

The Church's Greatest Need

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Let me state at the outset what I believe to be the church's greatest need, and I do so without fear of contradiction by any serious, discerning observer. The greatest need and one of deepest importance is for the continual manifestation of the Holy Spirit. I did not say theological theory about the Holy Spirit, or just intellectual understanding—I said, the power of the Holy Spirit; that has to do with experience not words. When we begin thinking and studying what the Bible has to say about the Holy Spirit and the believer, we are immediately into experimental awareness. I am talking about that which makes men aware of and sure of the reality of Jesus—the Living Christ.

Many preachers have little or nothing to say about experimental awareness of God. Not much is heard in our churches about the anointing through which men are made sure of the reality of Jesus as proclaimed by the apostles. 1st John 2:20,27 is what I am talking about: “*But you have an unction from the Holy One...But the anointing which you have received of him abideth in you...*” The Holy Spirit is a live subject on the contemporary scene and many of the qualified people are not saying enough about Him. And some unqualified people are often saying too much and often saying inaccurate things which sometimes leads to fanaticism and hypocrisy. There are few subjects more important to the Christian and the Christian minister because the Holy Spirit is the source of all spiritual witnessing and all spiritual worship; He is also the “Divine Agent of Evangelism.”

The Holy Spirit is to the life of the Christian what the Creator is to the world. Without God the Creator the world would not exist and without His continuing, sustaining, and preserving work the world would crash out of existence. So likewise, without the Holy Spirit there would be no Christians in the world and without His continual sanctifying influence the Christian would know no spiritual growth or power.

The churches of the reformation gave much emphasis to the work of the Holy Spirit. The reformers stressed that what is necessary for correct interpretation of the Bible is not the church, but rather the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit on man's mind.

Spurgeon said, “One of the most effectual ways for a church to revive herself is to preach much about the Holy Spirit; after all He is the very breath of the church. And when a church, a minister or a Christian finds that it is winter time in his soul they must turn to the Holy Spirit and cry ‘*Quicken thou me in the Way.*’” May that be our cry these days of the great need for reality in our lives and the life of the church.” Luther and Calvin set forth with clarity that it is the Holy Spirit that is necessary in applying the sacrifice of Christ in our lives—not the mass but the Spirit.

How many churches are seeking:

The power of the Spirit

The wisdom of the Spirit

The grace of the Spirit

The love of the Spirit

To pray in the Spirit?

I am not talking about some second experience subsequent to conversion. I am talking about seeking to experience the filling of the Spirit over and over and over again for gospel purposes.

In Romans 15:13,19 the great Apostle shows the absolute necessity of the work of the Spirit for the internal growth of the church and for all the outside work of gathering God's elect from the world.

In verse 13 he attributes the power to be filled with joy, and peace and abound in hope to the Holy Spirit. *“Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit”*

In verse 19 he shows the necessity of the Holy Spirit for outside gospel work: *“Through mighty signs and wonders by the power of the Spirit of God; so that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.”*

You see, my dear reader, that first of all, to keep the church happy and holy within herself there must be a manifestation of the power of the Spirit. Secondly, in order for the church to invade the territories of the enemy and conquer sinners for Christ she must be clothed with the same mighty power. And let me underscore one thing, that is, the power of the church for her external work will be proportionate with the power which dwells within herself.

What I am saying is this: gauge the power of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers and you may fairly judge their influence on unbelievers. Let the church be illuminated by the power of the Holy Spirit and she will be sure to reflect light and power to the unbelieving world. Why?? Because we, ourselves, must first drink of the living water before the rivers of living water will flow out to the unconverted. We can not distribute loaves and fishes out of an empty basket. Oh, the absolute necessity of the power of the Holy Spirit!

1. When we were baptized we were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
2. When we pronounce couples “man and wife” we do so in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. When we affirm our faith in the creed, we say that we believe in God the Father, and in God the Son and in God the Holy Spirit.

Yes, and the last words pronounced over our coffin before the mourners turn from our grave and the cold earth goes over our dead body, the last words to the mourners will be, “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.”

When we think of the incarnation we immediately think of the virgin Mary and how the Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Highest overshadowed her (Luke 1:35).

When we consider the earthly ministry of our Lord we remember before that ministry began the Spirit *“descended from heaven like a dove and abode on him.”* The Bible says that God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit; again, that the Father gave Him the Spirit above measure and that He was *“full of the Holy Spirit”* (John 1:32; Acts 10:38; John 3:34; Luke 4:1).

When the scripture takes us to the cross, where He suffered vicariously, we learn in Heb 9:14 that it was *“through the eternal Spirit He offered Himself without spot to God.”*

When we think of the keystone of Christian truth, the seal and top stone of all his work (THE RESURRECTION), the scripture again under scores the absolute necessity of the work of the Spirit.

It is written that *“He was put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.”* When we view his departure from this world and the tremendous pain and sorrow that filled His disciples—how did He comfort that little orphan family? Well, it was with that gracious promise that He gave to them the night before He died: *“I will pray the Father and He shall give you another Comforter. . . even the Spirit of truth.”* John 14:16,17.

And when we think of His final mandate to the apostles to preach the gospel to all the world we again see the necessary place of the Holy Spirit. Hear His own words to them. *“Wait for the promise of the Father.”* They were unfit to go forth with His message until they were *“filled with the Holy Spirit.”* And we too are unfit.

What do you think of the whole dispensation under which we Christians live? You know we are privileged far above the Jews in that we are told in II Cor. 3:8 that we live under the “ministration of the Spirit.”

Why do I say this is the need of the hour?

1. Without the Spirit there will be no conviction.
2. Without the Spirit there will be no conversions.
3. Without the Spirit there will be no Spiritual growth.
4. Without the Spirit all preaching and witnessing is in vain.
5. Even the preaching of our Lord did not produce one convert apart from this life-giving power, though He Himself had the Spirit without measure.

The Bible says, “*Ye shall receive power*” When? When the Holy Spirit shall come upon you.

When we think of evangelism we think of the Holy Spirit promised in Acts 1:8. Immediately our minds run to two things. First, to Pentecost where 3000 souls were evangelized, and secondly, to the effectual call that (1) enlightened their minds, (2) convicted, and convinced their consciences, and (3) renewed their wills.

Well, my dear reader, **I trust that you can understand my assertion that the greatest need in the church today is a manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit.**

Pentecost was a Holy Spirit event—an evangelistic event. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost God laid the whole world in the lap of the church as her responsibility to witness. Just think what the Holy Spirit produced at Pentecost.

What did the Holy Spirit Produce at Pentecost?

I hear someone saying, “tongues”. Well, we will see that tongues was the least thing it produced—almost insignificant by comparison.

First, the Holy Spirit at Pentecost produced *powerful, evangelistic preaching*. See it immediately in Acts 2:14-36. This preaching was not only powerful but it was relevant; it made them ask the right questions. One of the things that serious preachers must always be concerned about is that their preaching be relevant. There is much preaching which is answering questions that no one is asking. That is like scratching where it doesn't itch.

One of the fundamental problems of our generation, both in the world and in the church, is that people are not asking the right questions. They are not itching in the right place. Well, what is the answer to that problem?

The answer is Spirit-breathed, Christ-centered, Bible preaching in the power and unction of the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit can bring conviction. The New Testament and the history of revival clearly testify to that fact.

John 16:8 “*And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement.*” Under the powerful Holy Spirit preaching there is never any problem with people itching in the wrong places, and they will be asking the right questions (Acts 2:37) “*What must I do to be saved*“?

Did Anyone Ever Ask a More Important Question?

They did not ask any questions about tongues or anything about the phenomena. They asked a much more important question—verse 37: “*Men and brethren what must we do?*”

Some think of Pentecost as producing tongues. It did that, but tongues did not produce converts. No. It was the powerful preaching produced by the Holy Spirit that made people itch in the right place, ask the right questions, and find the right answers. This power preaching produced converts, thousands of them.

If you never understand tongues it will not make one bit of difference. But if you never experience Spirit-anointed preaching it makes all the difference in the world—yes, the difference between life and death, heaven and hell.

The second thing the Holy Spirit produced at Pentecost was an “*Apostolic Church*.” See Acts 2:42-47. The Holy Spirit is not just an “Evangelist” drawing people to Christ. The Holy Spirit is also a “Church Planter” and a “Church Builder.” The Holy Spirit draws people into the fellowship of the church, The Holy Spirit creates the communion of obedient, teachable, worshipping, and witnessing Christians. Christians who are learning to love God, love God’s people and God’s Church.

What is an Apostolic Church? It is a church experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit. This is apparent by what is revealed in Acts 2:42-47. The converts were steadfast. “*They continued steadfastly.*” That is, they were not a church that was carried away with every novelty and every new gimmick of evangelism. An apostolic church knows what it believes and why it believes what it believes.

There are four areas, or, four distinct marks of an apostolic church set forth in these verses.

1.(v. 42) — They were continually devoting themselves to *Apostolic teaching*. Perhaps this is the primary mark. A real church will be submitting to apostolic truth. They will be interested in what the Bible says, what it means and how it applies to faith and practice.

2. (v. 42) — They were distinguished by *God honoring worship* — “*Breaking of bread, prayer and praise.*” I wish all ministers and church officers were as much concerned about the power of the Holy Spirit in our worship services as they are about a lot of minute details. There would be much more peace and true worship and far less pharisaic quibbling about secondary matters.

All the forms and ceremonies—even baptism and the Lord’s Supper—though properly managed, will be empty and unedifying, and they will bring no glory to God or good to His people without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible teaches that the first concern in the official order of divine worship is the Holy Spirit. The hymn writer was correct when he wrote “All is vain unless the Holy One come down.” No ordinance has any effective spiritual power except the Holy Spirit gives it. No Christian’s heart is ever in the proper frame to worship without the Holy Spirit.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the worship of God issues in joy and gladness. They were distinguished by God-honoring worship.

3.(vv. 44,45) — They were marked by *Christ-like love and unity*. They did not forsake the assembling of themselves together.

4.(v.47) — They not only applied themselves to sound doctrine, and engaged in true worship, and were united by Christ-like love, but fourthly, they were increased by *God-centered evangelism*. The Lord added to the church. That is God-centered evangelism.

Did they just sit under apostolic teaching, worship and pray, and say the Lord saves? No, there was something else going on daily. Cf. 2:47. Every day or day by day the Lord added because every day... from house to house they kept teaching and preaching about Jesus.

Acts 5:42: “*And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.*” This was God-centered, Holy Spirit, God-honoring evangelism.

The Father has sent us the Comforter that He may dwell in us till the coming of the Lord. The Holy Spirit has never returned, for He came in accordance with the Savior’s promise, to abide with us forever. The gift of the Comforter was not temporary, and the display of His power was not to be once seen and never again.

The Holy Spirit is here and we ought to expect divine working among us; and if He does not so work we should search ourselves to see what it is that hinders, and whether there may not be somewhat in ourselves which vexes Him, so that He restrains His sacred energy, and does not work among us as He did before.

Spurgeon's Hymn says it well:

The Holy Ghost is here, where saints in prayer agree,
As Jesus' parting Gift is near each pleading company.

Not far away is He to be by prayer brought nigh,
But here in present majesty, as in His courts on high.

He dwells within our soul, an ever welcome guest;
He reigns with absolute control, as monarch in the breast.

Obedient to Thy will, we wait to feel Thy power;
O Lord of life, our hopes fulfill, and bless this hallowed hour.

What we long for supremely is to be empowered by the Holy Spirit—to know the fullness of the Spirit. Organization is helpful, but one thing is essential and that is the power of the Spirit.

With the fullness of the Spirit:

1. Our organization will be filled with power, peace and prosperity.
2. Our orthodoxy will pulsate with love. There will be no legalism or Pharisaism. Our liberty will serve the interest of truth and godliness, not self indulgence.
3. A fuller tide of the Spirit means spiritual discernment, deeper insight into the Scriptures.
4. The church will be "glorious in holiness," for wherever the Spirit of God dwell He is as the refiner's fire.
5. Peace, harmony, and unity will be insured. Fidelity to truth will carry no pride or bitterness.
6. The church will have a real missionary vision.
7. With the fullness of the Spirit the church will not use carnal or unworthy methods in worship or witness.

Whatever means you use to get people into the church is precisely what you must use to keep them. If you get them with a religious circus then you must keep the circus going—keep up the entertainment. If you get them with biblical preaching and teaching, then that will keep them and you will not need the entertainment.

The church will have an attractive power. When the fruits of the Spirit abound men will be drawn as bees to the apple blossom. Preaching will be "*in the demonstration of the Spirit and power.*"

But I think I hear someone say, "O, that was an apostolic promise, you are talking about apostolic times." No, my friend, I am speaking to you about something that not only happened in the far distant past, I am speaking about a promise that is far-reaching, yes, the promise of the Spirit is a far-reaching promise.

Let me give you just two verses to establish that fact. Acts 2:38,39: "*Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.*"

Please note the words “*to all that are afar off.*” If those words are not sufficient to convince you then underscore the rest of the words in the passage, “*as many as the Lord our God shall call.*” Oh, I am glad for this “far-reaching promise.”

Do you realize that all that has been done by God the Father and all that has been done by God the Son **will not accomplish one thing unless the Spirit makes them effectual. Surely this is the greatest need of the church. NO ACCEPTABLE action of the Christian life can be performed without the Holy Spirit.**

How Shall We Hope to Obtain
the Power or Fullness of the Spirit?

The Bible makes two things very, very clear in connection with fullness and power of the Spirit.

First, there is some relationship between the fullness and power of the Spirit and PRAYER. Two passages underscore this statement. Luke 11:13 “*If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?*” Acts 4:31 “*And when they had prayed (and not before), the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spake the word of God with boldness.*”

The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods but through men. He does not come on machinery but on men. He does not anoint plans but men. It is not great talent nor great learning that God needs but men great in holiness, great in faith, great in love, great in fidelity, great for God. These men can mold a generation for God.

Secondly, the Bible also teaches that there is some relationship to the power of the Spirit and OBEDIENCE. Acts 5:32 “*And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to them that obey him.*”

Our Lord condemned the religious crowd in His day on two counts (Mt 22:29). He said to them, “*Ye do err (or you are mistaken), not knowing the scriptures nor the power of God.*” They lacked knowledge and power. When the disciples could not heal the man in the gospels it was not a lack of knowledge but power. We do not lack knowledge—we lack power.

Knowledge comes by studying. Power comes by prayer and fasting.

It is possible to know the plan (knowledge) and not know the power. You will not get power by attending meetings even though you may get the principle for receiving the power by the meeting; you will get the power by waiting on God. You may get the inspiration to seek the power in the meeting, but the power itself comes by waiting, not going.

Yes, it is true, the wind blows where it will. And there certainly is a sense in which the Spirit is sovereign to blow when, where and how He will.

But the supernatural does have some laws just as the natural does:

1. Everything that grieves the Spirit must be put away. To use Biblical language “*all malice and all guile and all hypocrisies and all unbelief, worldly mindedness, pride*”—everything opposed to the simplicity, the charity and purity of Christ.

2. We will not have the power of the Spirit without importunate earnest prayer (Acts 1:14 preceded Acts 2)—prayer that has in it some intensity of desire; the kind of prayer expressed in Luke 11:9-13 “*And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone who asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he asks a fish, will he for a fish, give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?*”

This kind of prayer links together the whole communion of the faithful and knows no stopping till the answer comes. We cannot stop at mere theological consideration of the Holy Spirit. Why? Because sound theology without the Spirit will make you **dry up**. The Spirit without sound theology will make you **blow up**. But with both sound theology and the Spirit you will **grow up**. My whole motive and effort in this article is to create within us a genuine desire for the power of the Spirit in our ministry and in our places of service.

The old Latin hymn of the 10th century expressed it well. May it be the desire of our hearts.

Come, O Creator Spirit blest,
And in our hearts take up thy rest;
Spirit of grace, with heavenly aid
Come to the souls whom thou hast made.

Thou art the Comforter, we cry,
Sent to the earth from God Most High,
Fountain of life and Fire of love,
And our anointing from above.

Make our dull minds with rapture glow,
Let human hearts with love o'erflow;
And, when our feeble flesh would fail,
May thine immortal strength prevail.

Show us the Father, Holy One,
Help us to know the Eternal Son;
Spirit Divine, for evermore
Thee will we trust and Thee adore.

[The substance of this article is taken from an address which was delivered at the 1989 American Banner of Truth Conference at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.]