

WALKING
IN THE
SPIRIT'S
POWER

GARY HAMRICK



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*Dedicated to the memory of Pastor Chuck Smith,
who ordained me in 1993 and who was my pastor
thereafter until he went to be with the Lord in 2013.
He taught me more about the book of Acts and
the person of the Holy Spirit than anyone else.*

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Acts: A Sequel

Have you ever arrived late to a movie and needed a friend to catch you up on the plot? If you are not familiar with the Gospels, reading Acts can feel like starting in the middle of the action. After all, Acts is a sequel to the book of Luke. While the book of Luke is about the life and ministry of Jesus, the book of Acts is about the lives and ministries of His apostles and what they accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. That description would make for a longer book title than *The Acts of the Apostles*, but certainly a more accurate one.

Acts also begins where Luke leaves off. The last part of the book of Luke shows Jesus rising from the dead, appearing to His disciples for 40 days, promising the disciples that He would provide another Comforter, and ascending to heaven before their eyes. Acts begins with a recap of Jesus' ascension and of His promise regarding the coming of the Comforter, whom we call the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, and He is the One who empowers believers to continue Jesus' ministry and spread the gospel.

This emphasis on the Holy Spirit does not signify an end to Jesus' role. Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), to Peter in a vision (Acts 10), to Paul in a vision (Acts 18), to Paul in physical form (Acts 23), and to John to reveal Himself and end-times events

(Revelation). We have not seen the last of Jesus, but the focus shifts to the workings of the Spirit and what the apostles accomplish through Him.

However, to understand Acts, we need to know more than the narrative focus. We must also understand the author and his intended audience.

The Author

Luke is the only Gentile author in the Bible. Around AD 58 to 69, God used him to pen two books of the Bible—first Luke, then Acts.

By trade, Luke was a physician. In Colossians 4:14, Paul called Luke “the beloved physician.” And in this capacity, he later joined Paul’s missionary journeys. We know he joined Paul because the pronouns Luke used changed in Acts 16 from “they” to “we” when Paul and his companions were in Troas.

The Receiver

Both Luke and Acts were written to Theophilus, a name that means “lover of God.” Because of the symbolism in the name, some scholars speculate that this was a hidden reference to the Church and its love for God.

However, Theophilus was likely a real person. Luke addressed him with the respectful term “most excellent” in Luke 1:3, an unlikely title for the Church.

Theophilus may have even been Luke’s master. In those days, the rich would hire a personal physician if they could afford one, so Luke was probably an indentured servant or slave who had received permission from Theophilus to go on missionary journeys with Paul. And God, who shows no partiality toward the rich and powerful, any more than to the poor and powerless, chose to inspire this servant to author two of the 27 books in the New Testament.

A Book of Firsts

The book of Acts is a book of firsts.

- Acts 1: The first time the gospel was entrusted to men and women following Jesus' ascension to heaven
- Acts 2: The first time the Holy Spirit was poured out upon all believers rather than on assignment (in fulfillment of Joel 2)
- Acts 2: The first time an evangelical message was preached, the first time there were converts to the Christian faith, and the birth of the first church
- Acts 3: The first miracle of the early Church
- Acts 4: The first opposition to the early Church
- Acts 5: The first judgment of the early Church
- Acts 6–7: The first martyr of the early Church

Let's begin with an understanding of the promise of the Holy Spirit.

The Promise of the Spirit

ACTS 1

Some Christians feel powerless against sin, cowardly in their witness, and weary of the race that is the life of the believer. They are left wondering if there is more to Christianity than just biding their time until Jesus returns. This does not need to be you. Victory, courage, and strength are possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. But first, we must define the baptism of God's Spirit.

A Word on Jesus

ACTS 1:1-2, 4-5—"The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up...And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which,' He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'"

The Gospels are not the last word on Jesus. Our Lord does not fade out of the pages of Scripture after His ascension. He remains in contact with His people.

The focus of Acts is the ministry of the Spirit, but that does not mean Jesus leaves the scene. Besides the times that Jesus appeared physically or in visions to Peter, Paul, and later to John, we know that He continues to speak to His people today. The end of the Gospels may signify the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, but not the end of His impact on our world. Jesus is coequal and coeternal with God, for He is God, and He is still speaking to believers.

We also know that as believers, we are to live in light of His return. One day, we will see Jesus not as the Lamb, but as the Lion of Judah, the King returning to reign over His people. The men in Acts 1:10 allude to this.

Men in White

ACTS 1:10-11—"While they [the apostles] looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.'"

The men in white apparel are angels, and they promise the disciples that Jesus will come again from where He ascended, which is the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12). And when He does, there will be a great earthquake that splits the mountain in half (Zechariah 14:4-5). Then Jesus will fight for His people and reign over the earth, ushering in the Millennium, which will be marked by a universal peace that lasts for 1,000 years. After this, God will put an end to Satan's revolt and those who rebel with him. This will be the last we see of Satan's attempts to thwart God. After the devil's defeat, God will bring in the New Jerusalem, where He will reign forever and ever, amen.

That is what we wait for—the blessed return of our Lord.

Passing the Baton

Initially, the apostles did not realize they would have to wait for the second coming of the Lord. In their minds, the prophecies speaking of the Messiah were going to be fulfilled in their time, for the separation between Jesus' first and second comings was not yet fully understood. That's why they asked Jesus, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They were still thinking about the arrival of Christ's earthly kingdom rather His spiritual kingdom.

In response, Jesus explained to them that their job was not to try to figure out the exact date He would return to rule and reign. Instead, they were to be His witnesses, spreading the good news of the gospel throughout the world.

ACTS 1:8—"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

This marks the birth of the Church and the beginning of the Church Age, the period between Jesus' ascension and His second coming. During this age, we as believers are called to be Jesus' witnesses, proclaiming Him as the only way to the Father, for His death was the only way man's sins could be paid for.

Power of the Spirit

God does not give us a job without equipping us. Jesus sent His people the Holy Spirit, who gives them the seal of salvation, empowers them with victory over sin, and provides them with boldness for witnessing. This Holy Spirit power spoken of in verse 8 resides in every believer. Today, thousands of martyrs later, we can see that God's Spirit can and does empower His people to be faithful to Christ, even unto death.

Even the word Jesus uses for “witnesses” is translated from the Greek *martus*, from which we get our English word *martyr*. To be a true witness for Jesus, we must be prepared to die for Him.

A note on martyrs: Despite the way Islamic extremists have used the word, a martyr is not someone who kills for his cause, but someone who is killed for his cause. As the early Church Father Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

We should not be surprised that God can use even the frail mortality of man for His glory.

2 Corinthians 4:7—“We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (NIV).

Do not sit around waiting for the return of our Lord. Be active as you wait. “Do not quench the Spirit” by ignoring His desire to make you a holy vessel, fit for God’s use (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Submit to God, ask to be filled with the Spirit, and watch Him move through you.

Dynamite Power

Acts is all about the power of God working through His people. In fact, “power” in Acts 1:8 is translated from the Greek *dunamis*, from which we get the word *dynamite*. The Greek word is defined by the idea of a mighty force or authority, and that Holy Spirit power is the essence of Acts.

By way of comparison, “love” is mentioned more than 100 times in the Gospels but zero times in Acts. Instead, the operative word of Acts is “power,” repeated ten times, beginning in Acts 1:8. So the question is, How do we receive this power? Answer: by the filling of the “Holy Spirit”—*Ruach HaKodesh* in Hebrew, repeated 56 times in Acts.

Every believer is a walking, talking temple of God (1 Corinthians 6:19). The same God who raised Christ from the dead lives in us. Let us live our lives with the explosive power of the Holy Spirit so that our legacy may be one of victory in Jesus.

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the triune Godhead. Although there is one God, He reveals Himself in three persons. This concept was first explored in Genesis.

Genesis 1:26a—“God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.’”

Genesis 1:27—“God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

The use of both plural and singular pronouns to describe the same event clues us in to the plurality of the one God. Because He is God, the Holy Spirit has always existed. He is coequal and coeternal with God because He is God. The Holy Spirit did not come into existence in Acts 2. He was already present at the beginning of creation.

Genesis 1:2—“The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

The Holy Spirit is not an “it,” for He has all the attributes of personality.

1. He has a mind.

1 Corinthians 2:11—“What man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.”

2. He has a will.

1 Corinthians 12:11—“One and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.”

3. *He has emotions.*

Ephesians 4:30—“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” He is grieved when we sin.

The Spirit's Role

At the Last Supper, just before Jesus was crucified, He spoke of the Holy Spirit.

John 14:16-17—“I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”

The Spirit Draws Us

In the Greek—the original language of the New Testament—“with” is *para*, meaning “with, near, or around.” Notice that the Spirit of God dwelled with the apostles even then. We see that the first role of the Holy Spirit is to be around us, near us, drawing us, and leading us to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. No one comes to Jesus without the Holy Spirit's influence.

John 6:44—“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

1 Corinthians 12:3b—“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.”

The Spirit Indwells Us

In John 14:17, the Greek *en*, translated “in,” emphasizes how the Spirit would indwell believers at the moment of salvation.

John 20:19-22—“The same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

This is the moment that the Spirit of God indwelt the apostles. This is the moment I believe that they were born again.

Of course, the apostles had already known about God prior to John 20. Peter had declared that Jesus was the Son of God (Matthew 16), and the other apostles had believed in Jesus as Messiah (John 6), but John 20 was the first time that they had put their trust in Christ as the risen Lord who died for their sins. As soon as we trust in Jesus and His redemptive work on the cross, the Spirit comes to dwell in us.

1 Corinthians 3:16—“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”

Romans 8:11—“If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.”

The Spirit Baptizes Us

Some believers think that the Spirit’s indwelling at the time of conversion is all that is available to us. But if that were the case, why would Jesus promise His apostles that they would be baptized with the Spirit (Acts 1:5) and receive His power (Acts 1:8) after He had already breathed on them to receive the Holy Spirit in John 20?

ACTS 1:8—“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Perhaps your traditions say differently. But at some point, traditions must give way to Scripture.

And note the word “upon” in verse 8. This is the Greek *epi*, meaning “upon, on, or over.” This speaks not of the indwelling of the Spirit that the apostles experienced in John 20, but of an overflowing fullness and power upon the apostles that is available to all believers after salvation. Baptism, or *baptizo* in the Greek, means “to overwhelm, submerge, or immerse,” all words that better describe the concept of the Holy Spirit’s overflowing power.

The Bible also speaks of two kinds of baptisms:

Matthew 3:11—“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Acts 1:5—“John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

First, there is water baptism by submersion, as the word *baptizo* indicates. This happens after a person is saved and is a symbolic way for us to identify with the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord.

Second, there is a Spirit baptism. We who believe in Jesus should all seek to be empowered by the fullness of God’s Spirit to live victoriously over sin and speak boldly in His Name. To receive this fullness, we simply need to ask.

Luke 11:11-13—“If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil,

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”

If fallen men can be kind to their children, then how much more will the Father be kind to His children who cry out to Him?

Reflections on Acts 1

Study Questions

1. Whom did Jesus pass the spiritual baton to in Acts 1:8? How did that lead to the birth of the Church, which we belong to today?
2. Who is “the Promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4), and in what ways does He empower believers?
3. How do our limitations point to the limitless power of God (2 Corinthians 4:7)?
4. God is omnipotent, but our rebellion can still “quench” the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Instead of ignoring God’s commands, what should we do instead?
5. What is the operative word of Acts, and how should it shape our understanding of what is possible in the life of the believer? (See page 16.)
6. Why does the Bible call us the “temple” of God (1 Corinthians 6:19)?
7. How do we know the Spirit is part of the Godhead (Genesis 1:2, 26, 27)?
8. How do we know that the Holy Spirit is not an “it”? How should knowing that the Spirit is a person help us submit to His leading?
9. What is the difference between the indwelling of the Spirit (John 20:19-22) and the overflowing fullness or baptism of the Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Acts 1:5)? Is the Spirit of God in you and upon you? How do you know?
10. How do we receive the baptism of the Spirit?

Important Takeaways for Us Today

1. How does Christ continue to speak to His people today?
How has He spoken to you this past week?
2. Just as Jesus passed the baton to the apostles, they passed the baton to the Church—to us. How are you fulfilling the Great Commission given to us in Acts 1:8?

The Church Is Born

ACTS 2

I cannot imagine how the disciples must have felt. One moment Jesus was dead, then He returned, after which He ascended into heaven as suddenly as He had appeared. What were they thinking? What were they feeling? Anxiety? Excitement? Confusion? What was this “Promise” that Jesus spoke of? (Acts 1:4). But amid this upheaval, Jesus’ 120 followers sought God together, and the Spirit of God came upon them with power. A sound came like that of a rushing wind, something like flames of fire rested on each person, and they all spoke in tongues. In addition to the amazing signs that came upon believers that day, another wonderful event occurred in Acts 2: the birth of the Church. This chapter will look at the Spirit’s mighty outpouring not only as an historical event, but as an event with application for our lives today.

Discarding Ignorance

Before diving into Acts 2, we must understand that there are three topics within Paul’s epistles that he warned us to not be ignorant about.

1. Israel and the place of the Jewish people in history and prophecy

Romans 11:25—"I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in."

2. The rapture and end-times events

1 Thessalonians 4:13, 16-17—"I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope... For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."

3. The Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts

1 Corinthians 12:1—"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant."

Perhaps Paul warned us not to be ignorant of these three topics because they confuse many Christians and even incite conflict. How ironic that the very issues Paul warned us not to be ignorant about are the very matters over which many Christians divide today. And while I believe these issues are important and should be discussed, I also believe that topics not related to salvation should never cause division. Like the early Church, we must be united in Christ.

Ephesians 4:3—"Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Note the word “endeavoring” implies that unity takes two or more people. There are differences we must work through. But God calls us to peace. Keep this in mind as we read through Acts, the book of the Bible that mentions the Holy Spirit more than any other. As we discuss the person and role of the Holy Spirit, let’s do so with humble, open hearts.

Waiting for the Baptism of the Spirit

Immediately before His ascension into heaven, Jesus instructed His followers to “wait” for the “Promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4), which He defined as the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus’ followers totaled about 120 people at the time, including the 11 remaining apostles and Mary, the mother of Jesus (who is mentioned for the last time in Acts 1:14).

The people who heard Jesus’ instruction did not know how long they would have to wait, so in the meantime, Peter suggested that they select a replacement for Judas, casting lots (the ancient version of “rolling the dice”) to choose between two men: Joseph, surnamed Justus, and Matthias, to whom the lot fell.

This was likely not a directive from the Lord. Matthias is never again mentioned in Scripture, and neither is the casting of lots. Although the lots were a way to determine the will of God in the Old Testament, believers today now have the Spirit of God living inside us, guiding us. We do not need to flip coins or roll the dice—we can come to God directly through prayer, fasting, and the reading of His Word.

Regardless of the casting of lots, Matthias disappeared off the pages of Scripture. Instead, God selected His next apostle Himself in Acts 9 when He called Saul, who was later known as Paul. We also know Paul called himself an apostle in 1 Corinthians 15:9, though one “abnormally born” (1 Corinthians 15:8 NIV), for he came to the fold in a different way than the other 11.

But despite acting outside of God’s directive, the disciples had waited and sought God together. And on the day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, Jesus’ followers received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The History of Pentecost

ACTS 2:1-4—“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

Pentecost was a celebration that came 50 days after the Feast of Firstfruits, hence the name *Pentēkostē*, meaning “fiftieth”—a reference to where this feast fell on the Jewish calendar.

The Hebrew name for Pentecost was *Shavout*, meaning “weeks.” This celebration was also called the Feast of Weeks—a reference to the seven weeks and a day (or 50 days).

Historically, this feast commemorated the giving of the law that Moses received from God on Mount Sinai, and because this celebration came at the end of the wheat harvest, Jews gave an offering of two loaves of leavened bread at the temple.

Leviticus 23:16-17—“Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD. You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the LORD.”

God’s choice of day to pour out His Spirit was intentional.

Pentecost was the only feast during which the people were required to add leaven to bread, a substance typically associated with sin throughout the Bible. But in this feast, the offering of the two loaves was a picture of God as the Lord of the harvest and the ultimate harvest of souls (of Jews and Gentiles) that would come through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, enabling sinners to be saved.

The Significance of Jewish Feasts

There are other reasons for God's timing. Since Jewish feast days typically drew many people together, God chose this particular feast of Pentecost so that many would witness and hear God's power. Acts 2:5 tells us that devout Jews came to Jerusalem to celebrate "from every nation under heaven."

Another reason for God's timing was that He had been using the chronological order of ancient Jewish feasts to unveil His plans for the world:

1. Christ's crucifixion occurred at Passover.

While lambs were sacrificed at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Lamb of God gave His life on the cross. Jesus' death coincided with the sacrifice of lambs being offered for the feast of Passover.

2. Christ's resurrection occurred during the Feast of Firstfruits.

While the people were giving God the first of their harvest, Jesus rose from the dead, the firstborn of the dead. He represents the resurrected life that believers will have through faith in Him. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:20, "Now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

3. The Holy Spirit baptized the early Church at Pentecost.

Next on the calendar of the Jewish feasts came Pentecost, when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the Church.

4. The rapture of the Church could coincide with the Feast of Trumpets.

Following Pentecost came the Feast of Trumpets, or *Rosh Hashanah* in Hebrew. It is the last feast on the Jewish calendar and a celebration of the new year. This holiday, which occurs every September, may be pointing to God's trumpet call that begins the rapture, which is the next event on the timeline of the Church Age.

1 Thessalonians 4:16—“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.”

Two Contrasting Dispensations

God pouring out His Spirit on the day of Pentecost was no accident. On the same day of celebrating the giving of the law in the Old Testament, God showered His people with His grace, showing why the new dispensation (or order) under Christ is better than the old dispensation under the law.

The Law and the Death of the 3,000

In the Old Testament, Pentecost had a tragic beginning, for while God was giving the law to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Israelites, camping at the base of the mountain, became impatient and sinned against God by creating a golden calf to worship through lewd, pagan rituals. God informed Moses of what the people were doing, so Moses went down and, upon seeing the evil, called those who were on God's side to separate themselves from the others.

Exodus 32:26—“Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, ‘Whoever is on the LORD’s side—come to me!’ And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him.”

As punishment, God commanded the tribe of Levi to go through the Israelite camp and kill the disobedient, and 3,000 died.

Exodus 32:27-28—“He said to them, ‘Thus says the LORD God of Israel: “Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.”’ So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day.”

The Spirit and the Saving of the 3,000

In contrast to the death count in the Old Testament, the New Testament shows us people stepping from death to life. Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and Peter's preaching of the first evangelistic message, about 3,000 souls were saved. That's the difference between law and grace—3,000 died under law, but 3,000 were saved under grace!

ACTS 2:38-41—“Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.’ And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”

This is the same Peter who had failed Jesus, denying the Lord three times (Luke 22:54-62). But by the grace of God, Peter was restored and able to call his people to repentance.

In the Old Testament, Pentecost stood for the giving of the law. In the New Testament, it stood for the giving of the Spirit. In the Old Testament, Moses called for those on the Lord's side to separate themselves, and 3,000 died. In the New Testament, Peter called for people to separate themselves from their perverse generation and 3,000 were saved.

This stark contrast proves that while the law shows us how sinful we are, it cannot save us. Only God's grace can do that.

2 Corinthians 3:6-8—“The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?”

The law is not meant to save, but to convict. Like a thermometer, the law can show a man that he is sick but has no power to heal him. The moral code is important and ought to be abided by, but man cannot keep the law perfectly.

That is why we need Jesus, the Savior of the world.

The Offer of Life

Life truly begins when we trust Christ as our Savior. This is because the abundant life and eternal life come by the Spirit, not by the works of the law.

John 10:10b—“I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

John 3:16—“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Life is found in the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, not by the law. Hence, Pentecost became a picture of how the law kills but the Spirit gives life. Man is sinful and in need of salvation, and graciously, God is willing to accept sinners who find salvation through His grace.

Three Phenomena at Pentecost

In Acts 2, three supernatural phenomena marked the outpouring of God's Spirit, which was manifested audibly, visibly, and verbally.

Audibly

The Spirit came with the sound of a mighty, rushing wind (Acts 2:2). Scripture uses wind to symbolize the presence of the Lord:

Jeremiah 30:23—“Behold, the whirlwind of the LORD goes forth with fury, a continuing whirlwind; it will fall violently on the head of the wicked.”

John 3:8—“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Visibly

The Spirit came like tongues, or flames of fire, lighting on each disciple (Acts 2:3). Significantly, fire is another symbol of God’s presence and guidance.

Exodus 3:1-2—“Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed.”

Exodus 13:21—“The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night.”

Exodus 19:18—“Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.”

Matthew 3:11—“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Hebrews 12:29—“Our God is a consuming fire.”

Verbally

God’s people spoke in other languages, or “tongues,” and not everyone in the crowd responded to this outpouring of God’s Spirit in the same way.

Some were curious, asking themselves, “Whatever could this mean?” (Acts 2:12). Others were critical, saying, “They are full of new wine” (Acts 2:13).

And these two responses to the gift of tongues hold true for believers today: Some are curious, and some critical.

The Gift of Tongues

The verbal manifestation of the Spirit was the only one to continue into what we call “the gift of tongues.” This spiritual gift is defined as a language spoken by a believer that is known to others but unknown to the one speaking. God gives His people this gift for the purpose of prayer and praise to God.

The first mention of tongues in Scripture is in the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus spoke prophetically about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Mark 16:17-18—“These signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Tongues is mentioned again in Paul’s list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, and again in 1 Corinthians 14 when he instructs the Christians in Corinth on how tongues should operate in the Church.

But the question remains: Was the gift of tongues limited to the first-century Church, or is it still available for believers today? Christians differ on this issue, so let’s look at a verse that is often given two dissimilar interpretations:

1 Corinthians 13:8-12—“Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a

man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”

The debate arises from the phrase “but when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.” Some interpret “that which is perfect” as a reference to the completion of Scripture, and therefore they believe that the gifts of the Spirit have ceased because Scripture is complete. We call this cessationism.

However, the passage that cessationists use to support their view needs to be considered in the context of verses 11 and 12. In those verses, Paul used “now” and “but then” statements to compare the believer’s experience on Earth (the “now”) with what the believer’s experience will be in heaven (the “but then”). With that understanding, we see that the “perfect” (verse 10) that heralds the end of the gifts refers to the perfection of the believer in heaven, not the completion of the Bible. Therefore, until we are with the Lord in heaven, I believe that all the gifts are still available today. All who believe that the gifts are still available today are considered *continuists* rather than *cessationists*.

But then the question arises: Why would God give a believer the gift of tongues? What is the point of speaking without understanding what you say? Language is both a bridge and a barrier. And since most people occasionally struggle to communicate clearly in their native tongue, the Lord gives some believers the ability to bypass the limitations of their native language in order to communicate directly to the heart of God through a language unknown to the one praising Him or praying to Him.

Acts 2:11—“Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.”

Acts 10:46a—“They heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.”

1 Corinthians 14:2—“He who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.”

The Use and Misuse of Tongues

Although tongues can be a beautiful gift unto the Lord, like any good thing, this gift can be misused. Some have erroneously equated tongues to prophecy, but this gift is not about proclaiming a prophetic message to people. Still others have misused tongues to gain attention, but Scripture discourages tongues in public worship services.

1 Corinthians 14:18-19—“I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

1 Corinthians 14:23—“Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?”

Despite this, God gave the gift of tongues. Our God is creative and generous. He has bestowed many gifts on believers—but not all must speak in tongues. To some, He has given one gift. To others, more. He gives to each person as He determines. Paul asks some rhetorical questions about spiritual gifts to illustrate this:

1 Corinthians 12:29-30—“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?”

The Baptism of the Spirit and Tongues

Tongues can be evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but it is not the only evidence. God gives many gifts and is not required to give anyone a specific one.

1 Corinthians 13:1—“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.”

1 Corinthians 13:13—“Now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 14:1a—“Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.”

As you continue to read more about the Spirit of God and His role in the believer’s life, I pray that you will remain cautious and open, not closed and critical.

Wait upon the Lord for the gifts He wants to give to you. We can ask for the gift of tongues or any other gift—God will not be offended that we want more of Him (1 John 5:14)—but whatever your gift is, use it to glorify the Lord and serve others!

1 Peter 4:10-11—“As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

A Church in Crisis

ACTS 2:44-45—“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.”

When reading Scripture, we must take care not to remove a verse from its context. Those with a communist or socialist bent may take verses 44 and 45 to mean that God supports the forced redistribution of wealth, but that is not what the passage preaches.

Looking at the whole canon of Scripture, we see that God advocates for people to work to earn their bread.

1 **Timothy 5:8**—“If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

2 **Thessalonians 3:10b**—“If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.”

Instead of teaching the redistribution of wealth, Acts 2 teaches us about the great love shared between those within the early Church. In a time when converting to Christianity meant that your family network would no longer support you and other Jews would not buy from your business, church members chose to be generous to help each other survive.

People freely sharing their resources as a matter of survival is a principle, not a pattern. It's a description of what happened in Church history, not a prescription for how churches must act.

A Lighthouse in Danger

The Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in North Carolina is the tallest in the nation. Built in 1870, this lighthouse stands 198 feet high. Initially, this building stood one-half mile away from the coast. But after 100 years of erosion, it stood only 120 feet from the shoreline. Therefore, in 1999, nearly 130 years after the lighthouse was built, engineers strategically relocated this 4,830-ton lighthouse one-half mile inland to avoid the possibility of further erosion that could cause the structure to collapse.¹

The Church in America faces the same problem as that lighthouse. The foundations are eroding, and Christian values are being labeled as culturally irrelevant. Churches in America are closing faster than they are opening; they are no longer shining Christ's light of truth like they once did and still should. Every church in America ought to be a lighthouse founded on Christ our Rock, guiding people to Jesus.

However, unlike the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, the Church is not in danger of collapse. God always has a remnant, whether people accept God's truth in the mouths of His servants or reject it. For while the lighthouse in North Carolina was built by man's hands, the Church is built by Christ Himself:

Matthew 16:18—“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock [the confession that Jesus is the Son of God] I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (NASB).

God will preserve a remnant, no matter how small. Still, there is doubtless a declining number of people who make up the American Church. In the United States, about 86 Protestant churches close their doors every week—that is 12 churches a day. Lifeway Research out of Nashville, Tennessee, compiled a study in 2019 in which they found that 4,500 Protestant churches closed that year. Although Lifeway also found that 3,000 new churches were planted in 2019, this was the first time their research showed that church closings outpaced church openings in America—and that by 50 percent!²

In 1972, 92 percent of Americans identified as Christians. In 2020, the number of self-identifying Christians declined to 64 percent.³ This change is not caused by an increase in other religious camps: Only 6 percent of Americans identify as either Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or Buddhist. Instead, people are increasingly identifying themselves as “religiously unaffiliated.”

How can we change the tide of erosion? How can Christian values stop losing ground in our increasingly pagan culture? We need to make sure we are building on the right foundation: We need to return to God and His Word.

Essential Elements of the Church

There are four essentials to a thriving church—four elements that are essential to the proper function of the bride of Christ—and they are found in Acts 2:42.

ACTS 2:42—“They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

If these elements are abandoned, a church will be either anemic or dead.

While these are not the only elements that are vital to a church, all the rest of what a church does should flow from these four essentials.

The Apostles' Doctrine

The apostles' doctrine refers to the Word of God, which can be divided into two main categories: the principal message of eternal life, and the way to navigate one's earthly life.

Some do not wish to hear this essential element. Some who claim the name of Christ prefer to push the Bible away with opinions that Scripture is an antiquated book that is irrelevant to how we live. But when we abandon God's Word, we are the ones who become irrelevant. Without God in us, we have nothing to offer the culture since we have no hope to give others regarding this life or the life to come.

This is why the Bible stresses how we must meditate on God's Word and let it be our guide.

Psalm 119:105—"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

Jeremiah 15:16—"Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart."

If we reject the centrality of Scripture, if we do not believe that Scripture is the inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God, we take the foundation out from under the Church. If we cannot trust in the Bible, how can we trust anything that the Savior revealed through the Bible? How can we point people to Jesus?

We do not need to amend God's Word to fit the culture, as if somehow the culture has the higher moral authority greater than God. Rather than trying to change the Bible to fit us, we must change to fit the Bible.

God's Word contains timeless truth, no matter how unpalatable that truth may taste to our culture or our flesh. Ice cream and chocolate may taste better than broccoli and brussels sprouts, but that does not make sweets healthier than vegetables. The same is true for Scripture. God's Word is good for us even when it's hard to swallow:

1. *God's Word is the fire that refines us and the hammer that breaks the hard places of our hearts.*

Jeremiah 23:29—“Is not My word like a fire?’ says the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?’”

2. *God's Word is the water that washes away our impurities.*

Ephesians 5:26—“...that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.”

3. *God's Word is the milk that helps us grow.*

1 Peter 2:2—“As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.”

4. *God's Word is true in every age.*

Isaiah 40:8—“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”

God's book is bittersweet, but when we submit to Scripture's bitter reproofs and course correct, we are acting wiser than when we ignore the parts of Scripture we dislike.

Proverbs 13:15b—“The way of the unfaithful is hard.”

Those who choose to walk contrary to truth add unnecessary hardships to their lives. Life has enough challenges without us creating more problems for ourselves. Let us walk wisely.

When we study the Bible, God will speak to us on every sin issue and hot topic in our social, cultural, and political spheres. His truth will not always be popular. That does not give us an excuse to shy away from speaking the truth like many German Christians did in the 1940s. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The church was the conscience of the state and must call

it to account.”⁴ Our world is steeped in lies, and we must root ourselves in God’s Word to navigate the madness. If we do not stand on the foundation of God and His Word, we offer a lost world no hope of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, no assurance of life after death for believers, and no response to the social and cultural evils of our day.

As Martin Luther is reported as saying, “If you preach the gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time, you are not preaching the gospel at all.”

God’s Word centers us. That is why sound doctrine is one of the four essentials of the Church.

Fellowship

Acts 2:42 says the early Church was also founded on “fellowship,” or *koinonia*. This Greek word appears 20 times in the New Testament, but we do not have a perfect English equivalent. Hence, the word *koinonia* is not always translated as “fellowship.” Out of its 20 biblical mentions, *koinonia* is translated as “fellowship” 12 times. At other times, the word is translated as “contribution,” “sharing,” or “communion.”

1 **John 1:7**—“If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Romans 15:26—“It pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem.”

Hebrews 13:16—“Do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”

2 **Corinthians 13:14**—“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”

Each translation of *koinonia* conveys a closeness that involves caring for others and sharing life with them. We who believe are united in the common bond of Christ. We have good reason to be together!

We should also fellowship with one another because we need each

other. God's Word tells us in Hebrews 10:24-25 that we are to encourage each other to walk in righteousness, "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

Breaking of Bread

Sometimes during fellowship, the early Church also broke bread. Throughout the Bible, the phrase "breaking bread" can refer to believers eating together:

ACTS 2:46—"Continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart."

However, in Acts 2:42, "the breaking of bread" most likely referred to communion. This practice, first established by Christ at the Lord's Supper, reveals the true meaning of the Passover. What the Old Testament foreshadowed we now look back to, celebrating communion in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and in acknowledgment of our common bond of Jesus our Lord. Paul stated this clearly in his first letter to the believers in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 10:16-17—"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread."

Nowadays, the Church tends toward hermetically sealed communion elements for hygienic reasons. Our grape juice cups are prefilled for each church member. The little wafers, perfectly round, sit sealed over them. There is nothing wrong with that, but this does take something away from the symbolism of sharing one bread and one cup: that, regardless of our different backgrounds and circumstances, the same thing that nourishes you nourishes me. We are one body in Christ.

Prayer

The last essential element of the Church is prayer, which is defined as conversing and communing with God. This involves both talking and listening.

Psalm 5:3—“In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly” (NIV).

Psalm 46:10—“Be still, and know that I am God.”

Many times, we come to God because we need His rescue or blessing; but prayer is not about informing God of anything. He already knows all our needs and desires. Prayer is about seeking God's face and inviting Him into every aspect of our lives. We do not seek to move God's hand, but to have Him move our hearts. Of course, expressing our needs and desires to God is not wrong, but that should not be the only reason we pray.

And when we come together as a church, as the early Church did in Acts 2:42, we ought to have corporate prayer.

Matthew 18:20—“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Matthew 21:13—Jesus said, “My house shall be called a house of prayer.”

Reflections on Acts 2

Study Questions

1. What was significant about God sending the outpouring of the Spirit during *Shavout*?
2. Why did the Holy Spirit come in Acts 2:2 like a “rushing mighty wind” (Jeremiah 30:23; John 3:8)?
3. At Pentecost, the Spirit came like tongues of fire (Acts 2:3)—just as Matthew 3:11 prophesied. What does fire symbolize in Scripture (Exodus 3:1-2; 13:21)?
4. When the disciples started speaking in tongues, in what two ways did the crowd respond? What is your response to the gift of tongues?
5. What is the difference between the cessationist and the continuist views? Which view does 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 support, and why?
6. What is speaking in tongues, and why did God gift this to some of His people?
7. Why did the Spirit give us different gifts and combinations of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:14-26)?
8. How does the history and biblical context around Acts 2:44-45 influence how we understand the passage? How does this speak to the larger issue of how we should study the Bible?
9. Why must God’s Word remain central to our worldview and serve as our cherished guide (Psalm 119:105; Jeremiah 15:16) no matter how unpalatable we find the truth (Isaiah 40:8; Jeremiah 23:29; Ephesians 5:26; 1 Peter 2:2)?
10. What does “fellowship” mean in Acts 2:42, and how are

we called to practice this as members of the body of Christ (Romans 15:26; Hebrews 10:24-25)?

11. What did “the breaking of bread” most likely refer to? What is the significance of this practice, both for the early Church and for believers today?
12. What is the purpose of prayer? Are you praying “without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and inviting God into everything you do?

Important Takeaways for Us Today

1. Do you know what spiritual gifts God has given you? If you don't know, ask God to reveal to you the gifts He has for you. How might you use those gifts?
2. Of the four Church essentials listed in Acts 2:42, three of them require participation from the congregation. Write how you follow or will commit to following these principles:
 - a. Fellowship
 - b. Breaking of bread
 - c. Prayer