

Lecture #2

The Congregational Way of Faith

THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT FOR THE CHURCH

In 1972 Colonial Church in Edina granted me my first Sabbatical. It amounted to four months to be away. I chose to go on a physical and spiritual journey to do two things: to seek the Spirit, for my life, and to find Christian Communities where the Holy Spirit was at work, and to see what the Spirit was doing to them: in other words, did their having the Holy Spirit in their life as a community of faith cause them to hug the Spirit to their heart and simply turn inward, or did the Spirit overtake them and drive them outward to serve the world?

The experience was monumental for me. I knew my need. I was more than a little afraid. I know the Pentecost story. I know Jesus' frequent references to the Holy Spirit – and especially His chiding of Nicodemus the churchman for his failure to understand how much he, as a church leader, needed to receive the Spirit, and needed to be willing to let the Spirit come in His own way, and take over his life. It would be a new birth experience, Jesus said.

I was aware of my own sin, and of my need to take this risk, to chance this uncontrolled experience and whatever it would do to my life. I did not know how the Spirit would manifest itself in my life.

On the campus of a Catholic University in Minnesota, at the hands of a Lutheran minister, I bent down to receive whatever might conceivable come to me.

I had been trying for weeks to have this experience. I had prayed – I had mumbled words. But none of it had been authentic. The minister said, "The Spirit already groans within you with sighs too deep for utterance. You have already heard that speech, that voice, that language in your heart. You have only now to say out loud what you have already heard, as the Spirit gives it to you to say."

My palms grew sweaty. My spirit was apprehensive; I was a preacher of the Word. I was, I hope, a true Puritan. I wanted in preaching, to say what I meant, and to mean what I said. I feared to give up that power to control the words I spoke. I loved words, and I loved The Word as it comes ringing through to us in scripture.

Larry Christianson prayed for me. It was quiet and simple. He then suggested I try to offer the sounds I was already hearing in my heart. Stumbling, haltingly, I did that. It seemed only a mumble. But this fellow minister encouraged me. He said "That's it. Now just let it come, and you simply practice speaking it out."

My journey took me westward across South Dakota, up into Wyoming, and across Montana and Idaho. I rolled down the car window as I crossed those vast spaces, and – as the Meadow Larks sang to me, I sang back: just letting it come.

It was an experience of ecstasy, and praise. I did not know the words, but I knew they were words. They became joy for me, and freedom. They did not at all take away from me the discipline of putting words together for preaching. Because those words too, I had always believed, were always words given me from beyond.

I wrote a little book about the experience, called Receiving the Spirit at Old First Church – to try to tell my fellow ministers and Christians of the main line, and perhaps even more, my friends of the evangelical tradition who so highly cherish the Word of God – that they didn't need to be afraid. The experience was waiting for them, as Blessing – indeed, I believed, as power.

Actually, the United Church of Christ published it through the Pilgrim Press – I learned later, from friends in high places, that while the UCC did not stop the presses or the book, they made the decision not to promote, advertise, or use the book. It was too much for them, too strange. It lifted up something in the Christian life and experience that was not amenable to their channels or control.

In short, they were afraid.

Many Christians - - indeed many ministers – I found were afraid of this experience and understanding of the Third Person of the Trinity, about Whom we so glibly speak in the Creed.

My own Church's leaders were apprehensive. "What new thing is this, 'they more or less said' that our young minister is bringing back to us?"

Four members of my own staff I found had been trained or taught in a local Baptist Seminary, that the Spirit, was given only to the early church, in the mighty experience of Pentecost, as a "Special dispensation: to prime the pump. To help the church get started. It was a view called "Dispensationalism." It was a notion fostered in the highly Biblical traditions of Evangelical theology that cherished the Scriptural Word as ordered, precise, and in a certain sense controllable, whereas the embracing of an idea and experience such as Jesus commended to Nicodemus, which became the founding experience of the Christian Church at Pentecost was too rife with emotion, with tears, with tongues – indeed, with fire – at least deep in the heart and soul, if you will, -- as to be an invasion from beyond that would too easily, too quickly, get beyond human control.

The experience of the Spirit was seen accurately, as entering into the realms of the mystical, the mysterious, were power from outside, from beyond our creation – and perhaps understanding – invades our life and experience, producing joy and ecstatic utterance, and bringing power for the body and the spirit's healing, and bringing other gifts that allow work to be done, and relationships to be connected, and love to be lived and offered to others in a whole new way.

Many in our church welcomed and received this experience in their lives, including three of my own children.

I know now, as I look back, that my later years in that same, beloved church, were made possible by the "Baptism with the Spirit" and by the growing in the Spirit that came through the years that followed. My own sheer endurance in pastoral ministry was made possible by that initiating experience back in 1972.

All this has led me to deep convictions about the ministry, about our Congregational Way of church life, an about the church itself, and simply about the struggle in our day to live the life of a Christian.

I believe, for instance, that we should not be afraid of anything God has for us. We are meant to receive gifts that He wants to give us for our life.

When we are afraid, we are likely protecting something in ourselves - - that probably hasn't much to do with either faith or God.

Probably our fear has rather to do with something of ourselves, our comfort, our self satisfaction, our control: perhaps, our own pride, or ego.

You know that there are certain times in our lives when we love to break free in our spirits and laugh out loud, or wildly cheer. We do it at a game, in the stadium, without a shred of shame or embarrassment.

We do it in a setting of friendship – at a joke told – or a funny story recited.

But in church we fear emotion. We fear to break out. We fear letting go. We really fear "Letting God."

Many churches as you know, concentrate on what they can do by their own power - in planning. In program, In promoting.

They are much less likely - - though they believe in it to do their work by praying: by allowing God to work: to take over to do things to them and for them.

I

So, You Have, I Believe, The Phenomenon of The church without Power.

That is the very common phenomena of churches operating primarily by planning and programs.

And these are the churches I believe, that are very much more likely to be fitting into the culture around them.

Even as they try to be successful, to attract greater numbers, they concentrate on being as they say "User Friendly". They try to make visitors feel comfort, feel that the church is familiar - - that it is like their world, rather than different from it, or Over against it.

They are not prophetic. They do not speak a word of warning to the culture from God, about the greed and self-centeredness that dominates their society and its spirit and ethic and morality. They seek to offer a welcome that comes in the form of familiarity, friendliness - - not challenge, or questions, or the things that might bring change or reform in the person.

Interestingly: Jesus' admonition to the disciples, as He prophesied Pentecost, was that they were to remain in Jerusalem until they received "Power from High."

In Luke 24: 45, Jesus says:

This is what it written; the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sin will be preached in His Name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised. But stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

In Acts, Luke recalls it again. "But you will receive power" he remembers Jesus saying, "When thy Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1: 8)

This is something Jesus wanted for His church. He was saying essentially, "You can't do the ministry with out the power." The Holy Spirit will give you that power to do this work across the world of winning it home to the Father. So, don't go out there until you received this gift, this blessing, this Spiritual Baptism - - that will set you on fire and give you the strength to endure all that is ahead, and to win the battle.

Jesus, curiously, is the great Prophet of the Spirit. This was Jesus' message about the future of His body, His company, His people - - in the world. Jesus wanted His church to have a dimension beyond its worldly ability. Beyond its power to entertain, to do programs, to organize people, and to grow big. This dimension of the Spirit was to be the instrument God would use in the world. It would be mysterious, unpredictable.

Exactly what He confronted Nicodemus with for His life: the thing Nicodemus clearly needed beyond all his learning and his power as a member of the Sanhedrin.

Pentecost was God's great gift to His Church.

I must tell you that in our work of conducting three day healing retreats with Pastors and women and youth leaders of the church, to heal their hearts and to prepare them for reconciliation through forgiveness, We watch the Spirit work in people's lives. In the lives of burdened, grieving, often guilty and frightened and usually still hating people.

It is wonderful to behold. We have seen The Spirit do miracles of freeing, and healing and restoring in the lives of these people. We watch, we are witnesses, to God's pouring out on these people.

The power to love
The power to forgive
And so the gift of the healed heart.

Now – that's a new kind of church – the original kind of church. The church our spiritual forbears, the Separatists of 17th century England, discovered in the New Testament, in the account of Acts. It was That that they wanted to recover for their church in England: A church free, and open to the Spirit, daring to receive the Spirit, and be ruled by the Spirit.

It was for that – that they became Pilgrim to a foreign land in America.

II

How Do You Receive the Spirit?

1. You pray for it. You welcome the Spirit and receive Him as comforter, as teacher, just as Jesus said He would be! I will send you the comforter – the teacher, who will bring all things to your remembrance whatsoever I have said unto you!"
2. Dare to ask for what Jesus offers. "You don't ask enough" He chided His disciples: i.e. Claim it all.
3. See what the Spirit gives: See the gifts He offers – prophecy, teaching, helps administration, healing, ecstatic utterances. And those wonderful gifts in Galatians 5. "Love, joy, peace, patience, long suffering, kindness."

III

In my first book, written when I was a little country minister out in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, at age 25, called The Congregational Way of Life, I wrote a concluding chapter called "The Way of the Spirit."

I had not received what I would call today the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. There was a lot I didn't know. But it was clear from my experience of the English Congregationalist of the 1950's, as I studied them and their theology and practice of the Congregational way of church life, that Congregationalism, is profoundly, The way of the Spirit.

Our whole idea of the freedom and independence and autonomy of the local church is founded utterly on the radical spirited principle articulated by Jesus in scripture that the Spirit He promised to come, and be among the people of God, and actually lead them, and guide them, into truth and into unity – into one heart and spirit. "Where two or three are

gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them!" I'm there. And my presence gives authority to the Church. It's Me there, that gives the authenticity, the presence of the Lord, that makes the church the church. Nothing else does it. Popes don't, Bishops don't, priests don't. Creeds don't. Constitutions don't. Important people don't. Only Jesus, there, with His people do. That is where things happen. Where the church of Christ comes alive and goes out in power.

The grand tradition of the church meeting is born here.

The great heritage of brave mission to the world is, born here.

The whole notion of the Servant Church, the company of love, the healing community – is born here.

The Spirit is given to make freedom work, and bring Faith alive.

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