

Summary for Session 21: The Church Part 1

Prep work: Acts of the Apostles 1-8

DVD: Jeff opens this session by explaining that the book of Acts can be divided into three sections based on Acts 1:8 —the apostles act as Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem (Ch 1-8), in Judea and Samaria (Ch 8-15), and to the ends of the earth (Ch 15-28). This session will cover the formation of the Church and its spreading of the Good News in Jerusalem. First, Jeff ties Acts 1:8, where Jesus tells the disciples they will receive power from the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses, to Luke 24:48-49, where Jesus essentially makes the same statement. Jeff also ties in John 20:21, where Jesus proclaims, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." It is clear that Jesus has a mission for his disciples to continue the work he is doing; something one can do only by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jeff pauses here to note that we should take up the challenge to live the life that only Jesus can give us through the Holy Spirit—anything else is selling ourselves short by relying merely on our own resources. We are capable of the extraordinary, but only with the power of the Holy Spirit. Jeff also remarks that the word used in Acts to describe the power of the Holy Spirit is *dunamis*, the same word we get the word "dynamite" from. It's an explosive ability to **do**, and is reflected in the changed characteristics of the disciples once the Holy Spirit has empowered them. Along with this call by Jesus to continue his works is the realization that the Church is in many ways reliving the life of Jesus ("recapitulation" in fancy terms). Jesus' life was a recapitulation of Israel's history, in order that his New Covenant might fulfill the Old Covenant. In the same way, the Church recapitulates Jesus' life, perpetuating this New Covenant and being the enduring fulfillment of the Old Covenant. Jeff reminds us again that even the third promise of God's Covenant with Abraham is fulfilled in the Church: worldwide blessing in the form of the Church spreading the Good News to the Gentiles (Galatians 3:13-14).

Jesus teaches the disciples for 40 days after the Resurrection, preparing them to be witnesses to the Kingdom of God. We may recall that the number 40 in the Bible is associated with periods of trial, testing, and preparation. The Church calendar today still includes this important period, as there are still 40 days between our celebrations of Easter and Jesus' Ascension. During this time, the readings at the Mass also reflect this period of teaching ("Mystagogy" in fancy terms), drawing from Acts and laying out everything the newest members of the Church (who were baptized at the Easter Vigil) need to know about the Church and her mission. Also during this time, a replacement for Judas is appointed by casting lots. Jeff notes that today, casting lots is considered gambling and possibly in the realm of sinful divination methods—this does not seem like a suitable method for the Church to use. However, this was a legitimate method of decision-making in ancient times and there is a direct correlation between choosing Matthias by lots and the Old Testament practice of choosing priests by casting lots (1 Chronicles 24:5 refers to David ordering the families of Aaron be chosen for their duties "impartially by lot").

After 40 days, Jesus ascends into heaven from the Mount of Olives (where Jesus had previously spent time in the Garden of Gethsemane and also stopped to weep over

Jerusalem on his triumphant entry into Jerusalem), and the disciples wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit, as instructed. Jeff remarks here on the parallels between the Jewish festival of Pentecost and the Christian experience. Pentecost means “50 days,” and the Jewish festival (also called *Shavuot*, meaning “weeks”) is held 50 days after Passover to mark the giving of the Mosaic Law on Mt. Sinai. The disciples received the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), 50 days after Easter (the new “Passover” into freedom from sin). Instead of the Mosaic Law written on stone, the Holy Spirit comes to write the new Law of Love on the hearts of the disciples (fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy in Jeremiah 31:31-33). Just as the giving of the Mosaic Law on Mt. Sinai was marked by sound, fire, and speech (Exodus 19:16-19), the coming of the Spirit is marked by the sound of “a strong driving wind”, “tongues as of fire,” and speaking in many languages (Acts 2:2-6).

In speaking of the actual event of the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jeff observes that we may look at it as a reversal of the events at Babel. God confused the people of Babel's language because of a realization that if people are able to communicate with each other in a way all can clearly understand, then “nothing will...stop them from doing whatever they presume to do” (Genesis 11:6). This is bad in the case of turning away from God and His Law, but the Holy Spirit offers the Church the gift of languages, so that all people might hear God's Law, understand, and follow. The early Church is a prime example of how this common language and understanding provided by the Holy Spirit enabled a group of people to do extraordinary things. Peter, moved by the Spirit, made a speech to all who were gathered, relating the coming of the Holy Spirit to Joel's prophecy. Joel foresaw that a sign of the last days of the Covenant (the Old Covenant) would be an outpouring of God's Spirit: “Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” (Joel 3:1, sometimes renumbered as Joel 2:28). This would hearken a new period of wonders worked by God and a gathering of the faithful. Peter states that the life and works of Jesus have all been part of God's plan and because of Peter's witness to the Faith, 3,000 people were baptized into Christianity that day. The word used for witness here is *martus*, from which we get the word “martyr.” The witness the disciples gave was a total laying down of their own lives in order to pick up the cross of Jesus and follow him. Many would, indeed, carry this cross to their own death in martyrdom, but what powerful witness they gave!

The last aspect of Pentecost that Jeff remarks on is the perpetuation of the Holy Spirit's coming in the Sacrament of Confirmation. He quotes the Catechism extensively in noting that Confirmation “is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace” (CCC 1285). It is very important, then, to keep these “Sacraments of Initiation” (Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation) in unity as a complete entrance into the life of the Church and empowerment to “spread and defend the faith by word and deed” (CCC 1285). From Confirmation, we are rooted “more deeply in the divine filiation with makes us cry, 'Abba, Father!’” (CCC 1303). We are also united “more firmly to Christ;” experience an increase in the gifts of the Holy Spirit; perfect our bond with the Church; given “a special strength of the Holy Spirit to...confess the name of Christ boldly;” and left with an indelible mark on our soul as the sign of a Christian (CCC 1303-1304). Two observations from Jeff on this: 1) It is at the filial relationship with God that the devil often strikes, even during his

temptation of Jesus. Sin compromises the filial relationship—we no longer see God as an all-merciful and loving father whose Law of Love we should strive to follow. 2) What would the world be like if everyone who received Confirmation realized the power of the Spirit within them? Jeff also offers a personal reflection, noting that he does not remember much of his preparation for Confirmation, but he remembers knowing something had changed; he felt a strong hunger to read and understand the Bible, but no one had taught him how. The Holy Spirit empowered him, a person who normally shies from public speaking, to spread God's Word through the Bible Timeline Series. Confirmation, Jeff states emphatically, should change your life.

Jeff then turns to the characteristics of the Early Church, drawing from Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.” Jeff remarks that the unity of the Early Church was another gift of the Spirit. He notes that from the speeches of the disciples, we can tell that they taught the Tradition passed on from Jesus and could retell the Jewish salvation history in the context of its fulfillment in Jesus. Jeff quotes Paul to show that the early Christians identified closely with living the life of Christ: “yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). He also comments that the Catechism, too, describes the characteristics of the Early Church in communion (CCC949-953). Jeff will later observe that the case of Ananias and Sapphira being struck dead for keeping some of their money to themselves was more a case of the results of lying to the Holy Spirit than of an inability to share all in common as the Early Church did.

Jeff goes back to the idea of the Church as a recapitulation of Jesus' life. He points out that both were anointed by the Holy Spirit after spending a time of 40 days in preparation (Jesus: Luke 3:21-22 and Church: Acts 2:1-4). Both made a point to specifically speak to the Jews referring to the prophecies being fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 4:14-21 and Acts 2:14-39, 13:16-41). The sick were brought in great numbers to be healed by both Jesus and the disciples (Luke 4:40 and Acts 5:15-16, 28:9). Even specific healings, such as of paralytics, share many characteristics (Luke 5:17-26 and Acts 3:1-10, 14:8-11). Jeff goes into a little more detail about Peter's first healing of a lame beggar in Acts 3:1-10. Even though Peter can't give the man the money he's begging for (what the world wants), he offers something much more precious—healing and the Good News of Jesus (what the world needs). Jeff also remarks that unlike the early Christians, who expected miraculous healings and boldly called for them, we today seem afraid to pray for physical healing. He exhorts us not to be afraid, but to call upon the Spirit within and have the courage to pray for people. Jeff also comments on Acts 5:15, where people would line the sick up in Peter's path so that the mere shadow of him would fall on them and they would be healed. If we think of the light as God and see that Peter was standing in the Light of God, then it makes sense that even the shadow cast by being in God's Light is beneficial. Just as Jesus was persecuted by the Jewish authorities for his teaching, the Early Church, too, was persecuted. Their response to being confronted by the Sanhedrin was to witness boldly, pray for more boldness, and rejoice that they were found worthy to suffer for Jesus (Acts 4:13, 29, 31; 5:41). This boldness and willingness to suffer finds personification in the example of Stephen. Stephen is a deacon of the Church, one of

seven men blessed by the Apostles to share authority of the group and take an administrative load off the Apostles so they could focus on prayer and teaching (Acts 6:1-7). Stephen is arrested and at his trial, witnesses by recounting the story of Salvation History for the Jews, adding its fulfillment in Jesus. He is sentenced to stoning, but even as he is being assaulted, he cries out to God to forgive his murderers. In a fine example of the blood of martyrs being the seed of the Church, Jeff notes that Paul (then Saul) is present at the trial and death of Stephen. He surely was influenced by Stephen's witness, as he will later recount Salvation History for his own persecutors. Seeing Stephen's last words of forgiveness and hope would have been a powerful statement to the man who would later do so much as "the Apostle to the Gentiles." With Stephen's death, the persecution of the Church scatters the disciples, yet they do not stop spreading the Good News wherever they are. Jeff closes the session by reminding us that we, too, are called to give witness as the disciples did. He asks us to ponder whether we are doing so by our words and deeds.