

When Did The Church Begin?

Introduction

Reformed/Covenant Theology teaches (with some variation in details) that the Church is made up of the elect of all ages, and therefore the Church must have begun with the first person who was saved. This is the common view, although some begin the church with the nation Israel. In either case, Reformed men are unanimous in teaching that the Church was present in the Old Testament period.¹ Reformed/Covenant men stress that throughout all history there is but one people of God, and that these saved people comprise the Church.

Dispensationalists teach that the Church is a unique body of believers that began on the day of Pentecost and will be removed from earth on the day that Christ comes for His own (the rapture). It is made up of both Jews and Gentiles united together into one body and enjoying equal status in the body of Christ (Eph. 3:5-6). This is the “one new man” of Ephesians 2:15 and the “one fold” of John 10:16.

Others hold to differing positions as to when the Church began. Some Baptist groups believe that the Church began with John the Baptist or at some time during the Lord’s earthly ministry. Others whom we consider ultradispensational, begin the Church years after Pentecost (some in Acts 13 and others in Acts 28).

The answer to the question of when the Church began is important and has many theological ramifications. It is not a difficult question to answer. The Scriptures pinpoint the beginning of the Church in a very simple and clear way, as we shall now seek to demonstrate.

The Key Argument from Scripture

Spirit Baptism

The key passage on Spirit baptism is found in 1 Corinthians 12:13—“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 “one body” spoken of in this verse refers to the Church (see 1 Cor. 12:27-28; Eph. 1:22-23; 5:30-32; Col. 1:18), and Christ is the Head of this body. Spirit baptism is defined in 1 Corinthians 12:13 as that work of God whereby believers are baptized (immersed, placed) into Christ’s body, the Church. How then does a believer become a member of the body of Christ? It is by Spirit baptism.

The key to when the Church began is this: If we can determine when Spirit baptism first began, then we will

¹Thus we have the following headings at the top of *The Thompson Chain Reference Bible* in the book of Isaiah: “God’s mercy to the church” “God avengeth His church” “His great mercies to the church” “The church comforted” “The restoration of the church” “The church exhorted” “God will comfort His church” “The prophet’s zeal for the church” “Confession and complaint of the church” etc.

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.

Spirit baptism was first predicted by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11 (and in the parallel passages: Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33):

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost (Spirit), and with fire” (Matt. 3:11).

John’s baptism was a water baptism (“I baptize you with water”); Christ’s baptism would be a spiritual baptism (“He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit”). The “fire baptism” is for the unsaved and this is yet future (see Matthew 3:12). Notice the phrase, “He shall baptize you **with** (Greek-**en**) the Holy Spirit.” The verb “shall baptize” is in the future tense, indicating that Spirit baptism had not yet taken place when John the Baptist spoke these words. John was predicting that it would happen in the future, but he did not predict exactly when it would happen. Notice also that Christ is the Baptizer. He is the One who would place believers into the body of Christ. He is the One who would build His church. Christ is also the Baptizer in 1 Corinthians 12:13, as will be shown later.

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus said, “**I will** build My Church.” The future tense of the verb indicates that the building of the Church had not yet begun when Jesus said these words. He did not say, “I have built My Church.” He did not say, “I am building My Church.” No, the building project had not yet begun and thus the Church was yet future. At the time Jesus spoke the words of Matthew 16:18 the Church had not yet begun.

Today Christ is building His church. He is adding to the church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:47). But the question is, when did this building program first begin?

In Acts 1:5 the Lord Jesus predicted that Spirit baptism was still future:

“For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence” (Acts 1:5).

According to our Lord’s prediction, Spirit baptism had not yet taken place yet, though it would soon take place. No one had yet been immersed into the body of Christ. Thus, the Church could not have begun prior to Acts 1:5. When Jesus spoke the words of Acts 1:5 His death and His resurrection had already taken place, and yet Spirit baptism had not yet taken place and the church had not yet been formed. But the announcement of Acts 1:5 was very significant because Jesus said that Spirit baptism would take place “not many days hence” (not many days from now). This means that it would happen soon, in a matter of days. Indeed, as we shall learn, it happened just ten days later on the day of Pentecost.

The Day of Pentecost and the unique events that took place on that day are described in Acts chapter 2. In this chapter Spirit baptism is not specifically mentioned. It is not until Acts chapter 11 that we are specifically told that Spirit baptism took place on the day of Pentecost: “And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, **as on us at the beginning** [on 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” (Acts 11:15-16). Based on the clear statement of this passage we know that Spirit baptism first took place on the Day of Pentecost. It was then that believers were first placed into the body of Christ. It was then that the Church began.

But someone might raise an objection and say, “The Spirit baptism mentioned in Matthew 3:11 and Acts 1:5 is different from the Spirit baptism mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:13. In Matthew 3:11 and Acts 1:5 Christ is the Baptizer, but in 1 Corinthians 12:13 the Holy Spirit is the Baptizer. As we read the English Bible this

seems to be the case, but the Greek construction of Matthew 3:11 and Acts 1:5 is practically identical to that of 1 Corinthians 12:13, as the following chart illustrates.

All four of these passages are talking about the same baptism, and the Greek construction in all four passages is closely equivalent, as the following literal rendering reveals:

Passage	Greek Construction
Matt. 3:11	He (Christ) shall baptize you with (in) Holy Spirit
Acts 1:5	You shall be baptized (by Christ-Matt. 3:11) with (in) Holy Spirit
Acts 11:16	You shall be baptized (by Christ-Matt. 3:11) with (in) Holy Spirit
1 Cor. 12:13	We all were baptized (by Christ-Matt. 3:11) with (in) one Spirit into one body

The order of the words in 1 Corinthians 12:13 has been altered in order to show that the same Greek construction is used. In the King James Version the Greek preposition **en** is translated “**By** one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13) which has led some to wrongly conclude that the Spirit is the Baptizer. But the passage should be understood in this way: “With (**en**) one Spirit were we all baptized [by Christ] into one body [the body of Christ, His Church].”

Not only did Christ place us into His body, but He also immersed us in the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist made this prediction: “I indeed baptize you with water . . . He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 3:11). What does it mean to be baptized or immersed with (in) the Holy Spirit? The following Scriptures help to shed light:

“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” (1 Cor. 12:13).

“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which [the word ‘which’ refers to the Holy Spirit] He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour” (Titus 3:5-6).

“. . . having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:33).

“He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly [innermost being] shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)” (John 7:38-39)

Praise God, the Comforter has come! The promise of the Father has been given! Spirit baptism began at Pentecost and continues throughout this present age whenever a person believes on Christ.

Other Arguments from Scripture

1. Pentecost, a Day Specially Marked

If Pentecost marked the beginning of the Church, then this was indeed a significant day and we should expect that day to be specially marked. This is exactly what we find.

Pentecost was specially marked by the Comforter's coming as predicted by the Lord Jesus in the Upper Room Discourse (John 14:16-17,20,26; 15:26; 16:7-8,13). After the resurrection, the disciples were told to sit still and wait (tarry) for the promise of the Father (Luke 24:49 and Acts 2:4). This promise of the Father was nothing less than the coming of the Spirit and it was clearly associated with Spirit baptism (see Acts 2:4-5). So the Day of Pentecost was specially marked by the coming of the Comforter.

Pentecost was also a day that was specially marked by supernatural signs. There was **A SOUND LIKE A MIGHTY RUSHING WIND** (Acts 2:2) and "wind" in Scripture can be symbolic of the Holy Spirit (see John 3:8). The Comforter had come! There were **TONGUES AS OF FIRE** (Acts 2:3) sitting upon each of the believers, indicating that God was doing a special work which involved each and every believer. There was also **"SPEAKING IN TONGUES"** (see our book, *God's Gift of Tongues* for the significance of tongues speaking on the day of Pentecost). These supernatural signs indicated that God was doing something very special on this most unique day!

Pentecost was a day specially marked by Spirit baptism as we have already studied. It was also marked by two great distinctives which were predicted by Christ in John 14:20.

"Ye in Me" BAPTISM (see Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3)
"I in You" INDWELLING (see Gal. 2:20; 1 Cor. 6:19-20)

This twofold relationship was distinctively different from what the Jews had known in the previous dispensation. God was in the tabernacle and in the temple in a special way, and in the future God will manifest His glory in the millennial temple. But today God is dwelling in a body of believers (1 Cor. 3:16; Col. 1:26-27). The Church is "the house of God" (1 Tim. 3:15), His unique temple (Eph. 2:19-22). The Lord Jesus indicated that these realities would begin to take place "at that day" (John 14:20), at Pentecost!

Pentecost is a day that is especially marked out because Peter refers to it as "the beginning" (Acts 11:15). This is highly significant. Pentecost, according to Peter, was the beginning of something. No other day in the book of Acts is referred to as "the beginning" except Pentecost. What began on this day? What first happened on this day? According to Acts 11:15, Pentecost was the day when the Holy Spirit first came ("the Holy Spirit fell on them, as on us **at the beginning**"). According to Acts 11:16, Pentecost was the day when Spirit baptism first took place. Spirit baptism is that unique work of God whereby believers are baptized or placed into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Since Spirit baptism first began on the day of Pentecost, then this must be the day when the body of Christ, the church, was formed.

2. Foundational Men (Eph. 2:20)

"And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:20).

The "apostles and prophets" mentioned in this verse are the New Testament apostles and prophets (see Eph. 3:5 and 4:11). These verses are not referring to the Old Testament prophets, and obviously there were no apostles in the Old Testament. The New Testament prophets and apostles were foundational men. When a building is constructed the foundation is laid first. If the Church had its beginnings in the Old Testament period then we might expect the verse to say something like this: "And are built upon the foundation of Abraham and Moses and David and the Old Testament prophets, etc." However, the verse does not say this. If the Church began at Pentecost then we would expect the apostles and New Testament prophets to be foundational because God's new revelation came through these men (Eph. 3:4-5).

3. The Church Must be Post-Resurrection and Post-Ascension.

According to Ephesians 1:19-23 the Father gave Christ to be the Head of the Church, but He did this only after the resurrection and ascension. The Church cannot exist apart from its Head. The Head of the Church is the glorified, exalted, risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the Church could not begin until after the ascension. Compare also John 7:39.

4. Jew and Gentile United Together in One Body

The Church is a unique organism. In the Church, the body of Christ, Jews and Gentiles are united together in one body, and they are on an equal basis (Eph. 3:6). The saved Jew is not superior to the Gentile and the saved Gentile is not superior to the Jew. Out of the two God has made “one new man” (Eph. 2:15). In fact, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28). Such a situation never existed in the Old Testament period and such a situation will not even exist in the millennial period (see Zechariah 8:23). Thus the Church could not have existed in the Old Testament period and the Church age must conclude prior to the millennium.

5. The Temple of God

In Ephesians 2:21-22 the Church is said to be God’s temple, the “habitation of God through the Spirit.” See also 1 Corinthians 3:16. In the Old Testament period, God had a tabernacle and God had a temple, but neither of these was a body of believers indwelt by the living God. This indwelling of a group of believers is true only during this present age, from Pentecost on.

6. One Body . . . One Baptism

In Ephesians 4:4-6 we learn that the Church is “one body” and in connection with this “one body” there is “one baptism.” This one baptism is Spirit baptism, that special work of God whereby the believer is baptized into Jesus Christ and into His body. Christian baptism (water baptism) is symbolic of this “one baptism.” Since Spirit baptism did not begin until Pentecost, the Church did not begin until Pentecost, even as we have already studied. It is significant, therefore, that Christian baptism, the symbol of Spirit baptism, was first practiced on the Day of Pentecost. It is indeed a “Church ordinance.” Since there was no Spirit baptism or Christian baptism in the Old Testament period or in the days of Christ’s public ministry, it is obvious that the Church was not in existence in those days. That John’s baptism was different from Christian baptism is evident from Acts 19:1-5; compare Acts 18:24-26.

7. The Gifts that Pertain to the Church

In Ephesians 4:7-12 we learn that Christ has given certain gifts to His Church. These gifts are actually gifted men (verse 11). It is significant that these gifts were not given prior to the ascension of Christ. Therefore the Church could not have been in existence prior to the ascension because His Church could not function apart from these necessary and needed gifts.

8. Paul Persecuted the Church.

In three places we learn that prior to his conversion Paul persecuted the Church of God (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6). Therefore the Church must have been in existence prior to Acts 9, which gives the account of Paul’s

conversion.² This refutes the ultradispensational view which says that the Church began in Acts 13 (or some would say in Acts 28). Also Acts 13 and Acts 28 were not specially marked as was Acts 2 (Pentecost). Both Acts 13 and Acts 28 were significant **TURNING POINTS** (from the Jews to the Gentiles—Acts 13:46 and Acts 28:25-28), but neither of these chapters marked the **STARTING POINT**.

For other helpful discussions about when the Church began, see Renald E. Shower's book, *There Really Is a Difference--A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology*, Chapter 15 (published by the Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry), Charles Ryrie's book, *Dispensationalism*, Chapter 7 (published by Moody Press) and *The Glory of the Ages* by David Dunlap.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated from the Scriptures that the Church of Jesus Christ is a unique body of believers which was first formed on the Day of Pentecost, not long after Christ died and rose again and ascended to heaven.

This fact strikes a fatal blow to one of the pillars of Reformed/Covenant Theology, namely the doctrine that the Church is made up of the elect of all ages and that the Church was existent during the Old Testament period. Noah, Abraham, Joseph, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, John the Baptist—these were all godly saints, but they were not members of the Church which is His body.

The fact that the Church began at Pentecost also protects against extreme dispensational teaching which has the Church beginning in Acts 13 or Acts 28. Because the ultradispensationalists misunderstand the significance of Pentecost, other doctrines are adversely affected. Some teach that the Lord's Table is not for today, while others teach that water baptism is not for today and still others teach that the Great Commission is not for today (or different combinations of these views).

May the "God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory . . . give unto [us] the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that [we] may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power" (Eph. 1:17-19)!

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A Complete Literature List is Available Upon Request

²Romans 16:7 may be significant in light of ultradispensational teaching. Paul sends his greetings to saints whom he declares were "in Christ before me." If being "in Christ" means the same here as in Galatians 3:28 ("neither Jew nor Greek, etc."), then the Church must have begun prior to Paul's conversion.