

Don't Hide the Holy Spirit in a Seeker-Friendly Box

Pentecost Sunday is this weekend. Some pastors may preach a sermon on the Holy Spirit's ministry; others might read Acts 2; others may hang a red and orange banner over the stage to remind people of the Spirit's fire. Some might even allow a livelier-than-usual song to be performed since, after all, it's Pentecost!

The sermons, Bible verses, banners and music are all great. But I'm looking beyond this Sunday. I'd like to know if we're willing to allow the Holy Spirit to get out of the box we've put Him in.

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. The essence of Pentecost, which came "suddenly" (Acts 2:2), was 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 eight practical things we can do to encourage the freedom of Pentecost in our churches:

1. 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 has one of the last messages in the Bible (see Rev. 22:17). He moves and He speaks throughout the Scriptures! But we must invite Him to move and speak in our churches by giving Him the place He deserves.

2. Leave room for altar calls and personal ministry. A church

without altar ministry is like a hospital without a maternity ward. New life begins at the altar—whether it is salvation, healing, prophetic ministry or the impartation of a fresh anointing. Today many churches that offer multiple services often skimp on ministry time because they are focused on herding the 10 a.m group out of the sanctuary to get ready for the 11:30 a.m. crowd. 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.

3. 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 or Bible classes 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.

4. 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.

5. Offer "teaching moments" to explain the gifts of the Spirit. I've been in churches where Brother Herschel or Sister Agnes prophesied in such a harsh, condemning tone that everyone in the church let out a collective groan. Their "words from God" had the same effect on the congregation as 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. In the same way, a leader must address spiritual abuse from the pulpit by teaching that prophetic messages should be delivered in love and in God's tone of voice.

6. Expose your church to healthy ministries that flow in the anointing. There are some charlatans selling the Holy Spirit's gifts today—on television and in churches. But not every traveling minister is a fake. God has raised up thousands of prophets who have not bowed their knees to the Baals of exploitation, greed and gimmicks. 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.

7. 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.

8. Preach about holiness. Let's never forget that the Holy Spirit is *holy*. When people are filled with the Spirit, the Spirit burns up their sinful habits (see Matt. 3:11-12). The Spirit is quenched by immorality, carnality and pride, and He does not manifest His power when God's people are steeped in sin and compromise. Many churches today have stopped warning God's people about the dangers of sin, so we don't confront anymore. We've figured out that people will pack the house if we give them sugary-sweet motivational pep talks that never step on toes. By avoiding the tough topics, we've essentially told the Holy Ghost to take a hike.

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

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