

CONFUSED ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT?
MAY 18, 1986

Page 1

You could count on it. At every annual Revival meeting of the church, the same man would respond to the altar call, come forward, kneel at the altar rail, and pray loudly and audibly, "O Lord, fill me with the Holy Spirit." Then, a few months later, predictably, he would backslide. He would stop coming to church and begin frequenting the saloon and gambling joints. Then, the next revival, he again would respond and pray loudly and audibly, "O Lord, fill me with the Holy Spirit." Finally, someone lost patience and prayed equally loudly and audibly, "Never mind, Lord, he leaks!"

Today is Pentecost Sunday. On this day in history the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples as they were gathered in the upper room, some 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. From across the Roman Empire, people had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost, also called the Feast of the Harvest, celebrating the success of the barley and wheat harvest. During the course of the festivities, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, appearing to them like tongues of fire, analogous to Moses' experience with the burning bush. The disciples were empowered to witness in the native languages of those who had gathered. Peter preached a powerful sermon and 3,000 persons were baptized. The first harvest of the Christian Church was celebrated on the day when agricultural harvests were celebrated. The Christian church was born.

What about the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? What about speaking in tongues? When you experience the Holy Spirit, must you become highly emotional? I remember the time when a group of us teenagers went to the neighboring town and peeked in the windows of the Pentecostal Church to see if they really did roll on the floor. We called them "Holy Rollers." Are you confused about the Holy Spirit? Paul asked the Christians at Ephesus (Acts 19:2), "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" Have you received the Holy Spirit? Do you know what it means to receive the Holy Spirit? Are confusion and misunderstanding preventing you from experiencing the full presence and blessing of God?

Let's ask the question "What is the Holy Spirit doing?" The Holy Spirit is not about the business of making you spiritual, at least in the sense of the current understanding of the word "spiritual." When you hear the word "spiritual," what image do you conjure? Something ghostly, pale, anemic, ethereal? What does the phrase "spiritual person" mean to you? I'm afraid that I picture someone who is sweet, innocuous, unassertive, a smiler, a wallflower, quiet, gentle, meek and mild. You see, I have met some "spiritual people." Using the Bible as my criterion, I say to you that the Holy Spirit does not make you "spiritual." No image could be further from the Bible.

The Bible opens with the book of Genesis describing how the Spirit moved among the chaos and created the world. The word used in Genesis is "ruach," a Hebrew word which means wind, and it's a strong wind, like a gale or tornado. When God breathed life into Adam and Eve, the word used for "breathe" is again "ruach" or strong wind. We are not talking about some wimpy spiritual exercise here! We are talking about power, the kind of power that put the firmament in the sky to hold back the water, the kind of power that made the sun, moon, stars, animals and people.

When the spirit--the wind of God--came upon David, he killed a lion. When the spirit came upon Samson, he pulled down a temple. When the spirit came

CONFUSED ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT?
MAY 18, 1986

Page 2

upon Jeremiah, he boldly preached to the king, told him what he was doing wrong, and got thrown into a well for his efforts. The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness where he struggled with the devil, his own identity and the methods to use in his ministry. Jesus battled the unclean spirits-- the demons--and overpowered them so that the sick were made well, the deaf could hear and the blind could see. When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, they emerged from the upper room with power. They preached without fear. They healed. They stood for their convictions. They faced persecution, even their deaths, with courage.

Power is the essence of what the Holy Spirit is doing, not making you "spiritual" in the wimpy sense, but empowering you. A better English word for this experience than "spiritual," is "spirited," like a spirited horse. What would a spiritual horse look like? But, we all immediately can picture what a spirited horse looks like. Using the wrong word, using a wrong picture, can dissipate the power. A spirited person is energetic, dynamic, vivacious, full of life, vigor and power. A spirited person cannot be tamed, subdued, possessed or controlled. A spirited person is his/her own boss. When we talk about the Holy Spirit, we are talking about power!

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, preached and wrote extensively about the work of the Holy Spirit. He said that the Holy Spirit moves in our lives, works in our lives, so that we might experience forgiveness, conversion, salvation, the assurance that we belong to God, and sanctification or perfection. We are talking here about power. To forgive, to work a change in a person's life, to convert a person to Christ, is the result of the power of God. To live your life as a Christian, to be one of God's people, to be his witness in this world requires power. Empowerment is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now, what about speaking in tongues? On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the gift of speaking in the languages of those who had gathered for the Festival. But, the gift of tongues is also the utterance of a language that is seemingly not a language until another person, also inspired, interprets. In this century, speaking in tongues has become a dominant characteristic of those denominations we call Pentecostal, like the Assembly of God. Recently, the charismatic movement has spread to the mainline denominations, even to the Roman Catholic.

The tongues movement has confused Christians in two ways: First, some of those who speak in tongues preach that the rest of us have not received the Holy Spirit. Some tell us that speaking in tongues is the sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, so that when Paul asked, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit?", Paul was asking if they had yet spoken in tongues. The second point of confusion about speaking in tongues is expressed by those Christians who feel there is something wrong with them because they haven't yet spoken in tongues. They agonize and yearn to be filled with the Holy Spirit so they can speak in tongues.

Let's look at what the Bible says. In your leisure, read chapters 12, 13 and 14 of I Corinthians. We all know the famous love chapter, chapter 13, but it really should not be separated from the preceding and following chapters. In this passage, Paul is discussing the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Evidently confusion in the Corinthian church, as it is today, was caused by those who

CONFUSED ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT?
MAY 18, 1986

Page 3

spoke in tongues and felt they had achieved some kind of privileged status in the church. Paul clearly stated in 12:4-11 that the gift of tongues is only one gift among many. He uses the analogy of a body. Christ is like a body where we each have our particular part and place. He wrote in 12:27-30:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

Notice the order of priority Paul uses, with apostles first, (apostles were people who knew Jesus personally), and speakers in tongues last! He also made it clear that no one person will have all the gifts; in other words, it is not to be expected that every spirit-empowered person will speak in tongues.

Paul goes even further to clarify his position on tongues. His very next sentence reads, "Let me show you a more excellent way." He then describes the gift from the Holy Spirit that is more important than all the others. It is a gift that all Christians may receive; namely love. The beautiful 13th chapter of I Corinthians begins, "If I speak in tongues, but do not have love, I am as a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Isn't that clear? Tongues without love are noise. Faith to move mountains without love is nothing. Sacrifice without love is no gain.

As a United Methodist, I do not discredit tongues. Our church has taken no official position, but I know United Methodists who speak in tongues. They feel it is a language for prayer. It puts them in touch with the Spirit on a very deep level. Persons may speak in tongues in personal worship, but we do not encourage the speaking of tongues in public worship. Paul was clear at this point also, (I Corinthians 14:18), "I thank God that I speak in strange tongues much more than any of you. But, in church worship I would rather speak five words that can be understood, in order to teach others, than speak thousands of words in strange tongues."

There is a place for tongues, but it is one of the many gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is certainly not the greatest of God's gifts. Paul is very clear about that, for chapter 13 ends with the oft-quoted verse, "Faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love." But, Paul is not through with his thought. Chapters and verses were added to the Bible later and sometimes the thought is disrupted. The conclusion of Paul's love chapter is actually chapter 14, verse 1: "It is love, then, you should strive for." God will give you the gifts of the Holy Spirit in his time and according to his plan. Of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is the gift of love that you should seek.

The Holy Spirit, therefore, is about the business of empowering us to make us spirited in order to love. To love as Jesus loved requires the dynamic, vigor, power and energy of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers you to love your spouse completely, wholly and sacrificially as Christ loves you. The Holy Spirit empowers you to love your neighbor, respond to the neighbor's needs, feed the hungry. The Holy Spirit empowers you to love the world, to fight for justice, to work for peace, to save the environment, to lay your

CONFUSED ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT?
MAY 18, 1986

Page 4

life on the line for the causes that are dear to God's heart, the causes that benefit the poor and the powerless.

To love is the power of the Holy Spirit and it is not anemic, wimpy, and "spiritual." It is power, spirited power. Paul wrote in 13:4-7:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

To practice and express that kind of love requires more power than I have. I require the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers, makes you spirited, so that you may love. My brothers and sisters, have you received the Holy Spirit? Have you asked?

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION
by Glenn S. Fuller

Dear Lord and Parent,

Today we celebrate Your unique and gracious gifts.

You gave to us Your Holy Spirit on Pentecost - as Companion - as Comforter - as Guide - as Judge - as Energizer.

You gave to us the gift of Your Church, to be for us a spiritual family, to sustain and nurture us, to guide and heal us, to call forth our gifts, and to use us in the healing of a lonely, hostile, and broken world.

Offer Your healing touch to the sick; for Nina Lee Terpeney, for Frank Blauert, Gail Goldwater's father, Robert Youngblood; and the confused; to broken and fractured homes; to distraught youth and disturbed adults.

You gave to us Wind, Fire, and the Dove as continuing signs not only of Your coming, but of Your presence here and now.

So open us this morning to Your Wind, Your Divine Ru-ah, cleansing our hearts, cooling our stresses and distresses, enlightening our minds, and refreshing our viewpoints from Your Divine perspective.

So open us this Sunday to the fire of Your Spirit, that we may receive the warmth of Your Gracious love, the purification of our hearts and the generating power of Your presence.

So open us this Pentecost to the gift of the Dove, that we may learn the discernments of the Spirit, practice the work of reconciliation, participate in the healing balm for individual lives and for a troubled world, and become ambassadors of Your Shalom throughout the nations.

Through Jesus Christ.

Amen

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ACTS 2:1-4, 16-21 JOHN 14:12-17

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