

Why Do Some Churches Wear Red on Pentecost?



Session 1



Acts 2:1–13

Session Objective

The sessions in this mini-course focus on that big chunk of the New Testament that follows the four Gospels. (If you are looking for a curriculum that covers the Gospels, please refer to *Faith Questions: Gospels*.) Because it would be impossible to study this part of the New Testament without also studying the birth and growth of the church, we begin with the church’s beginnings: the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In this session, the participants will learn about the birth of the church as described in Acts, reflect on how the church is constantly being reborn through the work of the Spirit, and consider their own role in that ongoing rebirth.

Faith Statement

By the indwelling of the Holy Spirit all believers being vitally united to Christ, who is the Head, are thus united one to another in the Church, which is his body.

—Westminster Confession of Faith (6.054)

Session Overview

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Enhancements

Family Connections
Ecumenical Connections
Campfire Connections



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Of all the dramatic biblical instances of God's Spirit breaking into human life, the episode described in Acts 2:1–13 has to rank near the top in excitement and confusion. Take a few moments to read the passage, imagining that you were there in that gathering of Jesus' followers, and read the passage again. Reflect on the following questions:

- How does your own daily experience of God compare to the events described in Acts 2:1–13?
- Recall any particularly striking instances of God's presence that you've experienced. What made the experiences special?
- In verse 12, we read that people were asking one another, "What does this mean?" How would you answer this question?

Spend a few moments in prayer for the youth of your church, praying that God's Spirit would break into their lives and energize their participation in the body of Christ.



Understanding the Scripture

The second chapter of Acts opens with Jesus' followers gathered on the day of Pentecost. Though Pentecost, which means "fiftieth," is now part of the Christian calendar (coming fifty days after Easter Sunday), it was also a Jewish festival day that, in New Testament times, celebrated the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. Thus, without saying so explicitly, Luke (the author of Acts, which can be thought of as a sequel to Luke's Gospel) connects the revelation of God's Law that took place on Mount Sinai with the revelation of God's Spirit that takes place fifty days after Jesus' resurrection.

The Holy Spirit comes upon the people gathered at Pentecost in the forms of wind and fire, which are used throughout the Bible to signify God's presence, and the people begin to speak in other languages. Though the phenomenon known as "speaking in tongues" is mentioned or described in other places in the New Testament, only here are the speakers depicted using actual human languages rather than ecstatic, unintelligible speech. Thus, Luke paints a picture of the infant church as "a universal, inclusive community transcending languages and cultures."¹

While the nations that Luke lists didn't literally represent "every nation under heaven" (v. 5), it does symbolize the whole world in that it includes nations that were outside the Roman Empire. Interestingly, the list echoes such ancient lists as those found in Genesis 10:1–32, which precedes the story of the tower of Babel—a suggestion that the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost represents an overturning of the disunity of Babel!²

1. M. Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 370.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

Finally, it's worth noting that the inspired speakers in this account are testifying to "God's deeds of power" (v. 11). For Luke, the height of God's powerful works is reached both in the Christ event and in the birth of the church at Pentecost, reminding us that the church is first an act of God, not a human institution. We sometimes forget this truth, even as some of those gathered in that room misinterpreted what they were seeing as simply drunkenness (v. 13)!



Understanding the Faith Statement

The Westminster Confession of Faith, dating from 1647, was the sole confessional document for Presbyterianism in the United States until 1967, when it was incorporated into the *Book of Confessions*, part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The faith statement for this session neatly summarizes the intertwining of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, individual believers, and the church. It reminds us that the church, the body of Christ, couldn't exist were it not for the Holy Spirit, which binds individuals together. It also suggests implicitly that the church has a mission that goes beyond securing its own existence and preservation: if the church is indeed Christ's body, then it is called to continue the work that Christ began during his earthly ministry.



Teaching Today's Question

As you prepare for this session, be careful to not take the session question too literally. Many congregations, who celebrate Pentecost Sunday, invite congregants to wear red to worship since red is the liturgical color for this important Sunday in the liturgical year. If your congregation does not do this, consider changing the session question to: "Why is Pentecost important?"

The account of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost will probably be at least somewhat familiar to many of the participants in your group. If this is the case, be sure to draw on their knowledge and previous interpretations (several of the activities in the early portions of this session permit you to do just that), but also be sure that you spend time with the biblical text itself. The Bible has an uncanny way of presenting a fresh and new perspective with each reading, no matter how familiar it may be!

Also, leave ample time for the participants to explore the ways in which the Scripture passage relates to contemporary life in the church. On one level, it may seem irrelevant: how often in church do we witness events such as those described in the text? On a deeper level, however, it's important that we all open ourselves to the ways in which the Holy Spirit is indeed still moving and working in the church and in individual lives.



Enter

Seeing Red

- Variety of items or images of items that are or contain the color red (e.g., flags, items that display school or team colors, flowers, a red-letter Bible opened to a page containing Jesus' words, sanctuary paraments, emergency equipment), newsprint and markers

Before the participants arrive, display the red items throughout the meeting space and post the following questions on a sheet of newsprint:

- Why is each item red?
- For each item, what does the color red mean or symbolize?
- How would the meaning or impact of each item be different if another color were used?

As participants arrive, invite them to mingle throughout the meeting space, looking at the red items and reflecting on the questions posted on newsprint. After a few minutes, discuss the objects, listing the various responses to the posted questions on a sheet of newsprint. Review the list together and ask: What common threads do you see in the responses? As a group, develop a summary statement of what the color red represents or symbolizes in our culture.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

- Newsprint and markers, candle, matches

Before participants arrive, write *Why do some churches wear red on Pentecost?* on a posted sheet of newsprint. Place the candle in the center of the meeting space.

Gather the group around the candle and light the candle to focus the group's attention. Call the participants' attention to the session question, which is written on the newsprint, and let them know that it was initially asked by a Presbyterian teenager who was wondering about Pentecost. Use the following questions to guide the discussion:

- What do you already know about Pentecost? What questions do you have about Pentecost?
- What was the "energizing force" behind Pentecost?
- How do you picture, or how would you describe, the Holy Spirit?
- What is a spiritual gift? What forms do spiritual gifts take?

- How is Pentecost observed in our congregation?
- How does the use of the color red for Pentecost fit with the use of red on the items you looked at when you entered the room?

Explain that to answer the question “Why do some churches wear red on Pentecost?” will require going to the Bible for answers about the birth of the church. Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for gathering us together in this place. As we study and learn about the creation of your church, touch us with the realization that it's our own story that we're hearing. As we meet those first Christians who gathered in your name two thousand years ago, help us to realize that they were just like us: looking for answers, looking for community, looking for you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Option B: Balderpictionades

- Two hat-sized containers, three index cards, three small slips of paper for each participant, pens, timer, drawing paper

Mark one container as the “Do” container and mark the other container as the “What” container. Write each of the following phrases on a separate index card: *Sing or Hum; Act Out; Draw a Picture*. Place the cards in the “Do” container.

Give each participant three slips of paper. Have the participants write an example of each the following on a separate slip of paper:

- A famous person
- A well-known place or thing
- A familiar song title

Collect the completed slips of paper in the “What” container. Divide participants into two groups and explain the following instructions:

- Each group will draw an index card from the “Do” container and a slip of paper from the “What” container.
- The group will do the required action in an attempt to get the other group to guess who or what is on the slip of paper.
- For example, if a group chooses the *Draw a Picture* card and *George Washington*, they must draw a picture of George Washington.
- Each group will have a thirty-second time limit for each round.

Play a few rounds of Balderpictionades and then explain that the confusion they felt during the game is not unlike what the Bible describes at the birth of the Christian church. Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: Bible Study—The Birth of the Church

- Bibles, copy of the *Book of Confessions* or “Session 1 Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1a), one or two Bible dictionaries, map of Bible lands in New Testament times, newsprint, marker

Make sure that each participant has a Bible. Invite participants to read Acts 2:1–13 and then ask a volunteer to read the passage out loud to the group. Have volunteers look up *Pentecost* and *tongues* (or *speaking in tongues*, *gift of tongues*, etc.) in a Bible dictionary and share the information with the group. After clarifying any other unknown or confusing terms, explore the following questions together:

- Based on the definition of *Pentecost*, why is it significant that the events described in the passage took place on this particular day?
- Verse 3 suggests one reason why people in the church wear red on Pentecost. What other reasons can you think of?
- How are the events of this passage like or unlike what you’ve heard, learned, or experienced concerning *speaking in tongues*?
- Compare Acts 2:6–11 with Genesis 11:6–9. How are these two events similar and how are they different?
- Using the map, locate as many of the places mentioned in verses 9–11 as you can. What point do you think Luke (the writer of Acts) might be trying to make by listing all these places?
- What new insights or discoveries have you made in this discussion?
- In verse 12, the people ask one another, “What does this mean?” Two thousand years later, how would you answer this question?

Read together section 6.054 from the Westminster Confession of Faith using the *Book of Confessions* or “Session 1 Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1a). On a sheet of newsprint, have the group work together to rewrite the statement in contemporary language. Discuss this faith statement in the context of Acts 2:1–13 by exploring the following questions:

- What important ingredients do the Scripture passage and the faith statement share? What do they not share?
- In what ways do you see the faith statement represented in your congregation?
- In what ways does your congregation seem to come up short? If there are ways that your congregation fails to embody the ideal of the faith statement, how might that be fixed?
- What role do youth have in helping the church live up to the ideal of the Scripture passage and the faith statement? What gets in the way of fulfilling that role? How can such roadblocks be overcome?

Remind the group of the session question: “Why do some churches wear red on Pentecost?” Help the group understand that wearing red clothing symbolizes the fire of Pentecost and celebrates this important liturgical day in the church calendar. Ask: How can our congregation go beyond symbolism and participate more fully in the Spirit’s work in and through the church?

Option B: Pentecost—Act It Out



Bibles

Invite participants to read Acts 2:1–13 and then ask a volunteer to read the passage out loud to the group. Invite the group to plan and execute a dramatic presentation of the events described in Acts 2:1–13. Encourage the group to read through the passage several more times, figuring out how to enact the coming of the Holy Spirit without using props and deciding how to handle the multiple languages.

Give the group an opportunity to present the drama and then explore the following questions:



- How did you decide who would play what role?
- How did you decide how to enact the entry of the Holy Spirit? What other possibilities did you discuss?
- What insights did you gain from acting out the passage?
- In verse 12, the people ask one another, “What does this mean?” Two thousand years later, how would you answer this question?

If you have more than six participants, divide the participants into small groups and have each group plan its own drama.



Express

Option A: Film Clip—*Keeping the Faith*



Bibles, *Keeping the Faith* (2000, PG-13) and movie-viewing equipment

Preview the following clip from *Keeping the Faith*: 0:10:37–0:14:56.

Share the following: Acts 2:1–13 is the story of the birth of the church, a birth that is initiated by the Holy Spirit. In *Keeping the Faith*, Catholic priest Brian Finn (Edward Norton) and Rabbi Jake Schram (Ben Stiller) are childhood friends who have grown up to become leaders in their respective faiths. The clip shows their early struggles in ministry, as well as the transformation that results as they grow into their roles.

Watch the clip together before exploring the following questions:



- In Acts 2:1–13, the Holy Spirit is responsible for all that takes place among Jesus’ followers who had gathered on Pentecost. What role—either direct or indirect—does the Spirit have in the transformation that takes place in the congregations shown in the film?

- In a voiceover, Brian says, “We needed to kick the dust off our faiths—bring them up to speed with the times. . . . No more of the old routines. We were going to bring our religions into the twenty-first century any way we could—we were going to shove them a little if we had to.” Is this a good goal? Why or why not?
- In your view, does your congregation need to have the dust kicked off it? Why or why not?
- What role do you see yourself having in the transformation of your congregation? How do you make sure that you’re cooperating with the Holy Spirit?

Option B: We Are the Church

- Bibles; examples of how your congregation represents itself in print (e.g., congregation’s logo, a bulletin cover, a picture of your church building); art supplies including poster board, canvas, butcher paper, etc.; felt, fabric, paints, or markers in a variety of colors; newsprint and markers

This activity is grounded in the claim—made both in the Scripture passage and the faith statement for this session—that the church is first and foremost not a building but a community of people inspired and energized by the Holy Spirit.

Consider reviewing your congregation’s Website in addition to print resources.

Show the group examples of how your church represents itself in print. Invite the group to brainstorm ways in which your church’s logo or worship bulletin cover might be redesigned to emphasize the movement of the Holy Spirit among the members of the congregation. Use sheets of newsprint for brainstorming and sketching, then work together to design and create a new symbol for your church.

After the project is completed, look for ways to share it with the rest of the congregation, perhaps by displaying it in a common area or presenting it in a worship service.



Gathered and Sent

- Copies of the *Presbyterian Hymnal* or copies of “Hymn Text” (Web Resource 1b)

Consider inviting a musician to lead the group in singing the hymn instead of just reading the hymn.

Distribute copies of the *Presbyterian Hymnal* or “Hymn Text” (Web Resource 1b). Read together the hymn “On Pentecost They Gathered” (no. 128 in the *Presbyterian Hymnal*) and reflect on the words of the hymn by exploring the following questions:



- What images in the hymn jump out at you?
- In what ways does this hymn reflect or not reflect your understanding of this session's Scripture lesson and faith statement?
- What new insights on this session does the hymn inspire?

Pray the closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

Spirit God, we thank you for being present with us in this time that we've shared together. Continue to inspire us, we pray, even as you send us out of this place and into the world—a world full of people and nations that often can't seem to understand one another. When we open our mouths to speak, may it be in a language of love and a language of praise for you. In Christ's name. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after the session. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Ecumenical Connections

As a way of illustrating the truth that the church is larger than any one building or any one congregation, consider visiting and worshiping with congregations in your community that are significantly different from your own: a non-English-speaking congregation, a congregation that has no building of its own, and so on. To ensure that you and your group are good guests and faithful representatives of your own congregation, be sure to contact the congregations you would like to visit in advance and prepare your group for the experience in whatever way seems appropriate.

Campfire Connections

As part of a retreat or just an evening getaway, pack some songbooks and s'more fixings and have a campfire with your group. It might be a worship experience or just a time of fun and community building.

I, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus,
greet you in the name of the Lord,
and ask you to keep your dog
out of my petunias.

