



## **Here's Your Sign**

**Acts 2: 1-21**

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May 23, 2021

Do you feel it? Can you feel the mighty rushing wind that brings forth the Spirit of God?

It is Pentecost, and it is a joy to share in the celebration of God's great gift that gives life to the Church.

Over the past fifty days, we have talked a lot about what the Church is supposed to be. We took an intentional look at the early church, whose birth is journaled in the book of Acts, to ask how we might reclaim our calling as God's people, the Church, today. We identified who the Church is and what we are supposed to do, and in an act of confession, who the Church is not and what the Church is not supposed to do.

Last week, we named that our invitation as the Church is not to lay claim to the power of Christ. The ascension reminds us that we do not hold on to Christ, or the power of the Lord. Instead, following the ascension, following Jesus' return to be seated at the right hand of God, we are gifted the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does carry with it power, but it is a very different power than Christ. Understanding the difference between the power of God in Christ and the power of God in the Holy Spirit is essential for us to claim our identity as the Church.

The power of God in Christ is what makes new life possible – we celebrate this power at Easter.

The power of God in the Holy Spirit is what equips the Church to proclaim the power of God in Christ – we celebrate this power at Pentecost.

Let me say that again, the power of God in Christ is what makes new life possible. The power of God in the Holy Spirit is what equips us to proclaim the power of God in Christ.

We do not hold the power to gift new life – that is Christ's power, not the Church's. We, the Church, are empowered by the Spirit to make known the giver of new life.

As we look at the Biblical text and consider the creation of the Church, I want you to keep these distinctions in mind.

If we look back at Acts 1:8, we find that as Jesus was ascending, as he left the disciples, he promised they would receive power when the Holy Spirit arrived. In making this promise, Jesus indicates the purpose of the Spirit's empowerment; he says, "and you will be my witnesses." The promise of the empowerment of the Spirit is couched with the reason for such empowerment – so that we might witness to Christ.

Jesus ascends, and the disciples returned to Jerusalem. There they gathered together in an upper room, just like they had been after Jesus was crucified. They devoted themselves to prayer and, following Judas' betrayal, Matthias was added to the eleven apostles bringing the number back to twelve.

So the twelve are gathered there in a closed room when "Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

"The first gift of the Spirit is the gift of speech, [specifically] the gift of speech in different languages."<sup>i</sup> But as they are speaking in these foreign languages, they are not, as of yet, telling the story of Christ. The first gift of the Spirit is not for them to proclaim Christ in varying languages – their speaking in different languages is first used to gather people together – to engage in the community around them. Their gift of speech is first used to bring together a diverse crowd from those living around them. Look back to the text, beginning in verse 5:

"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound," at the sound of the disciples speaking in different languages, "the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." Luke then gives us a narrative interjection to understand just how diverse this crowd was. He names where all these people had gathered from – from Judea to Egypt to Libya to Rome.

Verse 11 names that each, in their own native language, heard the disciples speaking of God's deeds of power. The Spirit sets in motion this proclamation – the Spirit is "the engine that drives the church into all the world."<sup>ii</sup> But as of yet, as of yet, no proclamation of Christ has been made. At this point, the Spirit is just leading the Church to gather people together so that a proclamation might be made. And perhaps at first glance, it's not going well.

Picking back up in verse 12, we read, "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" "The proclamation evokes questions, bewilderment, and scorn ..."<sup>iii</sup> Their actions seem foolish and haphazard, to the point that some believe they are drunk at nine o'clock in the morning.

The Spirit has led this new Church out from their closed doors to engage with a very public congregation. They've been led by the empowerment of the Spirit to connect with their surrounding community in a way that has gathered a broad and diverse crowd. And being gathered together, Peter stands up and speaks to them, saying, "These men are not drunk, for it's only nine o'clock in the morning. No, what you are witnessing," Peter says, "is the fulfillment of that which was spoken by the prophet Joel."

Peter uses the words of the prophet to frame the events of the morning, reminding these Jews of God's promise to pour out the Spirit upon all flesh, that God's people might prophesy – speaking of

God's deeds of power. Peter goes on to name this event as the very one Joel spoke about, and promises that Jesus, the one who was crucified and raised from the dead, is the very Lord whom Joel promises will offer God's salvation.

The Spirit empowers the church to go out into the world, to gather people together, so that they might proclaim the power of God in Christ.

*The Spirit empowers the church to proclaim the power of God in Christ.*

If you look through the scriptures, anytime someone receives the gift of new life, it is gifted through the name and power of Christ. There are many stories in the Gospels of Jesus healing directly. But even when the disciples enact healing, it's done in the name of, or by faith in Christ. For example, in Acts 3 a lame man is given the ability walk, as Peter says, "in the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk." Again in Acts 9, Peter found a man named Aeneas (A-Knee-Us), who had been paralyzed for eight years. Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you," and immediately he got up. In Acts 14, there is another man who had never walked before, who, having heard Paul's preaching and *having formed faith in Christ to be healed*, was able to stand up and walk.

The power of God in Christ makes new life possible. It is the power of Christ that gifts healing and new life.

But it is the Holy Spirit that empowers the Church to proclaim this mighty power of Christ. The Church is empowered to profess and proclaim and testify to the healing power of Christ.

It is the Spirit that drove them from their closed room to gather an expansive group to hear the promise of God in Jesus Christ on that day of Pentecost. Everything the Spirit does, every way the Spirit moves within the people now called "the Church," is done to lead them in proclaiming the power of God in Jesus Christ.

Following this initial gifting of the Spirit, we read beginning in verse 44 that all who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. The Spirit led them in caring for one another so that their witness, their shared life together, their very existence as a community proclaimed the power of God in Jesus Christ. They believed so firmly in the power of Christ to gift life, that through the empowerment of the Spirit, they gave up the cultural norms of selfish ambition and personal concern.

Theologian Willie James Jennings, speaking of the empowerment of the Spirit, puts it this way, "A new kind of giving is exposed at this moment, one that binds bodies together as the first reciprocal donation where the followers will give themselves to one another. Their possessions will follow. ... Thus, anything they had that might be used to bring people into sight and sound of the incarnate life, anything they had that might be used to draw people to life together and life itself and away from death and end the reign of poverty, hunger and despair – such things were subject to being given up to God."<sup>iv</sup>

This witness of the early Church is not some unexperienced ideal, it is a real and tangible example of just how powerful the Spirit is in leading us to proclaim the power of God in Christ.

Acts narrates for us the power of the Spirit to lead this newly created body of believers to understand that every personal desire, every individual hope and dream, every earthly and socially inspired aspiration is at risk of taking a back seat to the promise of new life in Christ. The Spirit leads the body to see that anything – even something as simple as unified language – anything that might inhibit God’s expansive love from being proclaimed to everyone is justifiably overcome by the Spirit’s empowerment.

It’s the Spirit that forms the Body of Christ, the tangible witness of God’s love in Christ for the world. This body is defined in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, which demands that every member be fully welcomed, embraced, and utilized – for no gift is offered that is not intended for the witness of the Church to proclaim God’s love in Christ. Every talent, every capability, every penny, every education, every experience is claimed by the Spirit as an invitation to participate in the work of the church to proclaim the power of God in Christ.

The world focuses so much on the hindrances that make new life difficult. A purely capitalistic society focuses on the bottom line, not the promise of new life for all. Where the world sees problems, the Spirit gifts us the invitation to see hope and possibility. For we do not do this work alone, we do this work through the empowerment of the Spirit, who grants us the energy and strength to proclaim and participate in the work of God in this world. We are God’s Spirit-gifted witness to the love of Christ in the world.

And this work, this empowerment, while expressed at the corporate level in the Body of Christ – the formation of the Church – it begins with each one of us receiving the Spirit, and following the leading and participating empowerment of the Spirit. The Spirit does not gift the whole, it gifts the individual to be a part of the whole.

Over the coming month, we’re going to be looking at *life in the Spirit*, as we consider how God empowers us through the gifting of the Spirit to be a part of this Body of Christ, who is created, empowered, gifted, and called to proclaim and witness to the love of God in Christ, the power of Christ to give new life. Receive the Spirit, and let us share in this Spirit-gifted witness together.

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<sup>i</sup> William H. Willimon. *Acts: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Willimon.

<sup>iii</sup> Willimon.

<sup>iv</sup> Willie James Jennings. *Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary On The Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.