

A Church on Fire  
Acts 2:1-21

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The day the Holy Spirit came, about 120 followers of Jesus were gathered together in Jerusalem. The twelve apostles were there (Judas was dead by this time, but a replacement had been chosen), as well as certain women, other believers, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Jesus' brothers. Those who had seen Jesus risen and ascend into heaven gathered for prayer. They heard a loud, violent wind and all of a sudden flames burst out on top of their heads. They caught on fire, both literally and figuratively, and the church of Jesus Christ was born.

God's presence often appears as fire. God was seen to be a fire pot and flaming torch to Abraham, a burning bush to Moses, a pillar of fire to lead the way through the desert of the exodus, and a fiery judgment for the prophets of Baal and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And now at Pentecost, tongues of fire rest over the heads of those who believe in Jesus Christ, symbolizing the power of God coming upon them. What an awesome sight that must have been! What an awesome day!

Do you think God still does this to the church? Do you think God still pours out His Spirit upon believers like that? I believe God does and that any and every church can be ignited just like the first one on Pentecost. Every church should be on fire with the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst. But some are not. We must admit that some churches are as stale and dry and cold as can be. So today, from this story of the birth of church, I want us to consider what a church on fire looks like.

A church on fire knows the importance of being together. Acts chapter 1 tells us that about 120 believers gathered together. That's less than are in this room. That's how many were the start of the church. They realized they were not just individuals who believed in Jesus but that their common belief made them a community. Paul will later call those who believe in Jesus a body – the body of Christ – a living, breathing organism in which every member is part of the one body.

There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. We need to be together, to get together often, so that we stay on track, stay enthusiastic, and encourage one another. When one of us suffers, we all suffer. When one of us can rejoice, we rejoice together. There is power in numbers. There is Holy Spirit power when we are together.

Nicky Gumbel tells the story of a young man in England who was a Christian, but felt distant from God. He seemed to have lost his love and enthusiasm for God. This young man went to see an older Christian friend

in whom he confided his feelings. There was a fire in the fireplace and without saying anything, the older man went over to the fireplace, removed a red hot glowing coal from the fire and set it on the mantle. Within a few minutes, the coal had gone black. Again, without saying anything, the older friend got up and returned the coal to the fire. Within a few minutes the coal was red and glowing again.

This young man caught on to the wise parable he had been shown. Not being with the church can leave us cold and distant. Being with the church communicates the power of grace into our lives, keeping us aflame with God's Spirit. Life among the earliest believers as described later in Acts 2 is still an accurate depiction of a healthy congregation: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to breaking bread together and praying together. Next time you are deciding whether to roll out of bed and come to Sunday worship, next time you consider not coming to youth group or circle or Bible study, next time you wonder whether you should eat with your church family, remember that a church on fire gets together and that you are part of that church.

A church on fire comes out of its own doors to proclaim Jesus. The power that these earliest followers are given, the power that we are given is not just to be used for our own edification. It is to be used to do extraordinary things outside of our own church walls. It enables us to speak to others about Jesus, just as those first disciples did, without regard to language or cultural barriers. The fire of the Holy Spirit enabled those early disciples to lay aside their fear, their politics, their concerns about food and shelter and even safety, and to go public as witnesses for Jesus Christ. If we are to be the church, then we must also do as they did. Aflame with the Holy Spirit, we are to tell the story of Jesus, in word and in deed, to people outside this fellowship.

A church on fire uses every member in ministry. Did you notice that when they were all together, a rushing wind filled the entire house and a tongue of fire rested on each one of them. Not just on the apostles. Not just on the thin, beautiful ones. Not just on the old wise ones or on the young, vibrant ones. Not just on the extroverted ones. Not just on the talented ones. A tongue of fire rested on each one of them.

Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit to those who believe in Him. If you believe then you are given the Spirit and with that Spirit comes gifts that you and I are expected to use in the church. We have been given an overwhelming number of gifts in this church. God intends every disciple, no matter how old or how young, to do their part, to fill their niche, do the work of the church. It has been said that a church member waiting to be

asked to serve in his own church is like a member of a family waiting to be invited to pull weeds in front of his own house.

If everyone responds with the gifts the Holy Spirit has given, this church will be able to do everything it needs to do. It will be a vital, dynamic church that will change people's lives because you used your gifts, empowered by the Spirit of God burning in your life.

A church on fire transforms and grows. On Pentecost, Peter preached and 3000 people welcomed his message, were baptized, and joined the church. It would have been very comfortable for that 120 to stay 120 and do what they had done the same way in the same place forever. But that was not the will of God for them. That is not how the gospel of Jesus Christ is spread. The Holy Spirit forces us out of our comfort zone. The Spirit calls us to grow.

The Holy Spirit not only forces us out of our comfort zone externally but also internally. God's Holy Spirit, a cleansing and consuming fire, is the ultimate interior decorator. The Holy Spirit will transform and grow us on the inside. A wise, old Middle Eastern mystic said this about himself. "I was a revolutionary when I was young, and all my prayer to God was: 'Lord, give me the energy to change the world.' As I approached middle age and realized that my life was half gone without my changing a single soul, I changed my prayer to: 'Lord, give me the grace to change all those who come into contact with me - just my family and friends and I shall be satisfied.' Now that I am an old man and my days are numbered, I have begun to see how foolish I have been. My one prayer now is: 'Lord, give me your grace to change myself.' If I had prayed this right from the start, I would not have wasted my life."<sup>i</sup> The Holy Spirit gives our character the opportunity to be transformed. The Holy Spirit gives our church the opportunity to grow in strength, power, numbers, service, and love. Don't be afraid of being set on fire by the Spirit, because without the transforming fire of God upon us, we are dead.

A church on fire is passionate about Jesus and His church. Kierkegaard said that the church is in danger, not because of sin, but because of its lack of passion. Many people long for the kind of Spirit-filled passion that was exhibited on that day of Pentecost. Tony Campolo says that Friedrich Nietzsche originally attended Christian worship services, but he eventually walked out, frustrated with the lack of passion. I too have noticed that apathy is the number one spiritual problem in the church in the United States. It has been so easy, so comfortable, to be the church for so long in our country that we take it for granted. We sleep through church. One

comedian stated that if all the people who slept in church were laid end to end, they would be a lot more comfortable.

I too am guilty of sometimes not showing, not sharing the passion that I feel for Jesus and for His church. So I want to take this opportunity to share it and show you how I really feel. I love Jesus. I almost cannot contain it sometimes. I want to sing, to dance, to cry, to laugh, to shout about his love for me. I will be a witness to who God is in Jesus Christ with my words and my life.

I love the church. I have been raised in her, nurtured by her, prepared, taught, utilized, enriched, encouraged, and blessed by her. I have vowed to serve her the rest of my life with energy, intelligence, imagination and love and I will do it. There is no way I can ever pay back what Jesus has done for me and I am not trying to. But my passion for Jesus compels me to serve the church with enthusiasm. I know many of you share my passion for the church and many of you have served the church much longer than I.

I love this church. In the 5 ½ months I have been here I have already seen extraordinary love, generosity, sacrifice, effort, restraint, cooperation, energy, perseverance, and faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have seen commitment to learn and to teach the Word of God. I have seen outreach to the least in our community. I thank God every day for the generosity and loving kindness you have shown me and my family and I know that I am blessed because many clergy do not have the same experience.

This church is important to me. Therefore, I will preach you the truth. I will love you unconditionally. I will work for your spiritual health. I will give of my time, money and talents. I will encourage you and defend you, challenge you and help you with all that I am and with every gift God has given me because I love you. I will do whatever needs to be done to make this church the best it can possibly be, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The fire of passion that is in us is the Holy Spirit of God and when we don't let it out it hurts us and it deprives others of knowing the strength of the Spirit of God. Don't be afraid to be passionate about Jesus and our church and to let others see it.

Do you want to be a church on fire? I hope so because there is no other way to be a true church. That is how she started and that is how she must be until Jesus comes again.

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<sup>1</sup>As quoted in Paul J. Wharton, Stories and Parables for Preachers and Teachers