

BECOMING LIKE THE CHURCH OF ACTS 2

The Day of Pentecost marks the anniversary of the birth of God's church around 30 AD as a true community of believers where previously God's spirit had been given to just a very few scattered individuals. The word church comes from the Greek word ecclesia meaning called out ones or an assembly of people. Their enemies in Acts 17 would later describe them as "those who turned the world upside down".

Now before we look at the impact that God's Holy Spirit had on that first community of believers let's take a look at some of the original instructions for the Feast of Pentecost which was also referred to as the Feast of Weeks.

In Deuteronomy 16 we read in verses 9 and 10: "You shall count seven weeks to yourselves. Begin to count the seven weeks from the time you [*first*] began [*to put*] the sickle to the grain. And you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God."

Here we are told to count 7 weeks from the time of the wavesheaf offering to Pentecost.

Now let's go to the feast chapter Leviticus 23, and we'll read what it says in verses 15 and 16:

"And you shall count to you beginning with the next day after the Sabbath, beginning with the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven Sabbaths shall be complete. Even unto the day after the seventh Sabbath you shall number 50 days."

Pentecost is 7 weeks or 49 days after the wavesheaf offering and yet we are also told to count 50 days TO the day after the seventh sabbath which, on face value, would seem to make the beginning of this 50 day count the sabbath day before the wavesheaf offering.

Now this may seem confusing where it speaks of 49 days in one verse and then 50 in another but when we look at the prophetic fulfillment of the wavesheaf offering it begins to make much more sense.

After being crucified on a Wednesday before the annual sabbath that started the Feast of Unleavened Bread Jesus rose 3 days and 3 nights later on the weekly sabbath just before sunset.

Then later on the next day, the Sunday, He ascended to heaven probably around the very same time that the wavesheaf offering was being offered in the Temple. His acceptance by the Father in heaven that day was the christian symbolism of the wavesheaf offering.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread marked the start of the barley harvest. In Exodus 34:22 it calls Pentecost "the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of the wheat harvest." Pentecost marked the start of the wheat harvest in Israel and another firstfruits ceremony was held on Pentecost.

We read about that over in Leviticus 23:17 where it says: "You shall bring out of your homes two wave loaves of two tenth parts. They shall be of fine flour. They shall be baked with

leaven, [*They are*] the firstfruits to the LORD.” In verse 20 it says that they are wave offerings.

In the old Ambassador College Correspondence Course the interpretation given for the symbolism of the two wave loaves is that one represents the Old Testament saints and prophets and the other represents the New Testament church. They were wave offerings symbolising being offered to God and, when waived back, offered as a service to others. In light of that symbolism a question we could ask ourselves is: “Are we seen as a blessing or service to other people or are we content with just doing our own thing with our lives?”

Dropping down to verse 22 it is also very interesting to note the rather unusual placement of one of the statutes in this feast chapter of Leviticus 23 - that is the statute about not reaping the corners of the field and leaving them to the poor right after the instructions about Pentecost.

In essence, it seems to be saying that the real litmus test of a true spiritual firstfruit of God is whether you care for others around you like the poor just as the early New Testament church did after their first Pentecost together.

Jesus rose to heaven 40 days after His resurrection and told his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they would receive power from on high. On the Feast of Pentecost a mighty wind filled the whole house.

This house was likely the House of God or the Temple for so many Jews from across both the Roman and Parthian empires to have seen the mighty miracles of the tongues of fire and the disciples speaking in tongues.

Peter noted that it occurred around 9am or the time of the morning sacrifice. After Peter's famous Pentecost sermon thousands were baptised into the church and received the Holy Spirit.

The church in the early days soon after Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost was a very close-knit group of people who supported one another. We read this description of the early church in the book of Acts, in chapter 2 from verses 42 to 46:

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved”.

Let's look at those qualities a little more closely -:

- **"They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship"** – They were devoted to the true teachings they were being taught. They were hungry to learn more and very eager to discuss what they were learning with others.

- **"in the breaking of bread"** – They were big on hospitality and enjoying meals with others.
- **"in prayers"** – They were concerned and prayed for one another and the work of the church in spreading the gospel.
- **"Then fear came upon every soul"** – They had a great love and respect for God and feared to disappoint or displease Him with their actions as a result.
- **"Now all who believed were together"** – They were eager to spend as much time with one another in the church as possible. This togetherness, this bonding is something I want to come back to shortly.
- **"and had all things in common and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need"** – They made sure that no-one was doing without and their needs were not neglected. If someone had little they were all willing to give and share what they had to those who had little.

A couple of chapters later in Acts 4:34 it says as a result of this that "neither was there any among them in want."

Now that is a remarkable statement in a first century context. Remember they did not have the social welfare system that we have today. The church directly provided this type of welfare back then. Also, this was not a small group of 100 or so. At this stage, there were thousands of people in the church and without any government welfare there was no one person in want.

To make such an extraordinary thing possible it took 3 things. First, great communication to find out just who was in need amongst so many people. Second, good leadership and organisation and third, a generous spirit amongst all the brethren.

The communication of those needs would have been something that everyone would have had a part in playing and not just leaving it to the leadership to find those out. When we think of the needs in our own congregation here we need to remember that these needs are not just limited to physical needs or spiritual needs but also emotional needs and social needs and helping to ensure that everyone feels that they are wanted and that they belong here.

In Acts 2 it says many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Miraculous healings and the excitement of learning that the true Messiah had come, no doubt, played a big part in the first love and excitement that motivated the early church to be as united and generous as they were. This continued for a time but we know from later in the New Testament that their first love waned and this a cautionary tale for us.

The church has changed a lot in the 30 years that I have been attending. In a lot of respects we have grown and I have seen this in a kinder, less strict governance and less tendency to go to extremes.

That said, have we perhaps lost some of that early enthusiasm we used to have in some areas? Having less physical energy due to age is an obstacle and I feel that obstacle in

myself at times. I was very young when first I started coming along and just find it so hard to believe that I am now pushing 50.

Now over in Revelation 2:5 Jesus told the early church: "Remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the first works."

We are encouraged to remember those first works that we did when we were new to the church and do the good works that we did back in that time when we were full of enthusiasm for our calling. For the early church those first works would have included those very things we read about in Acts 2.

Often we think of the "feeding the flock" part of the commission to the church as something that is only done by the ministry through sermons and so on when in reality, we all play a part in it.

When we support and encourage one another with our time and our friendship and when we "stir up love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24) in one another we play a part in feeding the flock. Our support and friendship can play a big part in helping other people to grow spiritually and make it into God's Kingdom and on some occasions our friendship can even be the difference between whether a person sticks with the church or gives it away.

Over in Ephesians 4:16 we read: "From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body to the edifying of itself in love."

The Greek word for joined together here means "render close jointed together...organise compactly" and the Greek word for compacted here means a coming together tightly or under pressure. Verse 3 in the same chapter shows that this unity is not conformity against one's will but a voluntary coming together. It's not just merely a loose assembling of parts in the body of the church but a voluntary bonding or compacting tightly together.

Imagine I am holding a pencil. In the middle is a graphite tube which is made of pure carbon. Now imagine that I am holding a diamond. It is also made of pure carbon.

There is a phenomenal difference in the hardness between graphite and a diamond. Graphite can be easily crushed in one's hands while a diamond is the hardest material known to man.

This phenomenal difference is caused by the way that the atoms are arranged and the strength of the bonds between the molecules.

What are the bonds like between each of us in the church today? Are they weak like in graphite where we are just loosely connected or are they strong more like the bonds between diamonds.

King Solomon wrote about the bonds that should be between us in the church over in Ecclesiastes 4. In verses 11 and 12 he wrote: "Again, if two lie *together*, then they have warmth; but how can one be warm *alone*? And if one overthrows him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Solomon also said in Proverbs 18:24 that “A man *that hath* friends must show himself friendly: and there is a friend *that* sticketh closer than a brother.”

In conclusion, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit helped transform the early first century church into a very strongly connected community of believers who helped strengthen each other and made sure that no one was in need.

As the spirit begotten successors to that church we also should stir up the Holy Spirit within us to also strengthen one another and strive to take care of any need we can amongst us whether that be spiritual, physical, emotional or social and encourage one another to stick with our great calling and be there at Christ’s return when we will be not just begotten but become spirit born sons and daughters of God in His very family forever.