

'Being the Church' - Part 10

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our last message we began to explore the central role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and in the life of the early Church He birthed, the Church which Jesus is still building today through His Spirit. In that study we were reminded that the only reason the Holy Spirit was so powerful, so effective and so present in the life of Jesus is because Jesus made a daily choice to listen to and submit to the Holy Spirit. Jesus could have spoken and acted on His own, but He chose to speak only the words His Father gave Him to speak, through the Spirit and He chose only to do what He saw the Father doing, which was revealed to Him by the Holy Spirit.

The only reason the early Church exploded across the world like a raging bushfire, capturing the hearts and lives of millions of people is because those early disciples also submitted themselves to the Holy Spirit every single day and allowed the Spirit of Christ, the head of the Church, to call all the shots – right down to their daily instructions about where to minister and what to say!

So in this message I want us to further explore the most important, yet potentially the most controversial subject in the Church – the ministry of the Holy Spirit – or to put it another way: the manifest presence of God. For hundreds of years now the Church has gathered every week around a sermon. The focal point of most Church services is that message and we justify that because of our true commitment to the Scriptures and the teaching of the Word. But Israel camped around the Presence of God. I don't believe that anything I could ever do or say could impact you more than gathering in the actual presence of God.

Since I arrived in this wonderful place, that has been my single greatest desire, my deepest longing and my primary focus – to encourage, exhort, lead, guide and bring each and every one of you into the presence of God Himself. That is the greatest gift I could ever give you. Some time after I arrived, I recall one of our congregation actually coming to me after a service and saying, "You really do talk about God a lot, don't you?" I smiled and said, "I certainly hope so."

There is a great prayer in Isaiah 64:1, "*Oh, that you would rend (tear) the heavens and come down..*" It's a prayer that revivalists have prayed for centuries and historically we see times when the presence of God would be so strong, so pronounced in a preacher or evangelist, people would fall under conviction of sin and turn to God whenever they were in the vicinity of that person!

One example I love to recount is that of the great American revival preacher Charles Finney in the late 1800's as he passed through a small community called Houghton in upstate New York. Finney was reading and praying on the train as the town flashed by his window, he was not even aware of it. But as Charles Finney's train passed through that town, the Holy Spirit fell on sinners right across the community. Men in bars instantly fell to their knees under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and asked Jesus to save them. Churches across town were full the following Sunday as people came searching for God. Finney didn't even stop and never preached a sermon in Houghton.

"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down ..." is a great prayer, a powerful prayer, a legitimate prayer. But let me share something with you that I shared some time ago, but it's important enough to remind you again today.

In Mark chapter one we read about Jesus' baptism and it says that as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens parted and the Holy Spirit came down upon Him in the form of a dove – and John's gospel adds the words, *"and remained."*

Jesus was witnessing the answer to the prayer of Isaiah. When He saw the heavens parting, the word used for 'parting' there is the same word used in Matthew when he wrote about the temple veil being torn in two at the death of Jesus. It was a violent tearing of the veil and in that same verse it says the rocks around Jerusalem were torn apart – the same word - it is a violent rending, a tearing apart which cannot be put back together again. Those rocks would never be whole again. The temple veil would never be replaced and the heavens would never be closed.

Isaiah's prayer has been answered and as Jesus came out of the waters of baptism, there was a violent breaking of the powers of darkness which have clouded the minds of humanity for centuries. Now, here today, the Holy Spirit lives within every believer and our Father in heaven is jealous for fellowship with the Spirit that is within you and me and there is not a power in this universe which can get in the way of our Father's love. Such a power does not exist. Most 'closed heavens' are between the ears of believers as they fail to embrace the truth of who we are in Christ and Who resides within us: the Holy Spirit. *"Greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world."* (1 Jn 4:4)

It is too easy for us to become fearful of darkness; fearful of the times we live in; fearful about the next news bulletin full of bad news about man's depravity and evil triumphing somewhere. It's too easy to focus on the accomplishments of darkness and doubt the accomplishments of God. We pray against darkness and against things which afflict us instead of learning how to respond to the voice and actions of the Father, like Jesus did every day He was among us. If we live always in reaction to the darkness, then the devil is establishing our agenda and influencing what we do with our lives. But he doesn't have that right. He doesn't have the privilege to influence my agenda or yours at all. Jesus didn't live in reaction to the powers of darkness. He lived in response to the Father and said, *"I only do what I see My Father doing,"* and *"I only speak the words my Father gives me to speak."*

God is looking for a people who will embrace the privilege of living every day in response to the Father and a people who will not live one day in fear of the enemy's accomplishments – because the gospel that is in your mouth is more powerful than any dark force which has ever invaded this world. There is nothing that can stand in the way of the power of the resurrected Christ in us, through the Holy Spirit.

God is looking for a people who will learn to be good stewards of all that He has given them. Good stewards of the money and resources He bestows upon us; good stewards of the gifts and abilities He bestows upon us; good stewards of the freedom into which He has called us in Christ; and good stewards of the Presence He has given us – the Holy Spirit. God wants to raise up a people who will usher in that Presence to every area of this dysfunctional world – people who are bold for Him – people who minister like Jesus did in the same power of the Holy Spirit like He did. But to be a good steward of the Presence of God in public, we must first be good stewards of His presence in private.

If you grew up in the Church like me, then you will remember the great stories about King David. The one I am drawn to most is the story about how this young man killed a lion and a bear with his own hands as he was watching over his father's sheep. What really impacts me about that story is David killed the lion and the bear when nobody was watching. *That* is what then qualified him to kill Goliath when two entire nations were watching. God is looking for a people who will win private victories in secret places which are not for the audience or the applause of man. As we wrestle with our own doubts and fears; as our faith is formed in the crucible of life's trials; as we develop a personal history with God when nobody is watching – then, and only then, are we ready for God to use us like He used Jesus – and we have to believe that is possible.

Jesus said, *“As I have been sent, so I am sending you.”* Jesus said, *“Greater works than these shall you do.”* The more time we spend in the Gospels and the book of Acts, the more we will see and embrace Jesus, His mission, His passion, His purpose and His power.

Now Jesus is walking down the street one day and He is talking to people as He goes. He is already very well known at this point. People have heard about His teaching and His miracles and so He couldn't walk anywhere in public without being attached to a crowd. So as He walks, He is teaching them and counseling them and praying for them as people are pressing in around Him – trying to get as close as they can so they can tell others, *“I saw Him.”* or *“I was there when Jesus healed someone.”* But in spite of this thick crowd which was pressed in around him, somehow this one woman, who was not supposed to even be in public because of her physical condition, managed to push through as she reached out and touched a part of Jesus' clothing.

Now you have to picture this. Jesus is walking and talking and teaching and dialoguing with all these people. He is focused on multiple things, as well as not tripping over and being trampled to death, when a woman touches His clothing. She didn't touch Jesus – she only touched His garment. Immediately Jesus stopped and said, *“Power just left me – who did that?”*

The power He is talking about is the person of the Holy Spirit. So think about this with me for a moment. How conscious of the Holy Spirit's presence does someone need to be to realize in the midst of conversation, whilst walking with a crowd of people jammed in around them, to notice when somebody makes a withdrawal from their account?

When I say withdrawal, I don't mean that Jesus lost some of the Holy Spirit or the presence of God. He was given the Spirit without measure – so He was not left without – but He did feel that presence flow into someone else. How aware of the Holy Spirit do you need to be to realize when someone has put a demand on your anointing? It is one of the most fascinating stories about Jesus – worthy of our regular contemplation.

At this point many modern Christians think, *‘That's great, but I would expect that from Jesus – He was God.’* And with that one dismissive, ignorant comment, we destroy the whole miracle of the incarnation. Jesus did all His miracles as a man – not as God the Son. When Jesus took on human flesh, He took it on fully and completely and so He was born just like you and me with no special privilege or special powers because God the Son left all that in heaven when He chose to become a man. Anything and everything Jesus did, He did the same way you and I will do it – by the power of the Holy Spirit within.

That is why Jesus said, *“On my own I can do **nothing**.”* We read that and ignore it's true meaning because we think the second person of the Trinity said those words. We think that can't mean what it appears because this is God talking. No it's not! It was a carpenter from Nazareth talking! Please read through the references from last week about Jesus' total dependence upon the Holy Spirit for every word, every miracle and every direction - every day of His ministry. If I think that Jesus did all that He did as God, then I'm impressed and I applaud Him. But when I realize that He actually did everything He did as a man, just like me, then I am overwhelmed and I am no longer content to live as I am and I am no longer able to let you live that way either!

Now by the end of Mark chapter 6 we see that the story of this woman being healed by touching Jesus' clothes spread like a fire. In today's lingo: it went viral. So we read in the last verse of Mark 6, *“... wherever he (Jesus) went - into villages, towns or countryside - they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged Him to let them touch even the edge of His cloak, and all who touched it were healed.”*

All this happened from the story of one woman who did something nobody else had done before. But here's the crazy thing, Jesus never taught about touching anointed cloth to be healed. After it happened He didn't stop and say, *"Ok folks, there's a CD set on the back table 'Seven Steps to Miracles' and number 4 is 'Touching Anointed Cloth.'"* He never taught about this. By the time we get into the book of Acts we see the Apostle Paul making tents and people would take his sweaty headbands and pieces of clothing from Paul and put them on demonized or tormented people and the demons would cry out and leave the person healed.

Where did this come from? It came from the story of one woman touching the hem of Jesus' garment. But Paul never taught about this either. We have no evidence of him including this in any teaching he gave. Why? Well, we don't know, but personally, I just believe there are some things God won't let us find through instruction – He will only let us find them through adventure. They are hidden for those with child-like hearts to find.

But Jesus' story and Paul's story are eclipsed by Peter's story. In the book of Acts we read where Peter would make a habit of going to prayer at a certain time of the day and they had discovered that when sick people just got close to Peter, they got well. So people began bringing their sick relatives and friends and have them lie beside where Peter walked so that as his shadow passed over them, they were healed. But you will not find an instruction manual or any teaching on the power of Holy Ghost anointed shadows. No such instruction existed.

So what does all this mean? It simply means this: God has made it possible for human beings to host His presence in such a way that we impact everything and everyone around us. This is incarnational ministry on steroids! This is where you and I must understand that we take the literal presence of Christ into every area of our lives. When you stand in the queue at the supermarket, the presence of God, the actual manifestation of Christ is in that place and the more you believe that, the braver you will become in engaging people in conversation and hey, you may even do something crazy and out of character like ask them to come with you to worship next Sunday!

So the greatest news for every believer is that the Holy Spirit is in you. The same Holy Spirit Who was in Jesus when the woman touched His garment ... the same Holy Spirit Who was in Paul throughout his four missionary journeys as people were healed by touching his sweat-soaked headband ... the same Holy Spirit Who was so powerfully present in Peter that nobody had to even touch him or his clothing – they simply had to be near him!

Do I really understand any of this? Is the ministry of the Holy Spirit something I can clearly and cleverly explain to you in all its detail? No! I can't do that – nobody can. So much of this wonderful life in Christ is a mystery which must be embraced by faith. The Bible contains an enormous amount of instruction and teaching which we can know and embrace with our minds and our hearts. But the same Holy Spirit Who inspired what went into the Bible, also inspired what was left out. That's why they call this the Christian faith. Often, we just don't understand, but yet we still believe.

Every sincere believer I have ever known is longing to find that 'peace which passes understanding,' but very few realize the only way to find a peace that passes understanding is to stop trying to understand it. This is true for us all but it is especially true for those in leadership in the Church. There will be times when God will ask us to travel a road which makes no sense and goes against what our minds dictate and yet, if we allow God's Spirit to minister to our spirit – we will realize that some of the most important decisions the people of God will make, do not come with the level of understanding we would like. In fact, some of them make no sense at all at the time.

If you learn to be the resting place for the Holy Spirit Himself – then just watch what happens to the environment you walk in. When Jesus came up out of that water and the Holy Spirit rested on Him like a dove ... how did He walk from that time forward? How did He live? How would I walk around now if I actually had a gentle dove on my shoulder and I didn't want him to fly away? Every step I took would be careful, deliberate and always with that dove in mind.

Well *that* is how Jesus lived. *That* is how Peter and Paul and the early disciples lived. *That* is why the ministry of Jesus was so powerful and so life-changing. *That* is why His mission exploded across the world through His disciples over the next couple of hundred years.

Brothers and sisters, *being the Church* will be nothing more than the title of a soon-forgotten sermon series if we don't truly embrace what I have shared in this message and the last about the role of the Holy Spirit. I will have more to say about the Holy Spirit in the next message and my prayer is that those who have ears to hear, will really listen to what God is saying to us all right now – what God is saying to the Uniting Church right now – and what God is saying to the whole Body of Christ right across this nation.