

Exegetical Notes, Acts 2:1-13
“Happy Birthday, Church”

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Acts 2:1-13

Verse 1

When the day of Pentecost came,

- Pentecost was a Hebrew holiday celebrated on the 50th day after the Sabbath of Passover week. It is discussed in Leviticus 23:15-16 and in Exodus 23:16 where it is called the Feast of Harvest. Deuteronomy calls it the Feast of Weeks (Deuteronomy 16:10). Its purpose was to show joy and give thanks to God for the wheat harvest.
- The word Pentecost means 50 in Greek and is taken from the number of days between this feast and the Passover. The Hebrew name for this feast is Shavuot.
- If Jesus' death and resurrection happened during Passover week, as the New Testament proclaims, then we know that these events happened about 50 days following the resurrection.

they were all together in one place.

- The “they” is the 11 disciples, all of them but Judas who had hung himself. It is reasonable to assume that Matthias, who had been elected to replace Judas, was also present.
- Some scholars think that the “they” is the 120 Christians referred to 1:15. This is possible.
- If the group consisted only of the 12 the “place” mentioned was probably the upper room in which they were staying, 1:13. However, if the reference is to the 120 Christians, it is unlikely that it happened in the upper room. It is more likely to have occurred in some more public place like the Temple.

Verse 2

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven

- The word “suddenly” implies that this happened without warning or preparation. They were not expecting this event to happen nor did they do anything to cause it to happen.
- Wind/Breath/Spirit are the same word in Hebrew and in Greek. Wind/breath is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, see Ezekiel 37:9,14 and John 3:8.
- In this case, the Holy Spirit comes with a physical, audible occurrence. Those present heard the Holy Spirit’s coming. It sounds like a violent wind blowing.

and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

- This is an indication that this event concerned only the 12 as they were sitting in a house. 120 believers could not have fit in a house. However, some scholars argue that the word “house” could refer to the Temple. I think that this is unlikely. If the event had taken place in the Temple, I think that that would have been noted and recorded in such a way as to indicate that it happened in the Temple. The language would have been specific, not vague.

Verse 3

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

- Not only did the Spirit manifest itself audibly, it was also manifested visibly. They saw tongues/flames of fire. Fire is a symbol of the presence of God, see Exodus 3:2.
- While this flame appeared to be one flame upon its arrival, it divided into separate flames with one flame resting above each person present.
- It is important to note that the wind and the flame are not the Holy Spirit. These are images of the Holy Spirit sent to establish its presence in reality in that place at that time. These symbols confirm the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 4

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit

- This means that the Holy Spirit took control of them in order to fulfill the promise that was given in Acts 1:8.

and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

- The promise of Acts 1:8 was that when the Holy Spirit came upon them they would be given power to bear testimony to Jesus Christ. This is the manifestation of that promise. They are now able to speak the Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The “tongues” referred to here means languages. What happened is that the Holy Spirit empowered them to preach the Gospel in languages that they had never learned to speak. Verse 8 clearly indicates that these were known languages for everyone heard the Gospel in his “native tongue.” Thus they did not speak in a “prayer language” but in a recognizable language like English or French.
- This was of the Holy Spirit and not of men. They had not learned these languages before this occurrence. It happened instantaneously, and there is no indication that they retained this ability after this event.

Verse 5

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

- In Jerusalem at that time were Jews who came from every part of the earth. These were Diaspora Jews who had returned to Jerusalem for a visit or as permanent residents. They would have understood Hebrew but their native tongue would have been that of the part of the world from which they came.
- Perhaps these people had come to celebrate Shavuot.

Verse 6

When they heard this sound,

- Apparently, more than just the 12 or even the 120 Christians heard the noise as of a violent wind. The crowds in Jerusalem also heard it.

a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

- Apparently, the noise of the wind drew some people to investigate.
- When they came to the place where this event was happening, they were confused because they did not hear what was being said in Hebrew but in the language of their native birth.
- If the event began in the upper room, it must have moved outside into a more public place at some point for now a large crowd is involved.

Verse 7

Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?”

- All of Jesus’ disciples, except Judas Iscariot, were from Galilee. It is highly unlikely that all of the 120 Christians were Galilean.

Verse 8-11a

Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism): Cretans and Arabs...

- This is clearly a miracle of speaking. The Christians are speaking the languages of these places and non-Christians confirm the miracle.

Verse 11b

We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!

- Again it is clear that the disciples are speaking in foreign languages.
- They are praising God in these languages or declaring his wonders and the crowds understand what they are saying.

Verse 12

Amazed and perplexed, they asked each other, “What does this mean?”

- Some among the Jewish crowds do not understand what they are seeing. They have no explanation for the event.

- They want to understand how this is happening but there is no frame of reference to help them.

Verse 13

Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

- Others find a rational explanation for what they cannot explain. They conclude that the disciples must be drunk. They reach this conclusion because they can attain no other logical explanation. However, it is a shabby explanation. It allows them to dismiss the occurrence but it does not explain the situation. Do drunken people speak in languages they have never studied and proclaim the wonders of God?

Observations:

1. The Holy Spirit coming to the Church in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Shavuot) is the answer to the Church’s prayers and is fulfillment of the promise of Jesus. The Feast of Shavuot is a celebration of God’s providential care for Israel. The gift of the Holy Spirit is proof of His providential care.
2. The Holy Spirit falls on the whole community of Christ at once. It is not a private happening. It is the distinguishing mark of a people who belong to God, not of individuals who belong to God.
3. The disciples were unaware of the approaching event so they did not prepare for the coming of the Spirit in any way. They simply waited as they had been instructed to do.
4. This event was very open and public. It was not done in secret and nonbelievers confirmed the miracle that occurred.
5. The giving of the Holy Spirit enables a group of frightened men to speak the Good News boldly. It empowers them to proclaim. This is what the Spirit still does. It gives us power to declare the Good News in intelligible ways. The people who heard understood what was said.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Happy Birthday, Church*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)