

The Holy Spirit

Part 2 - What the Spirit did to our church

Dramatic changes have happened in our church. We believed we saved ourselves by keeping the law, for instance, but now we believe we can't keep the law and only Christ can save us. We also believed we were the only true church with the only right interpretation of Scripture, but now we believe God is working through many Christian churches who have much to teach us from *their* interpretation of Scripture - especially about Jesus, because we thought the gospel WASN'T about Jesus!

We thought, instead, that the gospel was about pinpointing the signs of the end-time and getting people to repent and save themselves by keeping the law before all those terrible prophecies in Matthew 24 and the book of Revelation came crashing down upon them. We focused heavily on prophecy being fulfilled through present events, therefore, rather than on prophecy all pointing to Christ (Revelation 19:10).

But what affected our preaching of the gospel most of all was our understanding of **John 6:44**, because in our minds the phrase, "[No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,](#)" meant that God the Father was only calling and saving an elect few in this day and age to become the leaders under Christ in the "World Tomorrow," and only then would the whole world be reached. It wasn't our focus, therefore, to reach out to all people with a message of salvation in Christ, nor did we believe that ANYBODY could respond to it.

In **verse 45**, however, Jesus says, "[It is written in the Prophets, 'They will ALL be taught by God'. EVERYONE who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.](#)" In other words, the Father ISN'T only reaching out to a select few. Instead, according to Jesus, the Father wants to teach "ALL" people, and "EVERYONE" can listen and learn and be drawn to Christ by the Father, not just those who attended our church.

Thinking we were "the only true church," however, made us believe that God was only calling a select few because there were only a few of us in the church! But in **Acts 2:21**, Peter yelled to the crowd, "[EVERYONE who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.](#)" Salvation, in other words, is open to everyone. When Paul spoke to the Athenians in **Acts 17:30**, his message was, "[but now he \(God\) commands ALL people EVERYWHERE to repent.](#)" And MANY people responded, **Colossians 1:6**: "[All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.](#)" But God was pouring out his Spirit "[on ALL PEOPLE,](#)" **Acts 2:17**, so no wonder lots of people were responding.

It was exactly what Jesus had said would happen too, in **Acts 1:7-8**. His parting words to his disciples were, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But 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.” So Jesus’ focus wasn’t on the signs of the end-time either. It was totally on **the power the Spirit would give to people** to “witness” to him all over the planet, so that ALL people could know what he’s about, because what **he’s** about is the central message of the gospel.

But why is Jesus so central to the gospel? Because only he can show us what God is like and why he created us. And HOW would Jesus show us that? By teaching and actually LIVING what God created humans for in the first place. His life as a human was a living, breathing demonstration of what God is bringing all humanity to eventually. And what he revealed in his life was stunning, that we humans can enter into a direct, loving and intimate relationship with God, upon which the messed-up thinking of the devil’s world has no impact whatsoever.

And how, in turn, would we be witnesses to that? By the Spirit living that remarkable relationship in us. He literally lives the same relationship that Jesus has with God in anyone who believes such a relationship is possible because of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. As Jesus himself said in **John 16:14-15**, “He (the Spirit) will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.” Jesus knows exactly what it’s like to be in relationship with the Father, because everything the Father is and has belongs to him as well. It’s Jesus’ greatest wish, therefore, that the Spirit takes “what is mine” - the wonderful relationship he has with the Father - and makes it possible for ALL us humans to know and share in it too, “for EVERYTHING that I learned from my Father I have made known to you,” **John 15:15**.

But how does Jesus “make it known” to us? By first of all living it himself as a human being, and then living it all over again in us human beings **through the Spirit**, exactly as he said he would in **John 17:26** when he prayed to the Father, “I have made you known to them, and I will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” Jesus came as a human being to help us know God as he knows God, so that we can know - just as he does - what it’s like to be loved by the Father. Jesus came to make his Father’s love real, and he’s still making the Father’s love real to people all over the world by actually living the relationship HE had (and still has) as a human being with the Father through the Spirit, in them.

And we in the church are witnesses to that, just as Jesus was witness to it in his lifetime. He’s now sending us into the world like the Father sent him (John 17:18) - to go and tell people about God and his love for us humans, and to make his love real.

We've come to realize, then, that God isn't sending us out to tell the world about the law, or the Sabbath, or how close the end is. We're not being sent to warn the world about God's impending wrath either, or to win God's favour by obedience. We're being sent to explain that "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight," **Ephesians 1:4**, and that "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the One he loves...to bring ALL things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ," **verses 5-6, 10**.

In other words, God loves us so much that before he even created us he'd already worked out a way through Jesus (verse 9) to bring us all into the same relationship with him that Jesus has. And that's the message we preach, that through Jesus' life, death and resurrection we've ALL become redeemed children of God already. Because of Jesus we've all been forgiven, and our relationship with God has been totally restored, exactly "In accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding," **verses 7-8**.

But someone has to demonstrate and teach that so people really believe it. Because at this point in time most people, including many Christians, **don't** believe it. Who really believes, for instance, that we're all raised with Christ (Colossians 3:1), or that we're all seated with him in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:4), or that we're all united with him in his resurrection (Romans 6:5), or that we're already together with God and Christ (Colossians 3:3), or that through Christ we've already received total reconciliation with God (Romans 5:11), or that God doesn't hold anybody's sins against him, no matter how bad they are (2 Corinthians 5:19)?

But not to worry because Jesus stated clearly in **Acts 1:8** that power would be coming from the Spirit to make us into "witnesses" who could prove that all this was true. Because that's what witnesses are for. Witnesses are people who can confirm something is true because they saw or heard it themselves. So that's what Jesus provides as back-up to the gospel - witnesses who know firsthand what's happened to them since they heard and believed what God has done for humanity through Jesus Christ. Just like the Galatians, they too have experienced **the Spirit working miracles in them** (Galatians 3:5), where their relationship with God has become one of love (Galatians 4:6) and they are full of love for each other (Colossians 1:4, 8).

Jesus has witnesses who know the transforming power of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18), because they've been transformed themselves. They can easily explain, therefore, why they believe what they believe - because they KNOW the effect the gospel of the Father's love through Christ has had on them personally. They speak from personal experience.

So, can WE speak from personal experience of the transforming power of the Spirit? Yes, because we've seen and deeply felt the dramatic changes in our understanding of God, the gospel, and other people. For instance:

- 1) We now believe that God in his immense love for us humans is **reaching out to everyone** through his church. And no one is immune. Anyone can be reached by the gospel message, "**small and great alike,**" **Acts 26:22.**
- 2) We also now believe that **everyone is in the same boat on the same journey with us.** Everyone out there is a saved brother or sister. The only difference between us and them is that they don't know, as yet, that they stand before God holy and blameless because of Christ, nor, therefore, have they experienced what that does to their relationship with God and other people as we have. But they will.
- 3) We also believe that **Jesus has equipped ALL Christians** with the ability to go, tell and show people how much God loves them, and that people will respond.

That third point probably sounds like a frightening prospect to the likes of us, though, because we have a history of not believing the first two points. We didn't believe, for instance, that God was reaching out to everyone with his love. We thought he was only calling a select group of people and everyone else was our enemy, including other Christians. We had no idea, either, that all people had already been reconciled to God. We thought they only became holy and blameless if they kept the Law. So why on earth would we go and tell people how much God loved them and their relationship with him had been restored when we didn't actually think God DID love them until they repented of their sins and accepted Christ's sacrifice on their behalf?

But now we understand that God is pouring out his love on people all the time, sucking everyone in like a magnet, even when we're still sinners (Romans 5:8), even when we're his enemies (Romans 5:10), and even when we're dead in our transgressions (Ephesians 2:5). He's never stopped loving us, even at our worst, because "**Where (our) sin increased, grace increased all the more,**" **Romans 5:20.**

Our message, then, is nothing but good news, of God loving us with every fibre of his being. And all he asks of us as witnesses is to go, tell and show that to people, and believe we CAN reach them because the Spirit is giving us the power to do so.

We probably don't think the Spirit IS giving us power, however, because we don't seem to be having much effect on anyone, right? It's difficult getting anybody into even a mild conversation about God, let alone get them to come with us to church. And for many years we isolated ourselves from people too, which hasn't helped. The thought of being an effective witness, therefore, sounds daunting!

But consider the following....

If we feel terribly handicapped by our inadequacies (which I certainly do), then think how the disciples felt in **Matthew 14:15**. They'd been hounded by a huge crowd all afternoon (verse 14), and ["As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.'"](#) No, Jesus replies, ["They do not need to go away. YOU give them something to eat,"](#) **verse 16**.

But how on earth were they going to feed all those people when the only food they could come up with was 5 loaves and 2 fishes? And likewise - how on earth am I going to go out and reach people in my family and in my community with my background, my personality and my dislike of people in general? I can't. I don't have it in me. I'm handicapped. I'm only a half loaf and one fish man. I can't feed even one person with that.

But what did Jesus do? He said, simply, ["Bring them here to me,"](#) **verse 18**. It's all right, he says, don't panic, just bring what you've got to me and I'll take it from there. So he took what meager rations they had, thanked God and thousands of people ["ate and were satisfied,"](#) **verse 20**.

It was an amazing demonstration of how God operates when people need feeding. He simply expands what little means we've got to meet the need. We supply what we have and he fills in the rest. My inadequacies, therefore, aren't a problem at all for God in the same way that 5 loaves and 2 fishes were totally inadequate but they weren't a problem for God either. If people needed feeding then he would provide the means to feed them. And if all we have to offer isn't enough, he'll miraculously make sure it will be enough. He'll multiply it to whatever is needed.

And he stamped a guarantee on that too, in **Acts 1:8**, promising us whatever power we need to make God's love real to people. If we feel we're getting nowhere, then, Jesus simply points to the Spirit and says, "The Spirit works miracles, remember? And since I'm the one sending you out, I'll make sure you've got what you need for the job, just as the Father provided what I needed for the job that he gave me to do. Watch and see!"

In other words, we can't fail, ["For we are God's FELLOW WORKERS,"](#) **1 Corinthians 3:9**. And in **Ephesians 2:10**, ["for we are GOD's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which GOD prepared in advance for us to do."](#) The Spirit will equip us, therefore, with whatever we need to finish what God had in mind for us to do. "Equip" in the Greek means outfitting a ship with all it needs to complete its journey. Well, we're on the most incredible expedition in existence, assisting Jesus Christ in reaching our world with a real taste of God's love. We've also got the best outfitter in the business, the Holy Spirit. Anything we need for the journey, he will provide.

So, what do we need? Is it courage? Confidence? The right approach? An opportunity landed in our lap? The ability to explain ourselves without stammering and stumbling? Or is it just plain love we need, and enough of it, as Paul said, that it **“compels us,” 2 Corinthians 5:14**, to reach out to people, where we simply can’t help wanting to help and feed people with a goodly dose of God’s love? Well, whatever we need for the job, it’s ours, Jesus said. And remember the 5 loaves and 2 fishes. He loves taking our pathetic loaves and fishes and surprising us with what they produce.

But for those like me who aren’t used to reaching out to people, it’s like sending us to Samaria, the last place we’d like to go, just as it was for the Jewish Christians in Acts, because Jews despised Samaritans. But the more difficult it is for us to reach out the better it is because the miracles of the Spirit will be more obvious! And if I make a hash of reaching out to people, then the bigger the miracle when the Spirit makes something of it anyway.

Jesus is asking us to sail into uncharted waters, yes, but believe Acts 1:8, that the Spirit will give power to our awkward witness so that at least we’ll step out and try. When Jesus told his disciples to **“go and make disciples of all nations,” Matthew 28:19**, it’s because they could, and would, thanks to the Spirit wind in their sails. People would respond - and the most surprising people too, like a Gentile Roman Centurion, a high-ranking palace eunuch and a jailer.

And the same surprises await us today. So does joy. Jesus went to the cross with joy because he knew what would come of it. The apostles experienced joy too, even when they were being persecuted, because people were responding. When Jesus tells us to go out and make disciples, then, it might hurt, and it might be embarrassing, and it might get tiring and frustrating, but Jesus promises joy because **as we go, disciples WILL be made**. And if all we can offer as our meager ration is prayer, then know that God is blessing that too, just like he blessed the 5 loaves and 2 fishes.

But when you realize that God is reaching out to all people, and the Spirit is pouring out God’s love all over the planet, it changes your whole approach to people, because **God has primed them to respond**. All they need is a whisper of God’s love, a friendly face, a willing listener, a helping hand, and the Spirit can expand that to feed them with a whole new view of God that kickstarts them on their journey of transformation too.

Such are the changes the Spirit has made in our church. But that’s why God gives us the Spirit. It’s to **“work miracles among you because you believe what you heard,” Galatians 3:5**. He not only works the miracles in us of ever-increasing love for God and our fellow Christians, he’s also working the miracle of us becoming effective witnesses of God’s love to others. And it all comes from believing what Scripture says, that this was God’s plan from the beginning, and now is the time when it’s being worked out like never before. So expect surprises!