

God's New Society
Acts 2

Turn to Acts 2. On one day, people from every nation under heaven heard the gospel, trusted in Christ, were baptized, and received the Holy Spirit. Our question: what changed for them? How were they different afterward? How did the Spirit pouring out shape those people?

“Every nation under heaven” are Luke’s words, they are not technically true, but people from many different nations were together for this event. The Scripture lists many nations in Acts 2. 3000 of these received Peter’s message on that day, and were baptized. What happened to them then? What did they do? What changed for them?

Last week, when we talked about the one central place of worship from Deuteronomy 12, we talked about the three festivals every year when all of Israel would go to the one place. Pentecost is the feast of weeks, seven weeks after Passover. Jews from all over the Roman empire still obeyed Moses, and they came to be at the temple, the one central place, for Pentecost.

The Spirit Arrives, Everyone Hears – Acts 2:1-17

Let’s read, from Acts 2S:1. *When the day of Pentecost came, the disciples were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” 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. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people....”

Jews had come from every nation for Pentecost. One estimate is that Jerusalem at that time had about 30,000 people, and that during the three festivals that number would go up to about 80,000 people. That is an educated guess, which is all we have.

These Jews probably all spoke Greek, but they also knew the language of the country where they lived. When the Holy Spirit was poured out, they all heard the wonders of God in their own language. This in a sense undoes the confusion God caused by languages at the tower of Babel. Because of the Spirit, they can all listen to these Galileans and understand them.

The Holy Spirit caused a great coming together of understanding. But the people in this crowd are totally confused. The paragraph stresses two things. One is the list of all the different parts of the world that were there, hearing about God. The other is the amount of bewilderment.

What does this mean? *A crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"*

Peter's Sermon – Acts 2:16-36

Then Peter explains, and his whole sermon is to answer their question, "what does this mean?" Peter's answer has two parts. First, this is the Holy Spirit. This is what Joel promised, that in the last days God would pour out his Spirit. That's what you are witnessing. This is the very thing Joel promised, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on God's people in the last days.

That's part one of "what this means." Part two answers, "why is this happening now?" And the answer is Jesus the Lord. "Why is the Spirit poured out now? Because Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified, is now exalted to God's right hand as Lord and Christ, and Jesus the Lord has poured out the Holy Spirit, like he promised to do when he was still with us."

So the people asked, "what does this mean?" Peter says, "It means that Joel's prophecy, that the Holy Spirit would come in the last days, is being fulfilled right now in front of you.

"And that's happening now because God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead, and God set Jesus at his right hand, as Psalm 110 predicted, and Jesus himself has poured out the Spirit. Which, incidentally, means that God's people are in a lot of trouble with God for rejecting and crucifying Jesus. But good news: whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

The New Lives of Believers – Acts 2:40-47

With many other words Peter warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Now we will hear the answer to our opening question: what changed for these people? What did the gospel and the Holy Spirit do to them? The answer is: their life together.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. Everyone (all Jerusalem) was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had all things in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and shared food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Let's go through this more carefully: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.* The apostles taught them about Jesus, they taught them what Jesus taught them, including how Jesus fulfills the OT. The 3000 were devoted to that.

And to the fellowship. They were devoted to the fellowship. It's very general, they were devoted to being together. But *koinonia* also often means partnership, or sharing goods. They were devoted to oneness in everything.

Very quickly in the early church, what we call "potluck" and "Lord's Supper" were more or less inseparable. So "the breaking of bread" means both eating meals together, and probably also the Lord's Supper.

And to the prayers. The NIV says "to prayer," but that's misleading. There were daily prayers three times a day at the temple. The Gospel of Luke ends with the disciples always in the temple praising God, and Acts 3 begins with Peter and John going to the temple for afternoon prayers.

The 3,000 were devoted to the prayer times at the temple. This does not really suit evangelicals, which is why the NIV fudges a bit, but the 3,000 new converts eagerly participated in these daily prayer times. They were model devout Jews!

Everyone (all Jerusalem) was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had all things in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

All the believers were together and had all things in common. "They were together." What does that mean exactly? Don't know. They were together in every way they could think of.

They had all things in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone of them who had need. The gospel and the Holy Spirit changed their social life, and it changed their economic life. *They had all things in common.* They had open hands about their possessions.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. The temple was a big place, probably not big enough inside for 3000, but in the temple courts there would have been room for a large crowd. They *all* wanted to be together *every day*. Wow!

So, some of you are probably gasping for breath right now. You are hoping I won't say we all need to start doing this, and you can relax, because I am not going to say we need to live just like this. When we read these words, and think about them, it seems impossible to actually be like that, and furthermore, we're not sure we want it. We're actually pretty sure we *don't* want it.

What we're reading here is the direction that the Holy Spirit is pulling. Let's take it that way. What is the Spirit after with his people? This. To what does he lead? This.

They broke bread in their homes and shared food with glad and generous hearts. They were together every day at the temple, and they were also frequently in each other's homes, to eat together and have the Lord's Supper. They were glad and generous.

Praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The other people in Jerusalem were impressed, both by the miracles of the apostles, and the unity of the believers. Both were amazing and miraculous. And the Lord added more people every day. When people came to the Lord, he put them in this group. It was not a sealed group. They were open to new members every day.

All of this is what happened on the day that the Lord Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on his disciples. People from many different nations and languages and countries were joined into one new society that lived like this. The Spirit produced in these people God's picture of how he wants people to live together. Most of them had never seen each other before.

This ideal situation did not last. It was a golden age, a short perfect time. The other NT churches did some of this, but by no means all. Even in Jerusalem it did not last this way. Still, this picture tells us what God is trying to do with his people. If everything was perfect, this is what his Spirit would produce in us. That's what Acts 2 intends to show us.

What did they not do?

To make a little clearer what this means, let's notice what Scripture does *not* mention here.

The 3000 did not do signs and wonders, only the apostles did those. They did not keep hearing the sound of the mighty rushing wind, or see tongues of fire on each other. They did not speak in tongues. These might have happened, but for Luke they are not worth mentioning in the fullness of what the Holy Spirit did with the 3,000.

The 3,000 were not evangelizing the unbelievers around them. Jesus told the apostles that the Spirit would come and they would be witnesses. We sometimes think that's for everyone, but by the end of Acts 2 it's clear that the 3,000 were doing something else. The Spirit gave them praise for God and love for each other.

There is not one clear instruction in all the NT Letters telling believers to speak the gospel to unbelievers around them. It's a good thing to do, I've done this, and some of the 3,000 probably did as well. But that's not what made them special to God.

The 3,000 did not share their possessions with unbelievers. But between the 3,000, everything was held in an open hand. Everyone believer got what they needed. In Acts and the NT Letters, do you know that there is not one story of believers sharing possessions with unbelievers, and not one instruction to believers to do this?

It is not wrong, of course. Marilyn and I do this, and some of the 3,000 probably did too. But the silence on this, in Acts and the NT Letters, is not an accident, my brothers and sisters. God intends, by his Son and his Spirit, to create a new society, God's alternative society.

And remember that the 3,000 do not know each other before Peter's sermon. They are Jews from all over the Roman world who came to Jerusalem for Pentecost, the Festival of Weeks. They were Jewish, but otherwise were strangers from different countries. The gospel, baptism, and the Holy Spirit, got them past the differences, and made them one.

We, in this church, want to aim ourselves in this direction, and that is why we have our covenant of membership.

Covid-19 and Church Unity

I am teaching this so we understand what pleases God, what he sent his Spirit to do. I am not teaching this because I think we are failing badly, and I am not teaching this because of anything having to do with covid-19.

This plague, and what we need to do to slow it down, interrupts all kinds of church body life. That's painful obvious. God knows all about that, and our call does not change. We will do our best to stay connected, in spite of the limitations and restrictions that are upon us.

One way or another, this pandemic is from God. Even if you think this comes from the Beast itself, it is still from God. The Beast has authority on earth because God gives it authority. Revelation makes that clear. The Beast is on a leash that ends in God's hand. God decides exactly how long the leash is, and God decides exactly how long it lasts.

I don't think this is from the Beast, at all, but it makes no difference. It is from God, and God decides how severe this will be, and how long it will last. Of that there is no doubt.

And God's call to us does not change at all. It has always been the same. We will serve God and worship him, we will love one another, and we will wait for Jesus our Lord, who saves us from the coming wrath. This was the call on the day of Pentecost, and it is the same call right now.

Specifically, in light of Acts 2, we will stay connected and involved with each other as much as we can. And we are doing this. I am much encouraged by how this group has responded since March. There have certainly been some rough and difficult parts, and that will continue. We're being tested and pruned, as God's people have always been tested and pruned.

And God has been faithful, he's provided in many ways. This very same Holy Spirit is among us, and works in us, and good things from God still happen. Here's how 1 Cor 15 ends: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.* Amen.

PRAYER: O God our Father, thank you for the picture that Acts 2 gives us of what your Spirit can do. Thank you for direction, thank you for aiming us. Apparently the Spirit's fruit produces best if we know what it is, so we can cooperate with him.

Father, the life of the 3000 in those early days seems so far beyond us. Have mercy on us, all the ways I don't live like this, and often I don't actually want it. That's who we are, you know what we are like. But we do love you, and we do love each other.

You tell us that you began a good work in us, and that you will complete it. You tell us that you're the one who works among us, so that we'll want to do what pleases you, and so that we'll do it. You tell us that you who call us are faithful, and you will make it happen.

So, Father, complete in us the work you have begun. Work among us, so that we'll want to do what pleases you, and so that we will do it. Equip us with everything good for doing your will, and work in us what pleases you. That's our only hope. The good news is that you've done much of this already, and for that we praise and thank you. Amen.

(response time)

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives us endurance and encouragement give us the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.