

Why Pentecost?

An Outline Prepared by J. Andrew Hill
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Baptists know about the importance of the Passover meal because they celebrate Easter at the same time. But unfortunately many Baptists do not understand Pentecost. While Passover rightly receives the lion's share of our attention, Baptists rarely celebrate Pentecost. Too few of us have taken the time to fathom what the book of Acts records actually took place on that holy day.

What is Pentecost?

Three major feasts occurred in Israel that required the attendance of all the men of Israel each year. They were the Passover, the Feast of Booths, and Pentecost. The Passover commemorated Israel's freedom from bondage through the slaughter of all the firstborn in Egypt, while the firstborn of Israel were passed over and spared. The Festival of Booths signified the wandering of Israel before entering the Promised Land. Pentecost celebrated the harvest of the first fruits in the Promised Land. For this reason, it was also called The Feast of Harvest.

Pentecost is the fulfillment of the Passover. The word *pentecost* means fiftieth day, and the feast was so named because it occurred fifty days from the day after the Passover. The day after the Passover, a sheaf of grain was presented to the Lord from the first harvest (winter barley). It symbolized the full harvest to come in seven weeks (the wheat harvest). Seven weeks later (50 days) Pentecost was celebrated as the first fruits were offered to God.

Christ brought the full meaning to the Passover by becoming the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He transformed the Passover into Easter--a celebration of his death, burial, and resurrection. The full meaning of Pentecost comes out when we see the resurrected Christ as the first sheaf (the first fruits) presented after the Passover. Jesus our Passover Lamb was crucified on Friday and then on Sunday, the day after the Passover Sabbath, he rose from the dead. In the same way the first fruits were offered up to God, Christ was presented before the Father as the victor over sin. Jesus was the first fruits. Paul writes, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20).

Then, fifty days later, the harvest began. This time the reference was not to wheat, but to souls. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples, empowered their proclamation of the gospel, and a great conversion of souls occurred beginning the New Testament Church. Men were present from every known nation. James writes, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (Jas. 1:18). Just as Christ's resurrection guarantees the salvation and ultimate bodily resurrection of his people, the expression of God's power displayed in the events of Pentecost demonstrates a fuller harvest will follow the first fruits. In other words, there will be more who profess Christ as Lord, more who are gathered into the kingdom to the praise and glory of God.

Why 50 Days? (Why not 40?)

Traditionally when we think of time periods in the Bible our mind instantly goes to the number forty. Biblically, forty was a number in which dramatic changes took place. The old was put away and

the new came. We remember it rained forty days and nights when God flooded the world in judgment, but saved eight souls and every kind of animal to fill the earth with new life. We recall that after a life of slavery in Egypt, Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years before they entered as victorious conquerors into a new land. In addition, we know that Jesus' life as a carpenter ended and his ministry began after his forty days of fasting and temptation in the desert.

It seems like forty would fit here, too. Why is it fifty? There are many theories, but perhaps the best explanation is that in this context the number fifty has a once and for all ring to it. Pentecost happens seven weeks after the Passover. Seven is seen as the number of completion because God took seven days to create the world and rest. Also, Jesus appeared for forty days after his resurrection, leaving ten days until Pentecost. Ten is the final number of completion.

This is important because the time between Christ's resurrection and Pentecost was not an accident. It was to demonstrate that what Christ had done on the cross was complete. His sacrifice is the only sacrifice. We will never wear out the blood of Jesus. He does not need to die and raise himself again. This may seem obvious to us today, however, the Jews who lived in the first century were so familiar with the repetitive sacrificial system that they needed the finality of Christ's *once and for all* sacrifice underscored.

What does Pentecost mean to us today?

Jesus often spoke of salvation as a harvest. He is gathering those that belong to him. He is harvesting them from every tongue, tribe and nation. Not all have yet heard his call to salvation. Not all have placed their faith in Christ. There will come a time when the harvest is over, but now the fields are ripe and ready. Christ is calling on all types of men, women, boys, and girls to have saving faith in him.

If you are a believer you are one of many. Your salvation story is unique yet common. Though we are a weak and fragile people he has placed his Holy Spirit as a seal on us who believe. He has given us the authority to share the good news about salvation in his name. He has sent us with a "Co-mission" to share his gospel with the nations.

You may think that your sin disqualifies you from being a witness to others about Christ, but he died for your sin, so it is no longer a viable excuse. You may think that you are not gifted and are unable to share, but he has placed his Holy Spirit in you and he will give you the power to proclaim his Word. You may think that people will not want to hear his message, and indeed the gospel does encounter much resistance, but have you ever considered these words of Christ, "**The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest**" (Matt. 9:37-38). Yet, if you keep reading in Matthew ten, you will notice that the very ones who prayed this were sent as laborers. They were the answer to their own prayer!

I sincerely hope that on this holy day of Pentecost you will remember the Lord's great work in saving you and consider it a promise that more will come to faith in Christ. Ask the Lord for opportunities to share the gospel with others. Pray even now, for the harvest is plentiful.

Grace in Christ,

Jonathan