

WHAT MAKES A CHURCH:
HOT AIR OR THE HOLY SPIRIT?
Acts 2:1-13

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May 15, 2005

There was a big spring festival in Jerusalem that day. It may have been similar to Dogwood Days in Atlanta, the Strawberry Festival in Dayton, or Mule Day in Columbia, Tennessee. This agricultural festival was called the “Feast of Weeks” and it took place every spring on Pentecost, 50 days after the Jewish Passover. Jews scattered throughout the world returned to Jerusalem for the celebration designed to emphasize the goodness of God. As people do at community festivals, everyone was having a good time — connecting with old friends, trading old stories, maybe even attending a community worship service or two.

Everybody was happy — except for a group of 120 followers of Jesus who were sequestered in an upper room, scared out of their wits, searching for perspective on the strange things that had happened to them in the last few weeks. On the day of Pentecost, God decided to do a new thing with this little band of believers. Heaven came down and glory filled their souls. The Holy Spirit descended upon them, and these scared disciples were empowered to change the world for the cause of Christ. That is history.

We come today in the season of the Church year to celebrate Pentecost Sunday and my prayer for all of us is this: Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.

There are three simple things I want to invite you to experience today as a result of the Spirit being present with us and filling us.

WHERE THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS, THERE IS COMMUNITY. *And when the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place (Acts 2:1).*

It is my deep conviction that the missing link in our society is community. Completing one another is much more important than competing with one another. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we will perish apart as fools.” There may have been a time in history where this was an option but it’s no longer an option. You and I live in a world community. We must learn to relate to one another across the world. Your cotton clothes may have come from Nicaragua, your watch made from metals that came from Chili or Zaire, your coffee most likely was grown in Columbia. Many of your medicines came from the Rain Forests. No longer can we talk about ‘buy American’ for parts of American products are made all over the world. We are a world community now and in the world community we have got to learn

to get along with one another.

In sports we talk about team players who produce a team spirit. What great winning teams have are people who know how to work together. We don't need more stars; we need more servants. We need people who are willing to trade suspicion for cooperation, willing to value interdependence over independence.

The world is hungering for community. Churches, through the power of the Holy Spirit, need to model community. Who else is better equipped in the world than the Church to model community with one another?

When people flocked to churches after 9/11 they were looking for a place to pray. In my opinion, they were looking for something else. They were also searching for community. When it's tough, when it's hard, when a crisis hits, when you are afraid and scared, you don't want to be by yourself. You call your friends; you call your family. You get together at church and you light a candle. You want to be with other people because it's important in the critical moments of our lives that we belong to one another. Those of us in the Church have been wondering ever since. What happened? You can go back and look at the blip in attendance at every church across America but we quickly got back to normal. Was this devotion a wave of emotion or did the Church fail in its responsibility to meet people at their point of need?

Competition has no place in the church or among churches. We are not out to be better than, bigger than, purer than, nor superior to, any other community of faith. One of my deepest regrets is that clergy are so competitive and lay people are so comparative about churches.

On the other hand, churches are not country clubs; they are not designed to protect the interests and convenience of present members to the exclusion of outsiders. Even if it means sitting a little closer, parking a little farther, waiting a little longer, we must never lose our passion for seeking and saving the lost. Or, to put it in the words of Thomas Jefferson, "A candle loses nothing when it lights another candle."

WHERE THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS, THERE IS COMMUNICATION. *Each one heard them speaking in his own language* (Acts 2:6).

Now there has been a great debate going on in the Church for years over the gift of tongues, or the gift of glossolalia. That's not what's happening here. That's what's happening in I Corinthians, Chapters 12 and 14 and it is a gift of the Spirit. What's happening here is not speaking in unknown tongues. What's happening here is a gift of understanding so that the people from all those places that you heard named, sixteen regions all together, suddenly could understand one another. Each in his own language suddenly had the gift of understanding. They could communicate even though they came from different countries, different

ethnic backgrounds, different situations in life. Suddenly, here on the Day of Pentecost they could understand. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the gift of communication.

Now isn't it interesting that here in the midst of an information revolution you and I are constantly bewildered by communication? It's hard; it's tough. One business man lamented, "I've got cable TV, two land phone lines, a car phone, a cell phone, e-mail, a computer, and a fax machine and my kids still tell me I'm out of touch."

Will Willimon wrote a few years ago, "The Church is like a football huddle. You know that something important is being said there, but you can't understand a word of it, and all you can see is their rear ends." Someone else said the Church needs to speak some language other than Christianese.

A cartoon in Leadership Journal has the church secretary hollering to the pastor in the adjoining room. "A man from Ripley's Believe It or Not wants a picture of someone on fire for the Lord. Would you send it to him?"

In spite of numerous communication books, seminars, periodicals, workshops, and practice, the number one problem between couples remains communication and conflict resolution.

Isn't it interesting that it is still hard to understand and to be understood? How can the Holy Spirit help us understand and be understood in moments like this? I want to suggest a couple of ways.

It seems to me the Holy Spirit can help us speak the truth in love.

In my opinion, the number one sin in the city of Brentwood is gossip. We embrace rumor a lot quicker than we embrace reality. 'Why be bothered with the truth when I am already convinced of my story and I plan on sticking to it?' When do I understand that every truth is not mine to tell, and many things that are right do not bear repeating? Before you spread something you've heard you might do well to ask "Is it truthful?" "Is it helpful?" To those questions give an honest answer. The Holy Spirit can help us speak the truth in love and the Church ought to model that kind of living.

The Holy Spirit can become a spiritual guide for us.

The late A.W. Tozer, preacher and author, said "If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the Church today, 95% of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament Church, 95% of what they did would have stopped, and everybody would know the difference. What is the driving force of the Church today?"

There is a great debate in the Church on how to be relevant in this post-modern

world. There are books and seminars galore on how to market your church, how to contemporize your worship, how to become seeker-friendly, and provide more customer service. They are all helpful. Sometimes I wonder if we are trying so hard to be “with it” that we just “don’t get it.” We need to be in touch with the world, not in sync with the world. My suggestion is the Church ought to be a little weird. We’re not in sync with the world. We don’t claim to be, we shouldn’t be. If we adopt the same value system as the world, we are in huge trouble in the Church. So if we are a little odd, a little weird, don’t do things in such a common way, then maybe curiosity alone would help people try to find us.

It seems the strategies of the first century Church were rooted in prayer and discernment from the Holy Spirit. The ultimate goal of the Church is not to be relevant but to be redemptive. It’s the Holy Spirit who helps us speak a language that can be understood and gives listeners ears that can hear. If the Holy Spirit took control of people, the world would know. If the Holy Spirit got hold of this church, God knows what might happen. It’s not the latest gimmick, it’s not the latest idea, it’s the power of God through the Holy Spirit that moves people to belief. I suspect when we start speaking to the real spiritual needs of people, that people will listen. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is communication.

WHERE THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS, THERE ARE CONVERSIONS.

Those who accepted the message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:41). Can you picture that in your mind? I can’t.

I met with a group of high school senior guys the other night. They have been praying for me and among other things I wanted to sit down with them and say thank you. I love those opportunities. It was a splendid moment in my life because I don’t get to do that very often. I enjoyed it immensely. The agenda was simple: Ask any question that might be on your mind. During the discussion one senior inquired “If you could ask God for anything and know that God would grant it, for what would you ask?” On the spur of the moment, in the midst of my self-pity, I replied, “I’d ask to live.” That was a bad answer.

I went home and got to thinking about it and thought, “That’s an awful answer.” It doesn’t matter in the light of eternity whether I live or not. I discussed it with Sandy and she agreed that it was an awful answer. That’s not what is really important in life. If I could answer that question again guys, I’d like a second chance. If I could ask one thing of the Lord and know that it would become a reality I would ask that the world would be saved, that the poor would be helped, that community would come to be. That’s what really matters in the light of eternity.

It’s an amazing story we have here. Peter preached one sermon and had 3,000 converts. Most of us preachers have preached 3,000 sermons and hope to have had one convert. Peter didn’t have a Sanctuary. There was no P.A. system. There was no band playing in the background and no choir singing ‘Just as I Am,

without one plea.’ There was just wishy-washy, on-again, off-again Peter talking about young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams, and the need for all of us to repent and believe the gospel. That’s what’s important in life, that’s what’s really important.

My friend Tom Rainer who is the Billy Graham professor of evangelism at Southern Baptist Seminary, did a recent survey on the classical question that Billy Graham asks — “If you died today, do you know for certain that you would go to heaven?” This is what people answered:

65% of the Builder generation, age 60 and up said, ‘Yes’

35% of the Boomer generation, ages 40-59 said, ‘Yes’

15% of the Buster generation, ages 28-39 said, ‘Yes’

4% of the Bridger generation, ages 17-28 said, ‘Yes’

In times of great need throughout American history, when the spiritual life of people has drifted away there has come what is known as a Great Awakening. The Spirit of God moved across the country.

In the 18th century, when the Anglican Church became complacent and cold, and more concerned with politics than people, God found the Wesley brothers and preachers like George Whitfield to lead a great revival that brought people back to spiritual life and restored their concern for the poor. That first great awakening spread to America with the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and other powerful preachers and sowed the seeds for the American Revolution. It is known as the First Awakening in spiritual history.

At the dawn of the 19th century, Americans were moving west to Ohio, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Life on the frontier was lonely and difficult. In July of 1800, a Presbyterian preacher by the name of James McCready called for people to gather on the Gasper River in Logan County, Kentucky and the Camp Meeting movement was born. It is interesting that it happened in Logan County, a place known for crooks and outlaws. This Second Great Awakening designed to reach the least and the lost spread like wildfire across the country and by 1812 there were 400 established camp meetings in the United States, often one in every district of the Methodist church. You cannot understand the people called Methodist without a great appreciation for Bishop Francis Asbury and the Camp Meeting movement.

I’ve got a question for you today. The question is this: Who is going to lead the next great spiritual awakening in this country? There is a spiritual hunger in America of fast growing proportion. People are skeptical of the Church but hungry for Christ. The poor, particularly, are once more being neglected by the Church. Religion has become a political debate more than a transforming force. Are we willing to lose ourselves that we may find ourselves in the service of the Lord?

Holy Spirit, Truth Divine,
Dawn upon this soul of mine.
Word of God and inward light,
Wake my Spirit, clear my sight.

Amen.

