

## “A Spirit-filled Church”

Today is Pentecost Sunday. It's the day in the church year when we celebrate the pouring out of God's Spirit on the first Christians, and the beginning of the Church. By now Jesus had gone back to His Father in heaven. He had promised that when He left them *physically*, He would send His *Spirit* to be with them, and *in them*. So the followers of Jesus went to Jerusalem as He told them, secluded themselves in an upper room, and prayed and waited for the Holy Spirit to come. On the Jewish festival day called Pentecost, the Spirit came on them...not a little trickle...but the Spirit *gushed out* on them! Acts 2:4 says, “They were all *filled* with the Holy Spirit...”.

Those first Christians saw this as the fulfillment of a prophecy in the Old Testament book of Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will *pour out my Spirit* on all people...” (Acts 2:17). So, Jesus' followers were *flooded by and empowered by* the Holy Spirit! Christians interpret Pentecost as the day *the Church was born!* And that Church born on the day of Pentecost was a *Spirit-filled Church!*

I want to talk about a Spirit-filled church! What does a Spirit-filled congregation look like? What will be its characteristics? Where do we go to find out what a “Spirit-filled” church is like? The best place to see what a Spirit filled church looks like is to go to the Book of Acts, as it describes a church so full of and saturated with the Spirit!

**One thing we can see from the Book of Acts is that a Spirit-filled church is motivated by a sense of mission.** As soon as the Holy Spirit was poured out on the group of Jesus' followers, they were given this compelling sense of mission to reach out beyond themselves. For instance, when the Spirit came, believers spoke in tongues: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4). Why the speaking in tongues? What happening here? Well, people from all over the world were in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. They spoke a number of different languages. Miraculously, as the apostles spoke in their own native tongue, people who heard them were able to *understand* – “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each one hears them in our native language...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’” (Acts 2:5-8, 11b). It was like a giant United Nations meeting. You know, where you could put on earphones, and hear the one speaking in your own language!

What was message heard? Notice: “declaring the wonders of God” (verse 11). Right after the Spirit comes, God wants the church to get out the message of His mighty acts!

Later that day, Peter preaches, and over 3,000 people are won to Christ. In the fourth chapter of Acts, Peter and John are preaching and teaching about Jesus. They are told by the Jewish religious leaders to shut up. Their answer? “But Peter and John replied, ‘Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard’” (Acts 4:19-20).

Acts 8 relates how a fierce persecution scattered believers to many parts of the world. But that didn't stop the mission of the church! In Acts 8:4 it says, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

*A Spirit-filled church is focused outward – it wants to get the message of Jesus out to others!* The famous British preacher and author, Leslie Weatherhead, once talked about 6 marks of the early church. According to him, the first two of these are: (1) It had a transforming, communicable experience of the living Christ; and (2) It had a passion to pass it on.

In a Spirit-filled church, individual members will be compelled to invite others to church, to pray regularly for friends, neighbors, and family members to be saved, to know Christ, and also to look for ways to express their faith at work, at school, and in their neighborhood.

I'm thinking of a young man who was in one of the churches I served, who we asked to talk to high school graduates in our congregation at a luncheon we held for them. Matt would speak of his own college experience. He told how first he made a commitment to live a moral life, and then he *found Christ*. He would then go to parties, not to drink, but to talk about God!

In a Spirit-filled congregation there is the conviction that *everybody* is in ministry, not just the pastor or church staff, or a few church leaders. *Every believer* was to reach out to others.

In a Spirit-filled church, the needs of people outside the church will have high priority. More and more time, energy, and money are spent reaching beyond the church to lost, hurting people, taking the message of Jesus to places outside the church building where you find unchurched people.

*The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost lit a fire that pushed the early church outward!* I have heard that when people leave the Metrodome stadium in Minneapolis there is a force of wind that propels the person outside in a hurry. This all has something to do with the controlled pressure inside the dome clashing with the normal pressure outside – so that when you leave the Metrodome there is a force that's strong and unmistakable, thrusting you outside! That's what the Holy Spirit did – and does – when He fills a church. He propels us to reach out beyond ourselves in mission!

When we read the Book of Acts we see another mark of a Spirit-filled church: ***People are growing spiritually as they rely on one another.*** Look at what it says in Acts, chapter 2: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:41-42, 46). Notice, they "devoted themselves" to teaching, to fellowship (deep sharing of life), to the breaking of bread (communion) and prayer.

In the early church, people met in homes. Believers were *connected* to one another, *committed* to one another...to *grow*...to *nurture* each other's spiritual development. In a Spirit-filled church, people are growing spiritually! People are becoming more SPIRIT-ual! The congregation is maturing SPIRIT-ually!

*Notice, this spiritual growth is not all dependent upon the pastor! It isn't just the pastor nurturing people spiritually! Believers are helping one another grow!* Now as your pastor I hope that I am helping you to grow spiritually – through preaching, teaching, through personal conversations, counseling etc. But you know, I've learned that when the church is most alive with the Spirit, *most of the growth is taking place **without me involved!*** People in the church are nurturing each other: by teaching classes, interacting with each other in small groups, conversing with one another about spiritual things and encouraging each other in the Lord (personal conversations, talking on the phone, emailing, etc.).

In a Spirit-filled church people realize what's always been true of Biblical faith: it's a *group thing!* There is a sense of "holy-togetherness" – a passionate bonding with one another for survival and growth as Christian believers!

We see this played out in the early church. Turn to Acts 4. Peter and John are in hot water for preaching Christ. They are held in custody, warned by the Jewish religious authorities not to speak about Jesus anymore. When they are released, they head straight to their Christian friends. "On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them" (Acts 4:23). They then prayed. Look at what happened: "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31). There is a fresh pouring out of the Holy Spirit *on this group of believers. In a Spirit-filled church, people are doing all they can to help each other grow in the Lord.*

As we look further at the Book of acts, we also see that *in a Spirit-filled congregation, there is a unity in the Spirit.* Acts 4:32 says, "All the believers were one in heart and mind." That's unity!

In fact, this unity is expressed in a radical way. Acts 2:44-45 tells us: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." Also, in Acts 4:32-35 it says this: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."

There was so much of a sense of oneness that these believers sold their possessions, lived and lived a communal type of life. Now it's true, this didn't last forever – it was not a permanent thing. But it shows how united and together they were!

*In a Spirit-filled church, people truly care about each other.* When one hurts, *all* hurt. When one is especially blessed, *all* rejoice. When one in the church has a need, the family of God responds. I believe we can see some of this in this church – in many ways you are there for one another. I was once approached about becoming a member in a lodge. The member inviting me said if I joined, if I ever had a need, there would always be someone there for me – that I’d never have to be alone. I thought: Isn’t that what the church is meant to be?

*A mark of a Spirit-filled church is that there is sense of **unity** among the people.* Now we have to be realistic here. Those in the New Testament church were not perfect. They had squabbles and differences – sometimes sharp divisions (e.g. Acts 6 and Acts 15). But in a Spirit-filled church, hostilities are dealt with and *resolved*. Divisions are *overcome*. How many congregations today are undermined by bickering, criticisms of one another, warring cliques in the church. When that is the case, we can be sure the Holy Spirit is not there in fullness in those congregations! *Human nature sometimes divides us: the Holy Spirit pulls us together!*

Also, in a Spirit-filled church, people share a oneness in Christ even if they are different kinds of people with divergent views and opinions. When the Spirit is in control, people are not expected to think alike, look alike, act alike. Bishop T. D. Jakes leads a large megachurch in Dallas, Texas. This church is thoroughly multiracial. He recalls a time when his churches weren’t so inclusive. In his early days, he was pastor of a black church in West Virginia. White people soon gravitated to his church because of its lively worship and outreach ministries in the community. One of the first white men to worship there said to Bishop Jakes: “I am just tired of being around people who dress like me, look like me, think like me. My life is boring. I want to see the many facets of God and life.”

I look back to the churches I have served. Frankly, most were fairly homogeneous. Those in the congregation were pretty much the same kind of people. Sure, there were different personalities, some differences in the choice of politics, or the amount of wealth – but I regret that I never served where there was as broad a range of race, nationality, and cultural difference as I would have loved.

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One more characteristic of a Spirit-filled church: ***There is an experience of the “miraculous”.*** Before Jesus left His disciples to go back to the Father, He gave them an incredible promise: “Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). This came true when the Spirit was poured out on the followers of Jesus at Pentecost. The church was invaded by the supernatural power of God! Acts 2:43 says, “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.” Acts 5:12 tell us, “Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles.”

In a Holy Spirit-filled congregation, people are *expecting* God to work in surprising, extraordinary ways. “God-things” happen. Things that can only be called, as someone has said, “Lordish”. I believe one of the biggest indictments against the church today is that far too many churches are just *boring*. We don’t expect anything supernatural to happen. We don’t expect

God to show up on Sunday morning, or in weekday church activities. Someone put it this way, “When was the last time something totally unexpected happened during Sunday morning worship services at your church? How long has it been since you completely lost track of time because you were so ‘caught up’ in the spirit of a prayer, a song, a speaker or even a vision? Is the church the last place you expect to find something new, fun and exciting going on?”

Well, the church following Pentecost was anything but boring! But you know...*we’ve got that same Power available to us!* There is not reason why “God-things” shouldn’t be happening all over the place! People being miraculously healed! People having their lives turned around and changed by Christ (that’s a miracle!). Extraordinary “coincidences” taking place that are really the hand of God intervening in situations!

So these are some of the qualities of a Spirit-filled church!

***Of course, the question for us is: Is this church a Spirit-filled church?*** In some ways I believe it is! In other ways...well...we have a ways to go! God wants this church to be one filled with and permeated by His Spirit. And if you and I are willing to yield to Him, and allow the Holy Spirit to get into us and fill us, we can be even more a congregation filled with the Spirit of Christ!

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