

We Believe in the Holy Spirit – Pentecost Sunday

Ephesians 1:3-14

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Happy Birthday Church! Today is Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church. Today we celebrate the day the Holy Spirit descended upon the church 50 days after Easter. Pentecost means 50. Jesus promised the Spirit would come and it certainly did. The Spirit empowered the early church and Christian faith spread like wildfire.

Raise your hand if you follow Jesus Christ. The same spirit that raised Christ from the dead and blew the church wide open lives in you! We believe that. In the middle of the Apostles Creed we say “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Ephesians underscores the importance of the Holy Spirit:

When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:13-14).

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of God that lives inside those who follow Christ. It was the Holy Spirit that motivates you to get out of bed on Sunday morning and go to worship. It is the Holy Spirit that inspires you to serve and love others. It is the Holy Spirit that guides you to make wise decisions. And it is the Holy Spirit who convicts you when you need to change. The Holy Spirit is God’s very presence inside of you, moving you, guiding you and shaping you.

But here is my question for today: How do we know the Holy Spirit is guiding us? How are we supposed to know when we are being motivated by the Spirit and not something else? How do we know when it is God who is trying to speak to us and not another impulse inside us? There are a lot of voices inside and outside of us clamoring for our attention. How do we know which one is the Holy Spirit?

I remember studying John 10 with a group of youth. We got to the part when Jesus said, “The sheep follow him because they know his voice.” This young man raised his hand and said, “Pastor, I pray to Jesus all the time but he never talks back. How am I supposed to know his voice when he never talks to me?”

Have you ever wondered what the Holy Spirit's voice sounds like? James Earl Jones? Alexa of Google? Or does it sound more like the woman's voice on your smart phone's GPS system?

Well, the truth is if we are literally hearing audible voices we probably need to take a trip to the psychiatrist, not the sanctuary. I am not saying it's impossible to hear an audible voice, but God doesn't usually operate like that. Instead, God, through the Holy Spirit, speaks to us through passion, desire, instinct, conviction and circumstance. To say we are hearing the Spirit's voice means we are being moved by the Spirit in some way.

But, again, how are we supposed to know we are being moved by the Holy Spirit? There have been times in my life when I have been faced with a decision or desired guidance. When I made my decision or chose my path I thought I was being guided by the Spirit but I was not. The whole thing blew up in my face. I prayed about it. Read scripture. I felt great about it. I did all the right things, but it was clear I made the wrong decision. I thought, "What did I miss? Where did I go wrong?"

Ever been there? Ever been confident that the decision you made was the right one, the one the Spirit was guiding you to make, and then disaster hit and all signs pointed to a bad decision?

Maybe you are faced with a decision today and you need some kind of guidance. You're seeking some sign of the Spirit, some nudge in the right direction but you are not really sure how you will know when it is the Holy Spirit guiding you. Or maybe you have made a decision and you want evidence from God that it was the right decision but you don't know what to look for.

I am going to reveal how you can be sure 99 percent of the time that the Holy Spirit is guiding you. I am going to show you how you can be sure whether or not the decision that you made was the right one. I am going to show you how you can confidently know you are being moved by the Holy Spirit.

I discovered something huge along my journey about how the Holy Spirit works. Through trial and error, reading scripture, listening to wise counsel I learned the key to knowing when I am going in the direction of the Holy Spirit. This key has helped me avoid a lot of mistakes. Learning this key will help you avoid a lot of mistakes too! More importantly it will help you find God's path for you.

To help us discover this key I want us to take a look at something Jesus said to his disciples about the Holy Spirit. These words appear in the fourteenth chapter of John. Jesus is comforting his disciples in the Upper Room. They know something bad is going to happen. Jesus is trying to break the news to them that he is going away and he is trying to comfort and encourage them. Jesus says something in the midst of his comforting sermon that I think is one of the most outrageous things he ever said. Take a look:

“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” –John 14:12

The first time I saw that I thought, “Whoa! Do greater works than Jesus? What is he talking about? Jesus healed the sick, walked on water, made the blind to see, and raised the dead! How in the world can any of us do greater works than Jesus?”

What is even more confusing are these words: “Because I am going to the Father.” I am sure the disciples were thinking the same thing that I was thinking. “Wait, don’t we need Jesus to do all of these amazing things? How can we do great things if he is leaving us? That doesn’t make any sense.” Jesus brings some clarity by saying this:

“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth.” –John 14:15-17

Here Jesus is introducing the Holy Spirit. This is when the light bulb went on for me. We are able to do greater works than Jesus because when Jesus ascended to the Father his Spirit began to live in each of his followers. This means Jesus’ power and influence multiplied and multiplied throughout the earth. So, when you compare all the work the church has done over the last 2,000 years to Jesus’ 3-year earthly ministry it is much greater.

Jesus uses some interesting words to describe the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls it an “advocate.” The Greek word was used to describe a witness who was called in to support your case in a court of law. Or it could also be used to describe a lawyer who pleads your case when you have been charged with a serious crime. An advocate was also used to describe someone who motivated athletes who were discouraged or fatigued. Jesus also referred to the Holy Spirit as the “Spirit of

Truth” because the Spirit guides us into truth and reminds us what Jesus taught. Later Jesus describes the Spirit like spring water that flows within us.

But how are we supposed to know that what is bubbling up inside of us is the Holy Spirit and not something else? How do we recognize the Spirit when we need to make decisions, find wisdom, or be guided through difficulty? Well take a look at what Jesus says next:

“The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” –John 14:17

Jesus is saying that the world, those who live as if there was no God, can’t recognize the Spirit because they interpret everything that happens out of their own ability. But Jesus’ followers know him because he will be with them and in them. In other words, the difference between us and the world is that we see things based on what God is able to do through us.

So we recognize the Holy Spirit’s work by its ability, not our own. When I made this conclusion these words from Jesus just a few verses later popped out at me:

“Apart from me you can do nothing.” –John 15:5

So here is what I figured out:

When you find ability beyond you the Spirit is with you.

This is the key to being sure the spirit is moving in your life. This is the key to knowing when the Holy Spirit is guiding you. When you find power beyond you, the spirit is with you. When you find wisdom beyond you, the spirit is with you. When you know you could not have accomplished something on your own, you can be sure it was the Holy Spirit. When you have been led to a place you would have never found on your own, you can be sure it was the Holy Spirit. When you found strength to do something that seemed impossible, you can be sure it was the Holy Spirit. When you are attempting to do something that requires God’s help to get it done, you can be sure you are in the right place!

The problem is too many of us are trying to do things without asking for help. We want to be in control, and so God’s Spirit says, “Ok, it’s all yours.” And we struggle and struggle.

This may be the missing piece in your life as a Christian. Maybe you are not finding the strength or wisdom you seek because you have not activated the Holy Spirit that lives within you. Every follower of Christ has the Spirit of God within them. John Wesley believed that even nonbelievers have the Spirit of God inside them but it lies dormant. We must give the Holy Spirit permission to work.

When was the last time you activated the Spirit within you? What are you attempting right now that only the Holy Spirit could accomplish through you? What are you doing right now that you know without God would lead to utter failure?" If we are not living our faith in this way we are missing out on one of the great joys of being a follower of Christ.

The church needs this message too. If the church is not relying on the Holy Spirit we are not a church. We are an entertainment center or just another charity, but we are not a church. Being open to the movement of Spirit is essential to being a healthy and thriving church. A church can survive for a time on a good band or choir, a motivational speaker and a Facebook page but without the work of the Holy Spirit a church cannot sustain itself. It cannot be the vessel God calls it to be. Charles Spurgeon said, "Without the Spirit of God, we can do nothing. We are as ships without the wind, branches without sap, and like coals without fire, we are useless."

Unfortunately, too many churches try to do ministry without the aid of the Holy Spirit. And then they wonder why they never grow. We have become real good at putting a governor on the Spirit of God. We have become rather skilled at stifling the Spirit when it doesn't line up with our whims and fancies or it threatens to inconvenience us. The Spirit is strong, but it doesn't force itself on anyone or any church, so it will go only as far as we allow it.

I know of a pastor who didn't like the direction the church was going. He felt it didn't have much life. It wasn't doing the things that a church ought to be doing. It wasn't praying enough and serving enough. It wasn't studying the Bible enough. So he, led by the Spirit, started all of these small groups in the church. Lo and behold, they started to catch on, got all fired up, started to change things and shake things up. And the leader of this crew started to speak all across town. He lifted up the gospel and all these people listened to him and responded. They received Christ. He was the talk of the town. Well, his church was none too pleased with all this excitement and exuberance, with all this change. They got annoyed with this group in the church and their leader. So, what did the church do? They wouldn't allow

him to speak in worship anymore. His name? John Wesley. The group? Methodists!

The Spirit was alive and well in Wesley, which is why the church rejected him and his ministry. Thank God the Spirit prevailed or we would not be here, but imagine how many Spirit driven movements have died because the church closed its doors to the Holy Spirit.

Did you know that in the Bible the Hebrew and Greek word for Spirit literally means "wind"? Jesus said it is like a mystery, the wind. You don't see the wind, and yet you know when it comes and when it goes.

When the wind of the spirit is blowing it is an exhilarating and powerful thing. When the wind is with you there is no greater experience. I know the wind is blowing with me when someone comes up to me and says, "Your message changed my life." That was the Holy Spirit. I have the task of preaching to so many different people. How can one message meet the needs of so many? Not by my power, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. I know the wind is blowing with me when I think of someone and call them and they say, "I was just about to call you. Do you have time to talk?" I know the wind is blowing with me when I feel a nudge to text someone and they reply, "Perfect timing. I need your prayers right now." I know the wind is blowing with me when I must rely on God's power to accomplish what is before me.

Are you looking for the wind of the Spirit in your life? Pray: Lord, help me to see the evidence of you at work in my life and where it is pointing me. Open my eyes to see your hand in my life. May I sense where you are working beyond me and trust that is where you are guiding me.

When you find ability beyond you the Spirit is with you.

I used to love looking at this big palm tree on a golf course. Every time I passed it I would admire it. Then one day I passed it and it had fallen to the ground. I was upset and said, "I wonder what caused that?" And someone said, "The wind."

I once knew a man who hated the church. He told everybody he didn't believe in God. He said that religion was for weak people who couldn't stand on their own two feet. Then one day all that hardness crumbled to the ground. His heart was changed. He started going to church and he never stopped going. I don't know what happened! Someone said, "It's the wind."

There I was 16 years old, minding my own business. I was playing tennis, getting crushes on girls, telling jokes, having fun. I was sitting in church with my parents and sisters. We were passing the mints, playing tic tac toe, and writing notes about where we wanted to go to lunch. Then this man got up to preach. I had never heard anyone like him before. I was inspired. Next thing I know I am shaking his hand at the back door of the church telling him I want to be a preacher! Me, a preacher? What happened? What caused that? You know what I think it was? The wind.

When you find ability beyond you, the Spirit is with you.