

# What Happened at Pentecost?

*Wind, Witness, and the Launch of the Church*

By James Burke • May 16, 2026

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Few events in Scripture are as important — or as misunderstood — as Pentecost.

For some, Pentecost is treated almost entirely as a dramatic supernatural experience. For others, it becomes merely a historical milestone marking the beginning of church history. Still others reduce it to debates about spiritual gifts, tongues, or modern religious practice.

But Acts 2 presents something much larger.

Pentecost is the public outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the exalted Christ, launching the church into its worldwide mission. It is the moment the gathered disciples move from preparation to proclamation, from waiting to witness, from the upper room into the nations.

The church before Pentecost was like a ship assembled carefully in dry dock. Christ had gathered the crew, prepared them through His earthly ministry, conquered death through His resurrection, and instructed them concerning the kingdom of God.

But the sails still hung empty.

At Pentecost, the wind came from heaven.

And the church was launched into the world.

## 1. Pentecost Was a Jewish Feast Before It Was a Christian Event

Pentecost did not begin in Acts 2.

Long before the Spirit descended upon the disciples, Pentecost was one of Israel's appointed feast days. In the Old Testament it was known as the Feast of Weeks, celebrated fifty days after Passover.

The feast carried themes of harvest and firstfruits. Israel gathered before God to celebrate His provision and blessing. Jews from many regions traveled to Jerusalem for the occasion, filling the city with pilgrims from across the known world.

That setting matters.

God did not pour out the Spirit on a random day in an empty city. He chose a moment when representatives of many peoples and languages were gathered together in Jerusalem.

Luke emphasizes this intentionally:

*“And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.”*

— Acts 2:5 (KJV)

Pentecost therefore becomes the perfect stage for the public launch of the church’s mission.

The gospel would not remain confined to Jerusalem.

The kingdom of Christ was about to move outward into the nations.

## **2. The Church Was Waiting for the Promise**

Before Pentecost, the disciples were waiting.

This waiting is one of the most important and often overlooked parts of the story.

The resurrection had already occurred. The disciples had seen the risen Christ. They had received instruction concerning the kingdom of God. They had been commissioned to bear witness.

And yet Jesus still commanded them not to begin their mission immediately.

*“But wait for the promise of the Father...”*

— Acts 1:4 (KJV)

The church could not fulfill its mission through memory, organization, education, or zeal alone.

The church needed the Spirit.

This is why Jesus told them:

*“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)

Pentecost was therefore not an optional enhancement to an already functioning institution.

It was the public empowerment of the church by the exalted Christ.

The ship had been built.

The crew had been gathered.

But the wind had not yet come.

## **3. The Spirit Descended from the Exalted Christ**

One of the most important truths about Pentecost is that Pentecost is fundamentally about Christ.

The Spirit does not appear in Acts 2 as an independent force detached from Jesus.

The Spirit is poured out by the risen and exalted Christ.

Peter makes this explicit:

*“Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this...”*

— Acts 2:33 (KJV)

That verse is one of the theological centers of the entire New Testament.

The Father promised.

The Son was exalted.

The Son poured out the Spirit.

The church was empowered.

Pentecost therefore cannot be separated from the ascension and enthronement of Christ.

The Spirit comes because Jesus reigns.

This is also why the disciples had to wait.

The Spirit’s outpouring belongs to the reign of the exalted Christ. John had already hinted at this:

*“For the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.”*

— John 7:39 (KJV)

The Spirit had certainly been active before Pentecost. The Spirit moved throughout the Old Testament and throughout the earthly ministry of Jesus. But Pentecost marks the beginning of the church’s Spirit-empowered mission under the reign of the exalted Christ.

## **4. Wind, Fire, and Languages**

Acts describes Pentecost with striking imagery:

*“And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind...”*

— Acts 2:2 (KJV)

Then:

*“And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire...”*

— Acts 2:3 (KJV)

The imagery is not random.

Throughout Scripture, wind, breath, and spirit are closely connected themes. Fire often accompanies the visible manifestation of God’s presence.

Pentecost therefore announces that God Himself has come to empower His people.

Then the disciples begin speaking “with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

The context strongly suggests real human languages. Luke repeatedly emphasizes that the gathered peoples hear the mighty works of God in their own native tongues and dialects.

The miracle appears centered primarily in the speaking itself. Galileans suddenly proclaim the works of God in languages they had not naturally learned.

But Luke’s emphasis is not merely linguistic astonishment.

His emphasis falls upon the nations hearing the works of God proclaimed in their own heart languages.

The event therefore celebrates the worldwide reach of the gospel.

Pentecost does not erase the diversity of peoples and tongues.

It demonstrates that Christ’s lordship reaches every people and every tongue.

This is why Pentecost should not be described merely as “Babel reversed.”

At Babel, humanity sought centralized unity apart from God. Mankind resisted God’s command to fill the earth and instead attempted to preserve a self-glorifying uniformity under human ambition.

God scattered the nations.

That scattering was not merely punishment. It was also the fulfillment of God’s purpose for humanity to fill the earth.

Linguistic diversity itself is not presented in Scripture as an evil to be abolished.

Even in Revelation, redeemed humanity worships God as:

- tribes,
- tongues,
- peoples,
- and nations.

Pentecost therefore does not erase the nations.

It reaches the nations.

The miracle is not the destruction of linguistic diversity, but the proclamation of one Lord across many tongues.

The gospel moves outward into the world without flattening humanity into sameness.

## 5. Pentecost Was About Christ

One of the clearest ways to understand Pentecost is to examine Peter's sermon.

Modern discussions often focus almost entirely upon the miraculous signs. But Luke devotes far more space to Peter's preaching than to the phenomena themselves.

And Peter's sermon is overwhelmingly Christ-centered.

Peter proclaims:

- the life of Christ,
- the crucifixion of Christ,
- the resurrection of Christ,
- the exaltation of Christ,
- and the lordship of Christ.

He concludes:

*“God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*

— Acts 2:36 (KJV)

This is crucial.

Pentecost is not primarily about ecstatic experience.

It is about the public proclamation of the risen Christ through the power of the Spirit.

The Spirit does not direct attention away from Jesus.

The Spirit glorifies Christ.

## 6. Pentecost Launched the Church into Mission

Immediately after Pentecost, the church begins moving outward in witness.

Peter preaches publicly.

Thousands believe.

The apostles bear witness boldly.

The gospel begins moving from Jerusalem toward the nations exactly as Christ promised in Acts 1:8.

This outward movement is essential to understanding Pentecost.

Pentecost was never intended merely as a private spiritual experience for the disciples themselves.

It was the launching of the church into its worldwide mission.

The church was not filled with the Spirit so it could remain hidden in the upper room.

The Spirit filled the sails so the church could move outward into the world.

## **7. Pentecost Did Not Complete the Church Instantly**

Although Pentecost was a true beginning, it was not the final mature form of the church.

The church at Pentecost was still overwhelmingly Jewish in composition and understanding. The Gentile mission had not yet unfolded fully. Questions concerning Jew and Gentile relations, church structure, and doctrinal implications would continue developing throughout Acts and the Epistles.

Even the apostles themselves continued growing in understanding.

Acts 10 reveals Peter still learning the implications of the gospel's reach to the Gentiles. Acts 15 records public debate concerning the relation of Gentile believers to the Mosaic law.

The church at Pentecost was therefore truly the church, but not yet mature in its worldwide structure and understanding.

The voyage had begun.

But the journey still stretched ahead.

## **8. Pentecost and the One Church**

The outpouring of the Spirit in Acts did not stop with Jerusalem.

In Acts 8, the Samaritans are publicly incorporated into the church.

In Acts 10, the Spirit falls upon Gentiles in the house of Cornelius.

Peter stands prominently in all three events.

These are not separate Pentecosts creating separate churches.

They are covenantal openings of one kingdom to all peoples.

The Spirit publicly demonstrates that Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles alike belong equally to one body in Christ.

Pentecost therefore points toward the creation of one people from many peoples.

Not uniformity.

Unity in Christ.

## **9. Why Pentecost Still Matters**

Pentecost still matters because the church still depends upon the same risen Christ and the same Spirit.

The church cannot fulfill its mission merely through organization, tradition, or human effort.

The church exists to bear witness to Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Pentecost also reminds us that the gospel belongs to every people and tongue.

The church is not the possession of one ethnicity, nation, or culture.

Christ is Lord over all.

And finally, Pentecost reminds us that the church is a missionary people.

The Spirit was not poured out so the church could become comfortable and self-contained.

The Spirit was poured out so the church could proclaim Christ to the nations.

## **Conclusion: The Wind Filled the Sails**

At Pentecost, the waiting ended.

The Spirit descended.

The apostles proclaimed Christ.

The nations heard the mighty works of God.

And the church was launched into the world.

Christ had already gathered the disciples.

He had taught them.

He had conquered death.

He had ascended to the Father.

Now the exalted Christ poured out the promised Spirit.

The ship had been built.

The crew had been prepared.

At Pentecost, the wind filled the sails.

And from that day forward, the church began carrying the gospel of Jesus Christ into the nations of the earth.

