

# Did the Church Begin in Matthew, John, or Acts?

## *Pentecost and the Launch of the Church*

By James Burke • May 16, 2026

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One of the most common questions in the study of the New Testament is also one of the easiest to oversimplify: When did the church begin?

Some point to Matthew 16, where Jesus says, "I will build my church." Others look to John 20, where the risen Christ breathes on His disciples and says, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." Many point to Acts 2, where the Spirit descends at Pentecost, Peter preaches, thousands are added, and the church appears publicly in Jerusalem.

Each of these answers sees something important. But if we force the question into a single mechanical "start date," we may flatten the way Scripture actually presents the church's beginning.

The church did not drop suddenly out of heaven as a finished institution in Acts 2. Nor was it fully functioning in its later apostolic form during the earthly ministry of Christ. Rather, Scripture shows us a progressive beginning. Christ promised His church, gathered and prepared His people, breathed resurrection life into His disciples, commanded them to wait, and then publicly empowered and launched the church at Pentecost through the Holy Spirit.

A helpful image is this: the church before Pentecost was like a newly constructed ship in dry dock: assembled carefully by Christ Himself, but not yet launched into the sea. At Pentecost, the Spirit filled the sails, and the church was sent into the world.

That image helps us preserve both truths. Christ is the builder of the church before Pentecost. Pentecost is the launch of the church into its public, Spirit-empowered mission.

## **1. Christ Promised the Church**

The clearest promise of the church comes in Matthew 16. After Peter confesses, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus replies:

*"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

— Matthew 16:18 (KJV)

This statement matters for several reasons.

First, the church belongs to Christ. He does not say, "I will build a religious organization," or "You will build My church." He says, "I will build my church." The church is not the invention of the apostles. It is not merely the natural continuation of a religious movement around Jesus. It is Christ's own work.

Second, the church is promised as something Christ Himself will build. The future tense is significant: "I will build." In Matthew 16, the church is not yet presented as fully established in its later form. It is promised, grounded in the confession of Christ, and secured by His authority.

Third, the church is connected to Christ's identity. Peter's confession is not a minor doctrinal point. The church is built upon the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Whatever else we say about the beginning of the church must remain Christ-centered. The church begins not with a human committee, a social need, or an institutional plan, but with the revelation of who Jesus is.

Matthew 16, then, is not best treated as the full public launch of the church. It is the promise of the church by the One who will build it.

## **2. Christ Gathered and Prepared the Church**

Although the church is promised in Matthew 16, Christ had already begun gathering the people who would become the foundation of the church's visible life.

He called disciples. He appointed apostles. He taught them the kingdom of God. He formed them around Himself. He gave them patterns of prayer, forgiveness, discipline, service, and mission. He taught them to gather in His name. He prepared them to bear witness after His resurrection.

In this sense, the earthly ministry of Jesus was not unrelated to the church. It was preparatory. The disciples were not merely a temporary group of students who would later be replaced by something entirely different. They were the nucleus of the church Christ was building.

This helps us avoid an artificial break between the Gospels and Acts. The church of Acts did not begin from nothing. The men who preached at Pentecost had walked with Jesus. They had heard His teaching. They had seen His works. They had witnessed His death and resurrection. They had been trained by Christ Himself.

This is why Acts 1 begins the way it does. Luke refers back to his former treatise, the Gospel of Luke, which recorded "all that Jesus began both to do and teach" until the day He was taken up. Acts is not a disconnected sequel. It is the continuation of Christ's work through His Spirit-empowered witnesses.

Christ gathered the church before Pentecost. But the gathered church still needed to be launched.

## **3. The Risen Christ Prepared His Witnesses**

After the resurrection, Jesus continued preparing His disciples. Acts 1 tells us that He showed Himself alive "by many infallible proofs," being seen of them forty days, and speaking of "the things pertaining to

the kingdom of God."

This period is important. The disciples were not sent into the world merely with memories of Jesus. They were commissioned as witnesses of the risen Christ.

Yet even after the resurrection, Jesus did not tell them to begin immediately. He commanded them to wait:

*"And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father..."*

— Acts 1:4 (KJV)

They had the teaching of Jesus. They had the resurrection appearances. They had the commission. But they were not yet ready to go. Something essential was still to come.

Jesus explains:

*"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."*

— Acts 1:8 (KJV)

This verse gives the shape of the church's mission. The church is not merely a gathered people. It is a Spirit-empowered witnessing people. The church is gathered by Christ and sent by Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Before Pentecost, the disciples are waiting. They are assembled. They are praying. They are obedient. But they are still in the upper room, not yet publicly launched into the nations.

The ship has been built. The crew has been gathered. The commission has been given. But the sails have not yet been filled.

## **4. Pentecost: The Launch of the Church**

Acts 2 marks a decisive moment in the history of redemption. Pentecost was not an accidental date on the calendar. It was one of Israel's great feast days, and Jerusalem was filled with Jews from many nations. God chose this moment to pour out the Holy Spirit and publicly launch the church's witness.

The sound came from heaven "as of a rushing mighty wind." Cloven tongues like as of fire sat upon each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

This was not private religious enthusiasm. It was public divine action. God made the event visible and audible. The gathered disciples became public witnesses. The nations heard the mighty works of God declared in their own languages.

Peter then stood up and preached Christ.

This is crucial. Pentecost was not primarily about the disciples having a spiritual experience. It was about the risen and exalted Christ pouring out the promised Spirit and bearing witness to Himself through His apostles.

Peter's sermon centers on Jesus: His works, His crucifixion, His resurrection, His exaltation, His lordship, and His call to repentance. The explanation of Pentecost is not, "Look what has happened to us," but, "God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ."

At Pentecost, the church is publicly empowered, publicly identified, and publicly sent.

Thousands receive the word, are baptized, and are added. The community becomes visible in doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers, generosity, worship, and witness.

This is why Acts 2 is rightly regarded as the launch of the church. Not because Christ was inactive before Acts 2, but because at Pentecost the church moves from gathered preparation to Spirit-filled mission.

The ship leaves dry dock. The Spirit fills the sails. The church is launched into the world.

## **5. The Church Continued to Develop After Pentecost**

To say that the church was launched at Pentecost does not mean the church instantly appeared in its fully mature form.

This point is often overlooked. The church at Pentecost did not yet look like the church by A.D. 70. In Acts 2, the church is still centered in Jerusalem. Its first members are Jewish believers. The Gentile mission has not yet unfolded. The relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers has not yet been clarified. The pastoral offices are not yet fully developed in visible structure. The doctrinal implications of the gospel will still be taught, defended, and applied through the apostles.

Acts itself shows this continued development.

In Acts 6, the church responds to a practical need involving the care of widows, leading to the appointment of servants for that ministry. In Acts 10, Peter is sent to Cornelius, and the inclusion of Gentiles becomes undeniable. In Acts 11, the church at Antioch becomes a major center of mission. In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas are sent out. In Acts 15, the Jerusalem council addresses the relation of Gentile believers to the law of Moses. In the Pastoral Epistles, we see more explicit instruction concerning elders, deacons, doctrine, discipline, and order.

This development does not mean the church was not truly the church before those later developments. A newborn child is truly human, though not yet mature. A planted seed is truly alive, though not yet a tree. A launched ship is truly at sea, though its voyage has only begun.

Pentecost was a true beginning. But it was not the end of the church's formation.

This distinction helps us avoid two errors.

The first error is treating the church as if it fully began before Pentecost in the same form it would later have after the Spirit's outpouring. That minimizes the significance of Acts 2.

The second error is treating Pentecost as if the church appeared with no prior gathering, preparation, promise, or continuity with the ministry of Christ. That separates Acts from the Gospels and weakens the truth that Christ Himself builds His church.

Scripture gives us something richer than either extreme: Christ promised, gathered, prepared, empowered, and continued to develop His church through apostolic teaching.

## **6. Matthew, John, or Acts?**

So did the church begin in Matthew, John, or Acts?

The best answer is not to force these passages to compete with one another. Each passage contributes something essential.

- In Matthew 16, Christ promises the church and declares Himself its builder.
- In the Gospels, Christ gathers and prepares the people who will become the church's foundational witnesses.
- In John 20, the risen Christ breathes on His disciples and speaks of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, and mission. This resurrection scene should not be ignored. It shows that the church's life is bound to the risen Christ and that the disciples' mission flows from Him.
- In Acts 1, the disciples wait in obedience for the promised power of the Spirit.
- In Acts 2, the Spirit is poured out, Peter preaches Christ publicly, believers are baptized and added, and the church begins its visible, Spirit-empowered mission.

Therefore, if we are asking when Christ began gathering and preparing His church, we must look to the Gospels. If we are asking when the church was publicly empowered and launched into its mission, we look to Pentecost in Acts 2.

The church was promised by Christ, gathered by Christ, prepared by Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and sent into the world as the witness of Christ.

## **7. Why This Matters**

This question matters because our answer shapes how we understand the church.

If we treat the church mainly as an institution with a start date, we may miss the living work of Christ in gathering, forming, and sending His people. If we treat Pentecost merely as an isolated spiritual event, we may miss its role in launching the church's mission. If we detach Acts from the Gospels, we may forget that the church is not built by human ingenuity but by the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ.

A progressive view of the church's beginning keeps several truths together.

## **Conclusion: Built by Christ, Launched by the Spirit**

The church did not begin as a finished institution dropped into history in a single moment. Nor did it begin merely as a human fellowship before Pentecost. The New Testament gives us a fuller and more beautiful picture.

Christ promised His church. Christ gathered His disciples. Christ prepared His witnesses. Christ died and rose again. Christ commanded them to wait. Christ poured out the Spirit. And by that Spirit, the church was launched into the world.

So when we ask, "Did the church begin in Matthew, John, or Acts?" we should answer with biblical care.

The church was promised and prepared in the ministry of Christ. It was publicly empowered and launched at Pentecost. It continued to develop through apostolic teaching and Spirit-led mission.

Pentecost was not the construction of the ship from nothing. Christ had already assembled it.

Pentecost was the moment the wind filled the sails.

And from that day, the church was sent into the sea of the world, bearing witness that Jesus Christ is Lord.