

God's Unstoppable Mission:  
Stories from the Book of Acts  
(Sermon Given on October 1 2006)

**The Spirit's Work and Witness**

**Acts 2**

**The Holy Spirit Comes at Pentecost**

1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" 13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine. (Acts 2:1-11)

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As we live the Christian life, something can happen to us over time that results in our losing a sense of expectation in the movement of God's Spirit, which in turn can lead us to question the truth of the Gospel. Consequently we lose sense of how the Gospel is to fill our lives with a sense of direction and thus our relationship with God can become very ordinary, and even bland.

However, when we read the book of Acts we see here a Church that is anything but ordinary and bland. Here is a community filled with the Holy Spirit, living her life in face of great opposition but so concentrated in the person of Jesus Christ and his purpose for them.

The Bible teaches us that the Holy Spirit is the most intimate of the members of the Holy Trinity. He's the one who actually touches us personally; he is the one who comes into our lives personally and magnified Jesus Christ for us so that increasingly he becomes the reason why we live.

St. Paul said it best when in *Galatians* he declared: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (*Galatians 2:20*)

When we were perhaps first touched by the Holy Spirit it was kind of like falling in love. There was a freshness to your walk with Jesus and a joy that characterized your life because it had a purpose and direction. But unless that relationship is cultivated it can become as stale of week old bread.

So as we begin this morning, I want to ask you about the condition of your life, deep down inside where the Holy Spirit comes to dwell :

- Are you fulfilled?
- Are you growing?
- Are you peaceful?
- Are you stuck?
- Are you defeated down there at the core of your being; are you discouraged?
- Are you joyful, invigorated, vital?
- Are you one day up, another day down?
- Are you empty; is there pain there?
- Do you experience intimacy with God?
- Is there something dynamic occurring through a real sense of the reality of God in your life?
- Do you pray out of duty or out of desire?
- Do you sense deeply the inner peace of God, or is there pain in your inner person?

- Are you struggling in your spirit; are you guilty?
- Are you locked up?
- Are you critical?
- Are you sort of moralistic?
- Are you alone?
- Or, when you slow down and reflect on who you are and who God really is, is there inner joy?
- Is there inner peace and an overriding gratitude that the Lord is bigger than your momentary pain and disappointment?

Now I need to just mention that some people do suffer from depression and forms of mental illness that are best treated by being able to see a psychiatrist or a family doctor. In some cases the use of medication can help alleviate these symptoms. I know that in my own life the opportunity to be under psychiatric care for a time, plus the daily use of anti-depressant medication has helped my mental well being greatly.

Yet, I know that as I looked at these questions myself, that although I am much more stable mentally, there are still times when I struggle with some of the items listed above.

It is as we grow ever closer to Jesus allowing him his rightful place in our lives that we will be able to concur with Paul's words in *Galatians 2.20*.

As we think about this it is worth noting that on the night of his betrayal, arrest and desertion by the apostles, and just hours before his crucifixion, Jesus said these words:

"Peace. I am giving you peace."

Now think about this for a minute. Jesus is about to be crucified and the disciples are going to experience the most harrowing crisis, and yet Jesus is able to say "Peace, I am leaving you peace." How could he say words like this in light of what he was about to face?

When Jesus is using the word peace here he is talking about God so ordering our lives that they come into a place of equilibrium and balance. And so he says that my peace is not the peace that the world gives. It is an inner peace

that is wrought by the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. So in order to understand how we receive this peace we need to think about the Holy Spirit's work and witness.

I now want to give a bit of background about the passage we are looking in Acts 2.

Pentecost is a Greek word that means "fifty." The day was Pentecost because it was fifty days after the Passover feast. Pentecost was a mean Jewish feast which is given to us in the Old Testament under the title, the Feast of Weeks, (i.e., seven weeks were to be numbered from Passover, or forty-nine days; then on the fiftieth day they were to have the Feast of Weeks).

It is called also the Feast of the Wave Loaves because it consisted of two loaves of bread that were baked of grain from the new harvest. We read in Leviticus:

**15** Seven weeks after you offer this bundle of grain, each family must bring another offering of new grain. **16** Do this exactly fifty days later, which is the day following the seventh Sabbath. **17** Bring two loaves of bread to be lifted up in dedication to me. Each loaf is to be made with yeast and with four pounds of the finest flour from the first part of your harvest. (Lev 23:15).

These two loaves were symbols of the two bodies from which the church was to be formed: the Jews and the Gentiles. Jesus said he came first to the lost sheep of the house of the Israel, the Jews. But he said, "Other sheep have I which are not of this fold; them also must I bring that there may be one flock," (John 10:16). He was referring to the Gentiles. Here, on the day of Pentecost, God took the Jews and the Gentiles and brought them together and baptized them into one.

For hundreds of years the Jews had offered these loaves, but only on this Pentecost would they have been fully appreciated and understood their significance.

The wave loaves are the only sacrifice in all the Old Testament that ever had leaven included in it. Why? God wants us to understand that we are his people being formed and shaped by him. And yet we have sin in our lives but because of the work of the Spirit we are being transformed into the image of Jesus. It reminds us that the Church is not made up of perfect people. It is made up of saints, but they are sinful saints. As we understand the Holy Spirit's work in our life collectively and individually than we come to better see what is His work and witness.

It is to this subject that we will now turn.

### 1 The Holy Spirit is: "The Divine Gift".

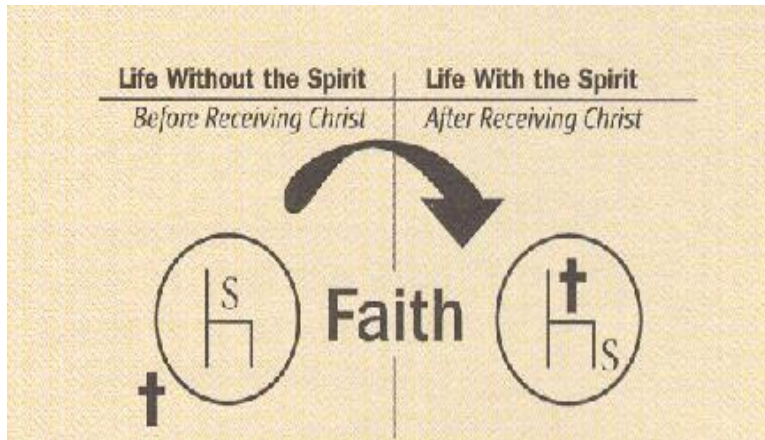
The Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us when we put our faith in Jesus Christ.

If you look at the text, here they are gathered, 120 of them and Jesus had said that he would send the Holy Spirit. They didn't know how he would come, but because they were expectant they were open to his movement.

Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like a rush of violent wind. There was nothing they could do to make this happen. He came upon them as the divine gift of God. Everywhere in the New Testament it speaks about Jesus living in us by his Spirit. One of the clearest expressions of this is in Ephesians 1:13:

**13 And now you also have heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. 14 The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us everything he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. This is just one more reason for us to praise our glorious God.**

Notice that Paul says that when we come to believe in Jesus Christ He gives to us the Holy Spirit. I want to develop this thought some more by having you look at the diagram below. It speaks of two kinds of people. Those who are without the Spirit and those who have received the Spirit



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You will notice that on the left hand side of the diagram the cross is on the outside of the circle. In the middle of the circle is a chair with a big letter S. When we do not have Jesus in our lives, self is on the throne of our lives. When Jesus is not in a person's life you are the centre. But then when we come to faith in Jesus Christ he takes his rightful place on the throne and self takes his our her rightful place. We are not pushed outside of the circle but come to see ourselves properly because we have the perspective that has Jesus at the centre. Notice that it is active faith that is the bridge from a life centred on self to a life centred in Christ.

Keep this in mind, because I will be returning to it in a couple of minutes.

Paul more than anyone else in the New Testament helps us to understand these two ways of life. Look at what Paul about the person who is living according to the flesh. Whenever you see the word "flesh" in Paul's writing understand that he means we are living with self on the throne of our lives.

"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God."

So if you have tried to witness to person who is not a Christian and they are not open to the message at all, this is the reason why. They think you sound like the adults did in those Charlie Brown Specials from the 1970s. Your voice sounds like *"wa, wa, wa, wa, wa,!"*

Why is this? Because Paul says they will not accept these things. They are foolishness to them He or she cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor. 2:14)

Two verses before this Paul says this about those who have received Christ:

"We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us." (1 Cor. 2:12)

As the Holy Spirit is given room to sit on the throne of our lives we understand his word more and more. Maybe you have experienced this too. There was perhaps a time when the Bible did not make sense to you, where it too sounded like a text spoken by those Charlie Brown incomprehensible adults. But now that you are growing in Christ, it is coming alive for you. And things you could never understand before are now making sense in a whole new way.

Now let move on to the next thought. If you know you are a Christian but you also know you are seldom satisfied in your experience of God. Do you know why that is? The answer comes in point two:

## 2 "The present danger".

People who trust in their own efforts and strength to live the Christian life will experience failure and frustration, as will those who live to please themselves rather than pleasing God. When we try to live the Christian life in our own strength we are guilty of idolatry.

Because although I am now a Christian I am trusting more in myself than in God.

When we live like this:

- Sometimes we try to be loving.
- We try to be obedient
- We try to have faith.
- But, we are depending upon ourselves instead of depending upon the inner person of the Holy Spirit.

This is dangerous to your soul health. We need to affirm that we cannot live the Christian life in our own strength..

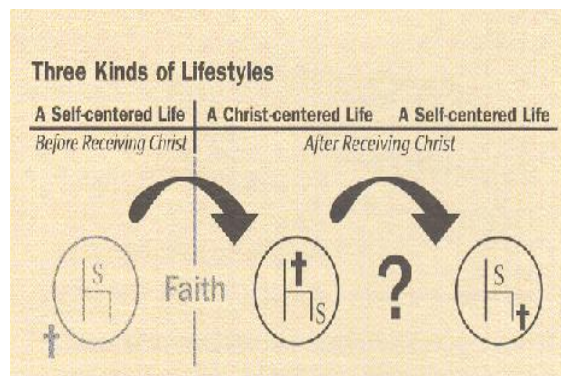
If we try to do this, we are not going to grow in Christ. Because we live in North America we all succumb to this temptation of celebrating the self made person, pulling ourselves up by our boot straps. This is anathema to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so we cannot be a little Jesus apart from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit working in you.

Look at what Paul says to the Christians in Galatia:

“Are you so foolish after beginning with the Holy Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” .... The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit desires what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want until you learn to walk in the Spirit.”

Let's go back to the diagram:



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So often we try to live the Christian life, I try to live the Christian life with self on the throne. Jesus is in my life but look where he is. He is placed below me, on the floor.

And that is the kind of Christian life that leads us to futility and frustration. There is a question mark on the right hand side of the diagram. How shall we live as Christians?

This is hard to hear isn't it? That is because it is true. As I was preparing this sermon I knew that there was truth here that needed to be spoken and heard. I recognize that as I thinking of myself that I need to repent of the fact that I have been a husband, father who has lived often lived a selfish Christian life.

We see with the disciples their attempt to live the Christian life before Pentecost with themselves on the throne. After Pentecost the change that has happened is that now Jesus has taken his rightful place. This is most clearly illustrated by the life of Peter. As you think of how he is depicted in the Gospel he is a Christian, yes. But one who is still self-centred. After Pentecost that changes and the Spirit enables him to let Jesus take his rightful place at the centre of Peter's life.

Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:

"Brothers and sisters, I couldn't address you as spiritual but as worldly, mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you are not ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly, [even though they were Christians.] You are worldly, since there is jealousy and quarreling among you. Are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men even though you have the Holy Spirit?"

Here is the other thing. To live a worldly life means I have every right to hold onto my jealousies. I have every right to hold on to my anger. I have every right to hold onto my resentments. I have every right to compare my self to other people who I think have it better than I do.

I do it all the time. It demoralizes me, it leads to a sapping of energy and it discourages me.

Knowing that:

- The Holy Spirit is the Divine Gift
- There is a Present Danger
- We then learn to:

### 3. Walk in the Spirit

Well, how do we get to this place?

It is learning to depend upon the Holy Spirit and his abundant resources as a way of life.

It's not going through life saying,

I will be loving.

I will be good.

I will obey God.

That's just depending on your own willpower.

You are going to fail.

It's as we depend upon the Holy Spirit that we have the ability to live a life that is pleasing to God. Paul says in Galatians 5: "16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

All right, then, how can I be sure that I am on this journey?

It begins with heartfelt thoughtful confession when we know we have been living a self centred Christian life.

"Most merciful God, I confess that I have sinned against you in thought, word and deed by what I have done and by what I haven't done. I haven't loved you with my whole heart. I haven't loved my neighbors as myself. Please forgive me."

As we come into a place where we are learning to keep short accounts with God by truly confessing when we have done wrong we can then move on to pray:

"Lord, I open the door of my life and I ask you take control of me, my will, my wants, my emotions, my relationships. Please fill every part of me with your Holy Spirit. Please help me become the person you want me to be.

Please help to change my heart that can help me to be what you want me to be."

Of course, there are other things that make a huge difference in our relationship with the Lord. Meeting regularly with other believers for honest discussion and prayer and worship; having models and mentors to follow; studying the Bible, learning to pray, learning about the gifts of the Holy Spirit; serving God in the church; serving God in the world; all of these things make a big difference, Satisfaction in the inner person only comes when I realize:

I am not God.

I do not know best.

I am not good enough.

I am not strong enough.

I am not wise enough to achieve a truly fruitful life.

I am not anything of those things.

Here is something that you can do to help you with this. When you are dealing with something in your life that is profoundly difficult and you cannot overcome it may I suggest you try *spiritual breathing*:

I exhale when I realize when I am trying so hard to do what only God can do, or when I am trying to do what is displeasing to God. I must get rid of that, I must exhale it. "Take it away, God. I get rid of that attitude."

I then inhale deeply receiving Christ's Spirit throughout my being again. I ask him to fill me. I give myself afresh to Christ. I ask him to take this particular problem. I ask him to take this relationship that I can't get worked out on my own. I ask him to take this dilemma and work in me and work in this other person and work in this situation and work on it, by the Holy Spirit, to work it out according to God's purposes.

This is a way that allows us to consciously say "I choose to rely upon the Holy Spirit.

I choose peace through trust in him."

When you choose to rely upon the Holy Spirit:

He answers your prayer to fill you, and he will be at work in that situation for his purposes.

Second, God strengthens you with power through his spirit in the inner person.

And third, God fills you with his Holy Spirit. He takes whatever the situation is and he takes control of it.

When we know that the Holy Spirit is "the empowering presence" we are strengthened to live in a way we never could before.

We understand that the essence of the Christian life is what God does in and through us, not what we do for God.

It is a huge, immense relief to affirm: I do not have to be God.

This then is the turning point in a Christian's life, realizing that it is God who lives the Christian life in us, through us, by the Holy Spirit. We are filled with the Holy Spirit simply by faith.

I started with some questions and it is this way by which I want to end:

Do you really want to experience intimacy with God?

Do you want God to have his way in your life?

Are you ready to give up trying to control your life and allow him to control it?

Have you truly accepted that he's God and you are not? Have you really confessed your sins to God?

Have you received his forgiveness?

Have you opened up all areas of your life as best you know how, giving him unhindered access?

Will you entrust your problems to him, even as you keep working to try to solve them?

Will you give them to him instead of holding them within yourself?

There is a wonderful Anglican Prayer that says all I have tried to unpack with an economy of words, with which we end. It goes like this:

**Collect for Trinity**

*O God, the strength of all those who put their trust in you, mercifully accept our prayers and, because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without you, grant us the help of your grace, that in the keeping of your commandments*

*we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen*