

Did the Church Begin at Pentecost?

The vast majority in Christendom have been taught that the Church, the body of Christ, began at Pentecost, in Acts 2. The logic for this view is the following: Membership into the body of Christ is through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred at Pentecost. Therefore, the Church began at Pentecost. These propositions appear reasoned and strong, but when the Scriptures are examined, the logic collapses.

The Church, the body of Christ, must be defined. The Church is that organism in which Jew and Gentile who have believed Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4) are baptized by the Holy Spirit, identified into Christ's death and resurrection, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and made part of "the body of Christ." The Church is a new creation, neither Jew nor Gentile. One acquires this new identity and becomes this new creation by faith alone, believing Paul's gospel, that Christ died for one's sins and rose from the dead (Romans 3.22,24-25, 28, 4.4-5, 5.1, 6.3-6, 8.11; 1 Corinthians 3.16, 6.19, 12.12-27; 2 Corinthians 5.17; Galatians 3.27-28; Ephesians 1.22-23; Colossians 1.18, 3.11).

Twenty-one proofs from Acts showing the Church did not begin at Pentecost:

1. The coming of the Holy Spirit was a Jewish promise, the New Covenant, which promised forgiveness of sins and the indwelling Spirit to Jews (cf. Jeremiah 31.31-34; Ezekiel 11.16-20, 36.21-28; Joel 2.28-29). This covenant promise was associated with God's regathering Jews into the promised land. Peter quoted Joel's prophecy (Acts 2.16-21), which stated the Spirit would be poured on "all flesh." The verses that follow qualify "all flesh"

to mean Jews, not “every person”—“your sons,” “your daughters,” “your old men,” “your young men.” Nothing in the New Covenant indicated the Holy Spirit coming on Gentiles.

2. Pentecost was a Jewish feast. Peter addressed Jews, not Gentiles (Acts 2.14, 22-23, 29, 30, 37, 38-39). He knew what the prophets wrote and Pentecost began the fulfillment of their prophecies. If this was the beginning of the Church, the body of Christ, Peter would have addressed Jews and Gentiles, not just Jews.
3. Peter’s address said nothing about the Church, the body of Christ, in which Jew and Gentile are equal in Christ. Everything in Peter’s address was Jewish; Gentiles were not in view. The idea of Jew and Gentile being equal was unknown and absent from the thinking of Peter and the other apostles.
4. Peter addressed the Jews about the crime of crucifying their Messiah. When they asked him what they should do, did Peter tell them to believe Christ died for their sins and rose from the dead for salvation (Paul’s gospel)? No. He told them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2.38). Is this the message of salvation today for one who becomes a member of the Church?
5. Peter told the Jews to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2.38) and healed the lame man at the Temple “on the faith of His name” (Acts 3.16). “His name,” spoke of Jesus’ identity, who He was, throughout the Gospels. This was the gospel of the kingdom. Did Peter tell the lame man to believe Christ died for his sins and rose from the dead for salvation (Acts 3.6)? Did he tell the Jews this after the healing of the lame man (Acts 3.11-21)? Why not, if the Church began at Pentecost? The message of Paul’s gospel for those who become members of the Church is not to believe in

Christ's identity (cf. Matthew 16.16; John 1.49, 11.27; Acts 8.37) but to believe in His work—He died for our sins and rose from the dead. Peter said nothing of this at Pentecost.

6. After Pentecost, Peter continued to address only Jews (cf. Acts 3.2-26, 4.8-12). If the Church began at Pentecost, why did Peter not address Gentiles?
7. Those who believed Peter's message sold their possessions and held everything in common (Acts 2.44-45). Do members of the Church, the body of Christ, do this? If the Church begin at Pentecost, why not? Why do church members not hold everything in common like those who believed Peter's message after Pentecost? What would happen if a pastor told his congregation to sell everything—stocks, bonds, houses, lands, etc. and put the proceeds into a common fund for all to use?
8. If the Church began at Pentecost, what was the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.1-11) who sold their possessions but concealed some of the proceeds? Peter declared they lied to the Holy Spirit and God struck them dead. Is this the nature of the Church, the body of Christ today? What happened to Ananias and Sapphira was a picture of Christ's earthly kingdom where He will rule with a rod of iron. Peter exercised the authority the Lord gave the Twelve to rule and judge the twelve tribes in the kingdom (Matthew 19.28). The Lord did not promise the Twelve authority over the Church, but rule over Israel, Jews. How could the Church begin at Pentecost when the Lord gave them no authority over the Church?
9. What are we to make of the healings, signs and wonders that continued, the lame man Peter and John healed at the Temple (Acts 3.1-10), the apostles' healing the sick and removing demons (Acts 5.12-16), Philip's healing and expelling demons in Samaria (Acts 8.5-7)? Do these acts characterize the Church, the body of Christ? Why not? These miracles were signs to prove to Israel that the apostles' message that Jesus was the Christ was true.

10. If the Church began at Pentecost, why were all believers not filled with the Holy Spirit? Acts 8.14-19 states Peter and John went to Samaria after they learned the Samaritans had been saved and prayed and laid hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit. Does this sound like the Church? Do ministers or fellow believers pray and lay hands on new believers to receive the Holy Spirit? Over a decade after Pentecost Paul encountered believers who knew nothing of the Holy Spirit. Paul laid his hands on them and they received Him (Acts 19.2-6). If the Church began at Pentecost, why did these believers not have the Spirit? For the Church, one who believes Paul's gospel is immediately indwelt with the Spirit (1 Corinthians 13; 2 Corinthians 1.22, 5.5; Ephesians 1.13). It is not a later event.
11. In Acts 8.22, Peter told Simon to repent from his evil and pray to the Lord so he might be forgiven. Are members of the Church, the body of Christ, told to repent and pray that our sins might be forgiven after we believe? On the contrary, we are told we have been forgiven (Ephesians 1.7, 4.32; Colossians 1.14, 2.13, 3.13). Why did Peter not tell Simon this? He did not tell him, because he did not know this. This was a Pauline revelation. The same is seen in 1 John 1.9. Members of the Church are never told to confess our sins so we might be forgiven. John knew nothing about Church truths, for God had not yet revealed them.
12. How was the Ethiopian eunuch saved after Philip witnessed to him? Did he believe Christ died for his sins and rose from the dead, how one becomes a member of the Church, the body of Christ? Did Philip tell him this? Acts 8 states Philip proclaimed the gospel to him—Jesus—the gospel of the kingdom—that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. The Ethiopian responded, "I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of the God" (Acts 8.37). Is the message of salvation today to believe Jesus is the Son of God? Or, is one saved by believing Christ

died for one's sins and rose from the dead? What occurred next? The Ethiopian was baptized. Several passages state that under the gospel of the kingdom, water baptism was required for salvation (Mark 1.4, 16.16; Luke 3.3; John 3.5; Acts 2.38, 22.16). Is water baptism required for salvation under Paul's gospel? Is water baptism required to become a member of the Church, the body of Christ? Paul wrote there is one baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4.5). One means one. Water baptism is outside the realm of salvation under Paul's gospel. No church should be practicing water baptism. To do so is to disobey God.

13. What did Paul believe in the case of his salvation? When he met the Lord on the road to Damascus, he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" That was the appropriate question under the gospel of the kingdom. The Lord asked His disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Peter responded that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16.15-16). After Paul was saved, what did he immediately proclaim in the synagogues? He declared, "He is the Son of the God" (Acts 9.20). Paul was also water baptized for remission of sins. Ananias declared, "When you get up, be baptized and wash away your sins after you call on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22.16). Are our sins washed away with water baptism? No. We have forgiveness of sins by believing Christ died for us and rose from the dead, Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4; Galatians 1.11-12; Ephesians 6.19). This did not occur at Pentecost.
14. Throughout Acts, before Paul's salvation, the salvation message was proclaimed to Jews only. No Gentile evangelism occurred. Acts 8.1 (years after Pentecost) states that even under intense persecution the apostles did not leave Jerusalem. Why? Their focus was Israel's repentance. For Jesus to return, every Jew had to repent (Acts 2.36, 38-39; cf. Matthew 23.37-39). Jesus gave them the order of their ministry: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and then the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8), Jew

first. Is this the order of evangelism in the Church?

15. Acts 10 records Peter's receiving the vision of the sheet and the command to go to Cornelius' house, a Gentile. If Peter and the apostles were evangelizing Gentiles, why the command? Why did Peter tell Cornelius it was not permitted for a Jew to visit and associate with a Gentile if they were evangelizing Gentiles (Acts 10.28)? Does this sound like the Church, in which Jew and Gentile are equal in Christ, with no distinction between Jew and Gentile?
16. When Cornelius and his household believed Peter's message and the Holy Spirit came on them, why were Peter and the six Jews with him astonished "that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (Acts 10.45). If the Church began at Pentecost, if they had been evangelizing Gentiles, would they be astonished? Does this make any sense?
17. In Acts 11.1 we read, "Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles also received the word of the God." If the Twelve and the believing Jews in Judea had been engaged in Gentile evangelism would this have been news? It was news because it had not been occurring.
18. After Peter returned to Jerusalem, why did the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem upbraid him for visiting Cornelius? They declared, "You went to uncircumcised men—and ate with them!" (Acts 11.3). If the Church began at Pentecost, would Gentiles not have been brought into the Church after over a decade? If the Holy Spirit came on and had been indwelling both Jews and Gentiles at Pentecost, why did Peter say, "Therefore, if the God gave the same gift to them as also to us after we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I hinder the God (Acts 11.17)? How did they reply? They said, "So the God gave repentance to life also to the Gentiles" (Acts 11.18). If the Church began at Pentecost, does Peter's statement make any sense? Does their response

make any sense?

19. If Gentiles were being brought into the Church, the body of Christ, since Pentecost, why does Acts 11.19 state that those who were scattered as a result of Stephen's persecution (Acts 8.1, 4) travelled to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, "speaking the word to no one except Jews only?" Could the Church begin at Pentecost if no Gentile evangelism occurred for more than a decade?
20. Why did the Twelve send Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11.22-24) when they learned Gentiles were being saved from the Jewish ministry in Acts 11.20? What was the gospel they proclaimed? They proclaimed "the gospel—the Lord Jesus"—the gospel of the kingdom, who Jesus was, His identity—not that He died for our sins and rose from the dead.
21. Why was the first thing Barnabas did after he confirmed Gentiles were being saved was to find Paul and bring him to Antioch (Acts 11.25-26)? Were the Jerusalem leaders unable to deal with Gentile believers if the Church began more than a decade earlier?

Could Paul write that the Church, unknown in other generations, was revealed to him if the Church began at Pentecost (Ephesians 3.1-10, 6.19)? What occurred at Pentecost was no secret. Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote about it 600 years before Christ. Jesus told His apostles to stay in Jerusalem until they were "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24.49). None of this was a secret. What was secret was that God would create a new entity, the Church, the body of Christ, in which Jew and Gentile were equal in Christ through faith alone, believing Christ died for one's sins and rose from the dead. That did not happen at Pentecost.

If the Church, the body of Christ, did not begin at Pentecost, when did it begin? The Scriptures declare the Church began with Paul. Consider the passage:

¹⁰ *According to the grace of the God given to me, as a wise master-builder, I laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one who builds take heed how he builds. ¹¹ For no one can lay another foundation besides the one which is laid, who is Jesus the Christ (1 Corinthians 3.10-11).*

Some have argued that these verses refer only to the local Corinthian church. Such a view cannot stand. Paul initially addressed the local Corinthian church but then spoke about the whole body of Christ. Four factors demonstrate this: 1) Paul's expression "the grace of the God given to me" identified his commission as apostle of Gentiles (Romans 11.13), beyond the Corinthian church; 2) Christ as the foundation spoke of the whole Church, beyond the Corinthian church; 3) Paul declared he laid the foundation of the Church, Christ; 4) the works of wood, hay, stubble, gold, silver, precious stones judged on the Day of Christ belong to all members of the Church, not just the Corinthians (verses 12-15). Paul's words here agree with what he wrote to the Ephesians in chapter 3 and Colossians 1, that the Church was a secret before God revealed it to and through him.

Paul called himself "a wise master builder," "a wise architect," ὡς σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων. A contractor or architect initiates a construction project. He does not appear after construction has begun. This alone tells us the Church could not have begun before Paul. A foundation begins a building. Paul wrote he laid the Church's foundation and that foundation is Christ. Christ is the foundation of all of God's programs.

Should the reader remain unconvinced, consider Paul's words to Timothy:

¹⁵ *The saying is trustworthy and worthy of all acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners: of whom I am first. ¹⁶ But because of this I was shown mercy, that in me*

first, Jesus Christ might demonstrate the full patience as a pattern for those about to believe on Him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1.15-16).

Most translations render verse 15 to read that Paul was the “worst,” “chief,” or “foremost” sinner rather than the “first sinner,” e.g., “of whom I am chief” (KJV), “and I am the worst of them” (NET), “of whom I am the worst” (NIV), “so that in me as the foremost sinner” (NASB). Paul was a great sinner, which he admitted in verse 13. This is not the point of the passage. The Greek text reads, Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς ἦλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἁμαρτωλοὺς σῶσαι ὧν πρῶτός εἰμι ἐγώ, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners: of whom I am first.” Paul wrote he was “first,” πρῶτός, not “worst.” Why have translators rendered the Greek text to convey that Paul was the worst sinner? Besides being an egregiously poor translation, do they believe (or expect others to believe) Paul thought he was worse than the tyrants throughout history, worse than the Caesars of his day?

Translators render the passage as they have for two reasons. First, they magnify Paul’s statement in verse 13, that he was a “blasphemer, and a persecutor, and insolent,” and continue this thought into verse 15. They circumvent the rest of verse 13 where he wrote he was ignorant and acted in unbelief and verse 14 where he wrote that God showed him mercy because of this. The second, and primary reason, is that they do not understand Paul’s apostleship. They do not recognize Paul was God’s unique apostle, not an appendage to the Twelve, not a thirteenth apostle. Paul was Christ’s previously handpicked (προχειρίζω) apostle (Acts 22.14, 26.16) to reveal a new program, the Church, the body of Christ, God had kept secret.

What did Paul mean when he wrote he was the “first sinner?” Clearly, Paul was not the “first sinner,” πρῶτός εἰμι ἐγώ, in the sense of Adam. Rather, he was “first” in the sense that he was the prototype, the pattern, to begin a new divine

program—the Church, the body of Christ. How do we know πρῶτος means “first” and not “worst?” An examination of how Paul used πρῶτος in other verses shows he always used it in its primary sense: first in time, place, etc. (Romans 10.19; 1 Corinthians 14.30, 15.3, 45, 47; Ephesians 6.2; Philippians 1.5; 1 Timothy 1.15, 2.13, 5.12; 2 Timothy 2.6, 4.16). Other passages reveal πρῶτος also has the sense of origin or originator. For example, in Revelation 1.17, the Lord says, ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, “I am the first and the last” (cf. Revelation 1.11, 22.13).

Verse 16 cements Paul’s meaning. Using the adjective πρῶτος again, he wrote “in me first,” ἐν ἐμοὶ πρώτῳ. Paul wrote he was “first” as God’s archetype, God’s prototype, a “pattern,” ὑποτύπωσιν, for all who would be saved afterward through his gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). A pattern is a model or standard for what will follow. God displayed His “full patience,” the extent of His mercy in Paul. Paul was God’s apostle of grace for God displayed His marvelous grace in saving Paul and giving him the gospel that Christ died for our sins, rose from the dead for our justification, and that by simply believing this, one can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Those who teach the Church began at Pentecost commit two flagrant theological errors. The first is failure to understand God’s covenant program with Israel, conflating it with God’s Church program. The second is not understanding that the Church is a new creation, an entirely new organism, a new program which God kept hidden. Pentecost began nothing new. Pentecost began the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel of the indwelling Spirit, which He made hundreds of years before.

The consequence of the great error that the Church began at Pentecost is confusion and misunderstanding of Church theology. *Those who teach the Church began at Pentecost lack a sound understanding of Church theology.* If the foundation is

unstable, can the structure be sound?

This article is from Appendix 2 of the author's book *Understanding Matthew*.