

Faith Fact



What is Pentecost?

On Sunday, May 20, Christians across the world will celebrate Pentecost. For Christians, Pentecost is a holiday (holy day) on which we commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the early followers of Jesus. Before the events of the first Pentecost, which came a few weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection, there were followers of Jesus, but no movement that could be meaningfully called "the church". Thus, from a historical point of view, Pentecost is the day on which the church was started. This is also true from a spiritual perspective, since the Spirit brings the church into existence and enlivens it. Thus, Pentecost is the church's birthday.

What does the word "Pentecost" mean?

The English word "Pentecost" is a transliteration of the Greek word *Pentekostos*, which means "fifty". It comes from the ancient Christian expression *pentekoste hemera*, which means "fiftieth day". But Christians did not invent the phrase "fiftieth day". Rather, they borrowed it from Greek-speaking Jews who used the phrase to refer to a Jewish holiday. This holiday was known as the Festival of Weeks, or, more simply, Weeks (*Shavuot* in Hebrew). This name comes from an expression in Leviticus 23:16, which instructs people to count seven weeks or "fifty days" from the end of Passover to the beginning of the next holiday (*pentekonta hemeras* in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture).

Shavuot was the second great feast in Israel's yearly cycle of holy days. It was originally a harvest festival (Exodus 23:16), but in time, turned into a day to commemorate the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. This day became especially significant for Christians because seven weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, during the Jewish celebration of Shavuot/Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon his first followers, thus, empowering them for their mission and gathering them together as a church.

What Actually Happened on that day of Pentecost?

This event is recorded in the New Testament book known as The Acts of the Apostles. Chapter 2 begins, "And when the day of Pentecost (*ten hemeran tes pentekostes*) had come, (the first followers of Jesus) were all together in one place" (2:1). All of a sudden, a sound came from heaven, like a strong wind, filling the house where the people had gathered. Something like tongues of fire rested on their heads. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak" (2:4).

The languages spoken by the early Christians were intelligible (not other worldly) and were heard by thousands of Jewish pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate *Shavuot*. The content of the miraculous messages had to do with God's mighty works (2:11). Many who heard these messages in their own languages were amazed, though others thought the Christians were just drunk (2:12).

At some point, Peter, one of the leading followers of Jesus, stood up and preached his first sermon. He interpreted the events of that morning in light of a prophecy of the Hebrew prophet Joel. In that text, God promised to pour out his Spirit on all flesh, empowering diverse people to exercise divine power. This would be a sign of the coming “day of the Lord” (Acts 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32).

Peter went on to explain that Jesus had been raised and had poured out the Spirit in fulfillment of God’s promise through Joel (2:32-33). When the crowd asked what they should do, Peter urged them to turn their lives around and be baptized in the name of Jesus. Then they would be forgiven and would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:37-39). Acts reports that about 3,000 people were added to the church that day (2:41). Not a bad response to Peter’s first sermon!

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