

## BIRTH OF THE CHURCH (Part 1)

Acts 2:22-36

Key Verse: 2:36

*"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."*

*"Now, brothers [and sisters], I want to remind you of the gospel..."* (1Co 15:1b) Those words of the Apostle Paul ring true today. Some of you may think, "But we already *know* the gospel; it's time to move on and talk about *practical* matters." Paul knew all about practical matters. He wrote 14 chapters to the Corinthians detailing all of their problems. His solution? "I want to remind you of the gospel." Today's passage from Acts is not just an evangelistic message. It is the mother of all evangelistic messages. Isabella Grace Lee was born last night at 6:53 pm. The Church of Jesus Christ was born on the Feast of Pentecost at 9 o'clock in the morning when the Apostle Peter preached this sermon. When the disciples gathered in one place to meet for early morning prayer, they probably had no clue of what was about to happen. In one day, their ministry was about to explode from 120 believers to 3,120 (1:15, 2:41). This event was not planned by them. It was an act of God, a work of the Holy Spirit. You may recall that the traditional name of this book is not "Acts of the Apostles," but "Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles."

When I examined Peter's message, one thing really stood out. This is very much *unlike* what usually passes for gospel preaching today. The standard gospel message of evangelical America is, "Jesus Christ died for your sins; accept him as your personal Savior." There is nothing inherently wrong with that message. That message is 100% true. But isn't it curious that we often leave certain things out? If I happen to be driving around on Sunday afternoon, I sometimes listen to the radio show *Unshackled*. Each episode of that show is the story of someone's conversion to Christ. In every episode without fail they mention Jesus' death and say, "Jesus Christ died for your sins." But I can't recall a single episode when I heard them talk in detail about the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps they have done so, but I can't recall it. Now compare that to what Peter does in today's passage. He spends exactly one verse on the Jesus' earthly ministry (22), one verse on his death (23), nine verses on his resurrection (24-32), and four verses on his ascension and reign (33-36). I'm not saying that we must always do exactly what Peter did. But this overwhelming emphasis on the resurrection and ascension is unusual by modern standards.

Another striking feature of Peter's gospel message is that there is very little in the way of doctrine and essentially no personal application. Now doctrine is important, and application is important. But Peter doesn't say, "The practical lesson that we should take away is this..." He spends all of his time and effort focusing on Jesus, recalling what God has done through Jesus. This message was so powerful that Peter's listeners were cut to the heart. They came to the

apostles and asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (37) Peter’s message was a simple declaration of the historical facts of Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

Would this kind of preaching be effective today? If you preach this same message to a modern audience of believers, they will probably start fidgeting and yawning. They may think, “We have heard all of this before. This is so un-entertaining. We need word-pictures and stories we can relate to. We need personal applications that are relevant to us.” And if you preach this same message to skeptics and non-believers, they are likely to challenge you on the facts. Some might say, “This is the dogma of the western Christianity, but it’s not really true. It’s doubtful that the historical Jesus even existed.” Others will say, “I can believe that Jesus was crucified. But the resurrection is a story that some people made up. It was a big conspiracy. Haven’t you seen *The DaVinci Code*?” It would be tempting to respond with rationalistic arguments about all the historical evidence for the resurrection. That evidence is abundant, and many great books have been written about it. But today those arguments may get you nowhere, because they presume that people are thinking and making decisions rationally -- which they aren’t, because very few human beings are or ever have been truly rational. Most things that happened in AD 33 seem incomprehensible to people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the resurrection of Christ was equally incomprehensible back in the year 33. It was no easier for Peter’s listeners to believe that Christ had risen than it is for people in our generation. If you showed them the empty tomb, they would say, “So what? That proves nothing.” Skeptics will never run out of reasons not to believe.

But something was different about that day of Pentecost. There was something going on that made this resurrection story seem credible – not just believable, but *so likely to be true* that thousands of people could accept it on the spot. What was it? It was the work of the Holy Spirit among the apostles. That morning, when the apostles were gathered in one place, the Holy Spirit came upon them in power. The apostles did not immediately begin to perform miraculous signs. Those signs came later, after the people already believed (43). But that morning the apostles were empowered to overcome their fear. They were emboldened to speak about “the wonders of God” (11). They were known to be ordinary men from ordinary places in Galilee (7); that much was obvious from the way they dressed and the way they talked. But God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven could hear the apostles speaking in their own native tongues. It seems that the apostles were speaking in their own language, but the listeners heard them in many different languages. This was the historic reversal of what took place at the Tower of Babel, when the LORD confused human language and the world was divided. The Holy Spirit broke every barrier of language and culture and allowed the apostles to relate to all kinds of people at a very deep and personal level to communicate to them the wonders of God. It was something like what happened when I first studied the Bible with a funny guy from Korea who didn’t speak much English. Now the apostles themselves did not achieve instant greatness. They were not suddenly changed into spiritual supermen with magnetic personalities and awesome haircuts. They did not become supercharged soldiers who could pray and study the Bible around the clock and produce one outstanding manuscript after another. In most respects, the apostles were the same old weak guys that they always were. But something about them had fundamentally changed. Their weak bodies of flesh were now

vessels of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit had transformed them into the Church, the literal Body of Christ on earth. Jesus came alive in them and was working through them. That's the beauty of what happened on Pentecost. Peter's listeners were stunned, not because they met Peter, but because they encountered the living Spirit of Christ in Peter. Peter's words came alive to them, because it was not Peter but Jesus speaking directly to their hearts and minds.

Look at how Peter begins in verse 22: *"Men of Israel, listen to this..."* Peter knew his audience. He was speaking to God-fearing Jews from every nation. These people already knew the God of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth. They were fluent in Old Testament history and theology, so he started right in with teaching about Jesus. When the apostles spoke to different audiences in other times and places, they did not always start this way. When Paul was in Athens talking to pagan philosophers, he started with Genesis lesson 1 about God who created the heavens and the earth (Ac 17:24). Now Peter continued in verse 22: *"Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know."* Jesus of Nazareth was simply amazing. Even today, people all over the world hold the name of Jesus in high regard. Billions of people reject Christianity, but they still like Jesus, because Jesus did everything exactly right. Jesus was a greater humanitarian than Mother Theresa. He was a greater evangelist than Billy Graham. He was a better philosopher than Socrates, a better theologian than John Calvin, more generous than Bill Gates, more inspiring than Barack Obama, more personally devout than Pope John Paul II. He was the complete package, the embodiment of everything that human beings aspire to be. And everything he did, he did in a weak body of flesh. He wasn't a superstar. He was simply Jesus of Nazareth, one hundred percent human, like us. He claimed no special privileges from God. When he waged war against the temptations of Satan in the desert, he did so as a human being. He lived a completely sinless life and defeated Satan as a human being, and in doing so, he reversed the original sin of the original man Adam and won the victory as a representative of every human being. Jesus Christ was simply amazing.

So how did the people react to Jesus? It says in verse 23: *"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."* Who put Jesus on the cross? It was the Jewish religious leaders who conspired to kill him. It was the people of Jerusalem who shouted "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Lk 23:21) and "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Mt 27:25) It was Pilate who condemned the innocent Jesus to death. It was the heartless Roman soldiers who beat him and led him to Calvary. It was also his disciples who abandoned him and ran away. No one stood up in his defense. When they nailed his hands and feet and lifted his cross up high, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). That prayer of Jesus was for all people of all time. We are collectively guilty of the death of Jesus. If any of us had been there, we would have done what those wicked people did. Perhaps now you would not join in the crucifixion of Jesus. But there was a time in your life when you would have agreed that Jesus should die, or you would have failed to stand up in his defense. We put Jesus on the cross. But someone else put Jesus on the cross too. God did it. Human beings killed Christ of their own free will. But it was also God's will, according to his set purpose and

foreknowledge. Don't ask me to explain it. It cannot really be explained. But that is what happened, as Scriptures written over thousands of years testify.

The death of Jesus was the world's greatest tragedy. It was also the world's greatest victory, because Jesus accepted it in obedience to his Father. Jesus went to the cross in loving submission and laid down his life of his own free will. The death of Jesus was only the beginning. Peter said in verse 24: *"But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."* Why couldn't death keep its hold on Jesus? When Mr. Death came to claim Jesus, he made a big mistake. In one sense, Jesus was supposed to die. But in another sense, he was never supposed to die. Death came into the world as a consequence of sin. God had said to Adam, *"for when you eat of it you will surely die"* (Ge 2:17) Adam sinned and eventually he died. Every person sinned, and every person will die. But Jesus didn't sin. For death to take him away was completely wrong. God's universe could not bear to let this injustice stand. So God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death. The resurrection of Jesus was a foregone conclusion. It simply had to happen, because God is right and just.

The resurrection of Jesus was God's best kept secret. There is no Hebrew word for "resurrection" anywhere in the Old Testament. The Jews of Jesus' time were divided over whether there even was life after death. The Pharisees argued that there was; the Sadducees said there wasn't. Jesus clearly sided with the Pharisees on that point. But when the Holy Spirit came upon Peter, God gave him great spiritual understanding, and he realized that the resurrection of Christ was indeed preached in the Old Testament. He gave a quotation from Psalm 16. Look at verses 25-28:

*25 David said about him:*

*"I saw the Lord always before me.*

*Because he is at my right hand,*

*I will not be shaken.*

*26 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;*

*my body also will live in hope,*

*27 because you will not abandon me to the grave,*

*nor will you let your Holy One see decay.*

*28 You have made known to me the paths of life;*

*you will fill me with joy in your presence."*

How on earth was Peter able to say this? Obviously he recited this from memory. Jewish people often prayed the Psalms. It was embedded in Peter's mind and became part of his spiritual life. But Peter never really understood it until now. The Holy Spirit came as Jesus had promised and illuminated the Scripture that was already in Peter's mind. The Holy Spirit brought the words of the Bible to life. The coming of the Holy Spirit doesn't mean that we should give up Bible study. He doesn't do the hard work for us, effortlessly putting the information into our heads. On the contrary, now that the Holy Spirit has come, we can study the Bible much more effectively. We can understand what we are reading by prayerfully

following the personal guidance of the Spirit, and by listening to other Spirit-filled Christians who know and love the words of God.

Peter's understanding of this difficult passage was remarkable. In the next four verses (29-32), he explains exactly what it means in a new way that no Jewish person had ever heard before. King David wrote Psalm 16 in using first person pronouns. Everyone had assumed that David was speaking as himself, praying to the LORD as King David. But Peter pointed out that this was not the whole story. David prayed with confidence that God's "Holy One" would not see decay. This could not possibly refer to David, because David died and was buried; his tomb is still there to this very day. It was not just David who was praying Psalm 16. It was the Spirit of Christ who was inspired David to write those words; it was Jesus praying to God through King David's pen.

Then Peter said something even more astounding. Look at verses 33-35.

*33 Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,  
"The Lord said to my Lord:  
"Sit at my right hand  
35 until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet.""*

This quotation comes from Psalm 110. Psalm 110 is very special. Of all the psalms, this is the one that is quoted most often in the New Testament. But in Old Testament terms, this psalm is very mysterious, and it confounds scholars to this day. No one seems to know what was in the psalmist's mind when this psalm was written; it just doesn't seem to make any sense. But Peter, in an apparent flash of brilliance, explains exactly what this means. It is God the Father speaking to his own Son, entrusting to him all power and authority in heaven and on earth. This is what the Father said to Jesus when Jesus ascended and arrived in heaven at his Father's house. And God gave Jesus a welcome home present. He gave Jesus the Holy Spirit, and Jesus turned around and gave that present to his Church. Now where did Peter get this understanding? He got it from Jesus Christ. During the Passion week, Jesus taught exactly this in the temple courts. He quoted Psalm 110 and explained that this was not about David, but about the Christ and the Father. The Pharisees were astounded, and the crowds were delighted, because Jesus showed that he understood the Scriptures even better than the people who actually wrote the Scriptures. That teaching from the gospels is one that we easily overlook, because it seems unimportant. But it is found in all three synoptic gospels, and on the day of Pentecost it became the cornerstone of Peter's evangelistic message. Peter did not need to make it up. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he simply repeated the teachings of Jesus and the effect was astounding.

Now for the punchline. Let's read verse 36: *"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."* The main point, the "one

word” that Peter planted, was simple and powerful. The crucified and risen Jesus is Lord and Christ. He is sitting at the right hand of God ruling over the heavens and the earth. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. Now when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart (37). How could they accept the Lordship of Christ? Was it on the basis of the apostles’ rationalistic arguments? No. But the evidence for the Lordship of Christ was there. The people could see it with their eyes. What was the evidence? It was the apostles themselves. The apostles were displaying Christ’s lordship to them. The disciples were no superstars, and they were no saints. They were saintly sinners, hypocritical yet humble. They were literally nobodies. But Jesus was living and reigning in them. It was obvious to everyone who was willing to see that Jesus had become their Savior and Lord. In evangelism, this is, as they say, “where the rubber meets the road.” I think there are quite a few Christians who want to preach the gospel today. There are many more who think that they should but don’t and feel guilty about it. And among the few who actually do preach the gospel, there are many whose witness to non-believers is simply not credible. Why not? For whatever reason, the lordship of Christ is not evident in them. Jesus does not appear to be reigning in them. They may look clean and nice and handsome. They may be knowledgeable and sincere and well spoken. But they don’t look like Jesus or smell like Jesus. They don’t love as Jesus loves. They don’t communicate as Jesus communicates. In their attempted holiness, they don’t stoop to the level of sinners, but expect sinners to come up to their standard. Bottom line: the work of the Holy Spirit simply is not there.

We learn from verse 41 that 3,000 new believers were added that day. Starting from a base of 120, that is a 2,500% increase in one day. Most churches would be overjoyed if they grew at 5% per year. Many would be tickled if they just stopped losing members. Every category of Christian church and even independent churches are now losing members. And USA seems to be on fire for the Lord compared to what is happened in post-Christian Europe. In the United Kingdom today, regular churchgoers number only a few hundred thousand, and the average age of churchgoers is now 61. We need the work of the Holy Spirit. We need a revival in our midst. We cannot engineer revival. What happened on the day of Pentecost was a special blessing from God. God surely wants to bless us as well. He wants to bring more sheep into the fold. When he doesn’t, it is for good reason. Perhaps it is because we are not yet ready for this blessing. Some Christians want to unleash the power of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is not a power or force. He is God. We cannot use him for our own purposes; we must become obedient to him and relinquish control of our lives to him. Now that is difficult because the Holy Spirit makes us uncomfortable. He disturbs our tranquility and brings us places where we are afraid to go. Yes, we need to recover the gospel message that was in the heart of Peter that day. And we must be ready to be disturbed by the Holy Spirit. We must repent and reform and wait. Then, in God’s time, the Holy Spirit will come and bless, as much as we will be able to bear.