
Christian Holidays: Pentecost

by: Ronald L. Dart

Of all of the Christian holidays, the one that surprises me the most, is Pentecost. What surprises me is that every Christian doesn't throw a big celebration on Pentecost. After all it is the birthday of the New Testament church. It is the day that the Holy Spirit fell on the church in power. You would think that if the churches were going to celebrate anything, they would have an important anniversary every year at Pentecost, On the other hand, it is a fact, that more than half of all Christendom does observe Pentecost. You may not know this, but for most people in this country, Pentecost passes without anybody knowing it was there.

But in England, it's a national holiday and they call it Whit Sunday or White Sunday. It is called White Sunday because of the custom of wearing white for baptism, for the large numbers of baptisms that take place on Pentecost. Most American churches remain blissfully unaware of Pentecost. It's a word they attached to the charismatic movement that includes speaking in tongues and they don't think of it as a day, and so every year, the anniversary of Pentecost, passes without most of them even knowing it took place at all.

Pentecost is a Christian Holiday

And yet Pentecost is definitely a Christian holiday. Pentecost is so much of a Christian holiday that in England they shut things down on Monday as well, even all of the shows in town are closed in London.

It is a curious thing about Pentecost. The word Pentecost is a Greek word that means fiftieth. Fiftieth what? Well, since it is the day of Pentecost, it would seem to me the 50th day, but the 50th day from what?

Appointments with God

To tell you that story I have to paint a little background. The basic Scripture that outlines all of these holidays is the 23rd chapter of Leviticus. In this chapter and in verse 1, it says, "The Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, 'Concerning the appointments of Jehovah which you shall proclaim to be holy assemblies, even these are My appointments.'"

Most translations call these appointments the feasts of the Lord and that meaning is derived from usage. They became festivals. They were feasts, but the word is 'appointment' and strictly

speaking an appointment is a meeting scheduled for a specific time and place and that's what these were. In this case, it was a holy assembly of all the people, to meet with God at a specific time and in a specific place. One of these meetings takes place on the day we call Pentecost, the 50th day.

It is described in this twenty third chapter of Leviticus beginning in verse nine, "The Lord spoke to Moses saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, "When you come into the land that I'm going to give you and you finally reap a harvest of it, you are to bring a sheaf of the first fruits of this harvest to the priest. {11} And he will waive the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted for you on the morrow after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it." This is commonly called the 'Wave Sheaf' although it was not a sheaf actually that was waved before God, a packet of grain, it was a small basket of prepared grain and in this case, it was barley.

Then God says this in verse 14, "You're not to eat bread, parched corn, nor green ears of this crop until the selfsame day that you have brought an offering unto your God, it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings." So, it seems to have been a command to put God first, but also to recognize that the grain harvest was a gift of God. The giving of the first of anything to God is a recognition that God is the source of the gift and that makes a lot of sense.

The Morrow After The Sabbath

"You shall count to you from the morrow after the Sabbath," verse 15, now all of us pretty well understand what that means, the morrow after the Sabbath is a Sunday. "You shall count from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, seven Sabbaths shall be complete: {16} even unto the morrow after the seventh Sabbath shall you number 50 days and you shall offer a new meal offering to the Lord."

This is not too difficult. From the morrow after the Sabbath to the morrow after the Sabbath and you have seven Sabbaths which encompasses seven weeks. This is the seven weeks leading from Passover to Pentecost .

Now one interesting thing about this day was, that it was not established as a date on the calendar, the reason is, that it always had to be done on a Sunday. Note that the beginning and end of this in this passage, "From the morrow after the Sabbath, from the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, seven Sabbaths shall be complete, even to the morrow after the seventh Sabbath you will number 50 days." So, it starts from the morrow after Sabbath, to the morrow after the Sabbath.

Jews Kept Pentecost on Sivan 6

Now the Jews believe that the Sabbath is the annual Sabbath of the first day of unleavened bread, and this is always in question, so consequently they do come out on the day of the year, the sixth day of Sivan on their calendar.

One wonders why when you read Leviticus 23, which is really quite plain in the law, one wonders why they don't observe this on a Sunday instead of it being on any day of the week. The answer seems to be related to the original giving of the Law. When you make your way through Exodus and it bring the Israelites systematically up to the Mount Sinai where they're going to receive the 10 Commandments, it appears that it was on the sixth day of Sivan, perhaps the sixth and seventh days that the 10 Commandments were given to Israel.

All through the years of their wilderness wanderings, there never were any crops planted and harvested so there never was a feast of the first fruits during all the years of their wilderness wanderings so the sixth of Sivan was well established with the Israelites as the day of receiving the Ten Commandments.

Now once they are in the land and once crops are being planted, it seems obvious that the calculation of the feast of weeks comes beginning with the weekly Sabbath. "From the morrow after the Sabbath to the morrow after the Sabbath," from a Sunday to a Sunday.

Wave Sheaf Sunday

So, when we ask ourselves, Pentecost then is the 50th day but from what? The answer is, it is the 50th day from Wave Sheaf Sunday. So why is that day so important? And what does 50 have to do with anything?

Well, first the question of 50. There was a harvest in Palestine that ran from Passover to Pentecost. It began with barley and ended seven weeks later with wheat. The very first sheaf of grain of that harvest had to be offered to God. So, there was a ceremony that took place during Passover week.

Saturday evening, after sundown, a little band of people went down to the field that had been prepared beforehand and cut the first sheaf of grain. It was prepared overnight and waved before God in the Temple the next morning, which was Wave Sheaf Sunday. Because cutting this grain was work, it couldn't be done on the Sabbath, so the cutting was done after sundown. It was the first workday of seven weeks of work leading up to the harvest of Pentecost. They would work six days and rest the seventh. Work six days and rest the seventh and they did these seven times through 49 days and on the 50th day was the 'Feast of Weeks' or the 'Feast of First Fruits' or as we call it 'Pentecost'

Remember the commandment that said they were to count so that seven Sabbaths were complete. Well the 50th day is one of the appointments of God.

Now for the Christian, Wave Sheaf Sunday, day one of these seven weeks was the day Jesus was presented to the Father in heaven as the first fruits from the dead, the firstborn from the dead, and the celebration was an annual event not a weekly one. The expression found in the New Testament, (quote) "The first day of the week" (end quote) is not correct. It's the 'first day of Sabbaths (or weeks)' leading up to Pentecost and it's an annual observance, not a weekly occurrence.

What Happened Between Passover and Pentecost?

But what about the time in between Passover and Pentecost?

You can pick up the story on this from a Christian point of view in the first chapter of the book of Acts.

Luke the physician wrote two of the most important books in the New Testament. First, he wrote 'The Gospel according to Luke' and then, he wrote 'The book of Acts.' Both of these works were written to a gentleman named Theophilus.

We are going to take a look at Acts chapter 1 and verse one where Luke says, "The former treatise I made," referring back to his gospel, "O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, {2} Until the day when he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom he had chosen. {3} To whom also he showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them for 40 days, and speaking of things concerning the kingdom of God."

So from Wave Sheaf Sunday forward, there were 40 days in which Jesus appeared in various ways and at various times to His disciples. On one occasion being seen by 500 people alive after His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-6). We know that from the apostle Paul.

And during this time Jesus continued to teach His disciples. "And, being assembled together with them," in verse four of Acts 1 tells us this, "He commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which you have heard of me. {5} For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence."

Well, if He said this on the 40th day before His ascension, it was only 10 days before this was going to happen, because it happened on Pentecost. Now there's one thing I think you can be sure of, not one of the people who heard Jesus make this statement, about being baptized with the Holy Spirit and about being imbued with power, not one of them had a clue what it meant. All they knew was they were supposed to stay in Jerusalem until something happened.

Lord, Are You Going to Restore the Kingdom to Israel?

Well when they had come together, verse 6 of Acts 1, "The disciples asked Jesus saying, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'" They displayed in this their perceptions of what the Messiah was supposed to do. Their idea was that the Messiah would come, He would deliver them from the Romans, He would establish an earthly kingdom right

then and right now in Jerusalem. And they said, 'What is going to happen here?' Jesus said to them in verse 7, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power." Okay, that's none of your business, {6} "But you shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth."

Now it is hard in the 21st. century looking back over 2000 years of Christian history, to understand how dramatic that statement had to be to His disciples. In fact, I'm not sure that they even grasped the significance of it. For to them God was the God of the Jews and their religion was a Jewish religion and they basically had lived their lives in the situation of being separated from the Gentiles, not associating with them, not worshipping with them, and not even eating with Gentiles. They kept themselves completely separate from them.

Gospel to Go to the Gentiles

Most Jews would've thought that the work of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ would have been a work that they were supposed to do with Israelites, not so. Jesus said, "They would be witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, and in the uttermost parts of the earth."

This is talking about the Gentiles and we know that in Matthew 28 at the very end of the chapter, in verses 19 and 20, Jesus told His disciples explicitly, "Go you therefore and make disciples of the Gentiles." Now I know that it says in the King James version to "Go you therefore, and teach all nations," but if you read Greek, you would see immediately that the word that is translated 'nations' is the word that is elsewhere translated 'Gentiles' with all the pejorative connotations that went with that for any Jew. So, what you're getting here is very, very strong.

Jesus Ascends Into Heaven

"When Jesus had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up and a cloud received him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). "And while they look steadfastly up toward heaven as he went up," and no doubt with their mouths hanging open, "Suddenly two men stood by them in white apparel, {11} "You men of Galilee, why are you standing here gazing up into heaven for, this same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven." And what was remarkable was that it was on the Mount of Olives where He went up and the prophets seem to tell us that it is to the Mount of Olives that He will come back.

So, in verse 12, "They returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a Sabbath day's journey." Just a short walk. {13} "And when they came in, they went up into an upper room where abode Peter and James and John, Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew where all of the disciples were waiting to include James and Judas the brother of James. {14} These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren." This went on for some time.

The Day of Pentecost

They had a piece of unfinished business they had to take care of and that was the replacement of Judas who was one of the 12 apostles and then we are brought down to the beginning of the second chapter of Acts, "When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place."

Now you have to understand something about these disciples. They were all Jews. Throughout the entirety of their lives, they observed the feast of weeks or the feast of Pentecost as we would call it. It was only natural, that when that day came, they would all be assembled together. It was only natural that they would have been in Jerusalem at that time as well, because they were supposed to go down there. The Law specified that there were three times in the year when all your males were to appear before God, in the feast of Passover, the feast of weeks and the feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:16). So, they were where they were supposed to be, doing what they were supposed to be doing. It was a time of one of the appointments of God.

While they were there, Acts 2 and verse 2, "Suddenly there came a sound from heaven like a rushing mighty wind and it filled the house where they were sitting. {3} And there appeared to them distributed tongues like fire." It is as though you need a science fiction guide to do the special effects for this scene with a group of men sitting around in a room and all of a sudden a great roaring sound comes and then shimmering fire all across the ceiling of the room and then a little tongue or a little stream of fire that descends and touches each one of them in the room. There can't possibly be a hair on anybody's body in that room that wasn't standing straight up at this moment in time.

Speaking in Tongues

"And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). Now out of this little incident comes a whole movement in the Christian faith of speaking in unknown tongues. People who may at one time or another in a sermon or perhaps just stand up in church and began to speak in a language that no one in the congregation knows and in fact in most cases the person who is speaking has no idea what he is saying when this takes place. Is that what happened here?

Well, you should know something first, the word for tongues in the Greek basically means languages and it says in this passage in Acts 2 and verse five, "There were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men out of every nation under heaven. {6} Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because every man heard them speak in his own language." Now, whatever you may believe about speaking in tongues, or believe about unknown tongues, or whatever you believe about glossolalia, about charismatics and so forth, this passage is not talking about unknown tongues. These are known languages. Every man there heard him speak in his own language. {7} "And they were all amazed and they marveled, and they said to one another, 'Look, aren't these people here all Galilaeans? {8} How then do we hear every man in our own language wherein we were born?" Now what were these languages? Well, they named them for us. Verse 9, "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, {10} Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya around Cyrene."

We are not just talking about languages, we are talking about a regional dialect. "And strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, {11} Crete's, Arabians, we do hear them speak in our languages the wonderful works of God." Somebody there was speaking Arabic, folks.

Now not only are they speaking in known languages, the languages are named. Fifteen discreet named languages were being spoken here, not only that, but the listeners understood the content of the message. They identified it by saying they are speaking to us in our languages the wonderful works of God.

Why Different Languages?

Now the gift of languages on this occasion was significant because it defined where the gospel was supposed to go. These were Gentile languages in the main and therefore it underlines again the great commission, "Go and make disciples of the Gentiles." It underlines what Jesus told them what they were supposed to wait for, they were going to be filled with power, they were going to be witnesses to the uttermost parts of the world and to do that, they needed a tool. They needed Language, because it's pretty tough if you speak only one language to go to people of another language and speak to them about the wonderful works of God.

The instructions were clear, and the miracle was clear and the miracle underlined the instructions. I hate to disappoint, but there's nothing in this passage that supports the speaking in unknown tongues, that's not what this was about.

"Now they were all amazed and they were in doubt, saying 'What in the world does this mean?' (Acts 2:13) Some people said, 'What it means is that they are drunk!' {14} But Peter stood up with the eleven, lifted up his voice and said, 'I want you to understand this, listen to my words, {15} These men are not drunk, it is but the third hour of the day.' They are not drunk, it's 9 o'clock in the morning.

Peter Sermonizes About Joel

"So, what's going on here," says Peter. He says in Acts 2 and verse 16, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel." You will find all of this in the book of Joel, it is a very short book, and it is in the second chapter of Joel.

Acts 2 and verse 17, Peter says, "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams: {18} And on my servants, yes and on my handmaidens, I will pour out in those days of my Spirit and they shall prophesy." Now this is really interesting because it suggests to me, now you may not remember this, but there were 120 of Jesus disciples at this time. Some of them were women and I have to conclude from this that all of them were there, all 120, not merely the 12, were present at this moment when this pouring out of the Holy Spirit took place because of what He says, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh," which basically means, not just men but upon men and women, and not just upon Jews but upon Jews and Gentiles, when you say, "All flesh." You can stick a pin in yourself, are you flesh or not?

"It shall come to pass I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." Now given the custom of the time and in the culture in which they worked, I don't know how this played out. Did women only preach to women? Did men only preach to men? There's nothing specified here on that. I guess we are just left to our own devices to figure that out. The point simply being is that women who were there were not silent.

He said, "They will prophesy {19} And I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath, blood and fire, and vapor of smoke. {20} The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord come, {21} And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Now it's interesting reading this, that Peter seems to have anticipated, that this also was the manifestation that would lead directly up to the heavenly signs, the sun being turned to darkness, the moon into blood, that great day of the Lord, which implies that it is right at the very end time. But, of course, Peter couldn't know that there were 2000 years yet to run.

2,000 Years From Now

You know, when you really stop and think about that, sit back in your chair and stare off into space for a moment, and imagine the world 2000 years from now, it's unimaginable. Well, it was just as unimaginable for people 2000 years ago.

There is every reason, when you believe the New Testament, to understand, the apostles, the evangelists had no idea that there was 2000 years of history stretching out ahead of them. They did not know when their master would return. They did not understand the timing of the return of Christ and end time events. They had reason to believe that they expected it within their lifetime, although they did not and could not know.

Whosoever

It is interesting that Peter draws into his discussion here, all of the events that come towards the end time and then he returns to the constant theme of the beginning, really to the end of Jesus' ministry in the beginning of the book of Acts. He says in verse 21, "It shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." I don't know if you mark your Bible or not, but you might want to draw a circle around and draw a line under, that word 'whosoever' because what it's talking about is that the gospel would go to the Gentiles.

The gospel was not restricted to the Jews. The book of Acts, in all of its beginnings, is the story of the breakout of the faith of God from the Jews to the entire world. God had come to the place, where I suppose one could say, where He was no longer willing to be merely the God of the Jews, He intended to be every man's God.

Peter having told them, this is God's intervention, he says in verse 22, "You men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did in the midst of you, as you yourselves also know." There was no need to bring witnesses up there and tell what happened, they all knew what had happened.

A Testimony to the Jews

"Him, Jesus (Acts 2:23), being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." This is a fascinating way of putting this. Basically, what he says is, "God determined and had foreknowledge of this, and He placed Jesus Christ in their hands and they took Him and by wicked hands crucified him and slew Him: {24} "Whom God had raised up having loose the pains of death because it was not possible that he should be held by it. {25} For David speaks concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, He is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: {26} Therefore did my heart rejoice and my tongue was glad and my flesh rested in hope: [27} Because you will not leave my soul in hell (the grave) neither will you suffer your holy one to see corruption."

David knew, David understood, that even though he might rest in the grave, that he would not be left in Hades. Hades or Hell in this context simply means the grave and the underworld.

You're not going to suffer your holy one (Jesus) to see corruption, three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40), His holy one was allowed to remain in the grave and then He came forth.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it a surprise to you that majority of Christian churches do not celebrate Pentecost?
2. Did you know that it is a national holiday in England?
3. Does using the word 'appointment' rather than 'feast' give God's Holy Days a little more importance?
4. What are your thoughts to the fact that the Jews do not keep Pentecost on the "morrow after the seventh Sabbath"?
5. Have you ever studied the Wave Sheaf offering?
6. If you have, what have you learned?
7. Have you ever noticed that the different languages spoken on Pentecost by the disciples were Gentile languages?

8. Is it interesting that ever since Jesus death and sacrifice, people have believed that His return was coming in their lifetime?
9. Do you celebrate Pentecost? Why or why not?
10. Have you ever thought about why 50 days?