

## “The Holy Spirit In the Church”

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(Genesis 1:1-5 and Acts 19:1-7)  
Baptism of the Lord  
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When Benjamin Franklin emerged from Constitution Hall, a woman asked him, “What kind of government are you giving us?” “A republic, Madam, if you can keep it.” So if you ask me, “What kind of church are you trying to give us,” I can only answer, “A Spirit-filled church, if you’ll have it!”

Let’s consider together the Holy Spirit in the church. Jaroslav Pelikan translates Acts 19:1 in this manner: “Although Paul of his own counsel wanted to go to Jerusalem, the Spirit told him to cross over into Asia.” Perhaps someone on a street corner in Ephesus asked Paul, “What brings you to Ephesus?” “The Holy Spirit sent me,” Paul replied. People often ask me, “What brought you to Dayton?” “The Holy Spirit sent me.” How does that play out in our understanding? Earlier in Acts 16:16 Paul and Silas were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.” Go to Asia. Don’t go to Asia. What can I say? The Holy Spirit changes her mind.

Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem, but the Holy Spirit told him to cross over to Ephesus. I want you to wrap your minds around the possibility that there are decisions that we make as a congregation that may be in direct contradiction of what God wants us to do. For all our intelligence and commitment we might be found, as Gamaliel said so famously, “**fighting against God!**” How many times do we make decisions here on the basis of what we simply vote to do? How do we get the Holy Spirit elected to the Executive Council? Sure we are flesh and blood, human beings, but believe me, if we are going to be a New Testament church, a believer’s church, a Christian church, we can’t have church without the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit doesn’t show, we are out of business.

Let’s go back to the beginning – to Genesis and there in the first words about God, what do we discover? The creating Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is power – all the power in the world! Creation power! Dead Sea-parting power! Opening-blind-eyes power, making-lame-walk power! Up from the grave power! In the beginning, when life came to be, the LORD God formed man and woman from the dust of the ground, and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life; and they became living beings. Now, when we die, the Lord God bends over us and breathes into us the resurrection breath of life, and we become living beings for eternity. Same power. Same God. Creation. Resurrection.

And if honest, we will admit that we need this divine, creative power. As the poet proclaims of creation, in spite of all our destructiveness

*Nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

“There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” How many of us could use a wind of freshness in our relationships? Even more, there lives the dearest goodness deep down in

the heart of God. Seven times the writer of Genesis says that God saw that creation was good. No matter what the critics may claim, God and goodness are at the heart of creation.

Yet we are suspicious of God from the serpent's "Did God say," to those who blame God for all evil. God has a bad reputation in our world. Did you know that the first question Jesus faced in the Gospel of Mark was, "Have you come to destroy us?" And the answer? Of course not. In fact, I want to suggest to you that God would have sent Jesus without our fall into sin. The incarnation is not required by our need or our wickedness. The incarnation is God becoming one of us in order that God might share God's divine nature with us and share the primal joy of our joyful creator. Those who wish to spend their time bewailing evil and blaming God for evil, have lost touch with the basic Christian conviction that God is good, God is good all the time, and God created a good universe.

I dare say, "Put your back to the ill winds that have blown for so long, and put your face to the fresh moving of the wind of God. Feel this power. Feel it First Baptist Church.

I'm inviting you to imbibe the spirit of God – joy, peace, wisdom/knowledge (*The Holy Spirit fills smart people too*), leadership (*The Holy Spirit fills CEO types as well*), generosity (*The Holy Spirit fills rich people*), teaching (*The Holy Spirit fills Ph.D.'s and professors*), and cheerfulness. Don't limit the Holy Spirit to emotion. The gates of hell have pushed against the church for more than 2000 years and emotion has not been the church's greatest defense. More times than not, the scholarship of great preachers and theologians has stood in the gap to fight off heresies. What kind of Bible would we have if emotion had ruled the councils of the Church? How many of the fifty plus gospels with their incredulous tales such as baby Jesus flying around the manger would have made the cut if emotion and feeling good and sweet, cute little baby Jesus stories were the criteria?

Receiving the Holy Spirit means signing a release of our bodies and minds to the power of God. Our bodies precisely because the church is the body of Christ only by the gift of the Holy Spirit – a Spirit clearly not under our control (SH, quoting Milbank). We are the gathered body of Christ and whatever more we are supposed to be, we cannot be less than the real flesh and blood characters that we are in all our imperfections, yet led by the Holy Spirit.

What if the power of God's Spirit lays claim on our hearts in such a fierce embrace that we become like Ruth exclaiming to Naomi, "Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" Loyalty and love like that we need to God and to God's church.

We tend to think that the Holy Spirit will come into our lives, look around, make a few cosmetic changes, a spring cleaning, and a few positive suggestions on how to live a balanced life. Well, think again. The Holy Spirit is not Dr. Phil or Oprah. Because sometimes the Holy Spirit shows up with a wrecking ball and announces that our whole way of doing business is shot and we're going to have to start from scratch. Are we ready for that action?

God has unleashed this creating power in the universe and it is still active. It is the same power that energizes and directs the life of the church. Like the disciples of John at Ephesus, we need more of the Holy Spirit. If we are willing, when the Holy Spirit calls us to action, instead of saying, "I'll try to be there if nothing comes up," we will say, "I will be there."

I'll go to Asia or not go to Asia. If the Lord says, "Give," I will give. If the Lord says, "Serve," I will serve. Whatever you say, Lord.