

HOW TO HAVE A GREAT CHURCH

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter
Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines
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Let's Begin

Rome was not built in a day; neither is a great church built in one service. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 were saved. Though both impressive and inspiring, for some reason the contemporary church has lost, in many ways, the secrets of this first church's greatness.

Unfortunately, there is a vast pessimism about church attendance. Some say that the crowds will never come again. It is true that many of the large, historic churches in this nation are largely empty on Sundays. Because of that, all kinds of things are being done to draw the crowds. Sometimes the things that churches do are extreme. Too often worldly amusements, personalities with questionable character, and high-tech worship services are planned to draw the crowds.

Today, we're going to look at the methods of the early church. We'll begin at the beginning—Pentecost. Pentecost is the fulfillment of the long-awaited promise given by the prophets of the Old Testament as well as by Jesus Himself.

As we make our way through Acts chapter two, let's follow the outline below:

- I. The Making of the Great Church (vv. 1-36)
- II. The Marks of a Great Church (vv. 37-47)

I. The Making of the Great Church (vv. 1-36)

There's no way around it: in order to understand the Bible's teaching about a great church, we must consider Pentecost. There can be no shortcuts or substitutes. Understandably, however, substitutes inevitably are offered. J.B. Phillips noted that churches today are fat and out of breath through prosperity. That is, they are muscle-bound through over-organization. Thus, we need again the wind and the flame of Pentecost. As we consider a great church in the making, two factors must be explored.

First, *the Holy Spirit comes down* (vv. 1-4). We will explore this first factor by asking three questions, questions concerning when, what, and how. Therefore, let's begin with this question: when did Pentecost happen? (v. 1). We must be clear in the beginning that Pentecost did not "just happen." Instead, Pentecost happened when *divine preparation*

was completed. According to the Old Testament, Pentecost was one of three major Jewish feast days—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Lev. 23; Deut. 16). Furthermore, Passover pointed to the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

The word "pentecost" literally means "50th day," and thus pointed to the harvest Christ's death would bring. On that day, according to the Old Testament, the priest would bring two loaves into the temple and would waive them before the Lord. This antitype spoke of the time when the Holy Spirit would be outpoured and souls would be gathered together as one.

Not only was *divine preparation* necessary, but also *human preparation* must be complete. Though the Holy Spirit would be given by God, they had to be ready to receive. Listen to the words of the Lord Jesus once again, "And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:4-5).

When, then, do we find the apostles assembled at the beginning of Acts 2? Luke records the scene, "And when the day of Pentecost was

Reflection Connection

Reflect for a moment on your church. What is the greatest attribute you can mention about your church? Why do you believe this to be a great quality? Explain.



fully come, they were all with one accord in one place” (v. 1). The apostles are gathered together in “one accord.” These men were so different in temperament. Their backgrounds were varied. Yet something or Someone fused them together. They all wanted the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out the awesome commission Jesus gave them. Too often, even in the church of God, people pull in opposite directions. They have no concept of the apostolic experience we find here stated simply as “one accord.”

Let’s now deal with the second question: *what happened at Pentecost?* (vv. 2-3). Stated simply, the Holy Spirit was poured upon the disciples and they were endowed with heavenly power. While the manger of Bethlehem was the cradle of the Son of God’s birth, the upper room was the cradle of the Spirit of God’s blessing. He descended upon the disciples with full power.

Understand that the Holy Spirit was already in the world. He was instrumental at Creation; He Inspired the Scriptures; He illuminated the disciples’ minds. Indeed, the Holy Spirit performed of a variety of tasks. At Pentecost however, He comes in a different way. He comes in unadulterated power.

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Luke records for us that the Holy Spirit came “suddenly” (v. 2). The Prophet Malachi had long ago foretold His sudden descent: “The Lord, whom ye seek, shall come suddenly to His Temple” (3:1). When God works, He works swiftly and sovereignly. The efforts that man could not produce in 1,000 years, God produced in one mighty visitation from heaven.

Let’s go a bit farther in understanding just what happened that day. There were two explicit miracles that announced the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Both miracles were sensual in nature. One was a miracle of *sound* and the other was a miracle of *sight*.

The excitement unfolds when Luke records the sound of the Spirit’s descent: “And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting” (v. 2). The Spirit’s coming is associated with “a rushing mighty wind.” The wind is a wonderful symbol of the Holy Spirit. The wind’s invisibility is well-known. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus openly about this (John 3:8). Through this symbol we are taught that the Spirit is invisible in essence, nonetheless He is real.

Critics sometimes mock believers because they worship a God they cannot see with the naked eye. Yet, we know through experience that there are many things we cannot see with the naked eye, yet they are very real. Have you ever seen a headache? Or a heart attack? Can you see a dirty thought? Or a genius idea? Of course not! Yet who would dare assert any are not real?

In addition, not only is the wind *invisible*, the wind is also *irresistible*. That is, one cannot control it, nor box it up, nor dictate how it will operate. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is irresistible. We cannot regiment Him; we cannot control Him; we cannot dictate to Him how to operate. Instead He is sovereign; He is God!

Reflection Connection

Take a moment and ponder the times you have felt that God was not willing to work because He had not worked thus far. Be prepared to share with the entire group. Allow time for others to share their experience.



Reflection Connection

Someone said that perhaps the greatest sin of the church today is attempting to control the Holy Spirit. Do you think they are right? Why or why not? Talk to your Pastor about speaking to your group a few minutes on the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

Reflection Connection

Is it possible to measure the temperature of the church? Why or why not? Supposing that it is possible, on a scale of 32° to 100°, what temperature do you think your church would be? Explain. As you share with the group, be respectful and reverent of the Body of Christ and His people. Also, avoid, at all costs, allowing open criticism of your Pastor.

This surely means that the Holy Spirit is, as the wind, *influential*. When the Spirit moves things are forever different. Where the wind of God blows on the church, the walls of resistance topple and the church is well on its way to becoming a great church.

The second miracle on the day of Pentecost symbolizing the coming of the Holy Spirit was sight. Not only did the apostles hear the Spirit's descent, they saw the Spirit's descent: "And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them" (v. 3). The symbol of fire is magnificent. The Holy Spirit of God burns when He comes. One need only ask Moses if the Spirit of God burns (Exod. 3:2; cp. Heb. 12:29).

Indicative of burning is the *cleansing* power the Holy Spirit brings. The Prophet Isaiah learned by experience that fire cleanses one's inner life (Isa. 6:1-4). So too the Spirit of God purifies the church. How easy it is for the church to get dirty by relaxing her standards. All too often church members live at a low level, a sub-Christian level. Only the Spirit of the Living God can purify the church of God!

In addition, the fire not only cleanses, the fire consumes. Whether it's the rags of righteousness or the dross of pride or even the stubble of doubt, the Spirit consumes them.

Finally, fire *conflagrates*. In other words, fire produces fire! The Holy Spirit's presence—authentic presence—will always replicate. His fire in the church inevitably produces disciples on fire! The Spirit takes hold of us and makes us what He is—a burning flame.

Finally, let's consider the third question: *why did Pentecost happen?* (v. 4). In short, Pentecost took place because God wanted to do something. The next question, of course, is, "Do what?" And that can be answered three different ways.

First, God wanted to do something *for us*. The promise of the Father was being fulfilled (cp. 1:5; Matt. 3:11). Even though historically Pentecost happened only one time—never to be repeated—experientially and personally Pentecost takes place at the time of salvation in every believer's life (1 Cor. 12:13).

Next, God wanted to do something *in us*. Luke reminds us that they "were all filled" with the Holy Spirit. It wasn't just a select few that experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit. Rather every Christian has the privilege of the presence of God's Spirit in his or her life.

Finally, God wanted to do something *through us*. Once again Luke records, upon the filling of the Holy Spirit, they all spoke as the Spirit "gave them utterance." Being filled by the Spirit means that we will speak for the Spirit. Nor is it a mystery what the Spirit speaks, "...we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God" (v. 11).

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The second factor we must explore is this: the crowds came running (vv. 5-36). While the focus in this first section is obviously the coming of the Holy Spirit, we must note as well the coming of the crowds.

Jesus clearly told His apostles to begin at Jerusalem (Luke 24:47). Jerusalem was a particularly *religious* city. In fact, it was the center of worship for the known world. From ancient times, Jerusalem had been known as The Holy City. Furthermore, Jerusalem was a *receptive* city. It cannot be denied that most of the population may have had interests elsewhere than the coming Messiah. Yet, there were some like Simeon who were waiting for the consolation of Israel. For Jerusalem, then, the coming of the Holy Spirit drew multitudes of people.

Before moving on to the marks of the great church, observe the challenge that lay before the apostles. There were men, women and children from varied nations of the world standing before them. They possessed not a clue how to reach them or even tell them about Jesus. Yet the Holy Spirit enabled them to tell about Jesus. If the church could simply trust God, He would provide the means to reach the crowds.

Reflection Connection

Take a few moments to reflect on your community, your city, or your county. Do you consider your church field as your Jerusalem? Be prepared to openly discuss this with the entire group.

II. The Marks of a Great Church (vv. 37-47)

Pentecost was just the beginning. The early church grew to an astounding 100,000 within seven years! Know that it took more than one service to produce that kind of results. Such growth demands the question: how did this take place? What were their secrets? Are there any visible marks that we may detect in understanding the making of a great church? Fortunately for us, God gives us the answer.

When we examine Acts 2, we find that there are three marks in making a great church. *The first mark is a converted membership* (vv. 37-41). The church must be made up of people who are saved—*really saved*. In other words, they are added by the Lord Himself. Scripture says, “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (v. 47). While the church clerk may add your name to the church roll, only God adds your name to the heavenly register!

Additionally, note that there are two sides to conversion. First, there is the *divine* side: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the LORD our God shall call” (v. 39). Conversion begins with a call from God. God takes the first step in your salvation. Without this call, no one can be saved.

Continuing with the divine side, there is also *conviction*: “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (v. 37). The people to whom Peter preached were cut deep within. They felt the weight of their sin and cried out for help. Jesus told his disciples how that is precisely what the Spirit would do when He came —He would convict the world of sin (John 16:8).

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Reflection Connection

Think for a moment when you came to Christ. Do you recall the guilt from your sin? Did you then know that the Holy Spirit was at work?

There's also the *human* side of conversion. After Peter's preaching, repentance was required (v. 38). Repentance means a change of mind toward sin, self, and the Savior (cp. Luke 13:3). When one repents, one turns from sin to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. Also, one receives the Holy Spirit, who, according to Peter, is the gift from God (v. 38). Finally, the human side of conversion means one *renounces* the world: "Save yourselves from this untoward generation," Peter proclaims! (v. 40)

The second mark in the making of a great church is a constant ministry (vv. 42-45). The Bible says that those who were saved and had joined the church "continued steadfastly" (v. 42). This is a beautiful picture of the constant ministry the early church possessed. The proof of a church's greatness is its continuity.

As we examine the early church, we note a *fourfold program*. Observe Luke's careful description: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (v. 42). The first part of their program was *instruction*. We see this in the "apostles' doctrine." Christians must be taught the Word of God. Grounding must take place concerning spiritual reality and this can only happen when the Bible is faithfully preached and taught.

The second part of their program was *inspiration*. This is what Luke means by "fellowship." Fellowship is God's people loving Jesus and one another. The third part of their program was *illustration*. The disciples continued "breaking bread." The beauty of the Lord's Supper reminds every believer of all that Jesus has done for us. The Lord's Supper keeps the memory of the Cross fresh upon our hearts.

The final part of the program the early church possessed was *invocation*. They continued in "prayers." No area of church ministry is more neglected than the prayer ministry. Yet, according to Scripture, a church is no greater than its praying. In fact, it is impossible for it to be. Prayer is the power plant of ministry. God blesses people who pray.

Besides observing the early church's *program*, observe also the early church's *power* (v. 43). There was a reverent "fear" among the people, which in turn produced "signs and wonders." Things *happened* in the life of the church! Do things happen in your church?

The third mark in the making of a great church is the continual multiplication (vv. 46-47). What is amazing about the church we read about in the New Testament is the continued numerical growth that cannot be explained except in miraculous terms. We see this in the *activities* of the church; that is, their

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Reflection Connection

Do you think that there is a reverent fear produced in your church? Why or why not? Do you think that within culture, generally speaking, that there is a healthy fear of God? Explain.



worship, their witness, and their winning. By openly worshipping “in the temple” and witnessing “house to house” concerning their faith in Jesus, the early church won multitudes to Christ.

Even more, we see the visible results of the Spirit-anointed church through their *additions* to the church. The church was “added to” daily (vv. 41, 47). Literally, that means that at least 365 people per year were added to the church. What a revival! What a church!

Golden Greek Nugget

According to Luke, “tongues” were a definitive part of the Pentecostal phenomenon (vv. 3, 6, 8). The Greek word is “*dialectos*” which is the common word for “language.” What we find in this passage is that the “speaking in tongues,” which accompanied the coming Spirit, was not ecstatic utterance that we often hear of today in some churches. Instead the speaking that the apostles uttered was in the form of known, intelligent languages of the first century (v. 11). Furthermore, what they spoke was neither a mysterious message nor a predictive prophecy, but the wonderful works of God that Jesus accomplished on the Cross!

Wrap Up

While it did not come overnight, it did come—the making of a great church. Those marks that we find in the book of Acts should mark every church today. We have no excuse for failing to reach the world. Why? Because the same Holy Spirit who empowered that church is the Holy Spirit who indwells us, every believer. Therefore, continued growth, constant ministry, and especially a converted membership should characterize your church and my church. God help us to be His church.

