

**The Self-Understanding of the Church:
The Community of the Outpoured Spirit
July 4, 2021**

Abstract. There are five descriptions of the early church that can be distilled from the early chapters of Acts. God's new ekklesia, besides being the community of the forgiven, is also the community of the outpoured Spirit, the eschatological city of God, the heavenly Zion, the firstfruits of a remnant of the last days (the whole time-period between the two Advents of Christ), and the true seed of Abraham by faith. In this first study, attention is focused on the birth of God's new ekklesia by the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and how this dramatic event fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 2:2-4. Contrasting pictures of the institution of the old and new covenants, each at the appointed time of the Feast of Pentecost, are then developed to show the superiority of the promissory covenant to the law covenant, which is further illustrated in the contrasting accounts of 3000 slain for idolatry with the golden calf at the institution of the old covenant and 3000 saved with the outpouring of the Spirit at the institution of the new covenant.

On this day that is set apart as our national holiday, we celebrate the freedom that was bequeathed to us by brave patriots in Colonial America who declared their independence from the unjust and tyrannical rule of foreign overlords, who wanted only to control, oppress, and strip from the colonists of "the unalienable rights" with which we "were endowed by our Creator." That's the familiar language that we recognize from the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence.

However, for all that we honor and celebrate in the beautifully-crafted language of this founding document of our nation, our present study in God's Word affirms an even greater set of blessings and freedoms that are our eternal inheritance as the beneficiaries of the New Covenant ratified by the shed blood of a sinless Savior who loved us and gave Himself for us. In the economy of words that makes up the seven combined promises of the New Covenant as they are enumerated in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, its foundational promise embodies the supreme pronouncement on which our redemption, rescue, and release from sin rests. It is God's promissory oath, "*I will forgive your iniquity and your sins I will remember no more.*"

Covenants built only on the promises of one party, because they are one-sided in their commitments, suffer the risk of being quickly broken by unforeseen crises or unanticipated circumstances. Open-ended promises made by only one self-obligating party are usually precariously poised and subject to unexpected vagaries, because they are based on benefits and blessings that are unconditional in what they promise to their named beneficiaries. But in Scripture we read of one such promissory covenant that is eternal because it is made by an immutable God and is ratified by His eternal Son who, though He consented by His incarnation to become our Kinsman that He might also be our Redeemer, is nonetheless Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today, and forever, and therefore immutable like His Father.

While there are several covenants (plural) of promise (singular) in Scripture, including for example the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants, there is one final, supreme promissory covenant of Scripture that embodies and draws together all the other promissory covenants of Scripture. It is the climactic New Covenant that brings together all the lesser promissory covenants of Scripture and incorporates them into one over-arching set of unconditional blessings. The promises of the New Covenant are stamped as eternal by the work of its unequalled Mediator, God's Son come in the flesh. By His self-emptying

incarnation and His covenant-ratifying death, the Son of God consented to become sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Then by His death-conquering resurrection, His victory was successfully announced as having accomplished our eternal redemption from sin and all its ruin. Consequently, no other covenant mediator in Scripture can compare with the Mediator of the New Covenant!

The New Covenant is celebrated in Hebrews as the covenant that transcends all others, and as the book closes it describes this New Covenant as the Everlasting Covenant. It is the one that uniquely will know no ending, because its Mediator has accomplished a finished, immutable work that can never be reversed, overturned, or abrogated.

Because the foundation stone on which this Everlasting Covenant is laid is the forgiveness of sins, its beneficiaries may be called in the most fundamental and basic sense, the community of the forgiven. It is a covenant that creates and assembles a worldwide community of forgiven ones from every tribe, nation, and tongue. As such, it is the covenant that uniquely embodies a community of beneficiaries upon whom the full measure of divine blessings has been bestowed. This community is also known as the ekklesia of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It was the third century church father, Tertullian, who said that the Father comes to this called out community, now called the church, with gifts in both hands. **In one hand is the gift of the Word**, who is the second person of the Trinity, His Son Jesus, the incarnate, living Word; and **in the other hand is the gift of the Spirit**, the third person of the Trinity. ***The Word and the Spirit, the logos and the pneuma, the fullness of God's gifts to His people; no greater gifts are possible, because they are God giving God.***

These are also the **twin gifts of the New Covenant** when Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 are read alongside each other. ***The gift of the Son and His redemptive work was required to ratify the one and only covenant that carried in it the unconditional promise of full and complete forgiveness of sins.*** What this gift of full and complete forgiveness means is that there is no sin that a sinner can perpetrate that is outside the reach of God's infinite grace that promises full and complete forgiveness. But alongside this gift of forgiveness there is also promised the gift of the Spirit, because ***we need the living, indwelling presence of God Himself to transform both our desire and our ability to walk in a manner that matches the forgiveness of sins. That's the reason for the gift of the Spirit.***

In the organic beauty of God's New Covenant, there is the clustered gift of five self-understandings that mature together in the community that the New Covenant creates and brings to expression in this present world. The first four are the fruit springing from the root of the fifth. Five is the number of grace in Scripture and these five elements are the ever-maturing cluster of realities designed to shape the understanding of our blessedness in the New Covenant. They are the understandings that accompany our salvation under the New Covenant, blossoming forth as fruit from the root of the forgiveness of sins. These thus form the maturing fruit of forgiveness in the New Covenant, and altogether they form the grace cluster that begins to fill in the identity and self-understanding of the awakened hearts of the risen Christ's called-out community. These five elements are the growing extension of the incarnate life of Christ now being manifest in a new people of God drawn from the nations of the world. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it represents some of the developing self-understandings that we discover taking shape in the early church in the opening chapters of Acts. The ekklesia is:

1. The community of the outpoured Spirit
2. The blessed citizenry of the City of God, living out in this present world their high calling and ultimate destiny in the coming Heavenly Zion
3. The remnant of the last days, called to be ambassadors of the Christ whose kingdom has been inaugurated but is not yet consummated
4. The true spiritual seed of Abraham
5. All of these are the outgrowth of the foundational self-understanding of the people of God as **the secured community of the forgiven by their redemption in Christ Jesus.**

We want to begin this morning a consideration of each of these in turn. The opening self-understanding of Christ's people in this list, namely the community of the outpoured Spirit takes us back to the first Day of Pentecost following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. We begin by noting the structure of **Acts 2:5-11.**

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And when this sound [the loud proclamations of the wonderful works of God declared in the clearly supernatural gift of speaking in other tongues] was heard, the multitude came together and were confused because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another,

“Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that...

A “**WE HEAR** each **IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE** in which we were born

B Parthians and Medes and Elamites

C and **those dwelling** in

| | |
|---|---|
| { | Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia Pontus and Asia Phrygia and Pamphylia Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene |
|---|---|

C' and **those visiting** from Rome (both Jews and proselytes)

B' Cretans and Arabs

A' “**WE HEAR** them **SPEAKING IN OUR OWN TONGUES** the wonderful works of God.”

The miracle of the community of the outpoured Spirit and its manifest expression in the gift of foreign tongues on Pentecost is arranged in a chiasmic pattern with **A:A'** serving as the framing echo of the amazement of the multitudes gathered on the Day of Pentecost, followed by Luke's inserted list of representatives from fifteen nations that had streamed into Jerusalem for Pentecost, beginning with the Gentile nations listed in **B:B'** and arranged around two interior groups (**C:C'**) designated by active participles as “**those dwelling**” in certain lands and “**those visiting**” from Rome, both Jews and proselytes to Judaism.

However, the greater significance of this catalog of fifteen nations arranged in the inverted (mirrored) pattern of **B:C::C:B** is that these nations form a giant elliptical circle stretched further to the east and west than they extended to the north and south, marking out the shape of the Roman empire that embraced a much greater east-west extension that included the Mediterranean world and portions of the ancient Fertile Crescent. The elliptical periphery of nations establishing the boundaries of the Roman empire began just outside Rome's reach in Persia far to the east and swept westward across northern Mesopotamia into the regions north of Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, and Italy and then turned southward, crossing the Mediterranean Sea with its island nations to take in northern Africa and move back to the

east past Egypt into Arabia completing the circular movement back to Persia. These fifteen nations are thus arranged as a large elliptical pattern of nations moving counter-clockwise around Jerusalem at its center. Without specifically citing Isaiah 2:2-4, Luke is suggesting the same circular geographical pattern of nations streaming into Jerusalem that Isaiah wrote about:

It shall come to pass in days to come
That the mountains of Yahweh's house will be established as the highest mountain
And elevated above the hills.
All the nations will stream to it.
For from Zion goes forth instruction
And the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem.

Luke is suggesting that this Isaianic picture of nations from the north, south, east, and west streaming into Jerusalem is being fulfilled at the Pentecost that followed the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus into the heavens. Luke may also have been aware of the very similar ancient "catalog of the nations" that dated back to the fourth century BC. That ancient catalog of nations had been fused with a system of astrology in the ancient world that was imagined to reveal the future fortunes of the nations. Versions of this "catalog of the nations" had become popular in the Roman empire and were regularly consulted in astrological predictions. However, Luke here uses this ancient catalog to demonstrate the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy as opposed to the empty predictions of astrology. He thus presents a polemic against the lies of astrology by aligning the nations in this ancient catalog with events that came from the outpouring of the Spirit following the redemption that Christ had won in His death, resurrection, and ascension. Luke, it seems, saw a prophetic fulfillment of this "catalog of the nations" in the prophecy of Isaiah. So he subtly disengages this ancient elliptical map from its more common, popular fusion with astrology to give it a new setting in ancient Hebrew prophecy.

What conclusions can we draw from Luke's use of this list? First, the catalog of the nations in Acts 2:9-11 is not a random arrangement of names original with Luke. It is instead a clear, formalized arranging of the nations of the earth in an elliptical circle stemming from the well-attested geographical drawings of that day. With his formal training almost certainly taking place at the well-known academic center in Tarsus (which included a famous medical school), Luke was doubtless familiar with the emerging field of cartography and map making that had a solid history in the Mediterranean world going back to the late fourth century BC. He would also have known how tightly the study of maps and geography was fused with astrology in the attempts to produce supposed astrological predictions for the nations. But Luke, as a defender of God's truth against the paganism of the world in his day, took the well-known "catalog of the nations" and showed how Isaiah's prophecy of the nations streaming into Jerusalem was in fact being fulfilled in the first century, and specifically on the Day of Pentecost, following the ascension of Jesus into the heavens only ten days earlier.

Now the events that occurred on this Day of Pentecost that opens the book of Acts is our first landing place to show the formation of **the community of the outpoured Spirit** promised in the New Covenant. Following their recognition of sins forgiven in the sacrifice of Christ, the 120 devoted followers of Christ were now poised to learn by a dramatic miracle that they were also appointed to become **the community of the outpoured Spirit!** Acts 2 reports how this added dimension of their self-understanding became a reality.

The Self-Understanding of the Ekklesia as the Community of the Outpoured Spirit

The Feast of Weeks, aka as the Feast of Pentecost, was one of three annual pilgrimage festivals on Israel's ancient calendar. It came only fifty days after the first of these annual festivals, which was Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. On the opening day of the Feast of Pentecost, only ten

days after the risen Christ had ascended to His throne at the right hand of the Father in heaven, the Holy Spirit was suddenly poured out upon the gathering of 120 devoted followers of Jesus who were waiting prayerfully and in one accord in an Upper Room in Jerusalem. Suddenly as the Day of Pentecost dawns, the 120 were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in foreign languages, which they did not know and had never learned, as the Spirit gave them utterance. They moved quickly into the streets and the courtyard of the temple, continuing to speak the wonderful works of God as the Spirit gave them utterance. The crowds were both amazed and confused by what they were witnessing.

Then Peter begins to address them, and he opens by declaring that the miraculous phenomena they were observing was not (as some had supposed) the result of too much wine. It was after all, as Peter notes, only 9 o'clock in the morning! They had not had the time to get so incredibly drunk that they lost the faculty of coherent speech! Instead, they were manifesting the supernatural outpouring of God's Spirit by coherent utterances in the diverse languages of the inhabited world, and it had only started very suddenly earlier that same morning! He then proceeds to explain who it is who has sent this miraculous release of the Spirit. **HE** has poured out all that you are now seeing and hearing, and who is this **HE**?

- It is Jesus of Nazareth, previously attested and validated to you by the miracles, wonders, and signs that He did in your midst (2:22).
- Then HE was further attested and validated to you when "God raised from the dead, of which **we** are all witnesses" (2:33). Peter's "we" is referring collectively to the entire group of 120 eyewitnesses who had seen the resurrected Christ.
- These 120 eyewitnesses of the risen Christ and His devoted followers are now by the power of God's outpoured Spirit given supernatural utterance in languages they had never learned, and were joyfully proclaiming the wonderful works of God that had been taking place over the previous three years throughout Galilee, Judea, and finally in Jerusalem. Peter makes plain to the Pentecost multitudes that they had just heard uneducated Galileans proclaim in all the diverse dialects and languages of the inhabited world the mighty works of God in His Son Jesus.
- Moreover, He announces that this outpoured Spirit had come through the release and command of the same Jesus who had now ascended into heaven where "He was exalted to God's right hand" (2:33).
- Conclusion: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (2:36).

And the moral summons that grows out of Peter's urgent message is that you must save yourselves from this crooked and perverse generation by heeding God's call to "repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38).

The structure of Peter's moral summons is arranged in the following inverted pattern:

- A Command: Repent
- B Command: And be baptized every one of you
- B' Accompanying prepositional phrase: In (lit., "upon" meaning "upon taking") the name of Jesus Christ (By publicly taking and wearing His name as the source of salvation)
- A' Closing prepositional phrase (joined in the inverted ABBA pattern to the opening command): For the remission of sins

And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Closing Observations from the Events and Sermon on the Day of Pentecost

Luke's two-volume contribution to the NT reveals that Pentecost is the climax of everything that has gone before. From the start of the ministry of Jesus, Luke points us forward, not just to the **death and resurrection of Jesus**, but beyond these events to the **ascension and outpouring of the Spirit** at Pentecost. It was only at Pentecost by the gift of the Spirit that the benefits and blessings won by Jesus in His death, resurrection, and ascension are applied to His disciples and devoted followers. Jesus' death and resurrection accomplish nothing without the gift of the Spirit! Pentecost represents a radical shift in God's plan! It indicates a pervasive and profound new beginning! It is the inauguration of a new age, the age of the Spirit, which had not been before. Luke makes this clear in several ways.

1. Luke wrote two books. One *ends with the ascension* and the other *begins with the ascension*. Acts, as it picks up with a second account of the ascension, continues its story by linking it to Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit. So the ascension from one standpoint *closes* the story of Jesus, and from another standpoint *opens* the age of the Spirit, as Peter declared in his sermon:

Therefore, being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out that which you now see and hear (Acts 2:33).

So the repeated account of the ascension at the opening of Acts is Luke's way of seamlessly continuing the stream of events from the finishing of the work of the Son into the beginning of the work of the Spirit whom He sent.

2. Acts introduces a new stage of history when the Father dispenses to the Son the authority to release the Spirit. The Son receives from the Father the appointment as the Baptizer in the Spirit. Interestingly, Acts 1:2 makes clear that Jesus before His ascension is still dependent on the Spirit for the inspiration and direction of His teaching in a way similar to that of all the prophets of old, and this dependence continues right up to the ascension. The Greek of Acts 1:2 indicates that Jesus' ministry through the Holy Spirit continued *right up until the very day* on which He was taken up into heaven.
3. It was only at Pentecost that Joel's prophecy of the outpoured Spirit is fulfilled. For the 120 in the Upper Room, the gift of the outpoured Spirit was the distinguishing mark that divided the old covenant from the new covenant. The last days did not begin for the disciples until the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:17 where Peter quotes Joel's prophecy of the outpoured Spirit as the event that marks Pentecost). The age of the Spirit had not yet come while they waited in the Upper Room. Proof that the disciples were still operating in an old covenant setting is seen in the electing of Matthias to become the successor of Judas by the casting of lots. The casting of lots under the old covenant was regulated by the principle set forth in **Proverbs 16:33**, "*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*" While the disciples waited for the outpouring of the Spirit, they made decisions by clear dependence on what they had been taught in the Old Covenant Scriptures. Pentecost is thus the initiating event of the new covenant and the age of the Spirit; and the church, properly and fully understood, did not come into existence until the Day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit.

In addition to these three observations, we should note that while the Feast of Weeks (later called Pentecost) was originally an agricultural festival celebrated at the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest, as Israel's history unfolded, it more and more became the feast closely associated with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. Since the other two annual pilgrimage feasts,

Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, were both related to the Exodus event, the Jewish sages over time reasoned that the third pilgrimage feast must also relate to the Exodus.

The Israelites left Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month, the morning after the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. They arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai on the first day of the third month, which would have been 40 days later. Moses then went up on the mountain and came down ten days later carrying the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments by the finger of God. The total timeline is reckoned as 50 days separating Passover and the future Feast of Pentecost that would be celebrated once Israel was in the promised land. So the Feast of Pentecost in later Jewish reckoning was exactly 50 days after Passover and corresponded to the time when Moses received the Ten Commandments at the summit of Sinai.

Paul develops his own commentary on the sharp contrast between the old covenant and the new covenant in II Corinthians 3. He describes the old covenant as the covenant of law that brings condemnation and death and the new covenant as the covenant of the outpoured Spirit that brings life and blessing. He sums up the contrast by declaring that “the letter (of the law of the old covenant) kills, but the Spirit (imparted in the new covenant) gives life” (II Cor 3:6). The developed contrast between the death and condemnation of the old covenant and the life and glory imparted by the Spirit under the new covenant is graphically illustrated in the events that are joined to the institution of these two covenants.

The old covenant was a bilateral covenant that required the consent of the people, which they gave in Exodus 24:3 when they declared, “*All that the Lord has said we will do!*” Then as the stipulations of the old covenant law were being given to Moses at the summit of Sinai, beginning with the Ten Commandments etched in stone, the children of Israel were rapidly apostatizing into idolatry with the golden calf at the base of the mountain. Aaron, Israel’s first high priest, was aiding and abetting their idolatry as he shaped the golden calf with an engraving tool. At the same time this was happening at the base of Sinai, the Lord God at the top of the mountain was by His finger engraving the commandments on stone. ***So there was engraving taking place at both the top and the bottom of Mount Sinai—one kind of engraving intended to set Israel apart as holy unto the Lord and another kind of engraving reflecting Israel’s departure from the Lord God in the manufacturing of their own idolatrous god.***

The two covenants are thus starkly contrasted in the worship that is born out of each. The Israelites left Egypt at Passover and 40 days later arrived at Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain where he receives the Ten Commandments; and when he comes down ten days later, he beholds Israel’s apostasy with the golden calf that stirs the wrath of God resulting in **the slaying of 3000 in Israel**. This was in one sense Israel’s first day of Pentecost before they had entered the land of promise and had any harvest to celebrate. Some 1200 years later, Jesus gave His life at Passover and three days later is resurrected from the grave. 40 days after His resurrection He meets with His disciples on a mountain in Galilee; He commissions them, and then ascends into heaven. Ten days after His ascension into heaven, Luke reports that He received from His Father the authority to pour out the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost resulting in **the salvation of 3000 in Israel!** On the same day of Israel’s calendar, God gave the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone under the old covenant, and the Holy Spirit came and wrote God’s commandments on the hearts of a new people being brought forth in the institution of the new covenant, thereby confirming the promise of the law written on the hearts of God’s new covenant people in Jeremiah 31:31-34. The contrast between these two covenants reveals the truth that Paul sums up in **II Corinthians 3:6**, “the letter (of the old covenant law) kills, but the Spirit (imparted in the new covenant) gives life!” ***The new has truly dislodged the old by the work of a Savior who makes all things new!***