

Pentecost
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The Evolution of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 104
1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13
John 20:19-23

It's really amazing how various things in life evolve. For example, NASCAR evolved from moonshine runners supercharging their cars to outrun local police to a multi-billion dollar sport racing industry.¹ Another amazing example is the evolution of television—from large, heavy, black and white boxes with fuzzy pictures to large, light, color boxes with high-definition clarity! Sometimes, we struggle to see how God has been at work in the evolution of things (i.e. NASCAR!), while at other times it is obvious that He has had His hand involved (i.e. television!).

Pentecost is a wonderful example of something that has evolved through the work of God. As Christians, many of us are unfamiliar with the context in which our celebration of Pentecost occurs. Before it used to be a Christian event, Pentecost was known only as a Jewish Feast day. It is known as the “Feast of Weeks,” or in Hebrew as *Shavuot* (which literally means “weeks”). It occurs fifty days (or seven weeks) after Passover. It is a pilgrimage feast for the Jews, meaning that after they return from Jerusalem following Passover they wait seven weeks and then go back to the Holy City for the celebration of *Shavuot*.

We read about the origins of the Feast of Weeks in the book of Exodus. It was “the feast of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field” (Exodus 23:16). In the same book, but in chapter 34, God commanded the Israelites, saying, “You shall keep the feast of Weeks with the first of the wheat harvest” (Exodus 34:22). From these Scripture verses we can be certain that *Shavuot* began as an agricultural celebration where the community of believers showed their gratitude to God for the harvest by offering to Him their first fruits. Eventually, though, the feast evolved.

Between the years 300 B.C. and 300 A.D. the Feast of Weeks lost its connection to the harvest and drew its meaning more and more from God's covenant with His chosen people.² During this period of time, the Feast of Weeks became associated more and more with God giving Moses the Torah³ on Mount Sinai, which reportedly happened fifty days after the original Passover event in Egypt. It was also near this period of time when the Feast of Weeks began being called Pentecost, which means “fifty days.” To this day, Jews celebrate *Shavuot*, or Pentecost, as a thanksgiving for God's gift of the Torah, which represents His covenant love for them. It was for this celebration that the Apostles were gathered together once again in Jerusalem, fifty days after the resurrection of Christ!

There are a couple of aspects of the *Jewish* celebration of Pentecost that help to give meaning to the *Christian* celebration of Pentecost. First, the Jewish Pentecost was a *pilgrim*

¹ www.cio.com/article/17142/A_Brief_History_of_Nascar_From_Moonshine_Runners_to_Dale_Earnhardt_Jr.

² We read about this in the pseudepigraphal book of Jubilees, which identifies the Feast of Weeks with the “first fruits,” but defines it as the covenant between God and Noah (Jubilees 22:1; 6:1-22).

³ Most Biblical references to the “Torah” refer to the instructions that God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai

feast. After the celebration of the event in Jerusalem, the people headed back to their homes, taking with them a renewed sense of God's love for them and His desire to be in a covenant relationship with them. Our Christian celebration of Pentecost is similar, in that, we are not meant to keep our experience of God to ourselves, but rather, we are sent to share the Good News with others. The imagery of the Holy Spirit descending upon the Apostles as tongues of fire, as well as the Apostles speaking in tongues, help illustrate the fact that God desires the Good News to be shared in all tongues and to all people.

The Jewish celebration of Pentecost was about God's gifts. As I mentioned earlier, Jews would journey to Jerusalem for the feast bringing with them the first fruits of their harvest. They were bringing to God the very first and best of what they possessed. Our Christian celebration of Pentecost reverences the fact that God has given all of us many gifts and we are called to put them at His service. Our second reading today explained just how communal we are, stating—

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.

-1 Corinthians 12:4-7

The variety of the Spirit's gifts in us is extraordinary! There are the charismatic gifts that Saint Paul mentioned in his first letter to the Corinthians, like speaking in tongues and prophecy. There are also ministerial gifts, like teaching and administration, which Paul mentioned.⁴ We are assured that each of us is given many gifts, to use for the sake of the Body of Christ. These are no longer gifts of grain from the harvest, but rather, gifts from the Holy Spirit for the sake of others.

The evolution of the Feast of Pentecost over the course of many centuries is both amazing and humbling. It is important for us to remember that God, centuries before the event of Pentecost described in our first reading, began preparing the hearts of His People to share the Good News of His love and to give back to Him and to His people the gifts He had first given to them!

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- Read 1 Corinthians 12 and choose of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that you feel you most need right now in your life and ask God for that gift.
- Take some time to meditate on how your prayer life and relationship with God has evolved over the years.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:28.