (verse 25). God would see them through the disaster and restore what they lost.

So in their depths of despair don't give up calling on God and trusting him, even when things looked hopeless. Joel's message to Israel was clear, therefore, that in this life God allows disasters and desperate things to happen that threaten life and limb, but never at any time does he abandon his people. So, call on him and prove it, that he will deliver and restore.

It's interesting, then, that the first thing that came to Peter's mind when the Spirit wind started howling on Pentecost was this message in the book of Joel. But it all tied in so perfectly with the desperation the Jews felt that God hadn't delivered them from pagan rule since their return from captivity in Babylon 500 years earlier. God had allowed them to feel abandoned for that long. For centuries now they hadn't been the nation that God had called them to be, nor had they drawn other nations to God either. They'd become an ineffective backwater nation that no one took any notice of, except to squash them whenever they rebelled. So, just like the priests in Joel 1:9, the Jews of Peter's day felt utterly helpless, and they had no idea what to do either.

Peter, however, knew that something new was about to happen to deliver the Jews from their doldrums and put wind in their sails to restore their vitality and sense of purpose again, because Jesus had already told him and the other disciples that the Spirit was coming. So Peter's mind was already tuned to God revealing the next step in his plan. But did Peter have any idea that the first thing that would happen was all one hundred and twenty of them yelling out the greatness of God in several languages, followed by this specific prophecy in the book of Joel about calling on the Lord's name and he would deliver them?

Did he have any idea, in other words, that his message at the founding and birth of the Church would be about deliverance and restoration? Or that the theme of the last days, from that moment on until the time Jesus came back to Earth again, would be about a group of people grasping the message of Joel, that in this life it's all about locusts and other troubles that never go away, but call on the name of the Lord and he will always deliver and restore?

Perhaps in Peter's mind he was only envisioning something that would lift his fellow Jews out of their present hopelessness, and prepare them for the horrors Jesus had predicted in Matthew 24, as if all that Jesus had told them was meant only for that time then. Perhaps the reason for the Spirit coming, therefore, was purely to enable the Jews of that day to see God's power for real, that he really was with them, and it would bring a change of heart in them, enabling them to trust God and start being the nation he'd called them to be again.

But if that really was all that Peter was expecting and hoping for, it suddenly burst its seams and roared like a flood-filled river into much huger proportions, when they all found themselves yelling out the greatness of God in sixteen languages to the biggest gathering of Jews all year. So this was what the Spirit being given was all about; it was all about animating a group of terribly ordinary people with an understanding of God's greatness so clear and real that they looked and sounded like people who'd drunk too much wine. They were bold, they were fluent, they were totally uninhibited, and they could stand up in front of thousands with no fear whatsoever in talking about God and how great he was to them personally.

And that wasn't all either, because Peter wasn't intimidated one bit by the hecklers, and he yells out, "You ain't seen nothing yet, folks, because this is just the beginning. This is just the first taste of what Joel predicted, that the Spirit will be doing exactly what you see happening right now, inspiring ordinary people like us from all walks of life, young and old, men and women, to believe and preach God's greatness. And that's because they'll know God's greatness in their own experience, of God again and again delivering and restoring them in whatever debilitating circumstances they find themselves in, when they call on his name. All during this time of the last days until Jesus returns, then, there will be people like these one hundred and twenty you see here, who will live lives of vitality and joy and celebration, no matter what hits them, because they know and believe what Joel wrote, that God is the great Deliverer and Restorer, who always makes up for what the locusts of this world have eaten up in their lives and destroyed."

And this was the message on the day the Church was born. It was all about a period of time coming when ordinary people from all walks of life would boldly and fluently explain to others the greatness of God - from their own experience. They wouldn't be shy about accepting the reality of life - that it mostly feels like maggots eating you up inside - but they'd also experienced what happens when you call on the name of the Lord for deliverance and restoration.

And this is what the Spirit was sent for, to make sure there are people just like us in every age who understand how God works. We understand that God allows the locusts (the trials of living in this world) to knock the stuffing out of us, just like they did in the time of Joel. God lets this ridiculous world suck the life and vitality out of us, just like a spider sucks the life out of a fly. He lets us bob around helplessly in the same boat everyone else does.

But the Spirit in these last days before Jesus comes is also constantly demonstrating through the lives of us Christians that God delivers and restores those who call on him in their troubles. That's why God lets us suffer like everyone else, because it's through us that he can show people suffering doesn't have to suck the life out of us. He can show people through ordinary folks like us, that no matter what we humans are hit by it is still possible to live a life of vitality, animation, joy and peace, even in the face of helplessness. And God makes sure there are ordinary folks like us, from all walks of life, in all sorts of circumstances, in every century, and all over the world, to prove it.

Word continually spreads during this last days period, then, that God can be experienced personally, based on the lives of people from all walks of life who've experienced God personally. And all they did to experience God personally was call on God whenever the world and circumstances were overwhelming them, and God in some way or other enabled them to feel delivered and restored. God doesn't even need to remove the circumstances either. I remember one Christian lady reduced to pointing to letters on an alphabet to communicate, because she couldn't talk or move more than a finger due to her illness. But her eyes were alive and she was at peace. I asked how she could be that way, and she slowly pointed to the letters on her alphabet board that spelled out JESUS. She was calling on his name. That's how.

Unfortunately, I forgot to pass that story on when another lady told me she wished she had such faith when confronted with a Christian dying prematurely from cancer who, amazingly, was still at peace and even joking, and wasn't bothered by the cancer at all. I should've said to the lady, "But that's what happens when you call on Jesus' name," to pass on the message of Pentecost. Because that's what Pentecost is about; it's about the Spirit inspiring an understanding of the message of Joel, that what Joel predicted is now happening, meaning that people from all walks of life and circumstances can now experience God delivering them and restoring them personally when they call on him in their troubles. And this was the message the Church was founded on.