

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DAY OF PENTECOST

“And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath.... Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath.... And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you” (Leviticus 23:15, 16, 21).

The risen Lord said to His disciples, “Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The Source and the purpose of that power are brought out clearly in the book of Acts: “But you shall receive power when the *Holy Spirit* has come upon you; and *you shall be witnesses to Me* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 2:8).

The Promise of the Father was the Holy Spirit, which would come upon the disciples and empower them as they went about doing the work Jesus had assigned to them. As witnesses to the risen Savior, the disciples were to “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15) and “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...[and] teaching them to observe all things” Jesus had commanded (Matthew 28:19–20). But they would be unable to accomplish this mission in their own strength. They needed power—power from on high. They needed the Holy Spirit to guide them, enlighten them, motivate them, and work through them in convicting the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (John 16:8–15).

The Spirit *did* come upon them, just as Jesus had promised. The day the Holy Spirit came was a very special day, the first day of a new era in God’s plan of redemption. That day was the *Day of Pentecost*.

Let’s focus our attention on this important holy day, its original meaning, what Scripture says about it, and what it means to Christians today. One of the best ways to study a subject is to divide the subject into several study categories, and address each category with a question. The following questions and answers should help people new to the holy days gain a good understanding of the meaning of Pentecost, and (hopefully) provide a fairly good review for those who have been keeping the annual festivals for many years.

Where is Pentecost found in the Old Testament?

The word *Pentecost* is not in the Old Testament, but the holy day that would come to be known by that name is described there. The word is derived from the Greek, and means “fiftieth.” This holy day falls on the fiftieth day—hence the name—from the day the sheaf of the firstfruits of the grain harvest is waved (Leviticus 23:15–21). In the Old Testament, the festival is called the “Feast of Weeks” (Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:10, 16), signifying the seven weeks of the spring harvest. It is also called the “Feast of Harvest” (Exodus 23:16) and “Day of the Firstfruits” (Numbers 28:26).

What did this festival mean for ancient Israel?

The Feast of Weeks was a thanksgiving festival. The men of Israel, with their families and servants, as well as the Levites, widows, orphans, and strangers dwelling in their land, were to “rejoice before the LORD” at the Feast of Weeks (Deuteronomy 16:11). In other words, they were to come before God with thanksgiving for the blessing of the harvest and all that He had done for them.

They were also to remember that they had been slaves in Egypt (verse 12). Remembering that experience helped motivate them to have compassion for the servants, for the poor, and for the strangers (including Egyptians) who dwelt among them.

The Feast of Weeks reminded Israel of the terms of the Covenant. God had promised that if the people would diligently obey His commandments, He would cause great blessings to come upon them. “Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.... The LORD will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you.... And the LORD

will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. The LORD will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand" (Deuteronomy 28:4, 8, 11, 12)

What does this festival mean for the New Testament church?

Let's first look at some terms that are used in the Old Testament. God said, "When you [Israelites] come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the *firstfruits* of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it" (Leviticus 23:10-11).

The sheaf of the firstfruits was to be waved on a Sunday ("the day after the Sabbath"). Like the Sadducees, Samaritans, and some others in the time of Christ, we take this to mean the Sunday that falls within the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Now let's look at the New Testament.

Paul writes, "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the *firstfruits*, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Christ was presented alive before God on the very morning the sheaf of the firstfruits was waved. When Mary Magdalene recognized Him that morning, He said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (John 20:17).

The symbolism is unmistakable. The sheaf of the firstfruits *clearly* pictures Christ and His being presented alive before the Father.

But remember, the waving of the firstfruits sheaf occurs on the first day of a seven-week harvest (Leviticus 23:15). The day after the Sabbath of the seventh week is the Feast of Weeks (verses 16). Notice what happens on this day:

"You shall bring from your dwellings two wave

loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the *firstfruits* to the LORD.... The priest shall wave them [certain sacrificial offerings] with the bread of the *firstfruits* as a wave offering before the LORD.... And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it..." (verses 17, 20, 21).

Now, let's go back to the New Testament.

James writes, "Of His Own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we [we *Christians*] might be a kind of *firstfruits* of His creatures" (James 1:18). James is speaking of the "church militant," or church in this world. And in Revelation 14, the 144,000 who are "redeemed from the earth" and who "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" are called "*firstfruits* to God and to the Lamb" (verses 3-4). This is a prophetic picture of the glorified church.

If the sheaf of the firstfruits waved on the first day of the harvest represents Christ the Firstfruits, then the wave loaves must represent the church—the "*firstfruits* of His creatures." And since the wave sheaf pictures Christ in His resurrected glory, the wave loaves picture not only the present church but also the "church triumphant," or church in its resurrected/transformed glory. The seven weeks of harvest between the wave sheaf and the wave loaves remind us of the ongoing harvest of lives for the Kingdom of God—the work of gathering the "*firstfruits*" for the time when they will be presented alive before the Father, just as Christ the Firstfruits was.

For us, the Feast of Weeks—or Day of Pentecost—is both a memorial of the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) and an encouraging reminder of our glorious future. It is also an annual reminder of our responsibility to "live in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25), "walk in the Spirit" (verses 16, 25), be "led by the Spirit" (verse 18), produce the "fruit of the Spirit" (verses 22-23), and "quench not the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19, KJV).

Why don't you observe Pentecost on the fixed calendar date of Sivan 6?

We believe the original instructions for calculating Pentecost call for waving the firstfruits sheaf on a Sunday. That puts the Day of Pentecost—fifty days later—on a Sunday. The fifty-day count begins with the Sunday of Unleavened Bread. But from

year to year, that Sunday occurs at different points within the feast. Therefore the Day of Pentecost, occurring fifty days later and always on a Sunday, can occur on different calendar dates.

Scholars have made arguments for both sides of the issue. We believe that an honest weighing of the evidence on both sides tips the scale in favor of a Sunday Pentecost.

First, the wording of the text itself strongly supports this view: "And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath..." (Leviticus 23:15-16).

Notice that the count begins on the day after a Sabbath, takes in seven Sabbaths, and concludes on the day after the seventh Sabbath. To us, there is no ambiguity here. The day after the Sabbath is a Sunday. Count fifty days and you wind up on another Sunday. As if that were not clear enough, we are told that the fiftieth day is the day after the seventh Sabbath. That would be Sunday!

But Sivan 6 advocates are not satisfied with that simple understanding of the word *Sabbath*. They claim that the first "Sabbath" here is the first holy day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread—an annual Sabbath. They then claim that the "Sabbaths" between that day and Pentecost are not Sabbath *days*, but "weeks"—seven consecutive periods consisting of seven days each—that may or may not end with a Sabbath. If we take "seven Sabbaths" to mean "seven weeks," and "seventh Sabbath" to mean "seventh week," then why don't we take "day after the Sabbath" to mean "day after the week"? Taken that way, we might be inclined to think that the "day after the week" refers to the day after the "week" called the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is a *seven-day* feast (Leviticus 23:6-8), and the instructions for counting Pentecost come only a few verses after mention of the "seventh day" of this feast, which is both an annual Sabbath and the end of a specific seven-day period (see verses 8-11).

But if we take "Sabbath" (Hebrew: *Shabbat*) in its ordinary sense, then the most logical and consistent conclusion is that the "day after the Sabbath" means the day after the *weekly* Sabbath—Sunday!

Second, Scripture gives calendar dates for Passover, the first and last days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day

of Atonement, and the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, but not for the Day of Pentecost. This seems odd, especially if this day was (as the later rabbis claimed) a memorial of the giving of the law at Sinai. The law may have been given on the Day of Pentecost, but Scripture does not say so. Some scholars believe that the fixed calendar date for Pentecost was established *after* the rabbis began viewing this holy day as a memorial of the giving of the law.

Third, Scripture instructs us to *count* to the Day of Pentecost. This is evidence, though not of itself conclusive, that the original Pentecost did not occur on a particular calendar date, but was calculated by counting from a day that could fall at various points within the Days of Unleavened Bread.

These are some of the most basic points favoring a Sunday Pentecost, but there is much additional evidence. (If you are interested in a more thorough study of this subject, we invite you to write or call for your free copy of our booklet, *Should We Observe Pentecost on Sivan 6?*)

Why do you count from the Sunday of Unleavened Bread rather than the weekly Sabbath that falls within the Days of Unleavened Bread?

The Bible does not say that the fifty-day count should or must begin during or even near the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, though they adhered to different counting rules, started the count within the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Essenes apparently started the count on the day *after* the feast, though they used a calendar different from the one the Pharisees and Sadducees used. These traditions have a common thread: All of them connect the wave sheaf and count to Pentecost with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The common element most likely reflects the intent of the original instructions. In other words, it appears that God intended that the fifty-day count connect Unleavened Bread with Pentecost.

The question, however, still remains. Should we begin our count with the Sunday that falls within Unleavened Bread? Or should we begin with the weekly Sabbath that falls within the feast? Since Scripture does not say, someone must decide what to do.

There are theological reasons for starting the count to Pentecost with the Sunday that falls within Unleavened Bread. Christ was raised from the dead

and presented alive before the Father during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The feast pictures Christ as the “Bread of Life” upon which we depend for spiritual sustenance. It seems logical, then, that the day that pictures Christ as the Firstfruits of God’s spiritual harvest would occur *within* the feast that so powerfully portrays His redemptive work.

Of secondary importance is the probability that the Sadducees, Samaritans, and others who observed a Sunday Pentecost began their count with a Sunday within the Days of Unleavened Bread. Here’s what the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has to say: “The firstfruits of the barley harvest are to be gathered on the ‘morrow of the sabbath’ (Lev. xxiii. II). This expression has formed the subject of dispute between Samaritans and other sectaries and the Jews [i.e., the Pharisees], the former of whom regard it as referring to *the first Sunday during the festival*, the latter as a special expression for the second day of the festival itself...” (Vol. 20, article: “Passover,” p. 889, emphasis added).

The church observed a Monday Pentecost until 1974. Why was it changed?

Long before the change took place, a good many ministers and lay members had doubts about the way the church determined the date for Pentecost. In 1974, the issue was reexamined, and the result was a change in the way the church counted the days leading to Pentecost.

Leviticus 23:15 says that we are to count “*from* the day after the Sabbath.” It was reasoned that “*from*” means “*away from*,” which suggests counting exclusively rather than inclusively.

The remedy for the error involves a simple reading of Leviticus 23:15–16. The count is *from* the day after the Sabbath, and *to* the day after the seventh Sabbath, for a total of fifty days. The text itself strongly suggests that the counting (*from* a Sunday *to* a Sunday equals fifty days) is inclusive. In other

words, it includes that initial “day after the Sabbath.” That’s the first day of the count. If you start on a Sunday and count fifty days, the fiftieth day will be a Sunday. (Recall that the word *Pentecost* means “fiftieth.”) There’s no mention of a “fifty-first” day, and not a hint that the Day of Pentecost is the day after the fiftieth day.

Did the early New Testament church continue observing the Day of Pentecost in the years that followed the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Of course. The first disciples of Jesus were Jewish, and the Day of Pentecost was an important feast for all the Jews. For the disciples, though, it became all the more important when the Holy Spirit came on that day (Acts 2). It took on new and much more profound meaning. Abandoning such a meaningful festival was out of the question.

In addition to Acts 2, two other New Testament texts mention Pentecost. The first is Acts 20:16: “For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost.” The second is 1 Corinthians 16:8: “But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost,” says Paul.

Standing alone, these texts do not conclusively prove that the early Christians observed the Day of Pentecost. But the fact that Paul mentions Pentecost to Gentile converts indicates they were familiar with it—and their familiarity with the holy day suggests that they observed it.

The historical record shows beyond the shadow of a doubt that the early church observed the Day of Pentecost. The manner of its observance was modified over time, but many of the early theologians and apologists mentioned Pentecost as a Christian feast. It is extremely unlikely that some second-century theologians one day decided to begin observing Pentecost. Undoubtedly, their practice was a carry-over from the earlier, apostolic church.



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