

Introduction

Good morning, and welcome to Blacksburg Christian Fellowship. If you are here for the first time let me give you a special welcome; I am glad that you are here, and I hope that the service and my message are a blessing to you. Let me introduce myself; my name is David Kingston, and I am one of the Elders here. I also teach organic chemistry at Virginia Tech, so some of you may have to listen to me in less comfortable seats in the future, and may actually have to take notes! Actually taking notes of sermons is not a bad idea either; when you think about it, it is much more important that you know and understand God's word than it is that you know and understand the SN2 reaction or the aldol condensation (although if you want to pass OChem you had jolly well better know these and many other reactions!)

Who has had a birthday in the last week? Please put up your hand; I promise I will not embarrass you! Thank you, and congratulations! Birthdays are a big deal; when we were children we looked forward to them with great anticipation, because each birthday was another step on the path to becoming an adult, and (of course) because of the birthday gifts that we got. And I am looking forward to my next birthday, because it will let the TSA think I am decrepit enough so that I do not have to take off my shoes at airport security checkpoints! But birthdays are also times when we can look back with gratitude on the miracle of birth, and give thanks for the mothers that carried us for 9 months, and for the fathers who played a small but vital part in the whole process. And today we all get to celebrate a birthday; not ours personally (except for those who raised their hands) but the birthday of the church of Jesus Christ. And like most birthdays, it came with a gift; God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the church. The story is told in Acts 2; it is a long chapter, so we will read only portions of it.

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Acts 2:1-41

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

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Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and 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 — we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

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Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

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"Men of Israel, listen to this: 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. 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. 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.

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. 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.

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

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When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call."

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

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Our series is titled "Power in the Gospel", and we see this power in spades in Acts 2. This chapter is an account of the Power of the Holy Spirit, the Power of God, and the Power of Jesus. Let us look at these aspects of this teaching from God's word.

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1. The Power of the Holy Spirit

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a. The timing of the gift. "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place." Let us first note the importance of the day that God chose to give the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was the day of Pentecost. For most of us this does not mean much, but for a Jew this was one of the three great Jewish festivals, the other two being Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. It was also called the Feast of Weeks [Shavu'oth (Weeks) in Hebrew], and it was originally a celebration of the new harvest:

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Deut 16:9-10

Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you.

By the time of Jesus, however, it had been changed to a feast that came 7 weeks and one day, or 50 days, after Passover; the name Pentecost in Greek means the fiftieth (day). It had also changed to a celebration of the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai, which was calculated to have been 50 days after the exodus from Egypt. But the important point to note is that this was a major festival. It was especially popular because it came late in the Spring, when travel was easier, so Jerusalem was filled with Jews from all over the known world who had come to celebrate this great feast.

The importance of this is that God sent the Holy Spirit at exactly the time when thousands of people from all over the world were in Jerusalem, so that the good news of Jesus would be preached to a crowd who could then take the news back to their home countries. This reminds us that God has a missionary heart; He desires all men and women to turn to Him.

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b. The nature of the gift. "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."

If you are a visitor here this morning and are hearing this for the first time, you are probably thinking "this is really weird." And you are right! Nothing like this had happened before. Here is a bunch of people, men and women, sitting or standing in this large house early one morning. It is the first day of a new week; they have been meeting together and praying and wondering what to do for over a week since their Lord and Master Jesus left them to ascend into heaven. Outside in the street they can hear the hustle and bustle as the crowds flock into town for the big celebration of Pentecost. And then suddenly a violent wind starts to blow from somewhere, even though they are in a house; they must have thought what is going on? The wind might have reminded them

of the spirit, since the Hebrew word "ruach" can mean both "wind" and "spirit". But then, even stranger, separate flaming lights that looked like – like what? Yes, they looked like tongues, and they looked like fire, and they came and everyone had one of these tongue-like flames on his or her head – but they did not burn. The fire probably made them realize that this was from God, since He appeared to Moses in a burning bush that did not burn up. Wow! So this was how God was sending the Holy Spirit!

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And then – strangest of all – they all began speaking in strange languages that none of them had learned. I doubt that any of them had expected anything like this to happen. Yes, Jesus had promised them power; as Jim reminded us last week, Jesus had told them before He ascended into heaven:

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Acts 1:8

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Power, yes, but this? They must have been puzzled. But by now they had left the house and were out on the street, and a crowd had gathered at the unusual sound of a rushing wind inside a house and now people speaking in strange languages. And as they listened, the people listening were flabbergasted; here was a group of country yokels from upcountry Galilee speaking in Greek, Arabic, Latin, Egyptian, Persian, and a whole bunch of other languages. And so they naturally asked “What does this mean?”

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c. The meaning of the gift. There are at least three things we can learn from this gift of the Holy Spirit to the church:

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- i. Jesus’ promises can be trusted. He had promised the disciples that they would receive power, and here are the disciples not only speaking in new languages – something that is clearly a miracle from God – but as we shall see in a minute they are also boldly preaching the about Jesus Christ to an audience that was at least in part hostile to him. Peter, who a few weeks before had denied he even know Jesus, is now telling this crowd that they are the ones who killed Jesus. Talk about how to win friends and influence people!

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- ii. The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of power. It was the Holy Spirit who changed Peter and the other disciples from spiritual weaklings to men and women of power and boldness and courage.

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- iii. It was a clear witness to the world that God was at work. Galilean country yokels do not begin speaking a foreign language unless God (or possibly some evil power) is at work, and no evil power will ever have people praising God, as the disciples were doing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And God is still at work in this way.

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2. The Power of God

With a crowd gathering around, Peter seizes the opportunity to answer the question of the crowd “What does this mean?” He begins by disposing of the jeer from some that the disciples were drunk; it was only nine in the morning, way too early for people to get drunk! He then goes on to show how this amazing event was planned all along by God, and he then launches into a retelling of the story of Jesus. We can summarize Peter’s message as showing God’s power in two ways: in planning for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and in raising Jesus from the dead. Let us look at both of these.

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a. God showed His power in planning for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter begins by telling the crowd that what they are seeing and hearing is a fulfillment of a prophecy by the prophet Joel some centuries beforehand. Joel had written: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” And he then goes on to say

“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” So God, in His wisdom and power, had moved Joel to prophesy about the coming gift of the Holy Spirit.

Having set the record straight on the fact that this gift of the Holy Spirit is something that God had promised many years ago, Peter then proceeds to his main point:

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b. God showed His power in raising Jesus from the dead. This is the heart of Peter’s message. His argument goes like this:

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- i. God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through him.
- ii. You handed him over to the Romans to be put to death on the cross.
- iii. This was all done as part of God’s purpose and plan.
- iv. God raised Jesus from the dead.
- v. We (Peter and the other disciples standing with him) are living proof that all this happened.
- vi. God has made this same Jesus, whom you crucified, to be Lord and Christ.
- vii. You need to repent and be baptized.

So we have here the very first message of the good news of Jesus. Peter does not at this time go into details about the fact that Jesus’ death was for the forgiveness of sins, but he does make it clear that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead. Let’s camp on this truth for a moment and consider its meaning. There is so much truth tied up in this simple statement “God raised Jesus from the dead” that it would take many sermons to plunge its depths, so this is just a very simple summary:

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- i. It separates Christianity from all other world religions. Take any major world religion you like; Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christian Science, and others, and you will find that the founders are all dead. Only Jesus Christ is alive, and so this is tremendously important.

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C. S. Lewis wrote “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, is of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.” That is an accurate statement, but I will change it slightly to say

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“The resurrection of Jesus, if false, is of no importance, and if true, is of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.” Without the resurrection, Christianity is of no value, and you are wasting your time listening to me. As Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth:

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1 Cor 15:17-20

And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished! And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world.

But the fact is that Christ has been raised from the dead. He has become the first of a great harvest of those who will be raised to life again. (NLT)

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- ii. It demonstrates the weakness of the atheists’ case against Christianity. As most of you are well aware, the last 20 or so years has seen the rise of a new breed of atheists; writers and lecturers who not only do not believe in God, but who go on to say that a belief in God is harmful and that Christianity in particular should be done away with. Men like Richard Dawkins of Oxford (just another reason why you should prefer Cambridge!) with statements such as “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.” Both Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens (also an Oxford graduate), author of “God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything” and others have wrongly concluded that Christianity is false. Now obviously they do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but here is Peter preaching at the risk of his life to a crowd that must have included some of the men who conspired to put Jesus to death. And not one person stood up to say “Peter, you are wrong you knucklehead. Jesus did not rise from the dead; his tomb

is there, just down the road, and the priests checked it out a few days ago and his body is still there.” You can be sure that the Jewish priests had everything to gain and nothing to lose by proving that Jesus had NOT risen from the dead, but they never did this, now or at any time in the future. Why? Because they could not, because Jesus’ body was not in the tomb!

Another theory is that Jesus simply swooned on the cross and was mistaken for dead, and then revived in the cool dank tomb. N. T. Wright, an eminent NT scholar, and also to be fair an Oxford man, wrote about this

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“It has been argued that Jesus didn't really die – someone gave him a long drug that made him look like dead, and he revived in the tomb. But this cannot be true: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people, and no disciple would have been fooled by a half-drugged, beat-up Jesus into thinking he'd defeated death and inaugurated the kingdom.”

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The English agnostic and Darwin supporter Thomas Huxley said one "The great tragedy of science is the slaying of a beautiful theory by an ugly fact." Those of us who are scientists know what he means; most of us have had some pet theory proved to be wrong by the cold hard facts of experimental science.

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I would rephrase that by saying “The glorious victory of Christianity is the slaying of the ugly theory of atheism by the beautiful fact of the resurrection.”

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3. The Power of Jesus

We now turn to the third major truth in this chapter. We have seen the power of the Holy Spirit in giving the gift of tongues and in empowering Peter to preach the good news of Jesus, and we have seen the power of God in raising Jesus from the dead. We now turn to the power of Jesus in sending the Spirit.

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In sending the Spirit. When I told my wife Beverly that this was my third point she said something like “Are you sure?” So let’s go back to our text to be sure; in Acts 2:32-33 Peter says:

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“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. 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.”

So Peter is here telling us that the sending of the Holy Spirit comes from both God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Son; Jesus received the Holy Spirit from the Father and then poured it out on the disciples.

And so what we have here is a beautiful early statement of the Trinity; God the Father giving the Holy Spirit to God the Son, who then pours it out on His people.

The subject of the Trinity is one that calls for a whole message, but I must make just one remark, which is that the fact that God is three-in-one, difficult as it may be for our little minds to understand, is the only thing that allows God to be perfectly loving and also to be perfectly holy, and is the only thing that makes sense of the death of Jesus for our sins on the cross.

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Michael Reeves in his book “Delighting in the Trinity” (which I highly recommend) writes:

This God makes no third party suffer to achieve atonement. The one who dies is the Lamb of God, the Son. And it means that nobody but God contributes to the work of salvation: the Father, Son and Spirit accomplish it all.

Now if God were not triune, if there was no Son, no lamb of God to die in our place, then we would have to atone for our sin ourselves. We would have to provide, for God could not. But--hallelujah!--God has a Son, and in his infinite kindness he dies, paying the wages of sin, for us. It is because God is triune that the cross is such good news.

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4. The Response to the Spirit

We see two types of response to the gift of the Holy Spirit in this chapter:

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a. Some mocked. These people said “They had too much wine” in effect “they are drunk!” This was a pretty stupid thing to say, given that the disciples were speaking Greek and Latin and other languages, but perhaps the mockers did not understand this. However, this is going to be a common reaction to spiritual realities. Some of you students have had or will have professors who will seek to undermine your Christian faith and to belittle those who believe. Of course this will not happen in chemistry classes, where everything taught is true and lovely, but you may find false teaching in the humanities and social sciences and perhaps in other areas too. So do not be surprised at this; we live in a post-Christian culture, and there are people who may mock your faith. But – and here is the key point – if you are a believer you are gifted; you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and you are part of God’s church, with brothers and sisters in Christ to help and encourage you.

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b. Many were convicted. We do not know how many people mocked the disciples, but we do know that many people were convicted:

"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do? Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Peter tells his hearers that they need to repent. What does it mean to repent? Its basic meaning is to turn; to turn 180° away from sin and to turn towards Jesus. It means giving up wrong ways, whether they are dishonesty or untruthfulness or sexual relations outside of marriage or pride or any of the thousands of other ways in which we fail to love God and our neighbor. And it means to turn to Jesus in love and loyalty, accepting Him as the new ruler of your life.

Peter also commands them to be baptized, although he does not mention this in his next sermon in Acts 3. Nevertheless, baptism is an important step of public witness to your faith, and should follow soon after your repentance and commitment to Jesus; the NT knows nothing of unbaptized Christians.

Peter then promises that all who commit their lives to Jesus in this way will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he goes on to say “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.” And so this means you and me; we are among those who are far off. What a wonderful promise! All of us who are believers have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, who then gives us the power to live for Jesus and to witness for Him and to be encouraged and strengthened.

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5. Our Response to the Spirit

Our response will depend on whether you are a believer in Jesus or are a not-yet believer.

a. Not yet believer. If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, I invite you to think about these key truths that we have shared together:

- i. Jesus of Nazareth did wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs in the power of God.
- ii. Jesus was put to death on the cross.
- iii. God raised Jesus from the dead.
- iv. Peter and the other disciples standing are living proof that all this happened.
- v. God has made this same Jesus to be Lord and Christ.
- vi. You need to repent and be baptized.
- vii. And you will receive the “birthday gift” of the Holy Spirit to empower you to live for Jesus
Jesus Christ

If you are here today, whether for the first time of the five hundredth time, and you have not yet taken the only logical response to these truths, then I would love to speak with you. I will be in the lobby after the service, and you just need to come to me and say something like “I want to learn more” and I will be happy to explain how you too can become a follower of Jesus. Or if you are here with a Christian friend, you can ask him or her the same thing.

b. A believer in Jesus

If you are one of the many believers in Jesus here today, I invite you to rejoice in the fact that you have received the Holy Spirit and you are a child of God and can look forward to life in His presence forever. And as Jim

reminded us last week, we are all called to be witnesses to our Lord, but now you know that you can do so in the power of the Holy Spirit within you. To Him be the praise and the glory!