

We've Got Spirit
Associate Pastor Adam M.L. Tice
Jan. 10, 2010

Acts 8:14-17

“For as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Does anything in that verse catch you a little off guard? What’s with saying “they had *only* been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus”?

What lies behind this concern? Why was baptism and confession of faith not enough? What necessitated this visit by two apostolic big-wigs?

Acts has been called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. It begins with Jesus’ promise to the disciples that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit¹ and moves quickly on to Pentecost with the tongues of fire and multi-lingual worship.² Peter quotes the prophet Joel and preaches that God says, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...”³ etc. and on to “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”⁴ Hmm.

When the audience hears Peter’s stunning sermon, they ask how they should respond. They are instructed to repent and be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁵

¹ Acts 1:5

² 2:1-4

³ 2:17a

⁴ 2:21

⁵ 2:37-38

Moving on, Peter and John are arrested. When the high priests question them, Peter is “filled with the Holy Spirit” as he answers.⁶

In celebrating their release, they again invoke the Holy Spirit, saying that God the Creator spoke “by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David” in the Psalms.⁷ And again, people are filled with the Holy Spirit and speak boldly God’s word.⁸ This is when we read of the communist tendencies of the community, which is followed by the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who Peter accuses of lying to the Holy Spirit when they keep back a portion of the proceeds of a land sale. They fall down dead when so accused.⁹

Again, Peter and the apostles are arrested; this time in their testimony, they claim the Holy Spirit as a fellow witness to God’s work in Jesus.¹⁰ Then we have the story of Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.¹¹ In his lengthy sermon of defense before his stoning, he describes the religious authorities as “opposing the Holy Spirit,” and he is filled with the Holy Spirit as he has a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God.¹² This initiates the persecution against the church and the anti-Christian career of Saul of Tarsus.¹³

As the Christians scattered, they took their faith with them and proclaimed the word wherever they went. Phillip went to the city of Samaria and did great signs and wonders there, curing and healing.¹⁴ “Now, when the apostles at

⁶ 4:7-8

⁷ 4:23-26

⁸ 4:31

⁹ 5:1-11

¹⁰ 5:32

¹¹ 6:5

¹² 7:51, 55-56

¹³ 8:1-3

¹⁴ 8:4-8

Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵

What do you hear when people invoke the Holy Spirit? Does it have positive associations for you? Do you become concerned about an overly-charismatic expression of faith? Does it sound like hocus-pocus? Do you feel that you are blessed with the Holy Spirit? That this church is? That it is even possible for Mennonites? Or would you rather leave the Spirit to the Pentecostals?

All these questions become rather pertinent to me as I read this passage. It immediately brought to mind some major statements about our congregation. First, if you'll look at the heading of our bulletin, you'll find that we are “A Christ-centered” church. And if you look at our church constitution, you'll find that the only explicit condition for membership is that people “confess their faith in Christ as Lord of their lives and commit themselves to a life of discipleship and mutual care.”

Are we like the nascent church in Samaria? Would Peter and John have to come give us a little talking-to? Has the Holy Spirit come upon us?

It is interesting to me that when talking about the Holy Spirit, many denominations place a heavy emphasis on speaking in tongues. But as my survey of the first part of Acts should indicate, the Spirit is much more than a Babel-fish.

The Spirit so far in acts has inspired prophecy, aids in answering authorities, inspires the poetry and music of David, enables people to speak

¹⁵ 8:14-15

boldly, calls out liars, acts as a witness to God's work and is described as the one doing that work.

The most extensive categories of works of the Spirit seen so far are doing the work of God and enabling the followers of Jesus to speak God's word. Later on in Acts, we see Peter citing the gifts of the Spirit as evidence of God's work among the gentiles.¹⁶ And at the famous Jerusalem council, the leaders of the church declare that inclusion of the gentiles seems "good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."¹⁷

I have sometimes thought of the Holy Spirit as representing a faith of the heart — an emotional experience that at best balances (and perhaps sometimes overwhelms) an intellectual faith. If I were to put it in terms of the Trinity, I would have suggested that God the Father represents the head, Jesus the hands and the Spirit the heart. Now, given that the Spirit is grammatically feminine, this becomes a pretty sexist view of the Trinity — the Father is the thinker, the Son is the doer and the she-Spirit is the emotional one.

There are a lot of problems with that formulation, especially since in good theology attributes assigned to one member of the Trinity must be ascribable to all three. Beyond that, this image of the Holy Spirit as representing a purely emotional faith doesn't stack up against the record in Acts. This Spirit is more like a brainy lawyer, advocating for Christians. She guides interpretation and helps make decisions.

¹⁶ 11:17

¹⁷ 15:28

Isn't it interesting that when we talk about Spirituality, this isn't at all what we think of? We don't seem to imagine this nitty-gritty stuff, this arguing, discerning, interpreting and thinking to be Spiritual work. And yet, I'm convinced that in the midst of all of it, the Spirit is here.

Perhaps this is why Peter and John believed it to be so essential that the believers in Samaria received the Spirit — because they could not become the church without her. The Spirit is how the work of Jesus is sustained in the body of believers. Without her gifts, the Church is a mere institution. With her, the Church is a living, breathing thing, which can work, learn, discern and thrive.

In college I began encountering the sentiment that some of my friends were happy to follow Jesus, but weren't interested in the Church or religion or even spirituality. And given the character of the Church at various points in history, who can blame them? But I now have to argue that this type of faith is simply inadequate. Without the Holy Spirit and her gifts, a life of following Jesus is unsustainable.

So back to the congregational statements I cited earlier. I do think that we are right in proclaiming a Christo-centric faith. After all, as I said earlier, attributes ascribed to one person of the Trinity are by definition true of all three; our most complete revelation of God's character and teaching comes in the person of Jesus, so centering our faith and practice on him makes sense. It is very Anabaptist of us. But are we missing out on something by not at least mentioning the work of the Spirit? Or of the first person of the Trinity for that matter — the

Mother/Father/Creator? What if our membership guideline invited people to do the work of God in following Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit?

Though perhaps we don't talk about her as much as we ought, I see the Spirit at work here at Hyattsville. She's been with us as we've made decisions together, discerned the Scriptures and answered to authorities. She's present in our worship, inspiring our weekly artwork and flowing through our song. She's there in the care we show one another when we experience pain and heartbreak. She's there in our laughter. She's there in our doubt and in our certainty. She's there in our hearts, in our heads and in our hands.

Josh has included a moment for silent reflection. I invite you to use that time to contemplate your own experience of the Spirit. What images does "Holy Spirit" bring to mind for you, negative or positive? Does what I've described today match up with what you understand or believe? Am I right that there are intellectual aspects to her work? Where do you see the Spirit at work in our congregation? Would it be useful for us to revisit the language we use to describe ourselves? I invite you to share your thoughts during the response time.