

*The Next
To the Greatest Story
Ever Told*

In 1965 a motion picture company released a cinema on the life of Christ which was called *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Beginning with Christ's birth, the cinema depicts His earthly ministry, rejection, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Although the production of the cinema was not faithful to the divine record of the Bible in its portrayal of Jesus, its title is a reminder that the actual life of Christ is the greatest story ever told.

If the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the greatest story ever told, what would be the next to the greatest story ever told? The answer is obvious as one reads the Book of Acts in the New Testament: The second greatest story ever told is the establishment of our Lord's church.

The story of the bringing in of the kingdom of God, the church, as one would expect, is filled with high adventure and gripping excitement. One chapter in Acts—chapter 2—relates the drama.

Let us review this chapter in Acts as if this one

chapter were an entire book or a complete story. This will allow us to divide the story into its compelling and inspiring parts. Each chapter in the book *The Next to the Greatest Story Ever Told* will present an exciting phase of the story of the establishment of the church.

CHAPTER ONE: "THE DIVINE OUTPOURING"

As we begin the book, we open to the first chapter, which is entitled "The Divine Outpouring."

Luke, the writer of Acts, said, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place" (2:1). The setting of the story, therefore, is the historic city of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Isaiah (Isaiah 2:2–4) and Micah (Micah 4:1–3) had prophetically marked Jerusalem as the place where the law of the Lord would go forth in the beginning of the age called "the last days." Pentecost was an Old Testament feast day which celebrated the harvest of grain (Exodus 23:16). From all over the Roman Empire, Jewish men with their families had come to Jerusalem to keep this important Old Testament festival.

As the Day of Pentecost was getting fully under way, something unusual happened:

And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance (Acts 2:2–4).

The apostles were the only ones to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2 and the context leading up to Acts 2 make that clear. First, “they” in Acts 2:1 means “the eleven apostles” mentioned in Acts 1:26. The apostles are the center of attention as the story unfolds. Second, the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–21) nowhere indicates that anyone other than the apostles received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The multitude that witnessed the apostles’ speaking in different languages through the Spirit recognized and acknowledged only the apostles as the ones doing the speaking (Acts 2:7).

For three years prior to this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, promises in different circumstances had been made to the apostles about how Christ would one day baptize them with the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of Christ’s ministry, John the Baptist had said, “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). Shortly before His ascension, Christ had said to them, “For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5). The parting words of Christ to His apostles at His ascension instructed them to abide in Jerusalem until they had received the promise of the Father and were clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:4). Now, in this divine outpouring of the Holy Spirit which came on the morning of the Day of Pentecost, all of our Lord’s promises concerning the coming of the Spirit upon the apostles were being fulfilled.

As the Holy Spirit was poured out from heaven, something was heard: “. . . there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind . . .” (Acts 2:2). Something was also seen: “And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them” (Acts 2:3). Something was also experienced: The way people saw the coming of the Spirit was the apostles’ speaking in tongues, or languages, as the Spirit empowered them. There can be no doubt that the apostles were speaking in the human languages of the people who had heard the sound resembling wind and had gathered to see what was happening. As the people spoke of what they were hearing from the apostles, they used the Greek words *dialektos* (translated “language”; Acts 2:6, 8) and *glossais* (translated “tongues”; Acts 2:11).

The apostles were baptized with the Holy Spirit for three divine purposes. First, they were baptized for the purpose of inspiration. The Holy Spirit would inspire them so they could give God’s revelation to the world. Christ had promised the apostles, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26). Now, through the coming of the Spirit, this promise of inspiration that Christ had made to His apostles would be realized.

Second, they were baptized with the Holy Spirit for the purpose of confirming that the message they preached was from God. They were empowered by the Holy Spirit to work miracles, signs, and wonders to confirm, or prove, the messages they would preach. Christ had promised, “These signs

will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover" (Mark 16:17, 18). This promise would be fulfilled through the Spirit as the apostles worked miracles to confirm that they were men sent from God. An illustration of its fulfillment is seen in Acts 14:3: "Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands."

Third, the apostles were baptized with the Holy Spirit so that they would have the power to lay hands on other Christians and give them miraculous gifts. An example of this giving of power is recorded in Acts 8:14–24: Peter and John, two apostles, were sent out from Jerusalem to Samaria to pray for the new converts who had come to Christ through Philip's preaching, lay hands on them, and give to them the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.

What does this beginning of the "next to the greatest story ever told" mean to you and me? It means that the revelation found in the New Testament was given to us through inspired men. We can trust the New Testament message to be accurate and infallible. God empowered His apostles through the baptism of the Holy Spirit; and the apostles, in turn, by the laying on of their hands, gave miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit to other Christians. Since all the New Testament writers were inspired, Spirit-guided men, we can believe confidently that the New Testament is God's revelation to man.

CHAPTER TWO: "THE POWERFUL SERMON"

Chapter two of *The Next to the Greatest Story Ever Told* is entitled "The Powerful Sermon." The day on which the church was established was a day of preaching. At first, apparently all the apostles spoke to the different national groups in their languages or dialects, declaring "the mighty deeds of God" (Acts 2:11). Then Peter stood up with the eleven and delivered a detailed sermon, speaking perhaps in Greek, the universal language of that day, proclaiming that Jesus was both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:14).

The people who had been drawn together by the sound of the rushing mighty wind were Jews, providing an audience of unusual potential for this first preaching of the gospel. They had an intellectual potential. They were believers in God and knew well the Old Testament Scriptures. They had a mental readiness for the reception of the gospel message. They also had the opportunity to take Christ to many nations. They had come from all parts of the Roman Empire. The opportunity was present for an immediate spread of Christianity by these people who would receive the gospel and would later return to their homelands with it.

Through inspiration, Luke provided us with a summary of the sermon Peter preached (Acts 2:14–36). This vital overview he gave of Peter's sermon can be outlined in two or three different ways; but let us outline it according to the formal elements of a typical speech, looking at its introduction, body, and conclusion.

Peter began the sermon by starting where his audience was. Some of the people had mockingly said,

“They are full of sweet wine” (Acts 2:13). Preachers of the gospel can get along without just about anything except a good reputation. Any preacher who does not have trustworthy character and a reliable reputation is doomed to failure before he opens his mouth to speak. He will not be believed or respected regardless of how powerful his presentation of the gospel may be.

It is no surprise, then, that Peter began this sermon with an answer to the accusation that had been made against the apostles. He responded to their misunderstanding of the facts with two truths: First, he stated what it was not. He appealed to their common sense. He said, “For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day” (Acts 2:15). Peter was saying, “The explanation cannot be drunkenness, for no normal Jew would be drunk so early in the morning on such an important day as Pentecost. Common sense will tell you that we are not drunk.” Second, Peter explained what it was. He appealed to Scripture as he said, “But this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). He then proceeded to quote Joel 2:28–32 (Acts 2:17–21). There can be no doubt, then, that the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost is, at least in part, the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy regarding the beginning of the age called “the last days.” We have Peter’s word on it. His words, “This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel,” must be regarded as a complete and final answer to this question.

This outpouring of the Spirit began the age of “the last days.” As the apostles were empowered by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the miraculous age of the beginning of the church commenced. Later in Acts, the apostles laid their hands on other Christians, and

sons and daughters prophesied, young men saw visions, old men dreamed dreams, and men and women bondservants prophesied (Acts 6:6; 8:4–8, 14–24; 21:8, 9). This outpouring upon the apostles was the spring which produced the miraculous stream of the early days of Christianity. God would use the miraculous gifts of the Spirit imparted by the laying on of apostolic hands for the guidance of the infant church until the written form of the New Testament appeared. With the completion of the written form of the New Testament, the deaths of the apostles, and the deaths of those on whom the apostles had laid their hands, the miraculous beginning of the church ended and the age of the Spirit guiding the church through the written Word commenced.

Peter's introduction, then, pointed out to the multitude what the event was not and what the event was. He appealed to their common sense, and he appealed to Scripture. He took his audience from where they were to where they would be ready to consider the evidence for Jesus' being the Messiah.

The body of Peter's sermon consists of a presentation of different lines of evidence for believing that Jesus is the Christ. If you were asked to stand before an assembly of thousands of people and list the evidence for believing that Jesus is the Christ, what evidence would you list? Let us see what evidence he gave and check our list against his.

When the repetition is eliminated, Peter listed and explained five lines of evidence. First, he pointed to *the evidence of the miracles of Christ*. He said, ". . . Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you

yourselves know” (Acts 2:22). It was the testimony of the miracles that had convinced Nicodemus that Christ had come from God. During his night interview with Christ, Nicodemus said, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). If a completely credible source of information, an undeniably reliable document, declared to us that Jesus worked true miracles, we would be forced by that testimony to respond to the miracles of Christ the same way that Nicodemus did—we would be compelled to believe that He came from God. The Word of God, the Bible, the most reliable source of information on earth, testifies that Christ worked actual miracles. This evidence can point to only one conclusion—He was “approved” of God, confirmed by the miracles He worked as being God’s Son. Peter reminded his audience of the miracles of Christ and called for an acceptance of the logical conclusion which that evidence demands.

Second, Peter placed before his audience *the evidence of the Resurrection*. He said,

This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power (Acts 2:23, 24).

The Resurrection was a significant part of all the apostles’ preaching. It was an argument that the Jews could not answer. The resurrection of Christ made cowards out of bold men and made bold men out of cowards. The Jews, who had boldly cried before

Pilate, “Crucify Him!” (Matthew 27:22), were drawing back in fear before the truth of the empty tomb. Peter, who had fearfully said at Christ’s trial, “I do not know the man” (Matthew 26:72), was boldly preaching His resurrection before a vast assembly only a short distance from the empty tomb.

The Resurrection provides conclusive proof that Jesus Christ is God’s Son. The only way anyone can deny the deity of Christ is to deny His resurrection from the dead. The Resurrection places Christianity in a category all by itself. Christianity is the only religion in the world of religions whose founder arose from the dead. It confirms His claims, authenticates His promises, and validates His religion.

Third, Peter argued from *the evidence of prophecy*. He quoted Psalm 16:8–11, a prophecy which predicted the resurrection of Christ:

I saw the Lord always in my presence; for He is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue exulted; moreover my flesh also will live in hope; because You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of gladness with Your presence (Acts 2:25b–28).

In his prophecy, David spoke in the first person. On the surface, it might appear that he was speaking of himself. Peter showed that David could not have been speaking of himself by pointing to two facts. First, he referred to David’s death. David, the one who made the prophecy, died and was buried and was still in his tomb. As his evidence, he pointed to David’s tomb, which was located in Jerusalem for all to see

(Acts 2:29). Second, he reminded them of God's promise to David (Acts 2:30). God had promised David that one of his descendants would eventually occupy his throne (2 Samuel 7:12). This promise, Peter said, has been fulfilled in Christ, for God has raised Him from the dead (Acts 2:31), placing Him at His right hand on a spiritual throne. Jesus came into the world through the lineage of David and now sits on a spiritual throne at God's right hand in heaven, reigning as King over His earthly kingdom, the church.

Peter made a similar argument from a prophecy in Psalm 110:1 at the end of his sermon (Acts 2:34, 35). His references to prophecy (Psalms 16:8–11; 110:1) proved that the One sent from God would be resurrected from the dead and exalted to God's right hand. Jesus, in His resurrection and exaltation, had clearly fulfilled both of these Old Testament prophecies.

Fourth, Peter used *the evidence of witnesses*. He said, "This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:32). The Jews would have to acknowledge that the prophecy to which Peter had referred predicted a resurrection. Peter was seeking to confirm that Christ had arisen from the dead and had fulfilled that part of the prophecy. He forced his audience to face the testimony of eyewitnesses that Jesus had arisen from the dead. A witness is high-quality evidence. Any authentic court of law will accept the evidence of a witness as long as no contradictions are evident in his testimony. God not only affirmed the resurrection of His Son in His Word, but He placed in His Word the testimony of witnesses who, after His resurrection from the dead, saw Him, touched Him, ate with Him, and studied Him. Who could refuse such testimony?

Fifth, Peter pointed to *the evidence of the descent of the Holy Spirit*. He said, “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33). Just before Christ’s departure to heaven, He promised to send the promise of the Father to the apostles (Luke 24:46–49). The multitude had seen and heard the results of the outpouring of the Spirit. These events gave them miraculous confirmation that Jesus had ascended to the Father’s right hand, had received from the Father the promise of the Spirit, and had sent the Spirit forth upon the apostles.

These five lines of evidence establish an undeniable conclusion. Peter focused their attention on this conclusion with the word “therefore.” Someone has said, “Whenever you see the word ‘therefore’ in the New Testament, you should stop and see what it is *there for*, for it is always *there for* a reason.” Peter said, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). His miracles, His resurrection from the dead, His fulfillment of prophecy, the testimony of witnesses, and the descent of the Spirit prove that Jesus is the Promised One of God, the Christ, and that He is Lord.

What does this chapter of *The Next to the Greatest Story Ever Told* mean to us? Does it not convince us that Christ is the center of Christianity? When one proves that Jesus is the Christ, he proves the credibility of Christianity. If Peter could not have proven that Christ was God’s Son who died for our sins and arose from the dead, Christianity would have died on the day of its birth!

CHAPTER THREE: "THE DEEP-FELT CRY"

The third chapter in *The Next to the Greatest Story Ever Told* is entitled "The Deep-Felt Cry." Many in Peter's audience were deeply moved by his sermon. Smitten in conscience, they cried out to Peter and to the rest of the apostles.

Luke wrote, "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). The King James Version of the Bible says that they were "pricked in their heart." This "pricking" of the heart is not the pricking similar to the pricking of one's finger with a needle or the pricking of one's hand by a thorn. It is an expression which means something like the breaking of the heart or like an arrow being shot through the heart. This same phrase is used in a different context in Acts 7:54: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him." In this incident the Jews reacted to Stephen's sermon with anger. Their hearts were engulfed with anger; they were pierced through with hatred. The Jews who responded to Peter's sermon, however, were overwhelmed with conviction; they were distraught with guilt.

Perhaps the people who cried out actually interrupted Peter's sermon. Interruptions are not always desirable, but this was a blessed interruption indeed. A preacher was once preaching when a man interrupted his sermon with the question "Can I be baptized now?" The preacher stopped, looked directly at the man, and said, "My sermon can wait. If you want to be baptized, we will stop this sermon and baptize you into Christ. Then we will come back, and

I will finish the sermon." An interruption of this kind would not be an intrusion but an inspiration.

Their question was filled with excitement. They did not ask nonchalantly, "What shall we do?" Their question was more like, "What in the world can we do? We are in trouble. Do we have any hope?" Their question was asked in all seriousness.

Look carefully at their question: "Brethren, what shall we do?" They were addressing fellow Jews, hence, their use of the word "brethren." It has a nationality connotation, not a religious one. They had come to realize that before God they were in a terrible condition. They had participated in the crucifixion of the Messiah, the Savior whom God had sent into the world. Peter's sermon placed his listeners' sin before them as if in huge letters (Acts 2:23).

You have had to ask and answer many important questions in your life, but have you asked and answered according to the New Testament the question "What must I do to be saved?" Others present on the Day of Pentecost must have heard Peter's sermon and witnessed the miracles of Pentecost but turned and walked away without facing their guilt and asking this question. Sin in a person's life is a tragedy, a tragedy so great that Christ had to come into this world and die upon a cross to provide atonement (payment) for it. There is an even greater tragedy. When one refuses to face his guilt before God and seek God's solution to that guilt, he experiences the greatest tragedy of all.

CHAPTER FOUR: "THE INSPIRED ANSWER"

The fourth chapter in the book *The Next to the*

Greatest Story Ever Told is a chapter entitled "The Inspired Answer." Guided by the Holy Spirit, Peter gave a plain answer to the convicted crowd's question: "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Shortly before His ascension, our Lord gave what is often called the Great Commission. Three full accounts of this commission are given in the New Testament: Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15, 16; and Luke 24:46, 47. Each account has a different emphasis. Mark 16:15, 16 stresses the condition of faith. Luke 24:46, 47 emphasizes repentance and remission of sins. Matthew 28:18–20 highlights baptism. These three accounts indicate that salvation or remission of sins through God's grace was to be offered upon the three conditions of faith, repentance, and baptism. The wording of these accounts of the Great Commission leaves no doubt as to this understanding.

All three of the conditions expressed in the Great Commission are seen in Peter's answer to their question. Faith in Christ had been engendered in their hearts by Peter's sermon, and this faith prompted their crying out for instruction. Peter's answer to the Jews' question, therefore, mentions specifically repentance and baptism, the other two conditions mentioned in the Great Commission. He said, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins . . ." (Acts 2:38). Notice where Peter placed the remission, or forgiveness, of sins in his answer. He did not promise salvation or forgiveness of sins before baptism, but after it. Peter was guided by the Holy Spirit, and the answer he gave was the Holy Spirit's answer, not his.

The answer given those who cried out is too clear to be misunderstood. In order to dodge the force and impact of this answer, some religious leaders have said that “for” in Acts 2:38 is translated from a Greek word which does not mean “in order to” but means “because of.” That the Greek word *eis* is translated reliably by “for” or “in order to” is seen by comparing the numerous translations of the Bible. Pile them on top of each other—they all render the Greek word *eis* “for,” “in order to,” or an equivalent phrase. None render this word “because of.” Peter’s answer clearly places forgiveness of sins after baptism. Let God’s answer to this question stand, and do not allow anyone to explain it away.

Someone has said that every verse in the New Testament has a twin. This is not always true, but it does have some truth to it. Some New Testament verses have twins, and when we look at the twin we see another way of saying the same truth. What is the twin of Acts 2:38? It is Acts 22:16. Saul had come to Damascus seeking the answer to his question “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10a). He was a believer, for he had seen, spoken to, and been convicted by the Lord. His repentance was indicated by the question which he asked the Lord. He had even acknowledged the Lord, as is also evident in his question; but he was told to go to Damascus that he might be told what to do. He waited in Damascus in prayer and repentance for three days for the answer to his question. Ananias was sent to him with the answer. What did Ananias tell him? The answer Ananias gave him, you might say, is the twin of Acts 2:38. He said, “Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.” If any doubt

exists that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, surely Acts 22:16 forever lays this question to rest.

A young man who was attending a private religious college once said that his Bible professor did not believe in baptism for the forgiveness of sins and was teaching this doctrine in his class. Someone asked him, "What have you done about it?" He said, "I asked my mother what to do about it, and she said that I should go to him after class and ask him to explain Acts 2:38. I did. I opened my Bible to Acts 2:38, went to him after class, and respectfully asked him to explain it. He said that Acts 2:38 really means 'because of' the remission of sins and not 'for' the remission of sins. I went home and mentioned what he had told me to my mother, and she said that I should go back and ask him to explain Acts 22:16. So I did. I went to him after class with my Bible open to Acts 22:16 and respectfully asked him to explain this verse. Do you know what the professor said? He said that he did not try to explain that verse but would just jump over it and go on to the next verse." Acts 22:16 cannot be explained away. It must be accepted or rejected.

Peter indicated that the answer he gave to this question was God's answer for the Christian Age, the final age of human history. He said, "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" (Acts 2:39). "You and your children" is an expression that refers to the Jews who would respond to the gospel, and "for all who are far off" is an expression that must refer to or include the Gentiles who would in time hear, accept, and obey the gospel. "As many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" is a phrase which includes all Jews and Gentiles who would ac-

cept the gospel in the future and come to Christ. If the Gentiles are not included in the phrase "for all who are far off," they are most assuredly included in Peter's "as many as" phrase. Peter announced God's plan not only for the Day of Pentecost but for all future days of the Christian Age. He gave God's answer to the question "What must I do to be saved?"

CHAPTER FIVE: "THE WONDERFUL RESPONSE"

The fifth chapter in the book *The Next to the Greatest Story Ever Told* is entitled "The Wonderful Response." Luke told of the amazing acceptance of the first preaching of the gospel message of salvation. He said, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

We are not told how long Peter and the other apostles preached on that morning. Luke wrote, "And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'" (Acts 2:40). Peter not only convinced them with evidence and argument; he also compelled them with testimony and exhortation.

The listening audience accepted Peter's message and acted upon it. Luke recounted, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). These people were not just hearers of the word; they became doers of it (James 1:25). They did not just listen to it; they decided to live it. How tragic it is that all most people ever do with sermons is listen to them. Some, at least, in the great multitude that heard Peter preach were not only convicted by

his message but, by yielding their minds and lives to that message, were converted to Christ.

Three thousand gladly received the Word and were baptized. Before conversion can take place, one must gladly receive the Word of salvation. One of the major reasons that more people are not converted to Christ is that people do not gladly receive the Word into their hearts. The Word will always do its work if it is gladly received.

CHAPTER SIX: "THE PROMISED BODY"

The sixth chapter in this book is entitled "The Promised Body." The three thousand who were baptized into Christ are pictured by Luke as the church.

The prophets had foretold that a unique kingdom of God was coming (Daniel 2:44). John the Baptist, as he prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah, declared that the kingdom of heaven was near (Matthew 3:1, 2). During His ministry Christ Himself, the Messiah sent from God, called for repentance because the kingdom of heaven was at hand (Matthew 4:17). After His resurrection from the dead, during the forty days before His ascension, Christ spoke with the apostles and the disciples about the coming kingdom (Acts 1:3). In His final words to His apostles, Christ told them to wait for what the Father had promised (Acts 1:4). Ten days after His ascension, on a Sunday morning, the long-awaited time came. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4), the first preaching of the gospel after the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:14-36), and the response of three thousand to the gospel, the church was born. Those who were washed in the blood of Christ as

they obeyed the gospel were made into Christ's church. From that day until this, every time someone hears the gospel and gladly obeys it by being baptized into Christ upon his faith, repentance, and confession of Jesus as God's Son, he is added to them (Acts 2:47)—these first ones, these three thousand who came to Christ at the very beginning on Pentecost.

From Pentecost forward in Acts, the church is spoken of as a present and living reality and no longer as a promise or prophecy. Luke said at the close of Acts 2, ". . . And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). At the end of Peter's second sermon recorded in Acts, Luke wrote, "But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand" (Acts 4:4). Following the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–10), Luke wrote, "And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things" (Acts 5:11). When a persecution grew out of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:8—7:60), Luke said, ". . . And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8:1). According to Luke, then, the church, the unique kingdom of God, had come.

It is said that one day someone came to Marshall Keeble, a great gospel preacher, and, pointing to his heart, said, "Brother Keeble, I like to feel it. I like to feel it right here." Brother Keeble had the marvelous ability to respond in an unforgettable way when he was placed on the spot. Pointing to his Bible, he answered this person, "Well, I like to read it. I like to read it right here." Feelings, of course, are important,

but we must not let them lead us. Only the Bible, God's Word, should lead us. When our feelings are based upon our sincere reception and obedience of His Word, we will have the genuine joy spoken of in the New Testament.

CONCLUSION

We close the book *The Next to the Greatest Story Ever Told* and begin to think about what we have read. It dawns upon us that we have thought about something that is far more significant than anything that appears in our newspapers or on the local or national news on television. We have literally been able to pull back the curtains which conceal the past and, through the inspired Book of Acts, see the most historic and far-reaching event, next to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, in the history of the world. We have witnessed the actual beginning of the church, the unique, long-awaited kingdom of God. With its beginning, we have watched the ushering in of the final age of human history, the Christian Age or "the last days" age.

Another book follows in importance this book that we have read. We could call it *The Third Part of the Greatest Story Ever Told*. It would be the story of your conversion to Christ, the story of your becoming a part of the church which Jesus built. The story, of course, would be different for each of us. For many of us the story could easily be written, but for others of us the story could not be written at all simply because it has not taken place. How is it with you? Has the story taken place? Have you become a New Testament Christian?

If you are not a New Testament Christian, you

know now how to become one. By your gladly receiving the Word of the gospel and by your obedience to it, you can be born into the kingdom of God, the very kingdom of heaven we have seen in Acts 2.

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 265)

1. In what sense can we say that the establishment of the church is the next to the greatest story ever told?
2. What evidence can you give that only the apostles were baptized with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost?
3. Discuss the divine reasons that the apostles were baptized with the Holy Spirit.
4. What does the baptism of the apostles in the Holy Spirit mean to us today?
5. Discuss the evidence for the deity of Christ which Peter presented in his sermon.
6. How vital is the resurrection of Christ to God's scheme of redemption? Could we think of Christ in any sense as being God's divine Son if He had not arisen from the dead?
7. Can you think of a greater tragedy than being in sin?
8. Explain the different emphases that the three accounts of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15, 16; Luke 24:46, 47) have on the conditions of salvation.
9. Discuss how Acts 22:16 supports Acts 2:38.

WORD HELPS

conversion—the act of changing one's heart and becoming a Christian.

miraculous age—the time period when the apostles and others they laid their hands on could work miracles. This was during the infancy of the church. While God still answers prayer, the miraculous age ended with the death of the last apostle (Ephesians 4:11–13; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10).

Nicodemus—a teacher who came to Jesus by night. Jesus taught him how to enter the kingdom of God (John 3).

revelation—truths revealed or made known by the Holy Spirit. God's revelation to man is the Bible.