

The Beginning of the Church Age

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – an overview of the beginning of the Church Age at Pentecost
2. aim – to cause us to always remember that the church is the work of the Holy Spirit
3. passage – Acts 1-2

b. outline

1. The Controversy of the Beginning of the Church Age
2. The Events of the Beginning of the Church Age
3. The State at the Beginning of the Church Age

c. overview

1. a clarification of where to begin
 - a. even though I said in the *Introduction* that I would not be reviewing the history in Acts, it is necessary to any discussion of Church History to discuss its *beginning*
 - b. so, tonight's lesson will be an overview of the *genesis* of the church and its "primordial" nature

I. The Controversy of the Beginning of the Church Age

Content

a. the question of "when"

1. **some:** that the church has *always* existed, since God has always had his remnant in the world
 - a. pro: it is true that there have always been true believers in the promises of God in the world
 1. **e.g.** the list in **Hebrews 11** of those who had true faith (**i.e.** the OT elect)
 - b. con: the advent of Christ himself strongly suggests that something "different" was afoot
 1. **i.e.** Christ himself hinted that a "new age" would start with his ascension (the coming of the *paraclete* to teach the disciples "all" that Christ had spoken)
 - c. con: the work of the Spirit in the OT was *clearly* external and limited (**1 Samuel 11:6 cf. 16:14**)
 1. **i.e.** the ability of the OT writers to understand the *fullness* of the work of Christ implies that *much more* would be needed for believers to continue over *centuries* to remain faithful
 - d. con: the historical "boundaries" of the message of the OT was limited to Israel, but there was always an undercurrent that this message would go to all the nations in the end (**Matthew 12:18 cf. Isaiah 42:1-3**)
 1. **i.e.** the church would have to become a truly *international* and *intercultural* reality in order for the message to reach every tribe, tongue and nation and become a worldwide force
2. **some:** that the church can trace its genesis to the ministry of Christ, particularly John the Baptist
 - a. some "landmark" Baptists argue that the church begins with the preaching of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Christ, baptizing those who repented in anticipation of the Christ
 1. **i.e.** with Jesus "validating" the baptism of John by going to him, and then later affirming his ministry in line with his own (**Matthew 3:13; 11:1-15**)
 - b. con: the message of John was *only* a message of repentance *in anticipation* of the coming of the Christ – it was not a message based upon *faith in the completed work of Christ*
 1. **i.e.** it is a "gospel" that is lacking *fullness* – something *often* true in Baptist churches
 - c. con: the ministry of John ended (with his death) – his disciples continued, but the discussion of John's work faded rapidly in the book of Acts (and was never mentioned by Paul; **note Acts 11:16**)
"As I [Peter] began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"
3. **most:** that the church begins at Pentecost with the coming of the Spirit
 - a. pro: the radical change in the hearts and minds of the early disciples (including their understanding of prophecy related to Christ) strongly suggests that a new "age" (dispensation) had begun
 1. the Church Age = the historical period in which the plan of God (his decree) to gather a people for himself occurs through a *specific* organism developed and directed by the Spirit as the *completion* of the work of Christ
 2. organism = the "extended" body of Christ made up of individual believers formed together into a universal organism with local incarnations in specific places, cultures, and circumstances

3. this Age begins with the *formation* of the church herself, the *development* of that organism through time (albeit imperfectly), and the *use* of that organism to advance the cause of Christ

b. the question of “what”

1. the ministry of Christ is simply the *end* of the previous dispensation (*i.e.* the age of Israel)
 - a. **IOW:** the ministries of John and Jesus are “within” the O.T. period; the **New Covenant** is inaugurated into reality when the Spirit of Christ falls upon the disciples and the relationship between God and man is now characterized by faith in the completed work *of Christ*
 - b. *i.e.* the OT system of sacrifice is completed by the Great High Priest (**Hebrews 7:22-27**)

II. The Events of the Beginning of the Church Age

Content

a. dating the Pentecost of Acts 2

1. dating the birth of Jesus c. 6-4BC – based on the death of Herod the Great in 4BC
 - a. allowing for Herod’s proclamation to kill all the children *under two* (**Matthew 2:16**)
2. dating the age of Jesus at ~30 (**Luke 3:23**) at the beginning of his ministry (c. 24-26AD)
 - a. **remember:** numerical figures are often treated as *approximations* in the Bible
3. dating the age of Jesus at ~33 at the end of his ministry (c. 27-30AD)
 - a. **note:** assuming Jesus’ ministry at 3½ years is based on a chronological examination of the accounts in the Gospels (*e.g.* three references to the Passover)
4. therefore, the Pentecost of **Acts 2** is probably c. 29-30AD
 - a. **note:** Pentecost = the celebration of the harvest 50 days from the Passover (*i.e.* the Feast of Weeks; 7 weeks after the beginning of the ceremonial calendar established at the Exodus)

b. outlining the events of Pentecost

1. the ascension of Jesus (**Acts 1:6-11**)
2. the “waiting” by the disciples (and the choosing of a replacement for Judas; **Acts 1:12-26**)
3. the falling of the Spirit (with its accompanying signs; **Acts 2:1-13**)
4. the preaching of Peter, and the conversion and dispersion of 3,000 (**Acts 2:14-41**)
5. the establishment of the primordial church (*see* **Acts 2:42-47**)

III. The State at the Beginning of the Church Age

Content

a. the state of the *primordial* church

1. mostly Jewish in ethnicity (*i.e.* the preaching of Peter [and John later] at the Temple; note **James**)
2. very small (*i.e.* 3000/5000 may seem *big*, but once scattered it means only a few in each locale)
3. centered mostly around Jerusalem, then later Antioch to the N (*i.e.* after persecution)
4. largely modelled on Jewish worship practices (*i.e.* coming out of the synagogue)
5. not *directly* disconnected yet from Judaism (*i.e.* often persecuted as a *sect* of Judaism)
6. without any N.T. Scriptures yet in place (*i.e.* based entirely on the Hebrew Bible at this point)
7. exclusively of believers meeting in homes (*i.e.* no *physical* structures yet)
8. no *official* structure of local bodies yet (*i.e.* deacons are not established until **Acts 6**)
9. only an *informal* structure of liturgy (*i.e.* basic meetings designed to interpret Jesus through OT)

b. the importance of Pentecost

1. the falling of the Spirit upon the disciples (and the conversion of a few-thousand souls) represents an *earth-shattering event* = the entire history of the world over the next 2,000 years would be indelibly changed (*i.e.* even measuring time from the “birth” of Christ)
 - a. without this event, it is *unlikely* that Christianity would have made it out of the First Century
 1. Jesus would be nothing more than a footnote in a dusty history book (*i.e.* knowledge of the resurrection would not come through the church, and be unknown to all but the eyewitnesses)
 - b. without this event, the development of W civilization would look tremendously different
 1. the development of nations in the W would continue the principles established in the E (*i.e.* democracy was already waning [*e.g.* the Roman Republic])
 - c. without this event, there would *inevitably* be some other way for the decree of God in Christ to be fulfilled in the world to bring the elect through the centuries to faith and salvation
 1. this was the way that Christ had purposed to bring his kingdom to fruition: through a lowly, little, persecuted and ostracized band of believers (*i.e.* just like his first advent into the world)