

100 Key Texts Study #18—Pentecost and the first Christian sermon—Acts 2:1-47

Background Information: Book of Acts

The Acts of the Apostles is the second volume of a work written by Luke to Theophilus by way of explanation of the Christian story. The first book is the gospel of Luke and this book, we might say, is the gospel of the Holy Spirit: how the Spirit directs and empowers Jesus' continued saving grace through the Church. Jesus himself states the goal of the Christian mission in 1:8: his church will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts charts that movement from Jerusalem outward, to Asia Minor, Greece and Rome, including in time, the Gentiles.

Acts 2—the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost—and Acts 15—the Jerusalem council of the early church, which established that Gentiles could be baptized and become Christ's disciples without being subjected to circumcision and most of the dietary laws which set Jews apart from others—are two pivotal passages in the movement from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

The Roman empire was a mosaic of cultures and religions held together by the power of Rome. The early Christian movement sought to address the gospel to people in all sorts of circumstances and places (Jerusalem, Corinth, Athens, Rome). Peter is the central figure in the early part of the book, as he preaches the sermon that follows Pentecost and results in many baptisms and then has a vision and meeting with Cornelius that convinces him that even Gentiles can become part of the Kingdom of God. After the council, however, the narrative is almost exclusively about Paul and his associates. Paul engages in three missionary journeys, experiencing success as well as opposition and persecution, throughout the Mediterranean world. He establishes the churches to which he writes letters that form much of the New Testament. In so doing, he runs afoul of the Jewish community and eventually of the Roman establishment. He is imprisoned several times and the book ends with him being taken to Rome for trial before the emperor (not without some harrowing experiences). While on house arrest in Rome, he engages in ministry with Jewish leaders, presenting the gospel to them.

The book of Acts ends here. Christian tradition holds that Paul was eventually executed by Rome as persecution of Christians began under Emperor Nero, perhaps by beheading.

Acts 2:1-47

1. **Read vs. 1-21, the Pentecost story.** What jumps out at you in this text? What thoughts are inspired? What questions arise?
 - Vs. 1. Note the day of Pentecost. 50 days after the Passover, this harvest festival was held and many Jewish people traveled to Jerusalem to observe it—hence the presence of people from all over the known world. The disciples were apparently still in the house where Jesus had appeared to them, when there was

a rush of wind, fire, and noise. These phenomena often accompany a revelation of God in the Bible which is called a theophany. So a wind of God blew over the void at the beginning of creation (the word spirit and wind are the same in Hebrew) Moses encountered God in the burning bush: God was making God's self known here.

- V. 3-5 The tongues here are not the ecstatic speech described by Paul and experienced by many Christians (the gift of tongues), but the capacity to speak in other languages. How does this fit with the overall theme of Acts?
- Note the reaction of the various peoples to the disciples' speech in v. 6-13. Can you imagine how you would have reacted, if you were a faithful Jew, to such a scene involving these fishermen, tax collectors, and sinners? Can you imagine how you would have reacted, as a disciple, to the sound of foreign words on your lips?
- In v. 14-21, Peter interprets this phenomena as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy, a prophecy specifically about "the day of the Lord," the coming of the "last days." Note the inclusivity here—who is filled with the Holy Spirit? Note also the end of this segment: the goal of this filling of the Holy Spirit is also inclusive: "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Whatever language they speak, whatever their gender, and by extension, whatever their nationality.

2. **Read v. 22-35, the remainder of Peter's sermon.** What jumps out at you? What thoughts are inspired? What questions arise?

- The sermon centers around the "kerygma," which lay at the center of all early Christian proclamation: Jesus lived, died, and was raised again from the dead. The salvation of God absolutely depends on this reality, which was part of God's plan for the world. Twice in this sermon Peter points his finger at the Jews: "this Jesus who you crucified (v. 23, v. 36)."
- In verses 25-28, Peter quotes extensively from Psalm 16:8-11, according to the widely used Greek translation of the Bible known as the Septuagint (the Greek word for seventy, as seventy scholars developed this translation). The fact that the quotation is already from a translation accounts for most differences in Peter's quotation from our Old Testament version of it. However, note that Peter says that David is here speaking of Jesus when he says, "the Lord." The same is true of vs. 34-35, where the original psalm was saying that the Lord (Yahweh) speaks to the king (my Lord), but Peter perceives David prophesying that Yahweh means these words for Jesus (my Lord).

3. **Read v. 36-47, the response to the sermon.** What jumps out at you? What thoughts are inspired? What questions arise?
- V. 37: Peter's listeners are "cut to the heart" by his sermon's accusation (you crucified him!) and want to be forgiven/added to the company of disciples. The reaction of this general audience of Pentecost festival keepers is very different than the reaction of the elders and scribes to a similar accusation by Stephen in chapter 7: they stone him. Here 3000 people are baptized!
 - V.42-47 identify some of the marks of the early church. Notice what the members of this church do to maintain and build their faith. In this passage, look for: communion, hanging out together in community, learning and study, worship, prayers together, generosity and sharing, praise.
4. **Questions to ponder:**
- Have you ever experienced/been present in a charismatic assembly where people spoke in tongues? What was like/different than the Pentecost scene?
 - We say that we are given the Holy Spirit in baptism, yet few of us are (almost literally) "on fire," like this. Do you think we must feel the Holy Spirit before we have the Holy Spirit?
 - Have you ever struggled to/been inspired to express the gospel to someone who is very different than you? Did you feel as if the Holy Spirit gave you the "language" needed to reach them?
 - Do you know other languages? Have you ever been on a mission trip to another country, like Colombia or Tanzania? Would you like to do this? How does this text relate to that experience?
 - Peter spoke of "the last days," which had come with the filling of the Holy Spirit. Are we still in the last days? Is the specter of the "last day" a frightening or a welcome thing for you? Real or unreal? Both?
 - How was Peter's sermon different than the sermons we hear (and preach!) these days in Church? Are there also similarities? What similarities? What makes a sermon helpful, in your opinion?
 - Do you ever feel "cut to the heart" by the gospel? What shape does repentance take for you?
 - Which, among the marks of the early church, seems to describe your life and ministry? Are there marks of the church that do not seem to apply to the church as a whole—or to you personally? How so? What can be done about it?

We'll be taking a break now from 100 Key Texts for all or at least part of the summer—no study next week.