

WHEN THE WIND BLOWS AND THE FIRE FLAMES, FOLLOW THE SPIRIT!

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Acts 1: 6-11; 2:1-4, 16-17; and Galatians 5:22.

Introduction: Comment on the situation of the early disciples after the crucifixion, resurrection, and 40 days earthly appearances. A volatility of emotions – loss and bitter disappointment resulting from the crucifixion of Jesus; surprise, excitement, doubt, hope on the news of the resurrection of Jesus; adjusting to the fact that Jesus was not dead, that he was again with his followers, and that he would soon be leaving them to be at the right hand of the father making intercession for them (that's good biblical language).

These verses describe the time just before the ascension of Jesus. The real question, while not directly asked by the disciples, was “Where do we go from here?” It is interesting that in a general sense Jesus instructs them to wait for the arrival of the promised Spirit and commands them to be witnesses to Him “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” In fact, the real story of Acts is to show the advancement of Christianity from being a sect of Judaism to making universal religious claims upon all.

Then Jesus ascended, to be with them on earth no more. This is followed by the appearance of two men in white robes, who asked them “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you, will come again in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” Or, in the Yarbrough paraphrase "Get to work!"

Basically, what is being said to the disciples is that it is time to stop focusing on the past and start focusing on the future. Again, the question really becomes “Where do we go from here?” There are lessons to be learned from these disciples who quickly formed the early church, although the name “church” is not used until some time later.

In summary, these early disciples organized, placing the apostles in a role of leadership and soon establishing the role of deacons to deal with issues that arose in the church. The early church also responded to the changing world about them, as it opened up its doors under the leadership of the spirit to accept not just Jews but also Samaritans (part Jew, part non-Jew), God-fearers (Gentiles attracted to but not converted to Judaism) and Gentiles or non-Jews. In other words by accepting all people they moved Christianity from being a sect of Judaism to becoming a movement making universal claims.

Many challenges faced these early Christians:

- (1) Persecution at the local and then the empire levels - they would need strength, courage, and conviction to respond with a lasting witness
- (2) Debate over the Jewish law and whether it applied to converted Gentiles - they would need to understand their Jewish roots in a new, more powerful manner, and recognize the universal nature of the Gospel of Jesus. They would need affirmation that the new directions they

Where the Wind Blow and the Fire Flames, Follow the Spirit

were taking was truly consistent with their understanding of Jesus and they needed to be encouraged to consider new directions, ones that they had never considered.

(3) Eventually, they needed hope and a vision of what to do when Christ's anticipated return did not take place. New issues, new challenges, new plans were all before them. One of the significant responses to the latter was the writing and canonization of Christian literature that by the late fourth century resulted in the New Testament, which could be used to not only tell the story of Jesus but also to teach new converts based upon the writings of those who were first or second generations of believers.

So the question of the early disciples "Where do we go from here?" was clearly and competently answered in such a way that some nearly 2,000 years later, we gather here today to worship based upon their witness to the remotest parts of the earth.

I. **So, if Jesus was no longer with his disciples and He did not return quickly, who** would lead them, who would strengthen them, who would give them direction and guidance when they had to face decisions and answer questions on matters that they had never experienced nor anticipated. The answer was the promise of the Spirit.

A. To be very honest, thinking about the Spirit scares me. I conjure up snake-handling, speaking in unknown tongues, hands raised in the air during worship, and general religious chaos that instead of being meaningful is quite disconcerting, at least it is to me.

B. But when I look closely at the Book of Acts, I see a different picture woven into the fabric of the narrative of a developing church. Time and again the presence of the Spirit is a part of a tapestry of mission and ministry, of new directions never anticipated, and of affirmation of important decisions.

1. For example, when it came time to replace Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve, the ancient practice of casting lots to determine the will of God was used in the selection of choosing Matthias over Justus. Never again would the early church use some mechanical means to determine God's leadership. From now on, evidence of the approval of the Holy Spirit was sought.

2. At Pentecost, the very power and presence of the Spirit was evidenced by the arrival of the Spirit like a rushing wind and with tongues like fire, as expressed in the phenomena of speaking in tongues. What is interesting here is that this is not *glossalalia*, speaking in unknown tongues. This was speaking, or more accurately hearing, in the language of the members who were having the message of the apostles proclaimed to them. They were from all over the Mediterranean area, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Pamphylans, Phrygians, Cappadocians, Judeans, Egyptians, Lybians, Cyrenians, Romans, and so forth. And the visitors to Pentecost were so amazed that they thought that the Apostles must be drunk. The phrase that "These men are not drunk, it's only nine in the morning" has a touch of humor to it. But in this one instance this amazing development, which led to the conversion of about 3,000 converts to Christ, was evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Where the Wind Blow and the Fire Flames, Follow the Spirit

3. The command to take the Gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Rome) began to be exercised very quickly, and in a real sense is the outline of the Acts of the Apostles. The movement begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome, the center of the Roman world. Under the leadership of the Spirit, the Apostles began to go and preach to people that were not acceptable in traditional Judaism. Reports came that Samaritans, those part Jew-part Gentile who were rejected by more pure blooded Jews were accepting Jesus. What were these early followers to do? They sent Peter and John to investigate, the Spirit came upon the Samaritans and they began to speak in unknown tongues! *Glossalalia!* This scares me. I prefer good old English. But in Acts, speaking in unknown tongues was affirmation that the church was moving in the right direction. Should we accept Samaritans! The Spirit says "YES!" Should the church accept a Gentile like the centurion Cornelius, who seeks out a reluctant Peter? The Spirit says "YES!" Should the church open its doors to God-fearers, Gentile converts to Judaism? The Spirit says "YES!" Should Paul take the Gospel directly to Gentiles? The Spirit says "YES!" Should Gentile converts be required to accept the Jewish law? The Spirit says "NO!" The just shall live by faith, alone! And, what about those followers of John the Baptist who had not heard the message of Jesus. The Spirit affirmed them as well. At ***each important step of advancement***, the Spirit affirmed that the church was going in the right direction.

Later on, Paul is addressing problems in the church at Corinth. One issue was *glossalalia*. There were those who saw this as a special gift that made them somewhat better than those without it. Paul responds, "Yes I speak in tongues more that you do." I surmise that in Paul's own journey, he was affirmed by the Spirit time and again as he took courageous steps into the unknown. But Paul says that he'd rather have a practical gift, the gift of prophesy, or really the gift of teaching. It is practical; it is useful. It benefits those who are taught, whereas only the individual is blessed by speaking in tongues. I find comfort in that. I don't have to speak in unknown tongues in order to know the presence of the Spirit. Paul also added that "Whatever you do, do it decently and in order."

II. But what does all of this mean today in the 21st century? I suggest a couple of things that we can learn from the advances in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

a. First, it is obvious that God wants us to move forward, that God wants us to ***expand*** our ministry and our influence. It is apparent that we need to be open-minded, that we need to see possibilities that go beyond the boundaries, which we too often have set for ourselves and for the church. Instead of deciding whom we should reject, we need to figure out whom we should accept.

b. Second, the affirmation of the Spirit to new ideas, new thoughts, new paradigms, and expanded boundaries should lead us to moving beyond where we are, beyond what we have been taught, toward new possibilities, new ways to express an old, old faith. We need to deposit old wine into new wineskins, in a manner of speaking. There must be more relevant ways of expressing the ancient Gospel, creative models for ministry, adoption of new tools, new techniques in communicating an age, old story. We must have a foot in the past, a foot in the future.

Where the Wind Blow and the Fire Flames, Follow the Spirit

c. Third, we must see the Spirit where she is present, feel the wind where she blows, and experience the warmth where there is fire. This is hard. It is scary. It may be intimidating? So what have we learned to look for from the Acts of the Apostles?

1. ***When the Spirit moves, something good happens***, people respond, people find courage and conviction, fear dissipates, and hope reigns.

2. ***When the Spirit moves, something practical happens for the community***. Doors open rather than close. People who have needs find their needs fulfilled. People of faith see their faith increase and expand. People of faith see fields white with harvest.

3. ***Where the Spirit moves, unity appears, not divisiveness***. Or if disagreement arises, higher ground is found. People pull together, not in contradiction.

4. ***Where the Spirit moves old forms give way to new possibilities***, irrelevance is replaced by relevance, and believers are joyfully surprised.

5. ***Where the Spirit moves, theology results from faith, rather than defines the faith***. Words reflect action; they do not replace action. Where the Spirit moves, there is life in worship, in service, in doctrine, and in ethics.

6. In Galatians 5:22, Paul tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; against such things there is no law. And, who needs glossalalia?

Conclusion: The church of the 21st century desperately needs an infusion of the Spirit.

First Baptist Church needs to feel the wind of the Spirit; needs to be warmed by the flames of the Advocate, needs to be comforted by the Counselor, and needs to be stirred in wondrous ways.

Each one of us as believers needs to grow in our belief, refine our talents, and commit ourselves to the greater cause of the church.

Can these things be? Yes, if we search for our spiritual side, if we truly believe that God loves us, that Jesus forgives us, and that the Spirit empowers us!