

Week 9: The Spirit And The Early Church

In Christian theology and history, Pentecost is traditionally called the "Birthday of the Church." While the foundational teachings were established during Jesus' earthly ministry, Pentecost — occurring fifty days after the Resurrection — served as the catalyst that transformed a group of frightened, isolated disciples into a unified, courageous, and global movement.

- How did it happen that the followers of Jesus, who were unknown Galileans and Judeans, became so well known?
- What transformed the shyness that moved these men to denial and flight at the Crucifixion into a boldness that made them staunch defenders of the new faith?
- How did ordinary men who had not been formally trained as rabbis make such an impact on the world?
- What was the origin of the theological truths contained in the New Testament and preached by the early missionaries?
- How did it happen that a movement that began among Jews, was centered in a Jewish Messiah, and was founded on Jewish Scriptures, became a religion adopted largely by Gentiles?

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George O. Wood, *Acts: The Holy Spirit at Work in Believers: An Independent-Study Textbook*

Acts 1:1-5

¹ In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Acts 1:8-9

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Luke's first book, the Gospel of Luke, gives an account of what Jesus began to do and teach. This introduction suggests that the book of Acts is going to be about what Jesus continues "to do and teach" in the world.

John 16:7-11

⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Early Church

The fifth book of the New Testament, also known as the Book of Acts, could be retitled as "The Advance of the Early Church," "The Acts of Peter and Paul,"

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“The Acts of the Apostles” or “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” as the work of the Holy Spirit is a pervasive theme throughout the book, with His name appearing in the first chapter, the final chapter, and 15 chapters in between.

The Holy Spirit empowered the early church as the apostles' resource against opposition, the catalyst for revival, and the solution to internal conflicts. He strengthened the first martyr, initiated missionary work, and guided leadership and corporate decisions.

The First Opposition

While on their way to the temple to pray, Peter and John meet a lame man and perform a miraculous healing (Acts 3:1–10). This event attracts a large crowd, giving Peter a platform to share the gospel (3:11–26). Although five thousand men respond in faith and enter the church (4:4), the miracle and its aftermath disturb the temple officials. Consequently, Peter and John are taken into custody and jailed to await questioning by the Sanhedrin Council (4:1–3).

While the interrogation in Acts 4:5–22 contains much worth exploring, our specific interest lies in Peter's answer to the council's question: “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” (4:7). In this setting, “this” refers to both the supernatural healing of the man who was lame and the act of instructing others within the temple complex—a role typically reserved for those with official authorization. Notably, Luke introduced Peter's defense by highlighting, for the first time since the day of Pentecost, that a specific person was *filled* with the Spirit:

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Acts 4:8-13

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

Matthew 10:19-20 (Luke 21:14-15)

¹⁹ When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. ²⁰ For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

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The First Revival

Following their release by the council, Peter and John return to the assembly of disciples to provide a report. The community immediately petitions God in prayer, seeking a unique empowerment to confront the difficulties before them. We want to focus on their courageous request and Luke's account of God's response:

Acts 4:29-30

²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

They ask to “speak Your word with all confidence.” Again, Luke highlights the disciples’ ability to speak God’s word effectively. The working of healing, signs, and wonders is secondary to the proclamation of the gospel and connected specifically to Jesus’ name. The emphases of this incident are identical to those in the preceding episode.

How does God respond to this prayer? He provides precisely what the church requests:

Acts 4:31

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

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The disciples pray for the Spirit's power, and God sends it. This incident illustrates both the importance of prayer in Spirit empowerment and the truth of Jesus' promise that the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

Luke 11:13

“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

The First Problem

Along with the Jerusalem church's explosive growth came challenges. Previously, benevolent funds from the temple and synagogues had aided widows. Now the new church must handle that task.

Acts 6:1–7 describes both the problem the congregation faced and the solution it adopted. In identifying men to put in charge of the task of distributing food to the widows, the members of the congregation were to look for “seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). The combination of the Spirit and *wisdom* again echoes Isaiah 11:2 and other Old Testament passages. The same combination appears later in the passage, specifically in regard to Stephen (Acts 6:10).

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Acts 6:1-7

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The administrative function these men were to carry out also has parallels in the Old Testament, particularly the seventy elders empowered for administrative tasks to relieve the burden on Moses. Recognizing men who were so qualified produced two results: "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly" (Acts 6:7).

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Again, Luke emphasizes God's word and the explosion of church growth that accompanies the spread of that word. As the Spirit empowers these seven men to handle this administrative role, he sets the apostles free to concentrate on the tasks for which he empowered them: "prayer and ... the ministry of the word" (6:4). Both speaking and serving roles in local congregations rest on Spirit empowerment.

The First Martyr

The congregation chooses seven men, including Stephen, whom Luke singles out as *full of* "faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). Stephen has a larger role to play, though. As a Greek-speaking Jew, he crosses that particular cultural threshold with the gospel by debating men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (6:8–10). In that debate, Stephen distinguishes himself by "the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (6:10), and so the combination of *wisdom* and the Holy Spirit appears yet again.

While Luke notes that Stephen performed "great wonders and signs," he associates these acts with Stephen being full of "grace and power" rather than explicitly mentioning Spirit-filling in that specific verse. Though these deeds are clearly tied to the Spirit's empowerment, Luke focuses primarily on the core theme of bold, Spirit-led testimony.

Stephen's witness before the Sanhedrin mirrored that of Peter and John, showcasing a profound grasp of Jewish history and a courageous call for repentance.

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His experience fulfilled Christ's promise that the Spirit would grant the necessary words for such moments, even as it led to his martyrdom—a fulfillment of Jesus' own prophecies regarding the fate of his followers. In his final moments, Stephen, remains "full of the Holy Spirit" and receives a vision of heaven, an experience reminiscent of the Spirit-led visions found in Ezekiel and Revelation. Through this divine empowerment, Stephen sustained his testimony until his death.

Luke 21:12-19

¹² But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name's sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives.

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The First Missionary Team

In Acts 8:1–11:18, the early church advanced geographically and culturally, fulfilling Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8. Philip reached Samaritans and an Ethiopian, while Peter brought the gospel to coastal Judea and the Gentile Cornelius. Meanwhile, the church's adversary, Saul, is converted on the Damascus road.

Acts 11 and 13 mark a significant shift as the gospel moved beyond the Davidic kingdom's borders toward the "remotest part of the earth." This transition included a cultural turn toward pagan Greeks and a focus on Barnabas and Saul as key figures in crossing these thresholds. In Antioch, while the church's prophets and teachers fasted and ministered, the Holy Spirit commanded that Barnabas and Saul be set apart for their specific calling.

Acts 13:1-4

¹ *Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.*

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Although none of the descriptors *full of*, *filled*, and *filled with* occur in Acts 12:25–13:4, Luke mentions the Spirit twice in connection with specific activities. The Spirit sets apart Barnabas and Saul for a specific task (13:2), and the Spirit sends out Barnabas and Saul to engage in that task (13:4).

In Cyprus, Saul faced opposition from the magician Elymas while witnessing to the proconsul Sergius Paulus. Being filled with the Spirit, Saul announces that God will strike Elymas with temporary blindness. Luke notes that the proconsul believed because he was amazed by the Lord's teaching, showing that the miracle served to validate Paul's witness rather than being the primary focus. Once again, the Spirit empowered an effective spoken witness.

Acts 13:12

Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

The Spirit empowered the early church to continue doing and teaching what Jesus had begun during his own ministry. The church did so by relying on the Spirit for boldness to witness effectively, even in the face of opposition; for discernment to make wise decisions as challenges and problems arose; and for wisdom to shepherd those entrusted to its care.

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As a result, the movement that had begun at Pentecost with 120 men and women praying in an upstairs room in Jerusalem spread outward geographically from that city to Judea, Samaria, Ethiopia, Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Achaia, and eventually Rome in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (Acts 1:8). It also crossed cultural thresholds from Jews to Samaritans to Gentiles in accordance with Jesus' command to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). From the experiences of the individuals who were part of that early church we learn a number of valuable lessons.

- Luke uses phrases like *full of*, *filled*, and *filled with* to describe Holy Spirit empowerment in Acts, emphasizing witness over secondary phenomena like healings and signs.
- The primary goal of this empowerment is enabling witnesses to speak the truth with boldness, power, and effectiveness, leading to church growth.
- Spirit-empowered witnesses remain faithful despite opposition and martyrdom, often occurring at significant cultural or geographical thresholds.
- Fullness of the Spirit serves as a key qualification for leadership roles, as seen in Peter, Stephen, Barnabas, and Paul.
- The Spirit active in church life sets individuals apart for specific tasks, provides wisdom for decision-making, and aids in shepherding and administration.

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"While not every church today is Pentecostal in the denominational sense, if it were not for Pentecost, there would not be any churches (see Acts 2)."

Michael Bird, *A Bird's-Eye View of Luke and Acts*

Next: *The Spirit and The Contemporary Church*