

A Fruitful Mission

Isaiah 42:1–12, 49:1–6; Acts 10:44–48

The Christian faith is collective—something that is experienced in community. The Christian faith spreads around the world through the planting of churches—men and women called into fellowship with God and his people, growing together in the faith and offering up praise and worship, to the glory of Christ.

Church planting is the work of the church. Just before his ascension Jesus gave his Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The Great Commission was addressed to the apostles as officers of the church. But the work of making and baptizing disciples would not be completed during the lifetime of the apostles; it was a work that would continue till the end of time. Christ promised to be with his church during that whole time. He said, “... and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age*. Amen.” The risen, ascended, exalted Christ is present with his church today and at all times through his Holy Spirit. He is present with our church as we gather today.

So church planting is the work of the church. This is clearly seen at the beginning of Acts 13, where “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” This was a command from the Lord—and the church obeyed. The next verse records the history: “Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” It was not the Lord’s will to send out Barnabas and Saul *directly*; they were to be sent out *by the church*, as a model for the church in all ages. Ministers and missionaries are ordained and sent out by the church.

But the church didn’t learn this strategy all at once. In the early chapters of Acts, God sent out his servants directly. The angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, and told him, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” When he saw the Ethiopian eunuch’s chariot approaching, the Spirit said to him, “Go near and overtake this chariot.” The angel of the Lord sent Phillip directly. Again, when God wanted Peter to go to Caesarea to preach the gospel to a Roman centurion and his household, he told Peter directly. He appeared to him in a vision on the roof of Simon the tanner’s house and convinced him to go. In this early phase of Christian history the church was not ready to take the bold step of sending preachers and missionaries to Gentiles, so the Holy Spirit did that work directly. At the present time, now that the initial transition from a mostly Jewish to a mostly-Gentile church is complete, and it is routine for churches to send missions to the Gentiles, God doesn’t send out missionaries and ministers directly; instead, the church ordains and sends out ministers and evangelists who evidence God’s call in obedience to her Savior’s command. Church planting is the work of the church. Just ten days ago the session of Harvest OPC, Grand Rapids,

officially organized a daughter church, Grace Fellowship OPC, Zeeland, Michigan. Michael Schout was installed as pastor of the new congregation; ruling elders and deacons were also installed as the church's session and diaconate. The Zeeland congregation is now a particular church of our presbytery, and the whole church rejoices. If there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents, then there is likewise rejoicing in heaven when a new, particular church is planted. It is our prayer that the Zeeland congregation, as well as all the churches of our presbytery, will faithfully conduct the work of missions—taking the gospel to their community, winning the lost to Christ, enfolding them in the local body, discipling them, ordaining pastors and evangelists and sending them out to start new churches, to the glory of Christ. The cycle continues, over and over. Christ, who promised, “I will build my church,” is glorified as his church continues to grow and spread throughout the world.

What does this have to do with our text this morning, when the Holy Spirit falls on Gentile converts? This: the work of planting new churches is actually the work of the Holy Spirit working in the hearts and lives of fallible humans. In the words of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, God “raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory.”¹ Poor, fallen sons and daughters of Adam are, through the regenerating work of God's Holy Spirit, brought out of the dunghill of original sin, given the incomparable knowledge of Christ and incorporated into the worshipping church, which in turn proclaims the gospel to the lost and forms new churches. Those who have no claim on the grace of Christ are “set among princes”—the officers of the church—and “inherit the throne of glory.” No mere man can do this work; it is the work of Christ, through his Holy Spirit.

In our text this morning, as the apostle Peter finishes his sermon at the house of Cornelius, a dramatic thing happened: “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.” This was a total surprise to everyone in the room. It was certainly not the conclusion that Peter intended or in any way tried to orchestrate. While Peter was still giving his sermon (ῥήματα, his spoken, audible words), the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word (τὸν λόγον; that is, the message about Christ, the Logos). As we work through this, let us consider three things: first, What happened? second, How do we know? third, What does it prove? First,

1. What happened?

Notice our text: “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.” The sovereign Holy Spirit interrupted Peter's sermon, as it were. This wasn't something anticipated by Peter. It wasn't something

¹ 1 Sam. 2:8, cf. Ps. 113:7

he planned or orchestrated. The Holy Spirit “fell.” It was entirely the Holy Spirit’s work. Peter faithfully preached Christ—something he had done before and would continue to do—and the Holy Spirit “fell.” He was “poured out.” It was a dramatic, amazing, totally unexpected event. Just as at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit suddenly came in visible form upon the 120 disciples gathered in the Upper Room, and “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4), so now, the Holy Spirit “fell” upon all those who heard the word, and the Christians who accompanied Peter from Joppa heard these Gentile believers “speak with tongues and magnify God.”

This was not something that Peter did because of his eloquence. It was the sovereign work of almighty God. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Holy Trinity. “There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory”²—three divine Persons, one God. According to the eternal, inter-trinitarian covenant, God the Father sent the Son into the world to save sinners. The Son in turn sent his Spirit upon his church.

In the King James Version the book of Acts is entitled, “The Acts of the Apostles.” That is true enough, but some have argued that the book should be titled “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” Certainly the Holy Spirit plays a leading role in the story. The book of Acts is the story of the Spirit of Christ bringing both Jew and Gentile into the church and equipping it to go to the ends of the earth. It is an exciting story, and one that deserves to be pondered and carefully understood.

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.” As I mentioned a moment ago, while Peter was still giving his sermon (ῥήματα, his spoken, audible words), the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word (τὸν λόγον; that is, the message about Christ, the Logos). Peter was in the process of preaching Christ to the Roman audience at Cornelius’s house. Clearly, he was intent upon his message. His purpose, as always, was to lift up Christ, not to lift up himself or anything *he* had to offer. So it is with the church today. Christ calls us to be his hands and feet in the world. As there is pain and suffering in the world, Christians are there to lift up the fallen. The deacons pray over how best to serve the needy, offering spiritual counsel and practical help as the situation warrants. This past week I read the testimony of Glenn Moots, brother of our elder Paul. Glenn and his family suffered a devastating loss when their home was destroyed in the flood that followed a dam break in Midland one year ago. The family had been self-sufficient: Glenn is a college professor, and his wife ran a successful internet business. Then, all of a sudden they lost everything—their

² Shorter Catechism answer 6

home, their library, their inventory, most of their personal possessions. The church rallied around the Mootses and came to their aid. Volunteers arrived to use their skills in the cleanup and renovation. Our church was privileged to give financial assistance. The Midland OPC housed and fed the volunteers. Now the Bible teaches that “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” but the Mootses—previously self-sufficient—had to learn how to *receive* as well. Glenn writes, “It is our sovereign God who directs our affairs. He not only puts us in circumstances where we should give, but in circumstances where we must receive. Even if it is more blessed to give, someone must be given to. There cannot be givers without receivers, and each are called to their position in God’s good time. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that as God’s handiwork we are created in Christ Jesus to do good works. Even if receiving isn’t a ‘good work’ in the sense we typically think of it, deliverance is also good in its own way. Through the providential deliverance of God, we are able to understand His lovingkindness better (Psalm 107:43). We should not think that God loves us any less because we are receivers. In fact, it is when we are in need that we see the love of God most tangibly.”

There are some churches—particularly the liberal, mainline churches—that deemphasize the gospel and emphasize helping the poor (or lobbying government to help the poor), but that is wrong. Wherever the church goes, we are to lift up Christ. Merely giving the poor a handout without introducing them to Christ does not bring about the lasting change they so desperately need. The poor of this world don’t so much need material help as they need *Christ*, who changes men and women from the inside out, giving them a love for God and for their neighbor, making them into productive citizens able and willing to care for their own. The church offers diaconal aid in the context of offering *Christ*, the Savior. The world’s help, involving government handouts to the poor, does not change their character. I saw this week some pictures of a beautiful beach in California that our family visited some years ago. Now it has become a permanent encampment of the homeless, with all the litter and filth of destitute people who have no incentive to change or improve their lot.

When Peter got to Caesarea, he preached Christ, his death and resurrection, and how he is ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead, and that through his name all who believe in him will receive remission of their sins. His emphasis through and through was Christ. How was he going to end his sermon? Presumably he would have said something like, “Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of of your sins.”³ But before he could make his appeal, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.” The hearts of all those who heard had obviously been prepared by the Holy Spirit. This was an amazing

³ Cf. Acts 2:38

response. Contrast this with what happened when Paul preached at the Areopagus in Athens: some mocked, others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” A few believed and began meeting with Paul to be discipled by him.⁴ But here in Caesarea there was an entire congregation that heard the apostle Peter preach Christ, and put their trust in the Savior—and these men were Gentiles! Heretofore in Acts we saw the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, but here was an *entire congregation* of Romans—pagans—who were delivered from their worship of the pantheon of Roman gods and put their trust in Christ. The Holy Spirit fell upon *all* who heard the word—a company of uncircumcised Gentiles. The next verse reports that “those of the circumcision who believed were astonished.” The Jewish Christians who had traveled with Peter were astonished at this clear miracle from God. The word for “astonished” is a dramatic word. It can even mean *lose one’s mind, be out of one’s senses*. In this case it means *be amazed, astonished*. Why were they astonished? Here were Christ-followers from congregations that were entirely Jewish—Hebrew Christians. Their entire church experience involved worshipping and fellowshiping with converted Jews. They had received Christian baptism but bore in their bodies the indelible mark of circumcision. They were from a comfortable, common, homogeneous background. But now what were they seeing? Uncircumcised Romans receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, speaking with tongues, magnifying the true God! They could hardly believe their eyes. What they were seeing required a seismic shift in their understanding. God was calling Gentiles and bringing them into his church. What happened? Gentiles were coming to faith. Consider with me a second question,

2. How do we know?

Here is Luke, the careful historian, reporting that the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word, and that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles. How did Luke know this? How did Peter’s traveling companions, who were taken back with astonishment, know this? What is the evidence? How do we know? In a nutshell, we know because these new Gentile believers began to speak with tongues.

What is speaking with tongues? The speaking with tongues that is spoken of in the book of Acts is not babbling nonsense syllables but speaking a known language that the speaker has never studied. Anyone who has studied a foreign language knows that learning a foreign language is not easy. It is hard work. It takes many years of constant use and practice develop fluency in a foreign language to be able to speak it as well as a native speaker of that language. A sober interpreter must understand speaking in tongues as Luke understood the term. The paradigm must be developed out of a careful understanding of the first use of the term in Acts 2,

⁴ Acts 17:32–33

where on the Day of Pentecost the early Christians were given the ability “to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”⁵ As these early believers spoke, Jewish Christians from the whole Roman world heard the gospel preached in their own native tongue. Clearly, according to Luke’s use of the term, a “tongue” is a human language—a language understood by the hearer that was previously unknown to the speaker.

Is speaking in tongues for today? Pentecostals and Charismatics contend that it is. The Assemblies of God doctrinal statement states that “All believers are entitled to and should ardently expect and earnestly seek ... the baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire This was the normal experience of all in the early Christian church.” Speaking with other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance is “the initial physical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit.”⁶ The problem with this statement is that having tongues of fire settle down on one’s head and being given the ability to speak in a previously-unlearned language was *not* “the normal experience of all in the early Christian church.” There is no evidence that biblical speaking in tongues was ecstatic speech or babbling nonsense syllables. It was the ability to speak in a previously-unlearned language. It would be akin to my suddenly being able to speak in Vietnamese.

There was a very good reason the Holy Spirit enabled the first Christians to speak the languages of the ancient world on the Day of Pentecost: to communicate in the heart-language of a person under the conviction of sin and to fulfill prophecy.⁷ And there was a very good reason the Holy Spirit gave the gift again in Caesarea, as we shall see. We have considered “What happened?” and “How do we know? Finally, consider

3. What does it prove?

What does the Holy Spirit’s falling on those who heard the word on this occasion prove? The answer is exceedingly important. What does it prove? That *Gentiles too* are now incorporated into the church. Here was a group of Romans—people from a pagan background. They had grown up believing in all the Roman gods and goddesses: Jupiter, Juno, Neptune, Minerva, Mars, Venus, Apollo, Diana, Vulcan, Mercury. But as we said last week, all of them are figments of the human imagination. They are not real. Now, Peter presents to them the Lord Jesus Christ, the anointed of God who came to this earth to do good works and heal all those—fallen sons and daughters of Adam—who were oppressed by the devil; to be killed by hanging on a tree—the cruel cross of Calvary; who was raised up by God on the

⁵ Acts 2:4ff.

⁶ <https://ag.org/-/media/AGORG/Beliefs/Fundamental-Truths/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths.pdf>

⁷ Isa. 28:10

third day; who was seen by witnesses; who is ordained to be judge of the living and the dead. Peter had just made the point that “through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins”—there is salvation in no one else; whoever wants to get to heaven must come through Christ.

Now the *whole group* of these pagan, uncircumcised Romans began to believe in Christ. They were brought to Christ through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. They did not ask for this; it was clearly the gift of a sovereign God. They were given the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as the upper-room Christians had been given on the Day of Pentecost. Suddenly, they began to speak with tongues—known languages, according to the biblical paradigm, a true miracle—and magnify God. Psalm 34 begins, “O *magnify* the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.” These uncircumcised Romans now accept that invitation and begin to magnify the Lord. This was conclusive proof that it was now God’s intention to bring not only Jews but Gentiles into the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Peter’s Jewish traveling companions understood that. They were astonished—blown away—by what they saw. And Peter, a strict, observant Jew from his birth, now commands that these uncircumcised Romans be baptized with water in the name of the Lord.

This is a sea-change. The once almost purely Jewish church is now transformed into the church of all nations. Since the cross, no one need ever again be ashamed of his heritage or his upbringing. Jesus Christ is clearly the Savior of the world. “Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream; all the fitness he requireth is to feel your need of him.”

The purpose of the gift of the Spirit and the speaking in tongues was not to make the individual worshippers happy. The emphasis in a lot of churches is on an experience, a seeking of joy and euphoria. One author writes of his “excruciating embarrassment, as a young teenager, of singing happy-clappy choruses to gradually accelerating Jewish melodies, as middle-aged women twirled their dresses, stamped their feet, and waved their tambourines” during church meetings.⁸ Christians were religious enthusiasts on a quest to find a deeply-satisfying emotional experience as evidence that God indeed was among them as they gathered to hear preaching. Now the apostle Paul in Romans 14:17 does mention “joy in the Holy Spirit.” The fruit of the Spirit is *joy*. But joy is not something to be sought in its own right. The true evidence of the Spirit’s attendance upon the word is the transformation of sinners into saints, of raising the spiritually dead and making them into worshippers seeking the heart of God. Does this describe you?

The purpose of the gift of the Spirit and the speaking in tongues was to prove conclusively that Gentiles were now to be included in the church of Jesus Christ,

⁸ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/worship-eucharismatic/>

and for this we can all be thankful. You today can come to the Father through the only mediator, Jesus Christ our Savior. Yes, through the blessing of the Holy Spirit, Peter's mission to Caesarea was a *fruitful* mission, and through the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the church's mission today will be fruitful. Amen.