

A Spirit-Filled Church

A Meditation on Acts 4:24-31

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The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost set in motion some remarkable events. The Spirit gave the apostles boldness to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem and many people came to faith in Christ. The Spirit also created a new community of those who believed that Jesus was crucified but raised from the dead. If we read Luke's report in the book of Acts, it is striking that the Holy Spirit was not just given to the apostles but to all the believers. In Acts 4:31 we read that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness."

This "filling" with the Holy Spirit happened after some dramatic events had unfolded in Jerusalem. The apostles Peter and John had performed an amazing miracle in the city: the healing of a man who had been lame from birth (Acts 3:1-10). They had testified that it was by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth that the man was healed (4:10). This had drawn the attention of the whole city, and Peter and John had used the opportunity to proclaim the news that Jesus of Nazareth, the man who had been crucified in this city only a few months ago, was raised from the dead by God himself.

Of course, the Jewish authorities did not like this. As it says in 4:2, the Jewish leaders were "greatly annoyed because [the apostles] were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead." Peter and John were arrested and put on trial the next day. During the trial the Jewish authorities tried to

bully the two apostles into submission and fear, but Luke reports that Peter, "filled with the Holy Spirit," spoke powerfully, testifying that Jesus is the Christ and that there is "no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Eventually the Jewish authorities sent the apostles home with many threats and warnings that they should stop speaking about Jesus Christ. In Acts 4:23 we read that the two apostles "went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and elders had said to them." This was an important moment. How would the congregation react? What would the elders of the congregation say? It must have been tempting for the brothers to say: In the current situation we should avoid further trouble and not rub the authorities the wrong way. Let's keep our heads down for a while and not speak publicly about Christ.

While this might be called a "wisdom" argument, it is worldly wisdom, not spiritual wisdom. Thankfully, this is not how the congregation reacted. Guided by the Spirit of Pentecost the brothers considered that the current situation required boldness (not meekness) on the part of the apostles. So they decided to pray together and plea with the Lord that the gospel might continue to be proclaimed boldly.

The prayer of the congregation in Jerusalem (Acts 4:24-31) is a remarkable prayer in many ways, clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Three

main aspects may be identified. First, we see that the Holy Spirit gives the congregation *prophetic insight* into the situation. They understand that there is more to the response of the Jewish leadership than just a human aversion against change or a resistance against “new theology.” The reaction of the Jewish leadership cannot be explained from a merely human perspective. There is something demonic about it! The congregation understands that “truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel (4:27).” This is a remarkable statement. It used to be that the Gentiles were on the one side and the people of Israel on the other, but now the Gentiles and the people of Israel are on the same side: against God and his Anointed!

The congregation’s prophetic insight into the situation is not just based on their analysis of the situation itself. It is also based on their understanding of the Word of God. They saw a connection back to a prophecy that was inspired by the Holy Spirit long ago when king David had composed Psalm 2: Gentiles and peoples, kings and rulers, are all gathered together against the Lord and against his Anointed (4:25-26). They see Psalm 2 fulfilled! The Spirit has given them the insight that the word “peoples” in Psalm 2 refers not just to pagan nations but includes the people of Israel as well.

While this is a terrifying thought, it is also comforting to know that the same Psalm 2 also foretold the victory over God’s enemies: “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill” (Ps 2:4-6). After this, follows the promise that

the Lord’s Anointed will break his enemies with a rod of iron. He will dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel (2:9).

It is important for the church in the 21st century to remember that the struggle continues and that we should not be surprised if we experience fierce resistance and hatred from the side of the world and even from the side of churches that have become unfaithful to the Lord. May the Holy Spirit give us prophetic insight to understand the situation we find ourselves in today! At the same time, the promise of Psalm 2 still stands for the 21st century. Christ will be victorious, and all his followers will be victorious with Him.

Going back to the congregation in Jerusalem, let’s see how the Holy Spirit also inspires the believers in Jerusalem to dedicate themselves totally to the cause of God’s kingdom. They must have realized that that it was dangerous to continue to live as followers of Christ openly. They must have realized that there would a time that they would no longer be tolerated in Jerusalem, that their lives might be in danger, that they might lose their possessions. If the Jewish leaders had killed Jesus just two months ago, why would they not do the same to the apostles? But these Christians display what might be called *priestly dedication*, inspired by the Holy Spirit. They do what the apostle Paul later asked the believers in Rome to do: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1).

Of course, the ones who experienced these pressures the most were the apostles. Therefore, the congregation prayed for them that God would grant them “to continue to speak [God’s] word with all boldness” (4:29). In other words, the congregation itself did not

want to go underground and neither did they want the apostles to refrain from the task the Lord had given them: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem...” (1:8).

May the Christian church in the 21st century not lose this priestly devotion that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. May we continue to devote ourselves to the mandate the Lord has given us: that the gospel be proclaimed, trusting that even though people might be afraid to join us, many will come nonetheless (see 5:13-14). And may those among us who have received the calling to proclaim the gospel of Christ have the courage to do so publicly. In a society that becomes increasingly secular, there will be an increasing need for the word of God to be proclaimed with boldness.

A remarkable aspect of the prayer of the believers in Jerusalem is that they asked the Lord to stretch out his hand to heal, and that signs and wonders would be performed through the name of Jesus Christ (4:30). This is not something we typically ask the Lord to do in our time, but at that point in time this request was entirely appropriate. The work of the apostles was to be accompanied by signs and wonders and mighty works (2 Cor 12:2; see also Mark 17:17,20). And after all, the Lord had already given Peter and John the power to perform an amazing miracle of healing in his name (3:1-10). It was to be expected that He would continue to do the same.

The Lord responds immediately to the congregation’s prayer. “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken...” (4:31). The shaking of the ground was a sign of God’s presence. In the old covenant God had made his presence felt with earthquakes. Here, it seems like there is a

kind of gentle shaking of the ground, not terrifying, like in the old covenant, but comforting and encouraging: “The Lord is with us!”

Finally, we read that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” It is interesting to read that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit because many of them, if not all, had been filled with the Spirit before. Peter had been filled with the Spirit when he addressed the Sanhedrin (4:8). On the day of Pentecost all the believers had been filled with the Holy Spirit (2:4). This means that Christian believers could be filled with the Holy Spirit more than once. The Holy Spirit’s power does not come on God’s people automatically. Rather, God’s people are filled with the Spirit when they pray for it, when it is needed, and when God in his grace grants it to happen.

Notice the end result: They “continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” We may assume that this “speaking boldly” did not just happen inside the building where they were gathered but that they took this boldness with them when they went outside, back into a hostile environment.

So, in conclusion, we see that the Holy Spirit gave the believers in Jerusalem three things: *prophetic insight* into their situation, *priestly devotion* to pray for the continuation of the gospel, and *kinglike boldness* to speak the word of God. May the Holy Spirit work the same gifts in the church of Christ today.



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