

# The Birthday of the Church

“I can’t wait!” Have you said that yet this summer? You have vacation plans, anniversary celebrations, dates, ball games, BBQs – “I can’t wait!”

The words express anticipation. Something good is coming. Remember when you couldn’t wait to get your driver’s license? To graduate from high school? To start your dream job? To get married? To see your child born?

“I can’t wait!”

I wonder if Jesus ever said that? He spent the first twenty-nine years of his life waiting. He knew who he was, the Son of God incarnate, yet he lived in relative obscurity. He worked with his hands as a craftsman, a carpenter in a rural village. I wonder if, when he talked to his eternal Father, he ever said, “I can’t wait! I can’t wait to begin doing what you sent me here to do: to be telling people about your kingdom and invite them to be a part of it. I can’t wait!”

What do you think he was waiting for? God’s timing, certainly. But there was something else—something so significant that without it even Jesus couldn’t have done what he did.

For Jesus, the wait was over the day he stepped into the Jordan river to be baptized by John the Baptist. Luke tells us: “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:21-22).

What was Jesus waiting for? The presence and power of the Holy Spirit. You see, Jesus did not do what he did because he drew on his own divine powers. He emptied himself of his right to act like God independently when he took on our humanity and became a man. Jesus served and taught and healed and did miracles by the Holy Spirit.

Listen to what Luke says happened after Jesus’ baptism:

- “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:1).
- “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:14-21).

Did you notice the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ life and ministry? He was filled with the Spirit, led by the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, and anointed by the Spirit. Jesus waited for the Father to pour out the Spirit on him. He knew he could not accomplish God’s purposes without the Spirit.

So it is not at all surprising that in Jesus’ final words to his disciples, he told them to

wait: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4-5). They weren’t to do anything until the Spirit came, until they received the power Jesus said was necessary to fulfill his purposes for them. If the Son of God needed the Holy Spirit in order to do his work, how much more do we?

After Jesus’ ascended back to heaven, his followers returned to Jerusalem for a ten day prayer meeting. I wonder if they every said, “I can’t wait!” But at the command of Jesus, they did—they waited, until the Day of Pentecost came.

Pentecost was one of three major festivals in Israel during which pilgrims flocked to Jerusalem. It took place on a Sunday, fifty days after the Sabbath of Passover. It was also called the Feast of Weeks, and Firstfruits. During Passover Israel presented the first sheaf of the barley harvest. By Pentecost the grain harvest, both barley and wheat, was complete. People brought their first-fruit offering: a representative sample of their finest grain.

On Pentecost Sunday, with the city jammed with pilgrims, Jesus’ followers were all together—all one hundred twenty of them. Let’s turn to Acts 2:1-13 and read what happened.

Pentecost is the true birthday of the church. This is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that his followers would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. It’s the fulfillment of John the Baptist’s prophecy about Jesus also. John said: “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16).

On the Day of Pentecost, Jesus immersed his followers in the Holy Spirit. This was something completely new. Under the Old Covenant, God’s Spirit came upon individuals for specific purposes. Sampson received strength from the Spirit. Bezalel was filled with the Spirit to lead the work on the tabernacle during the Exodus. God gave his Spirit to King David to enable him to rule effectively.

Under the New Covenant, *all* would receive the Spirit. Every believer from Pentecost onward would be immersed in the Spirit, into the Church, the body of Christ.

The disciples didn’t understand all this yet. They were experiencing it fresh. After some reflection, the Apostle Paul would later write: “For we were all baptized [with] one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Jesus is the one who immerses every believer in the Spirit into his body, the Church. When you trusted Jesus as your Savior, you were baptized with the Spirit into the Church. Your baptism in water symbolizes publicly what happened to you spiritually.

By the way, that’s the primary reason we require baptism for membership at Bethel. It follows the pattern. After you were saved, Jesus immersed you in the Spirit into his Church. Membership in a local church follows your immersion in water as a public witness to your faith in Jesus.

On the day of Pentecost the Spirit’s coming was marked by two unique manifestations of God’s presence. Look again at v. 2-3: “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”

There was the roar of a mighty wind but nothing stirred. Tongues of fire licked over them but they did not burn. Powerful wind and blazing fire often symbolized God’s manifest presence in the Hebrew Scriptures.

God was doing something brand new. He marked it with signs that could be both seen and heard. That is typical when God starts something new. For instance, when God rescued Israel from Egypt and gave the law on Sinai inaugurating the Mosaic covenant, he manifested his power openly. All kinds of things happened: plagues devastated Egypt, waters split in two, manna appeared, the ground opened up and swallowed people. After Israel was settled in the land, signs and miracles became much less frequent.

God was underscoring his work and vindicating his messengers so no one would miss that this was from God!

That's what happened on Pentecost. The sound of wind and the appearance of fire were signs that were never repeated. The church was born. The Body of Christ was formed. Jesus immersed his disciples in God's Spirit, and the wind and the fire made it obvious that this was the work of God.

Something else happened: "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."

The Bible describes spiritual gifts as a manifestation of the Spirit. This unique manifestation of the Spirit supernaturally enabled those present to speak in languages they had not learned. This was not ecstatic speech—unintelligible language-type sounds. They spoke in the languages and dialects of nations from all over the known world.

And note: Luke *describes* what happened. This is not prescriptive of what should happen in every case. On Pentecost Jesus followers were all filled with the Spirit and all spoke in languages they had not learned. Speaking in tongues is not a necessary sign nor a necessary accompaniment to the baptism in or the filling of the Spirit.

In this case, however, the disciples were filled with the Spirit, spoke in other tongues and spilled out into the streets. Look at v. 5-12.

Remember Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims. Jews from all over the known world had come home for the Feast of Pentecost. Those nearby heard the sound of the wind and yet felt no breeze. All who heard pressed toward where the sound came from. As they got close, they witnessed something else. A bunch of uneducated Galileans were declaring the wonders of God in the native dialects of everyone in the crowd.

Galileans were considered to be rough, uncultured, uncouth. They were the hillbillies and rednecks of Israel. They spoke with a distinct accent and had regionally distinctive clothing. In addition to their native tongue they would have known Greek and perhaps some Latin. But here they were, speaking fluently languages from every tribe around the Roman Empire.

Luke adds: "Amazed and perplexed, they [the crowd] asked one another, 'What does this mean?' Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine.'"

Some in the crowd blew it off. They were entertained by the show and said they'd had too much celebration, too early. Some people can't see the finger of God if it pokes them in the eye.

Most of the crowd was more discerning. They rightly saw this event as a sign from heaven. In their astonishment, they wanted to know: "What does this mean?"

That's what signs from God are meant to do. They capture the attention of people to make them willing to listen to God's message, and to validate the messenger as God's spokesperson.

The sign alerted Israel to the hand of God. And it opened the door for Peter to stand up and preach the first Christian gospel message. We'll look at what he said next week.

There is much in this passage that peaks our interest. It raises all kinds of questions about the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, and signs and wonders. We're amazed by what happened. Some

even attempt to recreate the events of Pentecost in our own day.

But we miss the point.

Just like Jesus needed the Spirit to fulfill his ministry, the Church of God needs the Spirit of God to fulfill God's purposes. We still do. Our church family exists because Jesus immersed each and every one of us in the Spirit, into his Church. We don't have to wait for the Spirit. He has already been poured out on us.

Read the New Testament and you quickly discover how significant the Holy Spirit is to our life in Christ. We serve by the Spirit; live by the Spirit; walk by the Spirit; worship by the Spirit; pray in the Spirit; put to death the misdeeds of the body by the Spirit; and have peace and joy in the Holy Spirit of God. We are indwelt by the Spirit; taught by the Spirit; sanctified by the Spirit; encouraged by the Spirit; empowered by the Spirit; and bear the fruit of the Spirit. We are given boldness by the Spirit; sealed by the Spirit; unified by the Spirit; have access to the Father by the Spirit; and we are temples—both individually and collectively as a church—in which the Holy Spirit of the living God dwells.

Jesus urges us through the Scriptures to be filled with that same Spirit that energized the believers on Pentecost so that we can have power and boldness, just like them to be his witnesses in our world.

Do you believe that the Spirit of God in you can enable you to make a Kingdom impact in Jackson, Michigan?

Today is the Fourth of July when we celebrate the birth of America. On this day in 1776, we declared our independence from Great Britain and announced to the world that a new, sovereign nation, a grand experiment in democracy was born. Christ-followers have enjoyed precious, unique freedoms in our country. On this day we rightly pray: May God bless America.

But the birth of the Church on Pentecost dwarfs our nation's birthday. Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit on a group of nobodies and they turned their world upside-down. Pentecost birthed a movement that is permeating the world and leaving its fingerprints on eternity.

The presence of God's Spirit marks our church family as part of that movement. If we rightly pray, "God bless America," how shall we pray for our church? May God bless the Church. May God bless our church family. May he bless us with a fresh sense of the Spirit's presence and power in our day. May Jesus give us boldness and character and courage by his good Spirit in such measure that we—another group of nobodies by the values of our age—may turn our community upside-down by our redemptive presence in it.