

February 12, 2012

The Holy Spirit: Power to the People

Acts 2:1-21

How do we really experience God? How do we really live our faith? We know God is doing things in our world; we want our lives to matter ... how do we find ourselves in the story of what God is doing? How do we grow in our understanding of the Holy Spirit and experience of His transforming strength? Who (or what) is the Holy Spirit?

One of the reasons I'm a Christian is the tremendous mystery in Christian theology. For instance, we affirm the truth of the Trinity: we believe in one true God, who reveals Himself in three persons: Father, Son (Jesus) and Holy Spirit. A theologian once quipped: "*Deny the doctrine of the trinity and you'll lose your salvation; try to fully understand it and you'll lose your mind!*" For 2000 years some of the greatest human minds have tried to explain the Trinity - and cannot do it! What person would ever concoct such an incomprehensible notion of God? God is infinitely beyond our ability to understand - I believe that's a good thing!

1. The Power and Presence of the Spirit before Pentecost

In the Old Testament age, God's people did not clearly know God in His three persons; they knew God primarily as God the Father. But they did have a profound awareness of God's Spirit, whom they referred to as the "*ruach*" of God, Hebrew for "*breath*" or "*wind*" (Genesis 8:1, Exodus 10:13, Ezekiel 37:1-10). God "breathes" His Spirit into creation, into Adam (Genesis 1:2, 2:7). His Spirit gives us life (Psalm 103:29-30, Isaiah 32:15, Genesis 6:3, Ecclesiastes 12:7). He works in special ways in people's lives:

- Enhancing skills (Exodus 31:1-5, 35:31, Judges 3:10, 6:34)
- Empowering superhuman feats (e.g. Samson, Judges 14:6-19, 15:14)
- Revealing God's truths (1 Samuel 10:6-10, 19:19-24, Numbers 24:2-3)

When God's work needed to be done, the Holy Spirit provided the resources through empowering and gifting His people.

But in the Old Testament era, the Holy Spirit was limited to a few people (mostly leaders). The Spirit was not permanent (e.g. Saul and David, Psalm 51:11). The majority of believers never did experience the Holy Spirit directly. And they yearned for it. They prayed for a time when God's Spirit would dwell permanently among them - and within them all.

The prophets looked forward to a time when this would happen: "*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest*" (Jeremiah 31:33-34). "*I will pour out my Spirit on all*

people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days"(Joel 2:28-29).

The fulfillment of these wonderful prophecies moved through the Spirit in:

- Jesus' conception (Luke 1:35) and birth,
- Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21-22),
- His life (Matthew 4:1, 12:28), and
- His death and resurrection (Romans 1:4, 8:11).

Jesus promised He would give all His people the full measure of the Holy Spirit, who would be like a well of living water flowing from their inner being (fulfilling the prophecies: John 4:14, 7:37-39). In John 14-16, Jesus lists several roles that the promised Holy Spirit would play in the lives of His people, when He came:

- He would empower them in their mission (14:16, 16:17)
- He would teach them and remind them of Jesus' instructions (14:25-27)
- He would testify about Jesus to the world (16:7-11)
- He would help His people share their faith in Him (15:26-27).

Notice the underlying theme: God's purpose is that the whole world would know and experience the good news that Jesus has come with the gift of new life in the Kingdom of God! He wants to use His people - us - to be His ambassadors! The Holy Spirit will help us share the good news of Jesus with confidence and conviction, assured of God's truth, presence, and power. But during Jesus' life, the people were still waiting for the Spirit to come ...

2. The Power and Presence of the Spirit at Pentecost

The fulfillment of the promise occurs at Pentecost (Acts 2). Like Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection, Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit, poured out on all people, introduces a new era in world history! Up until this point only a very few, chosen people received the Holy Spirit (the personal power and presence of God) in their lives. After Pentecost a new reality exists - our reality - in which the Holy Spirit is within all of us.

The details of the miracle itself are dramatic; God is inaugurating a whole new era so we can expect some fireworks (so to speak!). We can expect consistency with the Old Testament "*ruach*" of God: wind and fire. We can expect a powerful inauguration of a new order of things (as the nations were scattered at Babel through the curse of language; at Pentecost they are united, miraculously, through the gift of language). But these manifestations are unique (like the star at Jesus' birth, earthquake when He died, or rolled stone at His resurrection).

Other miracles happened at Pentecost that exemplify the ongoing power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our age. ***The first is the miracle of courage!*** God takes 120 people - a group of people hiding in an upper room, fearful of the Romans and the Jews, fearful to talk about Jesus - and gives them the courage to speak about "*the wonders of God!*" The Holy Spirit still does

this in our lives! 2 Timothy 1:7: "*God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*" He may not give us the miraculous ability to speak a foreign language, but He does give us the courage to talk with a neighbour, friend, or family member about Jesus. Try it! Ask God to give you the opportunity - and the courage - to talk about Jesus!

The miracle of sharing the message! Peter invites people to see themselves as part of the story of God's work in history. This is not a great sermon! I don't know of any book on evangelism, preaching, or communication that uses this as an example of how to share your faith! But the Spirit, at work in the lives of those who hear, moves several thousand to repent, be baptized, and become part of the church. The Spirit can work through our words, too. We don't have the responsibility of convincing people to believe in Jesus; we simply share what Jesus is doing in our lives; His Spirit does the convicting and convincing. Yes, we can learn helpful strategies to share the good news from other believers, the Bible, books (that is good to do) ... But God can work through us today, too!

The miracle of the church! A group of believers from every social and ethnic background imaginable gathers for teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer. They share their resources to provide for one another. "*The outpouring of the Spirit signalled the birth of the Spirit-endowed, Spirit-empowered, Spirit-led community - the church. And it commenced the age of the mission of the church. Beginning with Pentecost, the Spirit took on a new role. Throughout this age (our age), the Spirit would focus his work on the new community, the fellowship of the followers of Christ*" (Stan Grenz, *Created for Community*, p. 158). The Spirit is building Jesus' church! He is our teacher. He is our leader. He is our empowerer. We don't pray, "*Lord, send us your Spirit!*" He is here! We can pray, "*Lord help us to be 'filled' with your Spirit and to 'walk in the Spirit.'*"

We can pray Tom Wright's prayer:

*"Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth: Set up your kingdom in our midst.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God: Have mercy on me, a sinner.
Holy Spirit, breath of the living God: Renew me and all the world."*

3. The Power and Presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives

The Holy Spirit is at work in the church! He has brought us together - a group of believers from every social and ethnic background imaginable for teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer (we do not simply choose a church, God calls us to a church!) - to be His ambassadors, bringing His good news to the world. Our calling is to partner with God in helping His Kingdom come and will be done here on earth! When God's work needs to be done, the Holy Spirit provides resources through empowering and gifting His people (us).

The Holy Spirit is at work in your life! The Holy Spirit is the one who saved you - He is the one who brought you to repentance, faith, and conversion. The Holy Spirit is also the one who continues to transform your life, the way you are actually living. This is what Paul means by being "*filled with the Spirit*" or "*walking in the Spirit.*" If our spiritual lives are on track, we

discover we are changing! We are becoming more spiritually mature; we are becoming more and more like Jesus (Ephesians 4:15, Galatians 5:22-23).

The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the guidance, conviction, and power to become more Christ-like (1 Corinthians 10:13, Romans 8:12-14). BUT we are not passive in the process. The process of inward transformation, spiritual formation, being filled with the Spirit takes a commitment on our part to make it happen. Dallas Willard uses the acronym VIM:

- Vision
- Intention
- Means

1. First, we need a **vision** of who Jesus wants us to be! Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, in which the Holy Spirit leads and directs our hearts, minds, wills, and lives to be more and more like Jesus. We need that goal: to live fully in the Kingdom of God and as fully as possible now and here, not just hereafter. That His Kingdom does come and His will be done - in our lives - as it is in heaven. *Jesus' vision for your life is that you become more and more like Jesus!* That you obey His commands. That your priorities, values, and character become more like His. That you share His good news with the world around you.
2. Second we must **intend** - decide - to do it! We can full of good intentions, but if we won't actually act honour them, we will be spiritually miserable! It takes effort! It takes commitment! It takes discipline to become more and more like Jesus! It takes that will to allow the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, to renew us ... that will mean changing us!
3. If we really are committed to allowing God to transform us, we then explore the **means** to do so. Pure will, with gritted teeth is not enough! God helps us through the teachings of Jesus, the Scriptures, and God's people. Among the means are:
 - **honestly coming to terms with who we are**, and what needs to change in our lives. In what ways are we NOT like Jesus? We need to ask God to help us (it's impossible to objective about ourselves). This is an ongoing discipline, not a one-time thing.
 - **giving these issues up to God and receiving His ministry and healing**. That's not easy either! Maybe we need to "write a letter to the Lord;" talk with a mature Christian friend; ask people to pray with and for us; keep a spiritual journal.
 - **Practicing new ways of thinking and acting**: living differently!
 - **keeping focussed on God's vision for us**: to be a person who lives fully in the Kingdom of God, who lives for and obeys Jesus ... This brings us full-circle back to our vision. Spiritual formation is a continual cyclical process where we go through this process of renewing our vision, affirming our intention to change, and working through the means: honest reflection, humbly giving things to God, living differently, revisiting the vision ...