

When the Spirit Comes

Each of us has a birthday this year, and most of us will celebrate it—or at least mention it. Of course, it's not our *actual* birth day, but simply the annual commemoration of it. It's good to celebrate these annual events.

The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, and we can celebrate that fact and mark the occasion *this* Pentecost. But the Holy Spirit is not waiting to come at Pentecost this year—He is already here.

On the other hand, knowing that He is here, we can become so accustomed to the Holy Spirit's presence with us, that we lose touch with the reality, and in our blasé familiarity drift into non-awareness of His presence. Through natural eyes, we view the trappings of our Spiritless activity, and lose sight of the very heart of our distinctiveness. Without the Holy Spirit, what we do looks like the religious version of what the world does.

What's the difference between the Church and a caring charity? What makes our worship different from Wal-Mart starting each day singing the company song? What separates between Bible teaching and an informational lecture? The answer is the Holy Spirit.

What's the difference between prophetic exhortation and a motivational talk? What distinguishes our evangelism from recruitment? What separates between our calling and simple commitment to a cause? Again, the answer is the Holy Spirit. Even the Clydesdale Bank has a vision and a mission statement!

Without the Holy Spirit, full-time pastors become managers, worship becomes the singing of songs, and close intimacy with God becomes a distant honouring of God. Without the Holy Spirit, the Bible becomes the rulebook, or even the guidebook. Without the Holy Spirit, obedience becomes postponeable — later will do.

Without the Holy Spirit, the Church becomes the Sound Doctrine Club; apostles become administrators, prophets become mavericks, evangelists become salesmen, pastors become social workers, and teachers become academics. We *need* the Holy Spirit!

Jesus would not allow His Church to go off half-cocked. It was not to be a human effort or enterprise. They were to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you ...*" (Acts 1:8). A short time later, at Pentecost, the power came; that is, the Holy Spirit came in presence and power. Using Acts 2, let's therefore review that day.

Presence and Power in Demonstration

The believers knew they had to wait until they were clothed with power from on high (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4). Then suddenly it happened. They heard the sound as of a violent wind, they saw the tongues of fire, and they spoke in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. They hadn't read about this in Acts 2! It was all new and fresh and unknown.

As these dramatic experiences spilled out to the crowds, the Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast each heard them speaking in his own native language (v6,8). Some have suggested that the disciples were simply speaking, and each of the hearers supernaturally heard their speech *as* his native language. In other words, was the miracle in the *mouth* of the speakers or in the *ears* of the hearers? In response, we could ask, "Who was the Holy Spirit *on*?" Also (v4), they *spoke* in other tongues before anybody *heard*. Clearly the miracle was in the mouth rather than the ears.

They heard the believers declaring the wonders of God in their native languages, under the power of the Holy Spirit. And they responded with one of three reactions: amazement, perplexity, and mocking.

Signs and wonders, healings and miracles — the moving in power of the Holy Spirit always evokes these same three reactions: amazement, perplexity and mocking. The mocker seeks to rubbish, to pour scorn, to pull down to the level of his own understanding. The perplexed doesn't know *what* to think. And the amazed is *open*. His mouth may be physically open, and it's likely that his ears are too! Now the Word can come ...

Presence and Power in Proclamation

A crowd had gathered, and on this first day of the Church, Peter stood up and preached a powerful word. First, he explained their observed experience in Scriptural terms (v17-21). Then he proclaimed the good news of Jesus (v22-24), and tied it in to what they already knew (v25-31). Then he summarised his answer to their question (v32,33), drew breath, and made his peroration (v36).

The Holy Spirit was on the words, and the result was the conviction of sin (v37).

Peter gave them practical instructions of responses to make (v38,39). And the result was that 3,000 were saved and added to their number that day.

It seems unlikely (to say the least) that Peter had been up all the previous night working on his outline in anticipation of the possibility of God moving the next day! No, his message was spontaneous, and yet perfectly crafted for the event. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit will do that.

The response of the people revealed the further moving of the Spirit. Jesus had said, "*When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement*" (Jn 16:8).

An addition of 3,000 in a day may not seem impressive missiologically with our experience of worldwide increase. But when looked at as an increase of 2,500% in a single day, it takes on a new significance!

This is what can happen when the Holy Spirit comes.

Presence and Power in the Congregation

In Acts 1 after the Ascension, the believers were waiting as they'd been commanded (Acts 1:4). However, the waiting was not simple inactivity. They met together in the upper room and at the Temple, they prayed together, worshipped and praised together, they appointed leaders (Acts 1:14-26; Lk

24:53)—they were doing more than some “churches” do today! And yet it was incomplete, lacking a vital dimension—perhaps one could say “flat”.

At Pentecost, when the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit came, it became three-dimensional in full colour! This was the dramatic result:

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

This vitality and vibrancy from being filled with the Spirit is attractive and infectious, and although that's good, it can be also be a problem. People can come around having been drawn by the *life and vibrancy*, but never having been filled with the Spirit personally. Thus they seek to draw life from the *Body* without drawing life from the *Head*. They are around our churches still today. We need to tell them, “Don't just come for the life, vibrancy and up-beat music. Don't be content with the wrapping paper, but go for the *gift*. Be filled with the Spirit!”

Did the vitality of Pentecost continue? Was it lasting, or did it fade away?

In Acts 2:4, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit”. As early as Acts 4:8, Peter was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” The language indicates that he was filled with the Spirit just prior to speaking, so we could say that in Acts 4:8 he was filled with the Spirit *again*. Similarly in Acts 4:30, they were all filled with the Spirit (i.e. *again*), and we can see similar references elsewhere in Acts. In Ephesians 5:18, Paul writes, “be filled with the Spirit”, the language indicating not a *state* of having been filled, but an on-going, repeated experience of continued re-filling. If we are filled with the Spirit, and some time later are *again* filled with the Spirit, simple arithmetic shows us that our “level” must have fallen in between. Either we have an increased capacity or a leak!

If our experience falls far short of Acts 2:42-47, we may simply need to seek a re-filling of the Holy Spirit. It is normal to be re-filled with the Spirit, according to the Scriptures. However, not everybody knows or realises this. And so as well as telling people, “Be filled with the Spirit”, we also need to tell them, “Be continually re-filled with the Spirit.”

A car has great potential for usefulness, and indeed it *has* usefulness. It's a good shelter from the wind and rain, and a good place to listen to the radio or play tapes or CDs. But without petrol, it's not as useful as it could be! Once filled, it uses fuel, and eventually will again become empty. Once empty, don't throw the car away, or keep it as a shelter with vivid memories of what used to be. Get it re-filled! And the best way is like a long-haul aircraft, with in-flight refuelling.

It's been 2,000 years. Yet we still, as we always will, need the Holy Spirit. This Pentecost, and every day, we can experience the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in demonstration, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in proclamation, and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the congregation.

In continuing openness to and amazement at the works of God, let us individually and corporately be filled, and be re-filled, with the Holy Spirit.

George Alexander
May 2007

Note: All Bible quotations are NIV unless otherwise stated.