

Pentecost: The Church is Born! (Part 1)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Christians throughout the world will celebrate Pentecost Sunday and the coming of the Holy Spirit—in a new and fresh way, to begin the church age—this coming Sunday.

Interestingly, these celebrations may not involve many of our readers, as oftentimes the churches in our circles do not make much of this day on the calendar.

If you were like me, however—raised in a liturgical church that celebrated Pentecost Sunday every year—its chronological relation to the resurrection was likely fixed clearly in your mind. But, regardless of how we remember Pentecost, we certainly need to be familiar with it and understand its vast significance.

In this two-part blog series, we are going to consider the day of Pentecost as the birthday of the church and the launch of the church age—focusing on the fact that the church did not begin before that signal day, nor did it begin after it.

One very strong evidence that the church did not begin before the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 is Jesus' teaching given prophetically to the disciples in His Upper Room Discourse in John 13 to 16. He is clearly speaking of a major change that the apostles were about to experience, following His death, burial, resurrection and ascension.

Jesus, in fact, spoke precisely about “that day” when His disciples would “know that I *am* in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20). In other words, this was the specific day on which the body of Christ would be formed by the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:5; 2:2-3; 1 Cor. 12:13).

Of course, we know that many Jewish people were in Jerusalem on Pentecost, the 50th day from the resurrection (and also “fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath” [Lev. 23:16], when marked with relation to “the day of the firstfruits” [Num. 28:26]), to take part in the feast that God commanded His Old Testament people Israel to celebrate. In fact, “all (Jewish) males” were to “appear before the LORD your God” for this annual festival (Deut. 16:16).

General instructions on the observance of Pentecost, known to the Israelites as “the Feast of Weeks” (Ex. 34:22), were revealed in Ex. 23:16 (where it is called “the Feast of Harvest,” related to “the firstfruits of wheat harvest” [Ex. 34:22]), Lev. 23:15-22, Num. 28:26-31 and Deut. 16:9-12.

In the development of Jewish tradition, the day of Pentecost also came to be associated with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. Although this is not supported by the text of Scripture, it is very interesting because Ex. 19:6 is the formal beginning of the theocratic nation of Israel. Thus, to that extent, it can be said that both Israel and the church each began, individually, on the day of Pentecost.

There is so much more that could be said regarding Pentecost in both Biblical history and Jewish tradition, as Bruce Scott recorded in lively fashion in chapter four of his wonderful book *The Feasts of Israel: Seasons of the Messiah* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1997). But one thing is certainly clear—nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we see the inauguration of the church, on this day or any other, in the history of Israel before the time of Christ.

Those who believe that they can find the church in the Old Testament usually begin it all the way back with Abraham—or even Adam. They view all the redeemed as one united people of God, and Israel as the Old Testament *church* (and the church as New Testament *Israel*). Obviously, this removes all the distinctions which we as dispensationalists—who draw our doctrine directly from the literal interpretation of Scripture—believe truly exist between Israel and the church, making each one utterly unique.

In fact, the New Testament calls the church a *mystery*, using that term three times in Eph. 3:1-12—meaning that it was not revealed prior to that, or in the Old Testament. Indeed, the church, which includes Jewish people and Gentiles on equal footing in one spiritual *body* (v. 6), was not a concept that Old Testament Israelites could have fathomed.

We will pick up there next time, also seeing that the church did not begin after Pentecost but, rather, exactly on the day of Pentecost, in fulfillment of Jesus' own words.

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