

THE WAY, SESSION 2

Cut to the Heart

The Acts of the Apostles 2:1-47, Pentecost, Peter's Sermon, and the First Day of the Church

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that Pentecost is not a bolt from the blue but the deliberate fulfillment of two Old Testament scenes, Sinai and Babel, and that when three thousand hearts are cut and cry out "what shall we do?", the apostolic answer is sacramental: repent and be baptized. The group then finds, in Acts 2:42, the four marks of Catholic life already present on the Church's first day.

Catholic Touchstone. Baptism and the shape of the Mass. Peter's answer in Acts 2:38 joins baptism to the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is exactly what the Church means by baptismal regeneration (CCC 1226-1227). And Luke's summary of the newborn Church's life, the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers (2:42), is recognizably the structure of the Mass: Liturgy of the Word, communion of the Church, Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the prayers. The Catechism cites 2:42 for exactly this continuity (CCC 1342, 2624); the four-part mapping onto the Mass is the Church's cherished way of reading her own birth certificate. The Church did not drift into her worship over centuries. She was born with its seed.

What You Need to Know

Pentecost was already a feast before it was Christian. It is the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after Passover, a pilgrimage feast, which is why devout Jews "from every nation under heaven" are in Jerusalem (2:5). Jewish tradition came to associate this feast with the giving of the Law at Sinai, which came in the third month after the Exodus (Exodus 19:1). That association is explicit in later rabbinic sources; second temple texts already tie the Feast of Weeks to covenant renewal, so the connection may well have been in the air in the first century, but say it the way question 2 says it: clearly attested later, quite possibly current earlier. Hold that connection lightly in your pocket; the group will unlock it in question 3, and it opens the most stunning discovery of the night.

Read the signs as theophany, not decoration: a sound like a mighty wind, tongues as of fire. At Sinai there was fire, smoke, and the sound of a trumpet as God descended (Exodus 19:16-18). Wind and fire are how Scripture describes God arriving. Luke is announcing a new Sinai, and what is given this time is not law on stone but the Spirit on hearts, precisely what Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:26-27 promised.

The languages point backward too, to Babel (Genesis 11), where one proud people was scattered into many tongues. At Pentecost, many tongues are gathered into one people. The curse runs in reverse. The Fathers loved this symmetry, and your group can find it themselves.

Peter's sermon (2:14-36) is the Church's first homily, and its method matters as much as its content: he interprets the event by Scripture (Joel 2), preaches Christ crucified and risen (Psalm 16), and lands on His Lordship (Psalm 110). Notice who preaches: Peter, standing "with the eleven" (2:14), Matthias included, the restored Twelve speaking as one body through one voice.

The response verse (2:37) gives the session its title: "they were cut to the heart" and ask the question every evangelist prays to hear, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Sit with the fact that Peter does not say "accept Jesus into your heart" or "pray this prayer." He says repent and be baptized, and the promise is "to you and to your children" (2:39). Prepare the steelman chain on 2:38 carefully; it is the doctrinal center of the session.

Verses 42-47 describe the first parish: teaching, communion, breaking of bread, prayers, awe, generosity, daily temple worship, homes, and "the Lord added to their number day by day." Growth is the Lord's verb, not a program.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 19:16-18 and Exodus 32:25-28. Sinai: fire, smoke, trumpet-blast, and the descent of God, followed by Israel's fall into idolatry with the golden calf, after which about three thousand men died (32:28). On the day the Law was given, three thousand died. On the day the Spirit was given, three thousand were baptized and lived (Acts 2:41). St. Paul's line becomes almost a caption for Pentecost: "the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). Do not reveal this. Let the group find the number.

Genesis 11:1-9. Babel: one language becomes many, and humanity is scattered in judgment on its pride. Pentecost is Babel in reverse: many languages, one Gospel, one new people gathered. The Church is God's answer to the scattering of the nations.

Joel 2:28-32. Peter's own key: "in the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." Note the breadth, sons and daughters, young and old, servants both men and women. The Spirit is not for a caste.

Psalm 16:8-11. David's confidence that God will not give him up to Sheol or let His godly one see the Pit. Note the wording before the session: the psalm in your Bible speaks of the godly one and the Pit, while Peter, quoting the Greek version the crowd used, speaks of God's Holy One not seeing corruption (Acts 2:25-28). Peter's argument runs on that Greek wording. Peter's argument is simple and bold: David died and is buried, so David spoke of Someone else, and "this Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses" (2:32).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 271, on Pentecost (5th century)

St. Augustine preached that at Babel pride scattered one tongue into many, and at Pentecost humility gathered many tongues into one. He told his people that the Church, speaking every language across the world, is herself the continuing miracle of Pentecost: whoever holds to her unity now speaks, in a sense, in the tongues of all nations.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr, First Apology, 67 (2nd century, written around AD 155)

Describing Sunday worship for the Roman emperor barely a century after Pentecost, St. Justin lays out the sequence: the memoirs of the apostles and the prophets are read, the presider instructs, all rise for common prayers, then bread and wine are brought, thanks is given, and the gifts over which thanks has been given are distributed to all present. It is the pattern of Acts 2:42, and it is recognizably the Mass.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures (4th century)

Instructing the newly baptized, St. Cyril taught that in baptism we truly die and are truly born again: we go down into the water bearing our sins and come up alive, having received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as Peter promised the crowd at Pentecost. For Cyril, Acts 2:38 is not a figure of speech. It is what happened to you at the font.

Catechism Connection

CCC 731-732. On Pentecost the Paschal mystery is fully accomplished and the Holy Trinity is fully revealed; the Spirit poured out inaugurates the age of the Church.

CCC 1226-1227. From the day of Pentecost the Church has celebrated and administered holy Baptism; Peter's words in Acts 2:38 join baptism, forgiveness, and the gift of the Spirit. Baptism truly incorporates us into Christ.

CCC 1342. From the beginning the Church has been faithful to the Lord's command; the Catechism quotes Acts 2:42 and 2:46 as the description of that fidelity, centered on the breaking of bread.

CCC 2624. In the first community of Jerusalem, believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers: the prayer of the Church, founded on apostolic faith and nourished by the Eucharist.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. Still no name. Luke calls them "all who believed" (2:44). Keep the question alive without pressing it.

Thread 2, The Map. Firmly in Jerusalem, but notice the guest list in 2:9-11: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Rome, Egypt, Arabia. The end of the earth has come to Jerusalem before Jerusalem goes to the end of the earth. The map is already stirring.

Thread 3, Peter First. Peter preaches the Church's first sermon, standing with the eleven. Add it to the tally without comment.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread (new, plant tonight). The phrase appears twice in this chapter (2:42, 2:46). Tell the group only this: Luke uses this exact phrase very deliberately, he has used it before at a famous supper, and they should mark every time it appears. It will matter enormously later in the study. Do not say more.

Session Goals

1. Participants discover the Sinai background of Pentecost, including the three thousand of Exodus 32, and can articulate the reversal: the Law written on stone killed, the Spirit poured on hearts gives life.
2. Participants discover the Babel reversal and can explain what it says about the Church's catholicity.
3. Participants can trace the logic of Peter's sermon from Joel to Psalm 16 to the Resurrection.
4. Participants can state what Peter actually commands in 2:38, walk through the strongest Protestant objections to baptismal regeneration, and answer them from the text.
5. Participants can identify the four marks of Acts 2:42 and locate each one in the Mass.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on tongues, (3) compress question 6 (Psalm 16) into a 60 second explanation. Do not cut question 3 (the three thousand) or the steelman chain on 2:38; they are the spine of the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit. You descended in wind and fire on the first disciples and turned a locked room into a launching point. Descend on us tonight. Give us ears to hear this chapter as if for the first time, hearts soft enough to be cut, and courage to answer the question the crowd asked: what shall we do? Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. What is the most memorable birthday or beginning you have ever witnessed, of anything: a child, a business, a parish, a team? What made it unforgettable?
2. Have you ever heard something that "cut you to the heart," words that changed your direction on the spot? What gave those words their power?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 2:1-4. List the physical signs Luke describes. Where in the Old Testament has God descended with fire and overwhelming sound before? What kind of event is Luke telling us this is?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A sound from heaven like a mighty rushing wind, and tongues as of fire resting on each one. This is the language of theophany, God arriving in person, and its closest ancestor is Sinai: fire, smoke, trumpet-blast, and a mountain trembling as God descended to give the Law (Exodus 19:16-18). Luke is announcing a new Sinai. Something is being given to constitute a people, and this time it is not commandments on stone but the Spirit of God on human hearts, exactly as Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:26-27 had promised.

2. Pentecost already existed; it is the Jewish Feast of Weeks, fifty days after Passover, and Jewish tradition, clearly attested in later rabbinic sources and quite possibly current earlier, connected it to the giving of the Law at Sinai. So on the feast that came to be kept as Sinai's anniversary, God pours out the Spirit. Why does that timing matter? What is God saying by His calendar?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God is deliberately superimposing the two events. At Sinai, the covenant was given externally, written on tablets. At Pentecost, the promised new covenant arrives, written on hearts by the Spirit. The Church is the new Israel constituted at the new Sinai. Nothing about this day is improvised; it was scheduled from Exodus.

3. Live discovery. There is a dark detail in the original Sinai story that Luke expects careful readers to remember. Turn to Exodus 32:25-28 and read what happened just after the Law was given. Now look at Acts 2:41. What do you find?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

After the golden calf, about three thousand men fell in one day. At Pentecost, about three thousand souls were baptized in one day. Readers across the centuries have seen in these numbers a deliberate reversal, and it is hard to blame them. On the day the Law came, three thousand died. On the day the Spirit came, three thousand came to life. St. Paul gives us the caption: "the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

This is one of the most breathtaking hidden symmetries in the New Testament, and your group just found it with their own hands.

4. Second discovery. Read Genesis 11:1-9, the tower of Babel. Now reread Acts 2:5-11. What is God undoing at Pentecost?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

At Babel, one proud humanity grasping at heaven was scattered into many languages. At Pentecost, people of many languages each hear one Gospel and are gathered into one people. The scattering runs in reverse. This is why the Church is *catholic* from her first day: the crowd that heard, and the three thousand baptized out of it, were Jews and proselytes drawn from Parthia, Media, Elam, Rome, Egypt, and Arabia, the whole diaspora gathered into one place and one Gospel. The nations themselves are not inside yet; Acts 10 is still coming. But they are already standing at the door, and Luke wants you to notice that the guest list at the Church's birth was written in every language on earth. God's answer to the fracturing of the human race is the Church.

5. Read Acts 2:14-21. Notice who stands up, and with whom. Then look at how Peter explains what the crowd is seeing. What is his method?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter stands "with the eleven," the restored Twelve of Session 1, one body speaking through one voice, and it is Peter's voice. His method is to interpret the event by Scripture: this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. The Church's first sermon is a Bible study. And notice Joel's breadth: sons and daughters, young men and old men, menservants and maidservants. The Spirit is poured on all flesh, not on an elite.

6. Read Acts 2:22-32. Peter quotes Psalm 16. Your Bible will read that God will not let His godly one see the Pit; Peter quotes the Greek version the crowd knew, which speaks of God's Holy One not seeing corruption. That is the wording his whole case rests on. Follow Peter's logic like a lawyer: how does he get from that psalm to the Resurrection?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

David died, was buried, and his tomb is still in town; everyone in the crowd could walk to it. So David cannot have been speaking of himself. He spoke as a prophet of his descendant, the Messiah, whose flesh would not see corruption. Then the punchline: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses" (2:32). The argument moves from Scripture to empty tomb to living witnesses, the same chain the Church still stands on.

7. Read Acts 2:36-39. The crowd is cut to the heart and asks the perfect question: "Brethren, what shall we do?" Write down exactly what Peter commands, and exactly what he promises, word for word from verse 38 and 39.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Commands: repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ. Promises: for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the scope: "the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off." Baptism is not presented as a symbol performed after salvation; it is the divinely appointed answer to "what shall we do," carrying forgiveness and the Spirit.

Build the steelman. Present the strongest Evangelical reading of 2:38, fairly and at full strength. It runs like this: baptism is a public sign of a conversion that has already happened inwardly through faith. "For the forgiveness of sins" can be read as "because of" forgiveness already received, the way a man is arrested "for" a crime already committed. Add the grammatical point careful Evangelical readers press: *repent* is plural, addressed to the whole crowd, while *be baptized* is singular, each one, and elsewhere Acts attaches forgiveness simply to repentance and faith (3:19; 10:43; 13:38-39) without pausing over water. The thief on the cross was saved with no baptism at all (Luke 23:43). And in Acts 10, Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit *before* baptism, which shows God gives the Spirit through faith, not through water. Salvation is by grace through faith, not by ritual. Let this argument stand at its full height before pressing.

8. Press question one. Read 2:38 again in its plainest sense. If Luke had wanted to say baptism actually confers forgiveness and the Spirit, what would the verse need to say differently? And who else in the New Testament comments on what baptism does? Look up 1 Peter 3:21.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Nothing; the verse already says it as plainly as Greek can. Repent and be baptized *for the forgiveness of your sins*, and you *shall receive* the gift of the Holy Spirit: the same construction used of Christ's blood poured out "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28), where nobody argues it means "because sins were already forgiven." The grammar cuts the other way too: the singular *be baptized every one of you* attaches the command, and the promised forgiveness, to each individual precisely; and the same Acts that links forgiveness to repentant faith shows those very believers baptized on the spot, three thousand of them by nightfall (2:41) and Cornelius's household within the visit (10:48), because in Luke's world faith and its sacrament were never rivals. And the best commentator on Peter's sermon is Peter: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21), where he immediately adds that it saves not as a mere washing of the body but through the resurrection of Christ, an appeal to God from a clean conscience. That is precisely the Catholic view: the water has no magic of its own; Christ's resurrection works through it (CCC 1227).

9. Press question two. What about the thief on the cross, and Cornelius receiving the Spirit before baptism in Acts 10? Do those cases break the rule?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They show that God is not imprisoned by His own sacraments, which the Church has always taught: the thief on the cross is the classic case discussed under what the Church calls baptism of desire, and Cornelius's case was God's dramatic public verdict that Gentiles were to be admitted. But notice what happens next in Acts 10: Peter does not say "they have the Spirit, water would be redundant." He commands them to be baptized at once (10:47-48). If baptism were an optional symbol, that command makes no sense. God can act outside the sacraments; we are not authorized to. The consistent apostolic pattern in Acts is belief followed immediately, sometimes at midnight (16:33), by water. And an honest historical note for your group: the reading of baptism as a merely symbolic sign is a latecomer. It appears as a developed position only in the sixteenth century, with Zwingli and the radical reformers. Before that, the Fathers of East and West, and the medieval doctors after them, read Acts 2:38 the way it sounds, as water that actually does something; baptismal regeneration is about as close to a settled consensus as the Christian tradition ever produces. That does not settle the question by itself, but it does set the burden: a reading of this verse that no recognized Christian teacher held for roughly fifteen centuries has a great deal of explaining to do.

10. Read Acts 2:42 slowly, and list the four things the first Christians devoted themselves to. Now think through this Sunday's Mass from the opening procession to the dismissal. Where does each of the four appear?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The apostles' teaching: the Liturgy of the Word, where the apostolic writings are read and preached. The fellowship (*koinōnia*): the gathered communion of the Church, one body, expressed in the offering and the shared life it funds. The breaking of bread: the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and mark that phrase; Luke has used it before, at Emmaus, where the risen Jesus "was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). The prayers: the Church's structured, corporate prayer, from the Gloria to the Our Father. The four marks of Acts 2:42 are not a lost primitive simplicity that liturgy later buried. They are the skeleton of the Mass, visible on the Church's first day (CCC 1342).

DIG DEEPER: WHAT ABOUT THE TONGUES?

The tongues of Pentecost were understood human languages: Parthians and Egyptians each heard the mighty works of God in his own native speech (2:8-11). Many interpreters distinguish this from the prayer-tongues Paul regulates in 1 Corinthians 14. At Pentecost the miracle is comprehension, because the point is Babel reversed: the Gospel is for every nation in its own tongue, which is why the Church has never stopped carrying the Gospel into new languages, translating the Scriptures, preaching, and teaching the faith in the tongues of the nations.

DIG DEEPER: THEY KEPT GOING TO THE TEMPLE

Notice 2:46: the first Christians attended the temple together *and* broke bread in their homes. They did not experience the old worship and the new as enemies; the new grew from within the old, until the Eucharist stood revealed as the sacrifice toward which the temple always pointed. Keep this in mind when the temple authorities begin to push back in the coming chapters.

Send (15 minutes)

1. The crowd's question, "what shall we do?", is the sound of a heart that has been cut open by truth spoken plainly. Who in your life might be one honest conversation away from asking that question, and what is one plain, non-argumentative sentence of witness you could actually say to them?
2. "The Lord added to their number day by day" (2:47). Growth was the Lord's work; devotion was theirs. Of the four devotions in 2:42, which is weakest in your own life right now, and what is one concrete step this week?

Live It This Week

Go to Mass this week with Acts 2:42 written on a card or in your phone. Your one assignment: find all four marks. Note the moment the apostles' teaching is proclaimed, the moment the fellowship is visible, the moment the bread is broken, and the prayers you pray with the whole Church. Afterward, write one sentence: which of the four moved you most, and why? Bring your sentence next week. You will never again be able to say the early Church worshiped simply and we complicated it; you will have seen the first parish alive in your own.

Closing Prayer

Father, on Pentecost you gave the Law a heart and the world a Church. Cut us to the heart as you cut that crowd. Renew in us the grace of our baptism, deepen our devotion to the teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers, and add to your Church day by day those who are being saved, beginning with the people we love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 2, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 2:1-4 (wind and fire)
2. Acts 2:5-13 (the nations hear)
3. Acts 2:14-36 (Peter's sermon)
4. Acts 2:37-41 (cut to the heart; the three thousand)
5. Acts 2:42-47 (the first parish)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

6. Exodus 19:16-18 (Sinai theophany)
7. Exodus 32:25-28 (the three thousand who fell)
8. Genesis 11:1-9 (Babel)
9. Joel 2:28-32 (the Spirit on all flesh)
10. Psalm 16:8-11 (the godly one and the Pit; quoted in Greek form at Acts 2:25-28)
11. Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26-27 (the new covenant heart)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

12. 2 Corinthians 3:6 (the Spirit gives life)
13. Matthew 26:28 (blood poured out for forgiveness)
14. 1 Peter 3:21 (baptism now saves you)
15. Luke 23:43 (the thief); Acts 10:44-48 (Cornelius); Acts 16:33 (midnight baptism)
16. Luke 24:30-35 (known in the breaking of the bread)
17. 1 Corinthians 14 (tongues at Corinth, Dig Deeper)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 731-732; CCC 1226-1227; CCC 1342; CCC 2624