

How to Spark the Holy Spirit's Fire in Your Church

In the traditional Baptist church I grew up in, we talked a lot about Jesus—but not the Holy Spirit. There was a song in our hymnal called “Pentecostal Power,” but we never sang it.

This is today's sad reality for so many churches. We don't preach about the Holy Spirit; we don't make room for His gifts. Even in churches with a “Spirit-filled” label, fewer and fewer people know what it means to be baptized in the Spirit. And in many nondenominational Bible churches, the services are so tightly scripted and the sermons are so geared for new believers that we rarely challenge believers to go deeper in their faith.

British missionary C.T. Studd spoke these relevant words over 100 years ago: “How little chance the Holy Ghost has nowadays. The churches and missionary societies have so bound Him in red tape that they practically ask Him to sit in a corner while they do the work themselves.”

Every church needs Pentecost. I'm not referring to an annual celebration of an event in church history, but a living, breathing, awe-inspiring encounter with the Holy Spirit that shakes every member to the core.

To do church without Pentecost is unbiblical. To go for year after year without the power of God is inexcusable. Pastors who are content to go through the motions of church without the Holy Spirit's full involvement are not good stewards of the grace they were given when they accepted the call of God.

Those may be strong words, but British preacher Charles Spurgeon said it more forcefully in the 1800s, writing: “The lack of distinctly recognizing the power of the Holy Ghost lies at the root of many useless ministries.”

What the Holy Spirit Does for the Church

Pentecost empowers us. I've often heard ministers say that if the power of the Holy Spirit were removed from the church, most Christians would never know the difference. We can't reduce the Holy Spirit's work to an event in history. The Lord wants to make Pentecost personal for every believer. The early church could not fulfill its mission without the wind and the fire—and neither can you. Every believer needs to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.

In some paintings of Pentecost, the fire resting on the disciples' heads appears like tiny flames. I doubt the Spirit's power looked so puny. His anointing brings us power to share our faith, heal the sick, cast out demons and preach with authority. Don't minimize the Spirit's potential. God needs us to be like blowtorches, not birthday candles!

Pentecost interrupts us. Jesus compared the Holy Spirit to a wind that “blows where it wishes” (John 3:8a)—warning us that He is entirely unpredictable. When the wind of the Spirit “suddenly” blew into the upper room on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:2), His arrival was unscheduled. We cannot control the Spirit. Yet Jesus told His early followers to wait for His interruption.

Waiting for the Spirit is not convenient, and patience runs contrary to human nature. But the early disciples waited for the “suddenly”—and the result was the most explosive, effective and fruitful ministry strategy the church has ever known.

Pentecost unites us. When the Holy Spirit was poured out in the upper room, the New Testament church was born, and Jesus redefined who can be anointed for ministry. Under the Old Covenant, only Jewish males from the tribe of Levi could serve around the altar of sacrifice. But when the Spirit came, He poured His anointing oil on both men and women—and Peter said

all races and all ages would be empowered to preach the gospel.

The wind of the Spirit always breaks down barriers of race, gender, age and even economic class. Dismantling old traditions, He ushered in a revolutionary new day of reconciliation. Is your church truly Pentecostal? It isn't if you aren't reaching community members who have been sidelined or oppressed.

Pentecost propels us. There is nothing static about Pentecost. Although Jesus told His early followers to “stay in the city until you are clothed with power from high” (Luke 24:49b, NASB), He never intended them to linger. Once they had been baptized in the Spirit, they were energized with hot zeal. They could not remain still or silent.

Pentecost seemed to speed up time, and it gave Jesus' followers an uncanny mobility. The Spirit's power turned boring religion into an amazing adventure and transformed ordinary people into bold missionaries.

How to Encourage the Spirit to Flow

A few years ago, I led a men's discipleship retreat at a church in Augusta, Georgia. We had a special time worshipping Jesus, sharing meals and opening our hearts in small groups. But after the last message, I asked my Bolivian friend Fernando Villalobos to share a few stories from the Bolivian Revival of the 1970s. I was not prepared for what happened next.

Villalobos is humble and soft-spoken, but when he took the microphone, the atmosphere in the room shifted. He told a story about how Julio Ruibal, a Bolivian college student, was baptized in the Holy Spirit while visiting a Kathryn Kuhlman meeting in California. When he returned to La Paz, he led many students to Christ. One day, he asked a Christian woman to prepare a meal for 20 students—but when Ruibal arrived at her

home, he had 200 students with him!

When the woman complained that she didn't have enough food, Ruibal told her Jesus would provide. Everyone watched as God supernaturally multiplied the chicken and rice.

"Jesus is here," Villalobos told us.

I have listened to countless miracle testimonies. But when this broken man stood near the stage in that church in Augusta, it was almost as if the same revival spirit that hit Bolivia more than 50 years ago entered the room.

Men spontaneously got up and walked or crawled to the front of the church. Some were kneeling, others were flat on their stomachs. I heard many sobs, which within five minutes became a chorus of wails. Villalobos didn't ask for mood music, and he didn't manipulate the audience to get a response. He simply reminded us that the same God who poured out the Holy Spirit on Bolivia in the early 1970s was with us in that moment.

As I lay on the carpet in that church, I thought of all the times I have prayed in recent years for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit on my generation. Then I felt the Lord speak to my heart: "This is just a taste of what is coming."

Everywhere I go I hear pastors asking the same question: How can we encourage the freedom of Pentecost in a church culture that has become increasingly scripted, scheduled and controlled right down to the nanosecond? Can God interrupt our meetings today?

The essence of Pentecost is its unpredictability. But there seems to be no room for God's sudden surprises when we already have our sermons planned out for the next six months. Here are seven practical things you can do to encourage the freedom of Pentecost in your church:

Teach about the Holy Spirit often. The Holy Spirit was rarely

mentioned in the church I grew up in, so we never expected Him to do anything. Yet He is described in the second verse of the Bible as “moving” upon the surface of the newly created world (Gen. 1:2), and He is described as speaking in that last chapter of the Bible (Rev. 22:17). He moves and speaks throughout the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation! But we must give Him the place He deserves.

Leave room for altar calls and personal ministry. New life begins at the altar—whether it is salvation, healing, prophetic ministry or the impartation of a fresh anointing. A church without altar ministry is like a hospital without a maternity ward. Today many churches that offer multiple services often skimp on ministry time because they are focused on getting one group out of the sanctuary to get ready for the next. Multiple services are fine, but we are crowding the Spirit out of the church if we don’t schedule time for people to respond to the message.

Have small groups where people can use the Holy Spirit’s gifts. It’s not practical for everyone to prophesy or exercise other spiritual gifts in a large congregation. But if people are plugged into small groups, there will be opportunities for believers to encourage one another in supernatural ways. And people are more comfortable stepping out in faith in front of 10 people than they are in front of 3,000.

Train people in prophecy, healing and Spirit-led ministry. Many pastors clamp down on the operation of spiritual gifts because a few fanatics with inflated egos like to pull the church into weirdness with their visions, dreams or strange teachings. But in our effort to protect the sheep from deception, let’s not pull the pendulum to the other extreme by forbidding the gifts of the Spirit. The genuine power of God will flow if we teach people the difference between authentic anointing and strange fire.

Offer “teaching moments” to explain the gifts of the Spirit.

I've been in churches where immature people prophesied in such a harsh, condemning tone that everyone in the church let out a groan. Their "words from God" were like fingernails on a chalkboard. We cannot just ignore these moments and move on. When the Corinthians mishandled speaking in tongues and prophecy in the first century, the apostle Paul used their mistakes as an opportunity to teach about how to use gifts properly.

Expose your church to healthy ministries that flow in the anointing. We need life-giving traveling ministries because God sends them to win new converts, heal the sick, unleash prophetic power, train leaders and impart new vision in congregations. We should not be afraid to expose our churches to men and women of character who are called to minister in the supernatural.

Give time for testimonies of God's supernatural power. Nothing raises the faith level of a congregation like someone's raw experience with God. If a man was healed this week in your church, let him shout it from the housetops. If an infertile couple got pregnant, let them tell about the goodness of God. Stories of supernatural intervention trigger a holy expectation in everyone—and God gets the glory for His miracles.

The Ultimate Goal of Pentecost: Outreach

When I read the book of Acts, I'm struck by the fact that in the earliest days of the New Testament church, almost all ministry occurred outside of Christian meetings. Of course, the first disciples met together for encouragement, teaching and fellowship, but their primary focus was outward.

Outreach should be the norm in any church. Yet most American churches rarely engage in evangelism outside their buildings—and 95% of Christians in this country have never led anyone to Christ. Because of fear, apathy or lack of training,

we are content to live in an isolated religious universe.

If you and your church long to experience the Spirit's fire, you must be willing to break out of your religious box.

Ask for the Holy Spirit's power. The first outreach in the book of Acts occurred immediately after the Spirit's outpouring. The apostle Peter, who had denied Jesus just weeks before, preached boldly—and 3,000 people were converted (Acts 2:41). You will receive supernatural confidence to share your faith when you are baptized in the Holy Spirit. Lack of emphasis on the Spirit's power is the No. 1 reason the American church is timid about evangelism.

Look for opportunities. Peter and John were on their way to the temple to worship when they saw a lame man (Acts 3:1-3). They prayed for healing, and the subsequent miracle led to more conversions. We may be so focused on getting to church that we miss the people God places along the way. Your biggest opportunity may be on the street corner *outside* the church. Watch and listen.

Expect miracles. In the early church, healings occurred in the streets after the disciples preached (Acts 5:14-16). Maybe we don't see the same level of miracles today because we want God to perform them on our carpeted stages rather than on the city square, the subway or in the Walmart parking lot. You don't have to be a theologian to share the gospel—just offer to pray for someone and see what happens!

It's time we dispense with the crazy notion that people should come to us and sit in our padded chairs to hear our message. Jesus' mandate was "Go"—not "Wait for them to come to you." Let's trade in our passive, anemic religiosity and reclaim the passionate, aggressive, evangelistic faith modeled by the early church.

If you want the Holy Spirit to visit your church, pray that revival will begin with you:

"Lord, set my heart ablaze. Send a fresh wave of the Holy Spirit to my church, my city and my nation. We need another earth-shaking revival like the great awakenings of past generations. Let the book of Acts be repeated in my lifetime. Unleash the full force of Pentecost. I don't want to be a spectator in this movement; I want to be in the very middle of it. Let my heart be ablaze with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and let me carry that fire everywhere You send me."

Let's fling open the doors and allow the Spirit to have His way. Instead of being afraid of what He might disrupt or whom He might offend, let's fear what our churches would be like without Him.

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