

THE SPIRIT OF EVANGELISM¹

by Dr. Luke L. Keefer*

There is an essential relationship between the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the church's ministry of evangelism. The annals of church history have abundantly demonstrated that a loss of attention to either of those subjects has resulted in an attendant eclipse of the other. The two have become, as it were, one flesh. If the church ever tolerates their divorce, it will find itself to be fighting against God, for he has fashioned their union.

While our focus today cannot hope to take in the comprehensive scope of this subject, we can hopefully see something of the urgency of the Spirit's work in the area of evangelism. Evangelism is a specialized form of communication. If we reduce communication to its three simple elements of speaker, message, and hearer, we can see how the Spirit of God functions in each part of the communication process to bring about salvation.

In bringing this subject into its biblical focus, I will be using the book of Acts as a constant context for the message. It will furnish the primary examples for our consideration. Within that general framework, I want also to use one of the resurrection accounts from John's Gospel (20:19-23).

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Here, in this passage which most Protestants have avoided because of the use the Roman Catholic Church has made of it, is a paradise of nourishment that will reward our attendance upon it.

I. In the first place, it is obvious that the Holy Spirit is essential to evangelism because he molds the speakers of the gospel. Evangelism is a people enterprise. It begins with the men and women whom God chooses to be his witnesses.

When it says of Jesus that he breathed upon the disciples, we take our clue for this symbolic act from the second chapter of Genesis. For just as God fashioned man out of dust of the ground and then made

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him a living being by breathing his life upon his face (Gen. 2:7), so here Jesus was fashioning a new order of humanity out of the ashes of Adamic chaos. For three years he shaped the men and women who would be the backbone of the Church on the day of Pentecost. Finally, with hands that bore the visible prints of his recent passion, he put the finishing touches to his creation and brought it to life by the creative breath of the Holy Spirit. His witnesses would be a vast company of new Adams and Eves created to be spokespersons for God.

Many have puzzled over the difference of this serene setting of the Spirit's bestowal and the rather dramatic one in the book of Acts. Were they two separate events or two vastly different descriptions of the same thing? While one's perspective on this question is not of decisive practical consequence, I hold them to be both different in occasion and in effect, though they are vitally joined one to another by the Spirit who brings both to pass. One is the inward equipping of the disciple, and the other is the outward equipping of the believer. But the inevitable result of both is evangelism.

No phrase could convey in more graphic terms the need of the disciples for this interior Pentecost than the verse which says they were behind closed doors. Whatever good they may have been to each other in their fellowship of fear, it is clear no evangelism can take the place in their isolation from the world. Here they are at the close of resurrection Sunday. They are party to the most fantastic good news since the fall of mankind into sin. Christ is alive; salvation is accomplished! But the broadcast transmitters sit silent in an upper room in Jerusalem.

Why was this so? The concluding chapters of the four gospels point to some of the reasons. In the very passages where Jesus disclosed to the disciples his full messianic identity and spoke plainly about his approaching death, the disciples reveal what were their inmost motivations as well. They were dreaming of a restored kingdom of Israel in which only the Jews would reap the benefits. They were unfit for witness because of their pride of race.² And so as they passed through Samaria and Jesus was mistreated, they wanted to call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritans (Lk. 9:51-56).

They were unfit witnesses because of their pride of place. Jesus talked of servanthood and death, and they argued about who was the greatest and about who would be second in command to Jesus in the kingdom (Mk. 9:33-37; 10:32-45). Being heralds of the cross was far too lowly a job for those who wanted to crowd in upon the Messiah's throne and crown. They sought the splendor of the kingdom not its slave work.

They were unfit for witness because of their violent spirit. When it finally dawned upon them that Jesus would be taken to his death, Peter drew his sword to defend his Lord. And immediately one would-be arrester had only half the hearing capacity that he had before (Jn. 18:10), thanks to Peter's violent behavior. And one might press the illustration

to say that it has ever been so in church history. Whenever Christians have reached for swords in the name of Christ, they have lost their ability to witness to their enemies. To this very hour North American Christians are not very effective witnesses to Germans, to Japanese, to Vietnamese, to Latin Americans, and to American Indians. Violence and evangelism do not mix.

Jesus represented in his person the ability to treat people without partiality, the cherished role of servanthood to all, and the peaceful valuing of every human life. His witnesses could not speak forth his message with integrity while exhibiting in their lives the very opposite characteristics. They needed the inner working of his gentle Spirit to fashion them into the image of their Master. And so he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Did it work? Take the assessment of the very people who sought to find fault with their character. They were amazed at these simple Galileans, but they sensed rightly "that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). The mold marks of Christ's character were upon them. His label of ownership was visible in their life.

Their renewed nature was manifest in their speech and conduct. Racial prejudice is overcome. Peter and John go to the Samaritans and lay hands on their heads, praying that they be filled with the same Spirit that filled them (Acts 8). They call down upon the Samaritans the fire of the Spirit, whereas formerly they wanted to call down the fires of destruction upon them. Peter enters the house of a Gentile and says, "I perceive God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34, 35).

Pride of place is overcome as well. Barnabas cares so much for the advancement of the church, that he recruits Paul for the work even though that means that Barnabas will slip to second place in importance (Acts 11). Two deacons, Stephen and Philip, can become effective evangelists without the twelve apostles moving to silence them for exercising the preacher's office without a license (Acts 6-8). Before Acts has run its course, a young man like Timothy is exercising pastoral authority, and Philip's daughters are functioning as prophetesses in Palestine (Acts 21:9) without anyone fearing that God's order in the church is threatened. Rather, as Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost, Joel's prophecy was fulfilled in that male and female, old and young, highborn and lowborn were receiving the Spirit and bearing witness for Christ (Acts 2:17).

Gone too was the impulse to serve God by wielding the sword. One can hardly imagine a more detested symbol of Roman oppression than a Roman soldier. Twice Palestine was brought to disaster when zealous Jewish patriots attacked the Roman forces in hopes of throwing off the yoke of foreign rule. But Peter, after some special preparations by God's Spirit, went to the house of a Roman centurion in Caesarea and shared

the good news of Jesus with him, witnessed his household's reception of the Spirit, and baptized them into the Kingdom of the Lamb (Acts 10).

Yes, this gentle Pentecost of John 20 had brought into being a new kind of disciple, one different at heart than in the scenes of the gospel stories. How necessary this was before they should be clothed with the power of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Lk. 24:49)! The very expression of the Spirit falling upon them, of clothing them with himself, reminds us of the stories of the book of Judges. There we see people doing exploits of violence against Israel's enemies, though their personal lives at times were morally deficient. Had the strong winds of the Spirit in Acts 2 clothed the disciples with sheer power, the narratives of Acts might read like the book of Judges. No, such dynamic power cannot be trusted to unfit persons, for it would only increase their capacity for harm. That's why Peter tells Simon the sorcerer that his heart is not fit for God's gift of the Spirit (Acts 8:21).

But the inward Pentecost of John 20 was the necessary preparation for the outward Pentecost of Acts 2. Renewed in the image of Christ, the disciples were ready to be clothed in this power. The immediate result was that they left the Upper Room, and took to the streets of Jerusalem. The church was born in the Upper Room, but its first infant cries were uttered on the streets to the amazed people who crowded the festival city. The fear that had locked them up is replaced by a boldness that carries them out to the world. The Easter message was out of the closet and into the crossroads of the earth. It would spread in rapid fashion from Jerusalem to Samaria and Antioch, across Asia Minor and Greece, and finally reach the seat of world power in Rome. It feared not civil nor religious authorities, for the secret of its power was the conviction that "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Can any of us read this story without being struck by the awful irony of the situation? The very settings in which we rehearse this story to each other, and at times get carried away by it, are so like those of the disciples in John 20. We are behind doors locked by our own contrivance. Our prayer meetings do not spill over into the streets of our chief metropolitan areas — due in part to the fact that we no longer venture into such areas. For the most part, our religious gatherings are fellowships of fear. Do not our own hearts tell us that evangelism is not likely to happen among us in any appreciable measure unless we, the potential witnesses, are prepared for the task by the Spirit of evangelism? Breathe on us anew, O Resurrected Christ, that we might be equipped by the Holy Spirit within and without to communicate your gospel.

II. Secondly, the Holy Spirit is essential to evangelism because he is the one who fashions our message. The content, the communication, and the effects of our message are all shaped by the Spirit of God.

Paul reminded Timothy that the Scriptures were God-breathed and thus were the only true instruction for salvation (II Tim. 3:15-17). The gospels tell us that Jesus' primary ministry to the disciples after his resurrection was to teach them to see how the Old Testament pointed to him and his redemptive mission. When it comes to the book of Acts, one is struck by the powerful, skillful use of the Scripture in the disciples' public preaching and private witness. Aided by the Spirit, as Jesus promised they would be in John chapters 14-16, they blended the testimony of the written Word with their eye and ear witness accounts from the ministry of Jesus. Many were unconvinced by their message to be sure, but it is absolutely astounding what power their witness had when founded on the Word.

History has confirmed the issue over and over in the likes of John Chrysostom, John Wycliff, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Billy Graham, and a great cloud of other witnesses. It is the Word of God that converts sinners. God has breathed life into the pages of Scripture. It is when we open the Word to the hearers that they feel this vital breath of the Spirit infuse their own beings with God's life.

At the heart of this scriptural message was the word of redemption. In the gospels, the disciples repeatedly missed Jesus' words about the cross. On the heels of his great confession that Jesus was the Christ, Peter actually started to rebuke Jesus for talking about death on a cross (Mk. 8:27-38). But now the cross has become central to their proclamation. The Christ who stood among them and said, "Peace," did so with nailprints in his hands and a scar on his side. They came to understand that the only basis for remission of sins which they were to proclaim was the cross of Christ. Their preaching in Acts is obsessed with the cross. It is in virtually every message by direct reference or clear allusion. In the words of E. Stanley Jones, the disciples were not dispensers of good views but of good news. Christ crucified is every person's charter of salvation. And the Holy Spirit is never more actively engaged in witness than when our witness enters the street of the Via Dolorosa.

Yet, while the redemptive message holds center stage in every gospel witness in Acts, there is nothing routine or stereotyped about it. The message is put differently when Peter preaches to the crowd at Pentecost (Acts 2) than when Philip talks privately to the eunuch in the desert south of Jerusalem (Acts 8:26-39). Paul does not say the same things in the Jewish synagogue as he does on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-34). The central theme of redemption is wonderfully personalized in every case. Only the Spirit of omniscience could ever prompt one to shape the gospel story in such a way as to address the particular questions of the individual conscience. Frequently in our witnessing it is some incidental remark or kind act that is providentially ordered by God to go straight to a person's heart. Here we are clearly beyond natural explanations for why things happen as they do, but what is to us unfamiliar territory is home turf for the Holy Spirit, indispensable as he is to the message we share.

One final observation before we leave this area of the Spirit's role in evangelism. It is a natural corollary to the personalizing of the gospel to each person that we have just observed. I am struck by the power of application in the preaching of Jesus and the early Christians. This is, I believe, a lost art in much of modern Christianity. In order not to offend anyone, we so often talk in studied generalities. We might as well be talking about a recent show we observed on television. Both parties are free to offer comments upon it, but neither one feels he has to do anything with the other's views. It was different when the Spirit was present with power. People felt that the conversation ended with an urgent question mark. Some kind of response was expected. They could not change the subject nor immediately plunge into some other activity. They had been put into a jury box and forced to listen to a witness. The judge was awaiting their verdict. What would it be? For our witness to have that quality to it, the Holy Spirit will need to energize it in an uncommon fashion.

III. The Holy Spirit is essential to evangelism because he alone prepares the hearers to receive the message. Think, for a moment, of the area of mass communication. Thousands of messages are on the electronic media at any moment of the day. But unless some set is tuned into the proper frequency, the message will not be received. How dependent we are likewise on the Spirit of God to get people tuned in to the message we have to share.

Jesus said, "No one can come to me, unless the Father, who sent me draws him" (Jn. 6:44). Acts is a living demonstration of this fact. In Acts 2 God put on a spectacle of sight and sound that got the attention of a multitude. It appears that the crowd's ability to hear each in his own language was as much a miracle of hearing as of speaking. No matter about the details, the people's hearts certainly were ready, for before the day was over 3,000 sealed their faith in baptism.

Some of the individual stories of preparation in Acts are absolutely spine tingling. Take the Ethiopian in Acts 8. How else can you explain the timing that brought Philip from Samaria to the Gaza Desert at the precise moment the eunuch was puzzling over Isaiah 53. Move on to Acts 10 where a sincere Roman soldier at prayer was told to send for a man he never knew, temporarily residing in a town somewhat distant from his own. How God timed a preparatory dream for Peter to coincide with the arrival of Cornelius' messengers is simply thrilling. By the time Peter got to Caesaria, Cornelius had his whole house ready for his visit. What preparation on the part of God's Spirit! No wonder their reception of Peter's message and the Spirit that attended it seemed so effortless.

Stories abound nearer our own time, many of them out of missionary history. Baptist missionaries in Burma were surprised by their instant success in a rural village that had no previous contact with Christian-

ity. Then they discovered that a lady in the village had a dream in which two white-skinned men arrived in her village carrying a black book under their arm. What's more, they were dressed in the black suits fashionable in the United States at the time. God told her in the dream that these people would tell them the words of life. She told the villagers about her dream, but it all seemed rather fantastic to those who had never seen Westerners in their entire experience. Imagine their surprise when two missionaries arrived in the exact image of the women's dream.

I have no doubt that should we turn this into a testimony service we could go on for hours with stories out of your own lives where you shared a word of witness and found God had been preparing the person ahead of time for the seed you would drop upon well prepared soil.

Not only does the Spirit precede your word; he also attends it. In John 15:26, 27, Jesus said that the disciples would bear witness to him as also would the Holy Spirit whom he would send. Here was the ancient Jewish principle that every word would be established in the mouth of two witnesses (Dt. 17:6). It is not sufficient for a person to be convicted before God on the basis of our testimony alone. It takes the confirming witness of the Spirit to bring about a sentence of conviction. This was why the apostolic witness got results. Peter put the matter clearly in Acts 5:32: "And we are witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." For them Christian witness was a duet and not a solo.

The Spirit remains with the hearers after we are gone, skillfully hitting the playback button to the witness we recorded on their memory. For some time after the Apostle Paul participated in the martyrdom of Stephen, he continued his way of Jewish devotion, intensifying his persecution of Christians in the attempt to silence what he could not refute. But somehow Stephen's charge that he, like others, was resisting God kept disturbing his conscience. When the light of the Damascus road arrested him, God asked him why he was persecuting the Lord Jesus. The charge of Stephen had struck fast like an arrow and now was brought to a climax by the work of the Spirit of God.

Our witness can bring people to the presence of Jesus, but His Spirit must convert the soul. There is a close connection between the message of remission of sin that we proclaim and God's actual forgiveness bestowed upon receptive hearts. One of the sensitivities of the Spirit is to help us do our part well and then not intrude upon the work that God alone can do. If we are not careful here we will get decisions but people will not really be drawn into the Kingdom of God. But we can walk in confidence that God will execute his job without fail. As the third runner of a relay passes the baton on the last runner, there is a great sense of relief. His lap is run and the race is in the hands of the swiftest runner on the team. So too, when we have completed our act of witness, we rejoice that the matter of conversion is now in the hands of God.

It is time for us to come to a conclusion on this subject. It should be clear to us from Scripture and from Christian experience that the Holy Spirit is the essential ingredient in evangelism. He molds the witnesses for their task. He energizes their message. He prepares the heart of the hearers to receive the remission of sins we proclaim.

How then can we be equipped by the Spirit for our task of witness? I am struck by the role of prayer in the passages under consideration. In Luke 11:13, the passage where Jesus teaches on prayer, it says that God gives the Spirit to those who ask Him. This is the only explicit activity we know the 120 engaged in as they awaited the “promise of the Father” (Acts 1:15). When the Apostles were persecuted and felt they needed strength for witness, they prayed until strengthened to meet the challenge by the boldness of the Spirit (Acts 4:23-31). It was to a church in prayer at Antioch (Acts 13) that the missionary direction came to send Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles.

I know of no other way to be open to the Spirit of evangelism in our midst. A prayerless church will not be an evangelistic church, and a prayerless Christian will not be strong in witness. We must go to our knees before we can stand to our feet. In the words of E. Stanley Jones, “We cannot go further until we go deeper.” Prayer got the Easter news from behind closed doors to the streets of Jerusalem. “Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest that He would send his people forth into the harvest” (Mt. 9:38).



¹This message was originally preached in 1986 at the Allegheny Regional Conference of the Brethren In Christ Church during the biennium in which the denominational theme was “Energized to Evangelize.”

²This message is heavily indebted throughout to the insights of E. Stanley Jones as found in his *The Christ of Every Road: A Study in Pentecost* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1930).