

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 2

We need to acknowledge that the *Ruach HaKodesh*, the Holy Spirit was present among humanity prior to Acts 2. Isaiah, for example declared that "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me" (Is 61:1). And Ezekiel revealed that "the Spirit of the Lord fell upon me" (Eze 11:5). The Spirit would come and go from people, each time empowering them for a particular purpose, but not necessarily remaining with them in an enduring manner (see Judges 15:14; 1 Chronicles 12:18; Psalm 51:11; Ezekiel 11:5). Yeshua made that kind of acknowledgment, and then foretold the day when the Spirit would indwell believers permanently:

"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (John 14:16-17).

Acts chapter 2 describes the day when that prophecy was fulfilled.

2:1-4

We are told that the large group of disciples of Yeshua (120 persons according to 1:15) was in one location on Shavuot/Pentecost/Feast of Weeks. According to church tradition, this took place in what is called the upper room. And while the disciples did have a room where they gathered and slept and took their meals, they would not have been there during the time of this narrative. Instead, they would have been within the courts of the temple, because it was a pilgrimage feast that required men to there, and, in particular, they would have been near the temple at the time of the morning sacrifice at 9:00 a.m., which is identified in v. 15 as the time when the Spirit came.

Evidence of the arrival of the Spirit is marked in three ways:

- v. 2 – The sound of the rushing wind. This is consistent with the meaning of the Greek word *pneuma*, translated as spirit, being derived from the root *pneo*, meaning a current of air. Both *pneuma* and the Hebrew equivalent, *ruach*, are onomatopoeia words—they sound like they are spelled. We can recall how Yeshua compared the Spirit to the wind in His encounter with Nicodemus, saying in John 3:8 – "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." Like the wind, you cannot box the Spirit in, so we need to give Him the freedom to move in ways that go beyond our restrictive preconceived notions.
- vv. 3-4 The other two evidences of the coming of the Spirit were the appearance of tongues of fire resting upon them and the disciples speaking in tongues that the non-believers could understand in their respective native languages (Gr. *dialektos*). In this context, the manifestation of tongues was in the form of actual languages that the speakers did not previously know. This is in contrast to speaking in tongues to God that requires interpretation, according to 1 Corinthians 14:2,13,27.

2:5-13

The next section deals with the reaction of other people in Jerusalem to the evidence of the

coming of the Spirit. Who were these men who formed this large crowd in Jerusalem? Several commentators assert that the list of nationalities in vv. 9-11 refers to large number of Gentiles were present on that day. But that makes little sense for it implies that they just happened to be there, like you would have tourists from around the world visiting Jerusalem today. Arab Christians in particular make that claim because the Greek word *Arabes*, meaning Arabians, is used in v. 11. And today we tend to think of the word Arabs in a particular way. But applying that way of thinking to Scripture is projecting modern circumstances back on biblical days. The “Arabs” mentioned in v. 11 should not be thought of as modern-day ethnic Arabs but as Jews who lived in Arabia at that time. We know from historical sources that there were Jews who lived in Arabia and spoke Arabic in addition to Hebrew. The Jews who lived in the other countries listed here would likewise speak both Hebrew and the local language.

The greater context of Scripture further explains that they were Jews because it was one of three times during the year that they had to be in Jerusalem for a biblical feast (the other two were Passover and Sukkot/Tabernacles). Verse 5 further clarifies it by saying the men gathered on that day were “Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven.” All of these people described in this chapter are Jews, either by birth, or as Gentile proselytes by belief in the God of Israel and living Torah-observant lives, which included being in Jerusalem on this feast. But the proselytes would be by far in the minority. Most would be native-born Jews. There was no real reason for Gentiles to be present on this day. So, you have to think of this list as the places in the known world where Jews lived and they had come to Jerusalem in order to follow the commandments of Torah. All other explanations are inconsistent with the historical record and the context of Scripture.

Naturally these men would be perplexed by what they were hearing, as would all of us in a similar situation. Instead of accusing them of been intoxicated from drinking wine, we would probably suspect that they were high on drugs.

2:14-37

Peter then responds with a brief sermon explaining what had happened. He quotes Joel 2:28-32 as a prophecy that foretold this day. The first part of this prophecy dealing with divine manifestations of the Spirit is clearly relevant for the events of Acts 2. But the second part describing dramatic signs in the sky above were not involved in this episode. So how could Peter include them in his explanation?

Joel foretold that all of these things would happen in the last days, and Peter affirms the same point in his sermon. Scripture makes it clear that the last days had already begun with the coming of Yeshua: “in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Heb 1:2). And when you consider Yeshua’s teaching on the last days, such as in Matthew 24, He describes events that span from the time immediately after His resurrection and ascension all the way until His return. So the term “last days” spans an indefinite period of time that will culminate with the dramatic heavenly signs of Mat 24 and Joel 2/Acts 2.

Today we are in the midst of the last days, with signs pointing to an impending culmination. Paul describes the character of our current day very well and affixes it to the last days:

“But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good,

treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power. . .” (2 Tim 3:1-5)

And again Peter writes in his second epistle: “Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking” (2 Peter 3:3). Truly that sounds like today as well.

So all of these aspects—the coming of the Spirit, the prevailing unrighteous character of people and dramatic heavenly signs—are indicators of being in the last days, and Peter was justified in quoting the entire prophecy from Joel that is dealing with the overall concept.

Having made the point that prophecy had been fulfilled regarding the Spirit, Peter then moves on to show that Yeshua was also the fulfillment of prophecy by quoting David in Ps 16:8-11. David said in that God’s Holy One would not be abandoned to the grave (Heb. *sheol*, Gr. *hades*) and to decay—the normal process for people who die. But David died and decayed in the grave, so the verse could not apply to him but to an ultimate holy one in the kingly lineage of David. And Yeshua is that one, for He alone rose from the grave, never to return there and never to suffer decay. In verse 32 Peter and his numerous colleagues were witnesses to that fact, which gives credence to their position.

vv. 33-36 – Peter’s final argument is taken from Ps 110:1 which unquestionably describes God speaking to an exalted one in David’s lineage, using the phrase “*Yahweh le Adon*” in the Hebrew of the Psalm. In Matthew 22:45 Yeshua referred to this same verse and asked “If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” At that time, Yeshua’s audience could not come up with an answer. But here in Acts 2:37 the audience from those many nations responded in a different manner. They were convinced that Yeshua was the Lord of David’s proclamation. And they asked what they needed to do.

2:38-40

Peter states that they need to repent, be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and receive the Spirit. It is easy to build a doctrine of salvation based on this verse in isolation, namely that baptism is the means of forgiveness of sins. But that ignores the greater context of Scripture and the use of the original language. In multiple places, the forgiveness of sins is separated entirely from baptism and is described as a result of faith. And in the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins,” the word translated as “for” is *eis*, which can have the sense of “because” (we use the word “for” in the same two ways in English). So the reason for the baptism is *because* of their forgiveness of sins, not the *means* for it. That is consistent with the greater context of Scripture.

Moreover, it is important to note what is missing from the list in v. 38, most notably believing in Yeshua. That is undeniably at the heart of salvation. Yet, Peter omitted it. He could do that because they had already believed by virtue of their positive response to Peter’s message. So there was no need for Peter to restate that crucial element. He was just telling them what they needed to do as a follow-up. But not having that understanding can lead to the danger of building faulty doctrines. We should never base our beliefs on an isolated verse dealing with the particular circumstances of a biblical occurrence, but on the whole counsel of Scripture.

Notice also that Peter did not include a requirement that they forsake their heritage and way of worship. He did not tell them they were no longer Jews. He did not tell them to stop observing God’s commandments in the Torah or never again to come back to Jerusalem to observe the feasts. He was simply adding elements of righteousness to their cultural heritage.

2:41-47

About 3,000 people were saved on that day—all of whom were either Jews by birth or Gentiles who had previously converted to Judaism. They became the first Messianic community. Some of them would return to their homes and families in their countries far away, just as they had been doing for years after *Shavuot*. But this time would be different as they brought revival in Messiah Yeshua with them. And they would start their own Messianic communities there, like in Rome that Paul would later address in his epistle to the Romans. Others would have remained in Jerusalem, joining those who lived there throughout the year, plus the Apostles and other disciples.

For them it was the best of times, and the description in vv. 42-47 serves as an ideal model for any congregation. They emphasized:

- Devotion to the teachings of God’s appointed leaders, which would be based on the existing Scriptures of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) and the words of Yeshua. This is the first time that we see in the New Testament an endorsement of teachers of biblical or religious principles. Previously Yeshua was very critical of the teachers of Torah who had formulated the Tradition of the Elders, which later became the Oral Law. But the teachings of the Apostles could be different from those of the Pharisees and other leaders of Israel because the Spirit had now come and was upon the Apostles, guiding them in their teachings. This aspect is underscored by the coinciding of the giving of the Torah and the coming of the Spirit on the same day of the Hebrew calendar (see Ex 19:1). And in God’s manner of communicating, patterns are always significant.
- Fellowship (*koinonia* – from a root meaning, “to share”).
- Breaking bread (this is not communion but a Hebrew cultural idiom meaning having meals together).
- Prayer.
- Feeling a sense of awe (through worship and being aware of God’s works in the world).
- Being together.
- Sharing things in common.
- Being of one mind.
- Maintaining attitudes marked by gladness, sincerity (*apholotes* – lit. “not stubbing toes,” having the sense of making things go smoothly), and praise.
- Having favor with the people of the greater community.
- Witnessing (their numbers were increasing).

Pentecost is called by many people the day of the “Birth of the Church.” At first glance, this claim seems benign, but it has very serious implications. Because if a birth occurred, that means prior to this moment in Acts 2, the church did not exist, and that a materially new body came into existence for the first time. And that would place so-called Old Testament saints in a different category than New Testament saints, which is both illogical and demeaning to the former. Moreover, this perception contributes to the error of replacement theology. So, it presents a far more serious implication than what is apparent initially. And, for that reason, we need to take a deeper look at what is actually being communicated in Acts 2.

First, we have to know the background of the English word “church” that is driving this flawed teaching. As we saw when we studied the Life and Torah of Yeshua, the Greek word *ekklesia* is the primary New Testament term used in reference to the collective body of believers in Yeshua. This word combines the verb *kaleo* – meaning “call” with the prefix *ek* – meaning “out.” So it literally means “called out ones.” It implies a collection of people being called out with a purpose. The collective aspect is best expressed with the words “congregation or assembly.”

That is why the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the *Tanakh* during the second temple period, translated the Hebrew word *kehila*, meaning “assembly” with *ekklesia*. So in the day when the New Testament was written, *ekklesia* conveyed the concept of a “congregation or assembly.” But that concept was not born on Shavuot/Pentecost. The people of Israel are frequently described as a *kehila* in the Hebrew *Tanakh* or *ekklesia* in the Greek Septuagint, both meaning “congregation or assembly.” And the same terms are specifically used in reference to Old Testament people redeemed by faith. For, as we are told in Psalm 149:1 –

“Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, and His praise in the congregation of the godly ones (KJV saints).”

And since so-called Old Testament saints were saved by grace through faith, just as in Acts 2 onward, we can see that the term *ekklesia* applies to the congregation or assembly of redeemed people from every generation, not just beginning with Acts 2. And that makes the claim of the “birth of the church,” an inaccurate term.

The context of Acts 2 does show, however, that the congregation of redeemed Jewish saints became permanently indwelt for the first time with the Holy Spirit, and that enabled them, also for the first time, to become empowered with the task of being “called out ones” to the nations. And that becomes evident with the spreading of the Good News of Yeshua to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth that began a short time later.

This accurate understanding gets lost with the use of the word “church” that is commonly used to translate *ekklesia*, because it significantly fails to convey the underlying meaning of the original term.

As we also saw in our previous study on the life of Yeshua, when the first translations of the Bible into English were completed, *ekklesia* was rightly rendered as “congregation.” But the Geneva New Testament of 1560 was the first to use the word “church” instead. This term came from the Middle English *chirche*, which came from the Old English *cirice* (pronounced chir-EE-che), which came from the Latin word *circus*, meaning “circle.” That word was used to describe the way that Druids, Celts and Saxons sat in circles when gathering for their times of worshiping false gods. As Christianity began replacing those pagan gathering places, their buildings and outdoor stones were often converted for Christian worship. So Christians of that era retained the practice of sitting in circles.

When King James ordered his translation in 1611, not only was “church” employed again, it was mandated by King James himself. Among his fifteen instructions to the translators, he stated: “The old ecclesiastical words are to be kept, viz.: as the word Church is not to be translated as Congregation, etc.” James wanted to promote the retention of the custom of sitting in circles with his translation, in spite of its divergence and incompatibility with the original language.

Now, four centuries later, the legacy of King James carries on with his insistence on a particular Old English word. But it is a word that has become devoid of both its Old English etymology and the meaning of the Greek term that it is used to translate.

It is interesting to note that the KJV is the only translation that employs the English word “church” in Acts 2, namely in verse. 47, where it describes the Lord adding "to the church daily." The word *ekklesia* isn't even in the Greek, so this appears to be an unwarranted and forced insertion of the exalted word “church” by the translators. Because that popular and influential version of the Bible placed such an emphasis on the word church, I trust you can see how it has contributed to this flawed concept of the birth of the church. And we also need to see how an equally flawed belief that great numbers of Gentiles became believers on that day in Acts 2 contributed to this misunderstanding of the text.

For these well-documented reasons, the birth of the church is an invented and misleading phrase that we should not use. Instead, we should just let the text speak for itself. On that day in Acts 2, three thousand souls were added to the congregation of the redeemed that stretched back to saints like Abraham and forward to people like us today. For there is only one congregation of the redeemed, not two. And our terminology should always reflect that by being biblically accurate.