

God's Strength for This Generation

Originally written 20 years ago, a pioneer's message on our  need for the Holy Spirit's power is just as relevant—and prophetic—today.

Dennis Bennett was a priest in the Episcopal Church who became known as the father of the modern charismatic movement after he proclaimed from his pulpit on April 3, 1960, that he had been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Within weeks he was asked to resign his pastorate at thriving St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, Calif. He continued his ministry, moving into the pastorate at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Seattle, where he stayed until 1981. In 1968 he founded Christian Renewal Association with his wife, Rita, who is its president today. Dennis died on Nov. 1, 1991, a year after he wrote this article, which is adapted with permission from Mission & Ministry, then the magazine of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. It is a reminder that, in any era, the foundation for ministering to the world isn't us alone, but the Holy Spirit, who works through us to change people's lives.

I had a vivid experience of receiving the Lord Jesus as my Savior when I was 11 years old. I found He was alive and wonderful beyond belief but afterward spent much time looking for what came next. I tried to find that first, careless rapture of my conversion over again. At times I would sense that the Lord was still very much with me, but my awareness of Him was limited, although my intellectual belief was strong.

You who have been brought up in this age of awareness of the Holy Spirit cannot imagine how blank we were on this topic back in the 1940s and 1950s and even later. Kenneth Scott Latourette in his masterful two-volume history of the

Christian church, which covers church history up to 1976, does not even mention the Pentecostal revival! Yet without question the growth of the Pentecostal movement is a most striking phenomenon of modern church history.

In my personal Pentecost, the joy and glory of God broke in upon me in 1960. I recognized it as the same kind of experience I had when I accepted Jesus, only much more vivid and constant.

It didn't seem to matter whether I was awake or asleep—or what was going on—the new awareness of God stayed with me. It was an incredible new dimension in my spiritual life. I had been trying hard to become more aware of God; now, all of a sudden, He was with me without my having to seek Him.

I had no precedent for this experience. It was not the fulfillment of any expectations that had been implanted in my mind. I had never attended a Pentecostal church and had no notion what they taught or believed. Moreover, I did not receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit in a church setting, but in a private home, praying with two Episcopal laypeople.

True, I had done a good deal of research over several months while I was looking into it all, but the friends who witnessed to me simply told me faithfully what had happened to them and then prayed with me. After that I didn't have a great deal of further contact with them.

It concerns me that so many Christians nowadays seem not to grasp, or perhaps have not even had a chance to grasp, what happened back there 2,000 years ago and can continue to happen today as people receive the same Pentecostal experience. I believe the baptism in the Holy Spirit to be the drivetrain by which the power of the Spirit travels from the engine to the wheels.

Evangelism starts the engine, but without the drivetrain the people of God do not move very far, and soon begin to wonder

when Jesus is going to come and take them away from a world they obviously are unequipped to cope with!

Acts 8:14-17 clearly tells how Peter and John prayed with the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit after their conversion and baptism with water through Philip the evangelist. Jesus made receiving the baptism in the Spirit mandatory—and for a very good reason, since it is what makes the power of God available through the individual believer to the needy world.

In those early days in Van Nuys we experienced what it was like to be “early Christians,” both from the excitement of discovering how real it all was and from finding out how quickly one could become unpopular! We found out for ourselves why people in the first century were willing to risk their lives to belong to the fellowship of Jesus of Nazareth.

None of us may have literally risked our lives, but we did risk our reputations, our jobs, our friends. I saw the amazing fellowship and love with which people were drawn together after they had been set free in the Spirit, and to me it was worth the challenges.

I soon found, though, that there was much in me that could quench my new awareness of the Holy Spirit. He never leaves us, but I would lose my awareness of Him if I did not follow His leading.

During these last 30 years I have been learning how to continue to respond to the Holy Spirit in me, so His joy and power and freedom can continue to flow in and from me. I have certainly failed far more often than I have succeeded, but the Lord is patient. The main desire of my life is still to enjoy more of what I knew at the first.

So, in retrospect, my concern is still to keep that first fire burning—not to lose my first love. Yet I have learned that He doesn't forsake me. It is always I who forsake Him, or at least make my environment distasteful and untenable for Him,

so that He has to retire into the depths of my spirit, where my soul is not aware of Him for a time.

It has been a difficult three decades, but I would not go back to the time before I was baptized in the Holy Spirit for anything in heaven or earth. There is no nightmare I can imagine that would be more devastating than to lose this awareness of the reality of God.

Now what about the look ahead? I hear today that the charismatic movement is dying down. Some say the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have both passed their prime and are to be replaced by a "third wave" of the Spirit that, however, denies there is any experience of a baptism in the Holy Spirit after salvation and claims it all happens when we accept Jesus. It also maintains that it is not necessary to speak in tongues to be baptized in the Spirit.

Either of these lines of thought show that the purveyors thereof have not grasped what this Pentecostal or charismatic renewal was and is all about. This is mainly and usually because people have not themselves received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and therefore are sympathetic and well-meaning brothers and sisters commenting on something they have not entered into.

Many have the impression that the charismatic renewal is simply one among several programs for strengthening the church. But the charismatic renewal isn't one choice among several. It is the renewal of the experience of Pentecost as people respond to Jesus Christ's instructions to all His followers that they are to be empowered before they go out to the world with the good news.

The charismatic renewal is not an evangelical revival; although more than anything else it has fueled the current interest in evangelism. It is highly important that we see the difference between revivals—which are occasional and short-

lived upsurges of response to God—and this global renewal of the experience of Pentecost, which has been going on with increasing momentum for nearly a hundred years.

This is the breaking forth of the Holy Spirit from the religious prison in which He has been confined through much of Christian history, so He can begin to make Christians what they are supposed to be: centers of power and joy for the refreshing and healing of the world.

Evangelism is the initial offering and proclamation of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, and the receiving of new birth in the Holy Spirit. After this has happened Jesus commands us to receive the freedom and power of the Spirit, to release the Holy Spirit who has come to live in us, so that He can bless us and work through us (see Acts 1:4-5).

We can be so near to seeing this truth and yet so dangerously far away. The Holy Spirit comes to live in us when we receive Jesus as Savior, that is absolutely true; but we do not necessarily receive Him, that is, allow Him to rule in our lives.

Through the baptism in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God is allowed to extend His influence over our outward lives—our will, intellect, emotions and bodies. Not surprisingly He begins with our speech, and begins to tame the unruly member, to make it usable by our Lord so He can give us words to adequately express our praise and love to God in “words which are not in our power to say” (Rom. 8:26, Basic English Version).

Thus we can pray and intercede for ourselves and others in words that precisely express God’s will. This taming of the tongue also makes it possible for God to speak through us to His people, in prophetic utterances and also in gifts of tongues, which are then understood through the companion gift of interpretation.

I haven't changed my essential convictions about all this. I'm still saying the same things I did 30 years ago, although, I hope, with much more understanding of what it all means.

What is happening to people today when they receive the freedom of the Spirit is just the same as at the first, except that now we understand much more about it. The church is not primarily a preaching or teaching institution. It must be charismatic. It must manifest the gifts and fruit of the Spirit, for they are the continuing signs that Jesus is alive and ready to bless people now.

People are weary of talk about religion, whether by semi-believing intellectuals or arrogant fundamentalists, and they are especially weary of ill-natured Christians who condemn everything and everyone, including one another. (This includes the so-called liberals who use social concerns to bring people under condemnation.)

But if people see the glory of the indwelling Spirit in their friends and neighbors and experience His fruit and gifts pouring out of God's people to heal body, mind and spirit, they will be drawn to the love of Jesus, and they will indeed receive His complete healing. Jesus did good works, healings and deliverances, and these are what showed people the kingdom of God was "at hand"—that is, right here and now.

He tells us to do the same. It isn't any different today. If people see Jesus doing these things through His followers, how can they refuse to accept Him?

Evangelism brings people to receive Jesus, and then the Holy Spirit can come and live in them. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is letting the power of the Spirit flow out to bless, first of all, the individual and then the world around.

When Peter was challenged by the other apostles and brethren because he had ministered to the Roman centurion, Cornelius, and his household, Peter responded: "As I began to speak, the

Holy Spirit fell upon them as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:15-17, NKJV).

This is what Jesus promised at the first. Let us not be found with those who withstand God but with those who will stand with God so that this great response to His love and grace in the Holy Spirit can continue unhindered in our day.

THE STORY CONTINUES

Read our May 1980 cover story detailing Dennis Bennett's extraordinary life at [.](#)