

“Wheels, Baking Powder, and Words”

Reading: Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-21

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

There are some things that you simply cannot do without. We've probably all had that experience of doing a routine, familiar task and absent-mindedly skipping one of the crucial steps, only to end up with a sloppy mess at the end. Some ingredients cannot be left out or substituted; some parts are integral. Once when I was working in a restaurant kitchen for a summer, I was making a batch of candied walnuts, which I had done many times before, and the candy coating simply was not working like it was supposed to. I realized halfway through that I'd left out the butter, and there's an awful lot of baking that won't work without butter. When I went home at the end of the summer and tried to show off what I'd learned for my family by making those candied walnuts, again, I just couldn't get things to work right. This time it wasn't the butter, it was the fact that the recipe used artificial pancake syrup and I had used real maple syrup. As I learned that day, fake pancake syrup and real maple syrup are not the same thing.

Some things just have to be in there, or else you won't end up with what you want. A car has to have wheels on it, or else you've got an ugly lawn ornament that will probably earn you a fine from the township or your home owners' association. If you try to bake a cake without baking powder or some other sort of leavening agent to give it loft, you will not end up with a cake. (I've made that mistake, too. And yes, for those of you who want to be pedantic, a cheesecake does not have leavening in it, but it's more of a custard than a true cake.) If you have a book that doesn't have any words in it, you might have something that can be used for a journal, but you don't have a story if it's empty. A car is more than just wheels, and a cake is more than just baking powder, and a story is more than just words, but if you take away those critical ingredients, you're left with something else.

The church's celebration of Pentecost calls us to consider what the essential ingredients are for a church. You can take away stained glass, and you still have a church. You can take away hymnals, and you still have a church. You can take away church buildings and pews and Sunday morning meeting times, and you can still have a church. You can even take away printed Bibles, and you still have a church; the church existed for decades before the New Testament books were complete, and it was centuries before written Bibles were common. But you cannot have a church unless you have a group of people marked by the blood of Christ proclaiming the word of Christ in the presence of the Spirit of Christ. One person can't be the church; it takes a gathering of people who are following Christ. And if they're not proclaiming the word of Christ through speech and action, they're not the church. And today, Pentecost, reveals the final, absolutely essential characteristic of the church: it is sealed and filled with the presence of God the Holy Spirit.

The followers of Jesus spent forty days after Easter in the presence of the risen Jesus, learning from Him, but they weren't really the church yet. They saw Jesus triumphantly taken up into heaven, but they weren't the church yet. They gathered together in worship and prayer, but still, they weren't the church. It took the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the outpouring of His power, the filling with His gifts, and the motivation of His mission to make them the church. Perhaps above all others, this is the aspect of life in Christ that has been most neglected by the church and by individual Christians throughout history. The church has often emphasized the word of God reported to us in the

Scriptures, and the church has constantly renewed her desire to be like Jesus, but when we come back around to Pentecost, we've often shied away from diving deep into the Spirit.

But neglecting the Spirit, ignoring the Spirit, and resisting being filled by the Spirit are not options for the church of Jesus Christ. Again and again, Jesus promised His followers that the Spirit was coming, that there would be yet another phase in God's plan, that He would not leave them alone, and that even though His work brought the kingdom of God to us, there was still more coming. They didn't really understand what He was telling them, though; who can blame them? They were surprised by the outpouring of the Spirit upon their Pentecost gathering, but from that moment on, the growth of the church and the movement of the followers of Jesus and the stories of their amazing Acts becomes, at its root, the story of the movement of the Spirit. If you remove the Holy Spirit from the New Testament, you have no growth of the church, no powerful preaching of the gospel, no empowerment to live the example Christ gave us, no miracles showing the inbreaking of God's kingdom, no willingness to water the seeds of the church with the blood of the martyrs, and no revelation of the consummation of God's movement in history.

Without the Spirit, the blood of Christ secures a place for us in His kingdom for eternity after we die, but the kingdom has no power in the present. It had been a persistent problem in the lives of God's people for many generations. They had all the ingredients for a cake but no baking soda to give it texture; they had a car but no wheels to make it go; they had the ideas for a story but no words to make it alive. They knew the ethical commands involved in being God's people, and they had the call of God upon their lives, and they had the presence of God in their midst at different points in their history, but they had this persistent problem of sin lurking within them, sabotaging their ability to be holy.

The prophet Ezekiel recognizes this and promises them these words of God: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then...you will be my people, and I will be your God." God's plan cannot move forward unless His Holy Spirit finally solves the problem of human sin. The church cannot be the church without the indwelling of the Spirit.

We read a fascinating story of a foreshadowing of Pentecost, a mini-Pentecost that sheds a lot of light on the larger event. It takes place early in the formation of God's people Israel; they've recently been led out of slavery in Egypt and are in the wilderness learning what it means to be God's people. It's the context that really makes this story interesting. They're living in the desert and are wanderers at this point, so they have no real agriculture to sustain them and no real food to be found. God has been feeding them with manna, bread from heaven that miraculously appears. And yet they get tired of manna all the time, so they cry out for meat to get a little variety in their diet. The real problem is that their appetites lead them to desire to return to Egypt; they're choosing predictable, familiar slavery over trusting in God.

The result is that God is angry with their rejection of Him, while Moses their leader is at his wit's end. The people are crying out because they need meat, and Moses is crying out because he needs help. What does God give them? He tells Moses to gather seventy leaders from among the

people, and when they're gathered, the Spirit rests on them in a unique way. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit shows up here and there at various times for certain tasks or situations, but it's very rare for Him to rest upon a large group of people. But in response to the cries for meat and help with leadership — both of which God does eventually grant — the more significant thing that the people don't even realize they need but God grants first is the presence of His Spirit. An outbreak of prophesy, of proclaiming the truth of the word of God, is the result, and when a couple of no-shows to the main event start prophesying in the camp, Moses' response is that he wished the Spirit would be poured out on *everyone*.

Again, as time passed, the awareness grew of this need for the Spirit to be present in order for God's people to truly be His people. Ezekiel promised the time when our sin-stained spirits would be replaced by God's Holy Spirit. The prophet Joel promised that Moses' wish for the indiscriminate outpouring of the Spirit would indeed happen. On the day of Pentecost, as Peter proclaims in his sermon, Joel's prophecy came true. A church without the Spirit is not a church at all.

So how do we tell? What are the characteristics of a church that is filled with the Spirit? Or, to put it in the negative, how do we tell when a church is lacking the Spirit? There are all kinds of places we can look for examples of those who *almost* got it, who are firing on *most* cylinders but not all, who have a lot of the ingredients for the cake but are missing something key. We could look at the Hebrews there in the wilderness with Moses, who are willing to leave Egypt and are willing to start the journey and are willing to make a promise to be God's people, but then they can't follow through. They get excited, but then they get distracted. They start the journey, but they get afraid of crossing into the Promised Land. They make a covenant with God, but they don't carry through on their end of the bargain. They're similar in a lot of ways to the followers of Jesus before Pentecost: they have so much of the truth and they've come so far, but they lack the power to carry through with the mission.

Or I think of Saul, who later became the Apostle Paul. Early in the story of Acts, he's a zealous persecutor of Christians, and we have to assume that it wasn't because he was an evil or bloodthirsty person. On the contrary, Saul probably sincerely thought he was protecting the truth from blasphemers and troublemakers. He was a Pharisee, a member of an elite religious sect that was deeply concerned with being faithful to God, which is very commendable. He had zeal, and he had a lot of the truth, but he was missing the key truth about Jesus the Christ. He was obsessed with what he understood about the truth, but the Holy Spirit points us to Christ and helps us to know Him. It took an encounter with Jesus and the filling of the Spirit for Saul to become Paul, who did so much to build up the church of Jesus.

We could list example after example of people who stopped somewhere short of truly receiving the Holy Spirit and letting the Spirit do a new work within them. Sometimes it's out of ignorance, sometimes it's out of rebellion, sometimes it's out of fear of what sorts of crazy things the Spirit might do. He does what He will and He gives gifts as He sees fit, and that can be a scary thing; not everyone thinks they're ready to prophesy like Moses' seventy leaders. And it's true that the Spirit can surprise us and challenge us with His leading. But the work He does is so much greater than our fears or failings. He helps us to know Jesus. He gives us gifts to do the mission of God. He enables us in living holy lives. The result is not fear or uncertainty or disorder, the result is Christlikeness. He produces in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-

control. That's simply a more detailed way of stating what the cry of our church is, to be deep, beautiful, fearless people of Jesus Christ.

The story of Pentecost is a challenge to every generation of the church and to every individual Christian, because we live in the continuing age of the Spirit. Pentecost is ongoing; the Spirit is still being poured out on the church. He is and must continue to be essential to the life of this church, and to your life in Christ. He desires to fill you, if you desire Him. I hope that is your desire.



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