

Pentecost, Baptism, and Church Membership

By Pastor Kelly Sensenig

Acts 2:41

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”

There are some who hold the position that baptism is necessary for church membership based upon Acts 2:41 and what took place on the Day of Pentecost. However, we should take another look at what this passage is actually teaching and understand what was occurring in the book of Acts. Although we can use Acts 2:41 as a model to teach that water baptism should *precede* local church membership; this passage is actually teaching that water baptism was done *following* a person’s salvation and entrance into the new universal Church, which began to be formed on the Day of Pentecost, as prophesied by Christ in Acts 1:5 and confirmed by Peter in Acts 11:15-17. It is not said that the 3,000 saved on Pentecost joined the local church; instead, they entered the universal Church that was formed on the Day of Pentecost.

In retrospect, Luke concludes that this large group of people who “received his word” (the Gospel message) was saved and then baptized (the symbol of identification with Christ and Christianity). Furthermore, it was this same group of people that were added to God’s universal Church, which was being formed on the Day of Pentecost. The salvation and baptism of these people were linked to the formation of the universal Church – not the local organized Church. In other words, these people were saved and then baptized in view of what God had done in their lives. God had linked or joined them to the newly formed body of Christ – the corporate Church.

Luke is simply giving an accurate assessment of what occurred on the Day of Pentecost. In a general way, he concludes that this large number of people had been saved, baptized, and entered the new corporate body, the Church, through the promised work of the Spirit (Acts 1:5). Both their salvation and baptism (testimony of their salvation) was linked to what was taking place on the Day of Pentecost – the formation of the Church through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).

One must remember that the corporate Church consists of everyone who is saved (Acts 2:47; 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:13). The universal Church (spiritual organism of people united to Christ) consists of all believers from Pentecost (Acts 2) to the present. It is called the “general assembly” (Heb. 12:23) and “body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). The local church (organization) consists of believers banded together in a specific location or setting (Gal. 1:2) who are part of the larger body of Christ. The local church is a small reflection of the universal Church which was being formed on the Day of Pentecost.

Pentecost is the birthday of the Church (the body of Christ formed and welded together by the baptism of the Holy Spirit – 1 Cor. 12:13). The organization (local church) was developed (Acts 2:42-46), sometime after the birth of the organism (universal Church), which was formed on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41; 11:15-17) and which continued to grow in the days following Pentecost (Acts 2:47; 10:44-48; 11:24). What was occurring in Acts was the birth and expansion of the corporate or universal Church as the Gospel was initially being declared to Jews (Acts 2), Samaritans (Acts 8), and then the Gentiles (Acts 10). The record of Acts was recording the expansion of the one universal Church – not the local church.

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This is actually a salvation statement – not a church membership statement. It’s pointing to the truth how people are “added” or joined together in a saving relationship with Christ and possess a new position in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:22; Eph. 1:3; 2:6), since they share a spiritual and unbreakable union with Christ (Jude 1:1), in the formation of the New Testament Church (the corporate or universal body). These Pentecost saints were actually spiritually joined or linked together in Christ by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13), which began to form the corporate Church or body of Christ – not the local church.

Acts 2:41 is teaching that the people, first the 120 and then the 3,000, were saved by grace (way of salvation) and then baptized (proof of their salvation) on the Day of Pentecost. Afterward, Luke reminds us that the salvation of these 3,000 converts resulted in them initially being “added” to the newly created organism of the New Testament Church (the corporate body of Christians united to Jesus Christ – Col. 1:18). Ever since this time

people are continually being added to the organism of the Church as they come to faith in Christ.

One thing is certain; the 3,000 were not baptized into the local church membership of Jerusalem, since no such membership was officially formed on the Day of Pentecost. These new converts were baptized in order to identify themselves as the followers of Jesus Christ as was commanded in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). Let's set the record straight; water baptism had nothing to do with local church membership; it spoke of *identification* with the Lord and membership in His true Church (the universal body of Christ) which had begun on the Day of Pentecost.

Since the Church is actually Christ's body, welded together by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13), the Church's birthday could only occur on Pentecost, when this new work of the Spirit baptism initially took place (Acts 1:5). George Zeller correctly observes: "The key to when the Church began is this: If we can determine when Spirit baptism first began, then we will know when the church began. When did God first baptize believers into His body? When were believers first placed into the body of Christ? To answer this is to determine the day on which the church began."

Acts 1:5

"For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence."

Jesus predicted when the Spirit baptism would occur. He was looking ahead to the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit which would occur for the first time on the Day of Pentecost and create the Church (Gal. 3:27-28). Jesus said that Spirit baptism would take place "not many days hence." This means that it would happen soon, in a matter of days. In actuality it happened just 10 days later on the day of Pentecost.

Please notice that this baptism was not something that had occurred previously. Therefore, the Church and the subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit could only occur on the Day of Pentecost when the promise of the Holy Spirit was actually given (Acts 2:33 - "having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost"). The promise of the Spirit (Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13) was connected with the Day of Pentecost and this is when the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit occurred to initially form the Church. Ever since this time, people are continually being "added" (Acts 2:47; 11:24) to

the organism of the Church, as they come to faith in Christ and are placed in Christ – His body.

1 Corinthians 12:13 states:

“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

The Church (“one body”) was initially formed and continues to grow by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This baptism immerses all Christians in Christ and gives us a perfect standing in Christ before the Father (1 Cor. 1:30). Everything that Christ offers to us (salvation, justification, redemption, regeneration) becomes ours in virtue of our union with Him.

Acts 2:41

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them (the growing body of believers) about three thousand souls.”

Acts 2:47

“Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

The expression “added” looks back to the previous additions (Acts 2:41) of people to God’s universal Church on the Day of Pentecost and speaks of the Holy Spirit continually adding people to the New Testament Church (the body).

Although some like to apply these verses to people being added to church membership in the local assemblies (organization), they are actually teaching about the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit that adds all believers to the true Church (organism), which is the “church of the firstborn” (Heb. 12:23) and the universal “body of Christ” (Eph. 5:23), or the universal Church that consists of all saved people. This is what was occurring in Acts 2 and throughout the book of Acts (acts 8 and 10) as the universal Church initially began to grow and expand.

We need membership in the true Church by the baptism of the Holy Spirit before we become a member of any local church. Local church membership is a reflection of our membership in the corporate Church (the

body). Our water baptism and connection with the organized church is only a reflection of the true baptism (baptism of the Holy Spirit) and entrance into the corporate Church (organism).

Peter later talks about the Day or Pentecost as “the beginning” of the New Testament Church (the Church universal) – not the local church membership.

Acts 11:15-17

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them (the Gentiles), as on us at the beginning (the Day of Pentecost). Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost (on the Day of Pentecost). Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift (the Holy Spirit – Acts 10:45) as he did unto us (at Pentecost), who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?”

Peter confirms in unmistakable terms that the Holy Spirit was given on the Day of Pentecost, as a gift, and this is when His baptizing ministry began, the time He would save and create the Church. There should be no question in regards to when the Church began. The Bible tells us when it began in plain language.

Acts 11:24

“For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.”

This looks back to the other previous additions (Acts 2:41, 47) and refers to people being spiritually united to “the Lord” which is the New Testament Church, and which consist of Christians being joined to the living Christ – His body (Col. 1:18). Again, this is actually a salvation statement – not a Church membership statement. Being “added to the Lord” is what saves the believing sinner.

The Holy Spirit began to form the universal Church (spiritual organism united to Christ) with the 120 disciples in the upper room (Acts 2:1-4) and then 3,000 were “added” to the original 120 (“added” - Acts 2:42) as the New Testament Church (body of Christ) began to expand. Later the Gentiles were said to be “added” to this growing body of believers (Acts 10:44-48). And God has been adding people to the universal Church ever

since! Every time a person is saved they are “added” to the Lord, baptized into His body (1 Cor. 12:13), which is the New Testament Church (all saved people who are joined to Christ and possess a living relationship with Him).

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In conclusion, the salvation and baptizing of the 3000 converts causes Luke to respond by saying that the universal Church was growing by addition (Acts 2:41). He mentions it once again in Acts 2:47 where the Lord is said to be adding to the universal Church (not the local Baptist Church or any other local church). Peter reminds us that the same thing, which happened to the Jews on Pentecost, also happened to the Gentiles (Acts 11:16-17), and it had nothing to do with church membership!

We can be sure that the Gentiles in Caesarea were not saved and baptized into the local church of Jerusalem (organization), since they lived at a different location. The Gentiles were saved and added to the universal Church (organism). Peter says what happened in Jerusalem also happened in Caesarea. The believers were joined to the universal, growing body of Christ, which began on Pentecost, and which consists of all believers united to Jesus Christ – His universal body and Church (1 Cor. 12:13).

The baptism of the 3,000 converts was connected with their desire to follow Christ and be *identified* with the new movement of Christianity (the Way – Acts 9:2) and to confirm that they were part of the newly formed Christian Church (universal Church) which began on Pentecost. Their baptism had nothing to do with their identification with the local church of Jerusalem but their identification with Christ and the universal Church that began to be formed on Pentecost. When a person is baptized today they are recognizing that they are followers of Christ and Christianity (Acts 8:36-37; Matt. 28:19-20) and part of the body of Christ, the New Testament Church, which is His body (Col. 1:18). Baptism is never directly associated with local church membership but with membership in God’s universal Church. Acts 2:41 is teaching that the 3,000 converts were added to God’s universal Church and they were baptized in recognition of their new relationship to Jesus Christ, Christianity, and the universal Church.

Of course, one might promote water baptism before becoming a member of a local church based upon the principle of people being baptized by the Holy Spirit before entering the universal Church (Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12:13). A person's water baptism does prove a person's sincerity in following Christ (Matt. 28:19-20) and wanting to become a testimony for the Lord (1 Tim. 4:12); however, baptism and membership into the local church is not what Acts 2:41 is teaching. These converts were baptized because of their salvation and entrance into God's corporate Church (the spiritual organism of believers joined together with Christ) on the Day of Pentecost and their readiness and testimony to be identified with Christ and the new movement of Christianity taking place in the world.