

First Christmas Was a Pentecost Moment

Some Christians are notorious for downplaying the Holy Spirit. Many churches lock Him in a box of tradition or just ignore Him. Others treat the third person of the Trinity as if He magically appeared in the book of Acts like a genie out of a bottle and then vanished after the early church was established. And strict cessationists deny that the Spirit works in miraculous ways today.

Yet Luke, who recorded the account of Pentecost in the book of Acts, paid close attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel that bears his name. That's why the book of Luke is sometimes called "the Pentecostal Gospel." Theologian Graham Twelftree of Regent University says Luke "has more to say about the Spirit than any other biblical writer does."

Luke did not limit the Spirit's activity to the miracles of Jesus or the divine interruption of Pentecost. He made it clear in his account of the birth of Jesus that the Christmas story was initiated by the Spirit and fully bathed in His power. We should pay closer attention to the Spirit's work. There would be no Christmas without the Holy Spirit.

First, consider Zacharias, John the Baptist's father. Zacharias is criticized because he doubted God's ability to give his barren wife a child. But Luke reminds us that after Zacharias was struck dumb, he was filled with the Spirit when his son was born (see Luke 1:67). At that moment he began to prophesy. Humbled and chastised by God, Zacharias gained new strength from the Spirit and uttered one of the richest Messianic promises in Scripture. He made a mistake in the beginning, but he finished well!



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Second, look at Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother. She never appears in typical nativity scenes, and she is viewed as a minor player in the story. Yet Luke says she was filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary came to visit her (see Luke 1:41). Immediately the Spirit's power was manifested. Luke says Elizabeth "cried out with a loud voice" (Luke 1:42, NASB) and announced that Mary was carrying the Christ child. Her prophetic encouragement was crucial in Mary's life.

Third, consider the infant John. He was filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb, according to Luke 1:15. This was exceptional! I've never met a baby who was filled with the Spirit, much less an unborn child who experienced such an infilling. Yet because John's task was so great—to call a wayward Israel to repentance and prepare the way for Jesus—he needed exceptional power.

Luke understood that the Spirit's anointing makes all the difference. When God wants to do something exceptional, He pours out the oil of His Spirit on weak human vessels and transforms weak people into bold warriors.

Fourth, consider the young Mary. When she asked the angel Gabriel how she could conceive the Messiah, the angel said: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). It was the Spirit who accomplished the miracle of the Incarnation. God became flesh in the womb of a virgin.

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After Elizabeth prophesied (see Luke 1:42-45), Mary praised the Lord extravagantly and extolled Him for His mercy, power and faithfulness. Her psalm, which is part of inspired Scripture, is what came to be known as “the Magnificat”—the first Latin word in the phrase, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Mary reminds us that being filled with the Spirit unleashes praise. If our praise is subdued, casual or restrained, we probably need a fresh anointing.

Fifth, we read about Simeon. Luke introduces us to this elderly prophet who had prayed for the coming of the Messiah for many years. The Holy Spirit rested “upon” this man (Luke 2:25), and the Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen Jesus. As it turned out, Simeon was permitted to hold the promised baby in his arms. He then spoke a blessing over the child and prophesied to his mother.

Don’t keep the miracle of Christmas wrapped in a colorful package under a lighted tree. Let Luke’s Gospel help you unwrap it. Christmas is a time to be filled afresh with the Holy Spirit. As we celebrate His birth, let us also welcome the Spirit who gives us the power and boldness to praise, prophesy and proclaim that He is the Savior of the world.

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