

Holy Spirit Series: Power to Witness Acts 1 & 2 3/1/20

This morning we begin a four-part series on the Holy Spirit, the forgotten member of the Trinity! I grew up in a church that didn't say much about the Holy Spirit, and was deeply suspicious of churches that did! But, when I was in high school, the charismatic movement began to sweep across many denominations, including Episcopalians, Methodists, Roman Catholics, and, yes, even Presbyterians! It brought a renewed emphasis on the work of the Spirit, and on the spiritual gifts of healing and speaking in tongues. It was a source of great spiritual renewal in many churches, and a source of deep division in others. I had a number of friends that were deeply touched by it. And I got thrown out of Bible college largely because of it, but that's a story for another day!

The charismatic renewal raised a lot of questions for me about the work of the Spirit, some of which I'm still wrestling with today! For example: Is the work of the Spirit usually perceptible- can we sense it- or is it usually hidden? Is the work of the Spirit connected with surprise, spontaneity, and emotion, or is it more quiet and orderly? And, what do we do with those gifts of the Spirit like prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healing? We'll deal with these issues later in the series, but we'll also talk about things that almost all Christians agree on concerning the work of the Spirit, beginning with this morning's focus that the Spirit brings power for witness.

This begins to answer the question I raised in last week's sermon about how we get people in today's society to take a second look at Jesus and his church.

Let's start by looking at the work of the Holy Spirit at the birth of the church in Acts 1 & 2. *In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me;⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:1-8)*

Just weeks before these events, Jesus was executed, throwing his followers into deep despair and confusion. Then he was raised from the

dead, and spent 40 days teaching them and assuring them, preparing them for his departure, but promising that he would send his Spirit to comfort, instruct, and empower them. Their job was to wait in Jerusalem until God was ready to launch his church by baptizing them with the Holy Spirit, giving them the power to be his witnesses starting right where they were in Jerusalem, and then working farther and farther outward. Based on their previous reaction when Jesus was gone- they hid in fear- they really needed this empowerment by the Spirit.

The next verses in Acts tell of Jesus' ascension back to heaven, and the selection of Matthias to replace Judas as one of the twelve. Then we come to chapter 2. *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.* (Acts 2:1-4) Well, that was unexpected! The Spirit shows up in the place where around a hundred followers of Jesus are hanging out. It's accompanied by weird signs- the sound of violent wind and divided tongues of fire resting on them. And they begin speaking in languages that they didn't know!

Now there was some meaning behind these signs. Wind had been a sign of the Spirit from Old Testament times. In fact the Hebrew and Greek words for “Spirit” (“ruah” & “pneuma”) can also mean wind. Fire is also a sign of the Spirit, particularly his purifying action. And the sound of all those other languages drew crowds of Jewish people who had come from around the world for the Pentecost festival. They heard the witness of these followers of Jesus in their native languages, and soon would scatter throughout the empire carrying that message with them!

And then Peter preached the first Christian sermon! Peter- the guy who three times denied he even knew Jesus just a few weeks before! Apparently, the presence of the Spirit gave him the promised courage to bear witness to the truth of the gospel. You can read the entire sermon in Acts 2, but let me tell you that it is courageous- he doesn't pull any punches. And here's how people responded. ³⁷*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”* ³⁸*Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* ³⁹*For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”* ⁴⁰*And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt*

generation.”⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. (Acts 2:37-41) That must have been some sermon!

The people responded with repentance and baptism- about 3,000 of them! But why? Many of these people had heard Jesus in person or at least heard about him and his message. Some of them had rejected him and called for his execution just a couple weeks before. What was different this time? Why were they willing to give him a second look? Well, Jesus was raised from the dead, and many people had seen the resurrected Lord. That certainly made an impact! But the decisive difference seems to be the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in the disciples and at work in their hearts.

So, thinking back to last week's sermon, why would people today be willing to give Jesus a second look? Like Jerusalem in the first century, we are also facing a culture that is apathetic to Jesus and his church, or skeptical of him, or even hostile. I believe that the work of the Spirit is the key to our attempts to engage 21st century Americans with the gospel. How might that work?

It would begin with us, those who are followers of Jesus. We need to become more sensitive to the prompting of the Spirit to engage with people

with whom we come into contact- neighbors, colleagues, waitstaff, classmates, store workers, family members, etc. Sometimes the Spirit will bring someone to mind that we can reach out to. Sometimes it will happen as we're in conversation with someone. But I think asking God to make us more sensitive to the prompting of the Spirit is the starting point. That way we're cooperating with the work that we know God wants to do!

How might that look? Here are a couple suggestions. You could offer your help to someone in need- that could be financial support or practical support or friendship. God calls us to serve those in need. And there are lots of people in need all around us! Open your eyes. Answer the Spirit's call. Be the answer to their prayers.

Or, you could offer to pray with or for someone who tells you about a particular challenge they are facing. You could simply say, "Would you like me to pray with you about that?" And then offer a brief prayer for them.

You could talk about your faith on social media, perhaps referring to things that happened in church that were meaningful to you. And, it's OK with me if you want to take pictures here to share!

You could invite someone to come to worship with you or to another event connected with the church- a dinner, movie night, or a Sunday School class like the one Buz Myers is leading on the Book of Revelation

right now. Surveys show that about 25% of people say they would respond positively to an invitation to come to church! So ask them!

You can also testify to God's work in your own life. That's what a lot of the early disciples did. They simply talked about their own experiences with Jesus! Near the end of the 19th century, Aldous Huxley, the great agnostic, was staying with a group of friends for the weekend. Most of them prepared to go to church Sunday morning, but of course Huxley was not interested. Instead, he approached a local, uneducated man known for his simple, radiant faith and asked him to stay home with him and tell him why he was a Christian. The man responded, "You could demolish my arguments in an instant. I'm not clever enough to argue with you." But Huxley responded, "I don't want to argue with you; I just want you to tell me what this Christ means to you." So the man stayed home from church and told Huxley about his faith in very simple, personal terms. When he was finished, Huxley had tears in his eyes as he said, "I would give my right hand if only I could believe that."

You don't need to be a Bible scholar or master philosopher to be a good witness. It was the simple testimony of that man that touched Huxley's heart. Perhaps a good discipline for you this Lent would be to think carefully about how being a Christian makes a difference in your life

so you can share that with others when the opportunity arises. Be ready. Be open.

When I was a youth director, a strange thing began happening one year among the Sr. High students in our church. Although I had not encouraged them to do so, that year a few kids got permission to leave school to attend our noon Ash Wed. service. The next year there were more, and before long over 20 kids were coming each year. I thought they were probably motivated by the opportunity to get out of school for a while, but when I asked them about it, I discovered something else. It turned out that they liked getting the ashes on their foreheads because it turned into an easy opportunity for them to talk about their faith. You see, other students inevitably asked them about that visible mark of Jesus on their faces when they returned to school, and they could talk about their faith in Jesus.

There are lots of ways to testify to our faith in Jesus, and all of us- not just preachers and elders and deacons- all of us are called to do so. In what ways do you think the Holy Spirit would like to use your witness?