

'Being the Church' – Part 9

'Come, Holy Spirit'

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Over several months now we have been examining what it truly means to 'be the Church.' We have explored the characteristics of the early Church and examined how they functioned and how different that might be to how we function today. Whenever we examine the New Testament Church we are confronted with the reality in which we find ourselves today and the stark differences between the two are unmistakable.

Now as important as it's been to embark upon this study and see the many areas we may like to revisit if we truly want to be the Church, we need to step back from the detail and ask the key question: how? How was all this possible? What was the secret of those first disciples' success in establishing a Church which grew at a phenomenal rate each year for more than two generations? Did they just follow a plan and tick off the tasks each day? Did they simply decide one day that they would devote themselves to the Apostles teaching every day, share deep, rich koinonia fellowship every day, share meals with each other in their homes every day and worship together every day?

Were these things simply on their 'to do' list or part of some strategic plan and the rest just happened? Absolutely not. Human beings lack the capacity to discipline themselves to follow a list of tasks for that long and God only blesses and grows what comes from our hearts. The rest is just works-based religion and we all know that God hates religion.

So what was it that allowed our forebears to get it so right for so long and have such an incredible impact on the world around them? Well the correct question is not 'what' ... but 'Who' made all this possible. This 'Who' is mentioned in almost every chapter in the book of Acts and multiple times in many chapters. Of course I am speaking about God, the Holy Spirit. Everything about the early Church which made it powerful, effective, real, world-changing and dynamic – was initiated by the Holy Spirit. The disciples were responsible for listening to, discerning the presence of and then responding positively to the Holy Spirit.

This should not surprise us, because the One Who birthed this miracle of the Church, Jesus Christ, operated exactly the same way! Long before the book of Acts and the birth of the Church, Jesus modelled this Spirit-led lifestyle to His disciples. Jesus Himself is the one perfect manifestation in history of the complete work of the Holy Spirit in and through a human being. Jesus was begotten of the Holy Spirit. He is the only begotten Son of God. It was entirely by the Spirit's power working in Mary that the Son of God was formed within her.

Jesus also led a holy life and offered Himself without spot to God through the working of the Holy Spirit. We read in Hebrews 9:14, *"How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God."* Jesus met and overcame temptations as other men and women may meet and overcome them - in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was anointed and fitted for service by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 10:38 *"How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with Him."*

In Luke's account of the earthly life of our Lord we read, *"And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and there went out a fame of Him through all the region round about."* (Luke 9:14)

In a similar way Jesus said of Himself when speaking in the synagogue in Nazareth, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent Me to proclaim freedom to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* (Luke 9:18-19).

All these passages contain the one truth: it was by the anointing of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ was qualified for the service to which God had called Him. As He stood in the Jordan after His baptism, *"The Holy Spirit descended and rested upon Him like a dove,"* and it was then and there that He was anointed with the Holy Spirit and equipped for the service that lay before Him. Jesus received His equipping for service in the same way that we receive ours - by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was taught by the Spirit who rested upon Him. The Spirit of God was the source of His wisdom, direction and power whilst on earth. This was prophesied many years before by Isaiah:

Isaiah 11:2-3 *"And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. And shall make Him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and He shall not judge after the sight of His eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of His ears."*

Further on in Isaiah we read, *"Behold My servant, whom I uphold; My chosen in whom My soul delights; I have put My Spirit upon Him ..."* (Isaiah 17:1). Matthew tells us that this prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (see Matthew 12:17-18).

The Holy Spirit remained with Jesus in all His fullness and the words He spoke in consequence were the very words of God. We read in John 3:34, *"For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God: for He gives not the Spirit by measure."* After His resurrection, Jesus gave a commandment to His Apostles whom He had chosen through the Holy Spirit. We read in Acts 1:2, *"Until the day in which He was taken up, after that He through the Holy Spirit had given commandment to the Apostles whom He had chosen."* This relates to the time after His resurrection and so we see Jesus still working in the power of the Holy Spirit even after His resurrection from the dead.

Jesus performed His miracles here on earth in the power of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 12:28, we read, *"I cast out devils by the power of the Spirit of God."* It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was raised from the dead. We read in Romans 8:11, *"But if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwells in you."* The same Spirit who is to quicken our mortal bodies and is to raise us up in some future day, raised up Jesus.

Several things are plainly evident from this study of the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ: First of all, we see the completeness of His humanity. He lived, He thought, He worked, He taught, He conquered sin and won victories for God in the power of that very same Spirit Whom it is our privilege also to have. Secondly, we see our own utter dependence upon the Holy Spirit. If it was in the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, lived and worked, achieved and triumphed, how much more dependent are we upon the Spirit at every turn of life and in every phase of service and every experience of conflict with Satan and sin?

The third thing that is evident is the wondrous world of privilege, blessing, victory and conquest that is open to us. The same Spirit by which Jesus was originally begotten is in us so we can be 'begotten' again (born again) of Him.

The same Spirit by which Jesus offered Himself without spot to God is with us so we may also offer ourselves without spot to Him. The same Spirit by which Jesus was anointed for service is with us so we may be anointed for service. The same Spirit Who led Jesus Christ in His movements here on earth is ready to lead us today. The same Spirit Who taught Jesus and imparted to Him wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord is here to teach us. Jesus Christ is our pattern (1 John 2:6), "*the first born among many brethren*" (Romans 8:29). Whatever He realised through the Holy Spirit – we too can and should realise today.

Now perhaps we can understand why the book of Acts is full of references to the Holy Spirit. **The miracle of the Church and its impact on the world came in direct proportion to the people's knowledge of and submission to the Holy Spirit.** There are actually 45 verses in Acts which highlight the work of the Holy Spirit. Without that moment by moment work of the Spirit of God, there would be no Acts of the Apostles; there would be no Church. If we read through the book of Acts we see for ourselves just how prominent the Holy Spirit was. In the very first chapter of Acts we find Jesus warning the disciples to not do anything until they have the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:4-5,8 *"... (Jesus) ... gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Why did Jesus tell them to wait? Because without the Holy Spirit we are aimless and dangerous; we are ineffective; we are powerless; we are disconnected from heaven and the power of God. All we have is religion and a man-made institution which is completely powerless to change the world. Jesus had taught these disciples so much over the previous three years and they had a lot of knowledge and experience. But the main thing He taught them was that He achieved nothing apart from the Holy Spirit.

Everything in His ministry was in response to the Spirit's leading and empowering. The disciples knew that, so they waited for that power from on high before attempting anything in Jesus' name. If only the modern Church would do the same. If only we would wait for that power from on high before we race off into our ministries and plans in Jesus' name.

Here are all the other references to the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts:

Acts 1:16 *"Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus."*

Acts 2:4 *"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."*

Acts 2:17-18 *"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."*

Acts 2:33 *"Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."*

Acts 2:38 *Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

Acts 4:8 *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people!"*

Acts 4:25 *"You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David."*

Acts 4:31 *"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."*

Acts 5:3 *Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"*

Acts 5:9 *Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?"*

Acts 5:32 *"We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."*

Acts 6:3 *"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom."*

Acts 6:5 *"They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."*

Acts 6:10 *"They could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke."*

Acts 7:51 *"You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"*

Acts 7:55 *"Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."*

Acts 8:15-19 *When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money. "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."*

Acts 8:29 *The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*

Acts 8:39 *"When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away."*

Acts 9:17 *"Jesus...has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*

Acts 9:31 *"It [the church] was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers."*

Acts 10:19 *"While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you."*

Acts 10:38 *"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power."*

Acts 10:44 *"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message."*

Acts 10:45 *"The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles."*

Acts 10:47 *"Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."*

Acts 11:12 *"The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them."*

Acts 11:15-16 *"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

Acts 11:24 *"He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord."*

Acts 11:28 *"One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world."*

Acts 13:2 *While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."*

Acts 13:4 *"The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia."*

Acts 13:9-10 *Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil."*

Acts 13:52 *"The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."*

Acts 15:8 *"God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us."*

Acts 15:28 *"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements."*

Acts 16:6-7 *"Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to."*

Acts 19:2 *"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."*

Acts 19:6 *"When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied."*

Acts 20:22-23 *"Compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. "I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me."*

Acts 20:28 *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers."*

Acts 21:4 *"Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem."*

How much clearer can it be? Everything Jesus did, was in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Everything the Church which Jesus' birthed did, was empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. He was their constant guide. He was their only source of discernment about what they should speak and what they should do every day. He was the source of all their power, wisdom and truth.

The Holy Spirit was the reason why anything they did actually bore fruit and impacted the world. Wherever the Holy Spirit moved and God's people responded, lives and families and communities were transformed. The success and impact of the early Church was unprecedented before and since that time. Nowhere else in history do we have such a powerful example of the transforming power of a group of ordinary people on the society around them.

It was extraordinary and it all revolved around the work of the Holy Spirit. But we must understand something about the Holy Spirit – He will not barge in and take over. The only reason the Holy Spirit was so powerful, so effective and so present in the life of Jesus is because Jesus chose to submit Himself to the Spirit daily. Jesus could have spoken and acted on His own, but He chose to speak only the words His Father gave Him to speak, through the Spirit and He chose only to do what He saw the Father doing, which was revealed to Him by the Holy Spirit.

The only reason the early Church exploded across the world like a raging bushfire, capturing the hearts and lives of millions of people is because those early disciples submitted themselves to the Holy Spirit every single day and allowed the Spirit of Christ, the head of the Church, to call all the shots – right down to their day by day instructions about where to minister and what to say!

For many years I have been pleading with my brothers and sisters in Christ and especially those in leadership in the Body of Christ to give the Church back to God and the book of Acts shows us what the Church will look like and be like whenever we have the courage to loosen our grip on what is not ours and never was. When we get over our demonic, irrational fear of the Holy Spirit and actually trust Him the way Jesus did and the way the early disciples did, then what we see in the life of Christ and the early Church will become our reality.

Jesus said, *“I will build my Church ...”* and there is only one way He can do that - directly and deliberately through His Spirit. When we let go of the reigns of the church we have built and let the Holy Spirit take the lead in every area of our lives and ministry, then we will finally see the Church Jesus is building and we will be writing our own book of Acts, just as powerful, confronting and mind-boggling as the first one written by Luke.

Jesus told His disciples to wait and not to go anywhere or do anything in His name until they received power from on high – until the Holy Spirit was released in their midst to guide them and empower this new Church. Jesus knew what would happen if they raced off in their own strength and tried to save the world with nothing but hearts full of good intentions. They would have ended up with a powerless, ineffective, marginalized, shrinking, irrelevant Church ... does that sound familiar? It should.

Perhaps it's time we burned all our Church growth books, cancelled our 'how-to' seminars and just decided to heed Jesus' warning again. Maybe we need to shut down every ministry of the Church we have built – close it all down – and wait in prayer, for as long as it takes, doing nothing else, until we receive that power from on high – until the Holy Spirit once again takes up the reigns of the Church Jesus is building and directs our every word and action.

A global pandemic has actually provided most of that 'shutdown' for us right now . . . so I ponder what might emerge on the other side of this unprecedented ministry hiatus if we all spent this time on our knees in prayer before God, asking that the post-pandemic Church will be one led and empowered entirely by the Holy Spirit. I wonder what might emerge if we let go of all our plans and man-made visions of the Church and allowed God to rebirth the Spirit-led Church Jesus promised to build. My mind boggles as my heart pounds with anticipation of what could be.

The bottom line is this – and it's embarrassingly simple: **when you look at the life and ministry of Jesus when He was on earth and the life and ministry of the early Church He birthed, you cannot avoid the fact that the sovereign presence, power and moment-by-moment reality of the Holy Spirit is the only reason Jesus and the early disciples achieved anything at all.** And the fact that, with the Holy Spirit, they achieved so much – turning the whole world upside down – should be our strongest motivation and greatest encouragement to follow their lead.

Do you remember when Peter and John healed the lame man at the temple gate and news spread and they found themselves dragged before the Sanhedrin to answer for actions? They testified to the power of the resurrected Christ and were scolded the threatened and sent on their way. What did they do next? Let me remind you and give you another glimpse into what being the Church really looks like:

Acts 4:23-33 *“On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David ... Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all.”

If we truly want to be the Church, then we have to let it go – we have to give the Church back to God as we allow the Holy Spirit His rightful place once again in our hearts, our committees, our conferences, our worship services, our ministries and our communities. Then, and only then, will we be the Church that Jesus promised to build.

Come, Holy Spirit, come!