

# ***IS THERE A HOLY SPIRIT?***

## **WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?**

Acts 2:1-18

May 19, 2002

Wesley J. Gabel

Bethany Church

It was a warm June evening. To catch the breeze from the lake, we senior high boys gathered in the porch of our camp dorm. I had no clue as to how pivotal and profound the next few minutes would be. For years I had read, heard and hungered for the experience of the Holy Spirit that is described in Acts 2. I wanted the power revealed at Pentecost. I knelt at communion railings asking for it. I prayed with people for it. I dedicated my life to God and rededicated it time and again. I repented of sins, confessed faults, asked forgiveness, surrendered my life to Christ and asked the Holy Spirit to come. Despite this seeking, I felt fickle, wayward, cowardly and insecure. I was a Christian chameleon. I changed colors to match my environment. My life was more a thermometer reflecting the surroundings than a thermostat influencing it. I wanted to change, but didn't know how. The change I sought was not a "God helps those who help themselves" kind of change. Self-improvement escaped me. I needed God to do something. I prayed for the Holy Spirit, and at times was desperate for him. Occasionally, I would accommodate myself to the lack of power, but then someone would come along and exhibit what was described in Scripture. I would become hungry again. On that porch, around 11:00 in the evening, our devotional time began. An older youth played a soft, melodious song of praise. I can't remember how the song finished because we were all shaking. An angry youth

sobbed uncontrollably. He could not stop. Try as he would, this hardened youth could not help but cry. Everyone else was shaking. I shook. Involuntarily. I could no sooner stop shaking than the young man could stop crying. My spine was electrified. Some power had moved in on us all. My roommate was struck with conviction. He felt the pain of his sin and alienation from God. An insatiable hunger gripped him, an irresistible desire to repent and surrender his life to God's control. My experience was different. I felt a love come over me. I felt the thrill of God's love and presence. If I didn't praise God right then and there, I'd burst. From that moment on, Pentecost was not merely a historical event. It was my experience. I knew the love of God. I knew the joy of God's presence. I was filled with passion to proclaim God's goodness to all. Boldness was not a problem. It was a consequence of what happened in me.

Since Palm Sunday we have been asking the question, "What do you believe?" Is Christian faith reasonable? Must you surrender your intellect to believe in Christ as some skeptics maintain? Must you be superstitious? Is there reason to embrace the witness and teachings of the Bible? Today we ask, "Is there a Holy Spirit?"

Until now, the questions we've posed about Christianity required historical study. We can't stuff Jesus into a test tube or lay him out on a Petri dish and then conclude, "Yup, he is the Son of God." You can't prove the existence of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln that way either. Historical truth is much like legal proof. Evidence must be gathered, testimonies collected, the imprint of the past studied and conclusions drawn. Live experiments won't work. However, the Holy Spirit lives and works today. His existence is not limited to historical inquiries. Field observation works because He unveils himself in the lives of believers. His existence is validated by changed lives and by signs and wonders like healing and prophecy.

We are experiencing healing at Bethany as teams pray with people. Testimonies are being printed in our newsletter and posted on a hallway bulletin board, but healing isn't the only sign of the Spirit's presence. There are many others. Prophecy is one of them. Prophecy is speech inspired and directed by the Spirit. In prophecy God speaks to people through some believer, laying bare their souls or encouraging them in a specific way. God may do this through sermons or through private and personal words that are very apt. Scripture reveals this is not a rare. It is to be normal. All Christians may not give sermons, but at times they will prophesy.

***In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18, NIV)***

The Pentecost event we read in Acts 2 was explained by this prophecy of Joel. God was pouring his Spirit on all people. Their children would prophesy. Indeed as recipients of this outpouring they would be inspired and directed by God in their speech. They would prophesy.

I recall an incident from the life of Moses in the eleventh chapter of Numbers. The burden of leading Israel became so heavy that Moses preferred death rather than continuing as sole leader. God told him to gather seventy elders from the nation. God promised to give these men a share in the anointing, a share in the Spirit with which he had anointed Moses. Sixty-eight joined Moses at the assigned place. God's Spirit descended upon them. Immediately all of them began to prophesy. Two of the seventy, however, missed the meeting. A report came to Moses and Joshua that the two missing leaders suddenly began to prophesy right where they were in the Israelite camp. Joshua feared that this would lead to separate claims of leadership and eventually result in civil war. Moses told Joshua:

***Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them! (Num 11:29-30, NIV)***

Guess what? The prophet Joel prophesied that very thing, that God would pour out his Spirit on all people, and that they would prophesy. Pentecost began the fulfillment of that promise.

Speaking of that promise, John the Baptist said that even as he immersed people in water, Jesus would immerse us in the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would serve as a Counselor and Teacher for us. He told his followers to wait for this promised gift, that his good Father would not withhold such a gift from those who asked. He said that after the Holy Spirit came upon us, we would receive power and be Christ's witnesses everywhere. Peter said of the Pentecost experience:

***Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.*** (Acts 2:38-39, NIV)

Peter saw this Pentecost experience as the birthright for every repentant sinner regardless of what generation or century they live in. He saw this as a promise for you and me.

I had received the gift of the Holy Spirit long before that warm June night that I sat in the porch of a camp dorm. Like a single burning flame, the Spirit gave me a hunger to know God, to please God and to serve God. The Spirit fed me with faith to repent of my sin and confess Jesus as my Savior and Lord. However, people who saw me could not tell that I was all that different. That single flame was hidden within me like a pilot light that goes undetected unless you know where to look. As I said earlier, I made little difference in the world around me, yet the Bible reveals a Christianity where the flame roars like a furnace in people's lives. It reveals people burning with passion and warming the world around them. It reveals people who are close to God, who are led, directed and often overwhelmed by his presence. I hungered for that.

I was bothered that it took so long for me to experience what I hungered for. That bothers the church as well. We Americans don't deal with such a waiting period very well. We

look for instant, automatic experiences. Many believers identify the Pentecost experience with receiving peace when our sins are forgiven. Many Pentecostal believers focus on acquiring an unknown prayer language. They mistakenly assume that God has immersed a person in the Holy Spirit when through faith one prays in an unknown language. That is not what the Bible reveals. At Pentecost, believers prophesied in joy. They declared God's works in the languages of the foreigners around them. They didn't open their mouths in faith as much as the Spirit of God opened their mouths in joy.

Pentecost calls us to wait upon God and to seek the gift the Father promised. There is an example of waiting and seeking in Acts, chapter 8. Philip preached the gospel in Samaria. The Holy Spirit moved powerfully among the Samaritans healing many of them and convicting them of sin. They repented and confessed faith in Jesus and were baptized with water. However, verse 16 reveals that despite their faith, none had received the Holy Spirit. No one exhibited the changes and empowerment that comes with being immersed in God's Spirit.

The Samaritans had to wait. Finally, Peter and John came from Jerusalem. They prayed. We don't know if they prayed for minutes, hours or days. We do know that when they laid hands on the Samaritans, the experience of the Holy Spirit impressed deeply a local sorcerer. He believed Peter and John knew a secret that Philip didn't and offered to buy the secret. However, there was no formula to buy... only a God to obey. God was baptizing Christ's followers with his Spirit in a way that tied the church of Jerusalem and the church of Samaria together.

That warm night in June of 1970 I didn't know what was going on, but I discovered years later that God was tying his church together. In February of 1970, the Holy Spirit visited students at a Kentucky college as they worshiped in chapel. That chapel service continued for two full weeks as people overcome by the Spirit publicly confessed sins, asked for forgiveness

and rededicated their lives to Christ. Classes at the college were suspended as the faculty and students found themselves driven to pray and testify. Hundreds visited the campus. Travelers and tourists found themselves mysteriously and unintentionally driving to the chapel and leaving profoundly changed. Students went in teams to share their experience with churches and other colleges. Wherever they went, the Spirit eventually came in great power. Kathy and Nancy were two students of that college who attended camp with me each year. They returned to camp to share their experience. Either I didn't listen or I was not impressed. Whatever the case, some time after they shared, the Spirit descended in power upon everyone, not just the senior high boys, but everyone who were on those grounds. As God was tying his church together in America, a hungry young boy was filled, immersed in the same Spirit that was in Christ. That boy's life was changed forever.

Pentecost is not so much a history to celebrate, as it is an invitation to embrace. Are you hungry? Do you want life at its fullest? Will you seek and wait for what has been promised to you? The Spirit will validate his presence through you.