

THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

The Spirit Empowers Witness

Questions for Personal Study

Begin by reading John 7.37-39. What is Jesus promising his disciples? Why had the disciples not yet experienced what Jesus was promising? Read John 15.18-16.4. What instructions is Jesus giving his disciples? What promise does he give them? Why would this make them hopeful? Read Acts 1-2 to see how this promise comes true!

Questions for Study in Community

Read John 15.12-17. Do these verses describe your community? How? As a community, do you believe that Jesus has chosen you to bear fruit? Read John 15.18-16.4. What is Jesus instructing the disciples to do? Why did Jesus proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel get him killed? Do you think we should expect this in our lives today?

Questions for Staying on Mission

What does it mean that we and the Spirit will “witness about Jesus?” How is that happening through your Missional Community? What role does the Spirit play in empowering us to be witnesses? What fears or hesitations keep you from proclaiming the gospel?

Practical Thoughts on the Empowering of the Spirit

Preacher Martin Lloyd Jones once wrote: “The essence of a revival is that the Holy Spirit comes down upon a number of people together, upon a whole church... It is, if you like, a visitation of the Holy Spirit...an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And what the people are conscious of is that it is as if something has suddenly come down upon them. The Spirit of God has descended into their midst, God has come down and is amongst them. And the effect of that is that they immediately become aware of **his presence** and of **his power** in a manner that they have never known before. I am talking about Christian people, about church members gathered together as they have done so many times before. Suddenly they are aware of his presence, they are aware of the majesty and the awe of God... manifesting his power and guiding them, and leading them, and directing them. That is the essence of revival.” **So pray for it!**

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The Spirit: God’s Empowering Presence

We continue our study this week in John 14-16, some of Jesus’ final words to his disciples. Just after finishing the last supper with them, from which we get our practice of communion, Jesus begins to instruct his disciples regarding their responsibility to carry on his ministry once he is no longer with them. These instructions are disconcerting for the disciples for two reasons. First, they aren’t sure what he means by “leaving” them - where is he going? And why? What does it all mean? Second, they are overwhelmed by the fact that he is turning over his powerful and miraculous ministry to them - How do we do what he was doing? What does he expect of us?

Into this context, Jesus begins to promise the disciples that he will send another Helper, the Holy Spirit, who will more than compensate the disciples for the loss of Jesus’ physical presence. The disciples primary responsibility is to abide in Jesus, by which he means they are to stay rooted and grounded in the his life, death, and resurrection. The disciples must put roots down deep into the gospel, and let that become their source of life. There is nothing more important for us than this: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” As they learn to do that, they will begin to produce “fruit”. Jesus uses the imagery of the vine and branches to magnify the organic nature of their dependency on him. They must be deeply connected to him - resting in the gospel - in order to do any of the things he is telling them to do once he is gone.

The two primary “fruits” that Jesus wants to produce in his disciples is love for one another and the ongoing ministry of proclaiming the gospel and making disciples. **He wants them to be the church!** So he sends his Spirit to dwell with them and in them, and by reliance upon the Spirit these disciples will find themselves comforted and empowered for the works of ministry Jesus has prepared for them. This week we’ll focus on the Spirit’s role in making these disciples - and us - bold and winsome witnesses to Jesus. The primary verses we’ll look at are in John 15.26-27.

The (Hated) Ministry of Jesus

Beginning in John 15.18, Jesus predicts that the world will hate his followers just like it hated him. The world hates Jesus because of the message he preached (John 15.22) and because of the works that he did among them (John 15.24). He includes in this hatred that of religious leaders, too, stating in John 16.2 that “they will put you out of the synagogues” and that in trying to stop the early church they would murder believers, thinking they are “offering service to God.” Jesus is preparing his disciples for the cost involved in following him and taking over his ministry.

The ministry of Jesus included both proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel. Jesus was a preacher - he boldly proclaimed the coming of God’s kingdom, that God was breaking in, and that all were welcome. His message turned the world upside down because he welcomed in the outcasts, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, and all those considered “sinners.” Jesus’ came to invite broken people back into relationship with God, offered forgiveness of sin and newness of life, and made it all possible by giving up his own life in our place. Needless to say, his message was controversial, particularly for the religious leaders who had good systems set in place to keep order and control through religious practices. Jesus blew the system to bits, undermining the authority of the religious leaders, and offering forgiveness as if he were God himself! No wonder they conspired to murder him!

Yet Jesus was not only a preacher of the gospel; His message was confirmed by the works that he did. In John 14.11, Jesus encourages his disciples to believe in him not only because of what he says about himself but also because of the works he does. These same works are part of what got him murdered: “If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.” (John 15.24) The power of Jesus miracles - feeding thousands with a few loaves & fishes, opening the eyes of the blind, turning water into wine, and many others - confirmed both his identity as the Son of God and his message about the Kingdom of God.

In both word and deed, Jesus pointed powerfully to the truth and reality of his identity and message. The watching world - religious and secular - had to deal with Jesus because they saw God’s power on his life. No one could remain neutral toward him: they either fell at his feet in worship or they killed him.

Empowered to Witness

In light of that reality, Jesus promises that it will be no different for the disciples. They are now called to witness to Jesus through proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel. And just as the watching world either loved or hated Jesus, so will they do the same with the disciples: “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.” (John 15.20)

For this reason Jesus promises the comfort and power of the Spirit: “When the Helper comes... he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.” The word translated “Helper” can mean both Comforter and Advocate, and clearly the disciples will need both as they bear witness to Jesus!

Just before Jesus finally departs to return to his Father, he teaches the disciples about why he had to die and rise again, and then entrusts his ministry to them: “Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” (Luke 24.45-48) The disciples - and each disciple of Jesus since - is commanded to be a proclaimer and demonstrator of the gospel. These instructions are for every disciple.

But then Jesus says one last thing: “And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24.49) If the command to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel holds true for every disciple, then so does this marvelous promise! Jesus tells us to expect “power from on high” and not to attempt to carry on Jesus’ ministry without the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit!

You Will Be My Witnesses

If you’ve read the book of Acts you already know the rest of the story. The disciples waited and prayed, and Jesus sent his Spirit at Pentecost, transforming this rag-tag bunch of fearful disciples into Spirit-filled, rejoicing, empowered witnesses to Jesus! And what begins in Jerusalem with a few disciples quickly spreads around the known world as the Spirit and the disciples bear witness to Jesus. Today we stand as much in need of the empowering of the Spirit as those first disciples did. Have you asked for the empowering work of the Spirit? Has the Holy Spirit filled you with joy and power today? Ask him - he wants to!