

We Are the Body of Christ, Part IV: We Are Pentecostal

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I come today to talk about the third of our family's three streams, and I want to begin by sharing a word of personal testimony, as I have with each of these sermons.

After I was ordained, I served in a very affluent church in the heart of Christchurch in New Zealand. The church was called St. Barnabas, and it was where I met my wife! This was a very sophisticated congregation, and when I was there as a very young priest there were stirrings of new life within several members of the congregation. And as I got to know them, I heard them testifying to something they described as "baptism in the Holy Spirit." I had no idea what they were talking about, but the evidence of what they were describing was on their faces. There was a vitality, there was a joy, and there was a delight in the Lord. For all my commitment to the Lord Jesus, those things were not as present in my own life. I was intrigued.

I began to speak more with them about this new thing that had happened to them, this "baptism in the Holy Spirit." And in my wanting to discover what they had found, I made my way into a non-denominational Pentecostal church in Christchurch called The New Life Centre.

It's a large church now. But back then, I began to go on weeknights to the worship services in this little fledgling church. It was packed with people, and they were worshipping God in a way that I had never experienced before. There was exuberance. There was a joy. There was vitality. What was going on in the worship was not just the lifting of voices of praise and worship to the Lord, but powerful ministry.

I saw lives being changed, I saw people being healed. This was a kind of a phenomenon, you might say, this was a dimension of Christian experience which, for all my understanding of the evangelical tradition, which I loved, and of the catholic tradition, which I had also embraced, was new to me. And God in his great mercy led me to long to walk down that path.

What I am beginning to describe to you today is the third of the streams that flows into the river that makes up our family: the Pentecostal stream. We are catholic, we are evangelical, but we are Pentecostal as well. Let me tell you something about the Pentecostal stream.

This is the fastest growing stream in Christendom. Did you know that, according to Dr. David Barrett who has authored the World Christian Encyclopedia, there are one hundred million people around the world today who profess to have had a Pentecostal experience? Are you aware that every single day, thirty-five thousand new people are testifying to being baptized in the Holy Spirit? Many of them are in Pentecostal churches, though not all of them. It's an extraordinary thing.

There are three vital witnesses to the faith that the Pentecostal stream gives us. *All* the testimonies of these streams are vital: our challenge is to hold them together in dynamic tension.

First, We are to know God by experience.

When our Lord Jesus was teaching his disciples he didn't just say, "*This is how you perform miraculous works, this is how you heal, and this is how you do this and that*"; he gave them some clear promises. Many of these were about a gift which he said he had in store for them, the gift of the Holy Spirit. "*If you love me,*" he said, "*you will obey my commands*"—and here is the promise: "*and I will ask the Father and he will give you another comforter to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive since it neither sees him nor knows him, but you know him, because he is with you and will be in you.*" His promises all had the same thrust: "*I am going to give you One who will fill your lives in the way that he has filled mine. Then you will know by your own experience that you are children, sons and daughters of the living God—not only by faith, not only by holding onto the truth of scripture, but deep within your hearts you will know that you truly are my children. When the Holy Spirit comes, you will do the works that I have done.*" Jesus' promises were fulfilled at Pentecost, when the waiting church experienced the awesome power of the wind and the fire. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues. You see, it was experiential.

None of the disciples at Pentecost had any question, any doubt that something new had happened to them. They could put a time on it; they could put a date on it, they could describe what had happened to them, as indeed Peter did in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. But prior to Pentecost, Jesus had said, "*Wait for this promised power.*" He might have

gone on, “Just because you have experienced the greatest miracle that’s ever occurred in creation, the resurrection from the dead of your Lord and your Savior; and just because I am now putting my word into your hearts (remember how he opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures—the evangelical imperative that our minds understand the scriptures) *don’t think that your understanding is enough to do ministry, and proclaim the gospel. Wait until you receive the power.*”

Moving into Acts 19, we find Paul traveling in the region of Ephesus. He finds a dozen or so men there, who appear to be believers. His question to them is startling. “*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*” He expected them to *know* whether they had or not. His question didn’t arise from theological curiosity! He was asking, “*In your experience do you believe that you’ve received the power?*” They answered, *We haven’t even heard that there’s a Holy Spirit.*” Paul had suspected that, and hence his question.

I want to read you a reflection on that by a man called Lesslie Newbigin. He was a distinguished English bishop who served most of his life in India. He wrote a book called The Household of God in which, in the early 1950s, he was the first to articulate the three streams, one river concept. Commenting on Paul’s question in Acts 19, Newbigin writes, “*The apostle Paul asks the converts in Ephesus one question, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ And Paul got a plain answer: ‘We haven’t even heard that there’s a Holy Spirit. Paul’s modern successors [which means us, the church today] are more inclined to ask either, ‘Did you believe exactly what we teach’ [that’s the evangelical question], or ‘Were the hands that were laid on you our hands?’ [that’s the catholic question.] If the answer to those questions is satisfactory, we want to assure the converts that they have received the Holy Spirit, even if they don’t know it.*” The Pentecostal stream says: that is absolutely inadequate, you’ve got to know him by experience. Anything else is less than what the Lord has for us.

That was John Wesley’s experience as well. He had ministered and preached, and had a wonderful ministry. But in the eighteenth century, when he was back in England, after a short time in this country, he went to a little church in Aldersgate Street in England. Somebody was teaching about the letter to the Romans, and reading Martin Luther’s preface to the letter to the Romans. John Wesley wrote, “*about*

a quarter before nine, while the teacher was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation. And an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

Most people familiar with John Wesley, who come out of this Pentecostal tradition, say *that* was when he was baptized in the Holy Spirit, because it’s the Holy Spirit who gives us the assurance of what we already know by faith. That turned Wesley’s whole ministry around and sparked a revival. It caused a great conflagration throughout England, and saved them from terrible things that might otherwise have happened to their society.

The same thing happened to Dwight Moody. In 1871 Dwight Moody had the largest church in Chicago, called The Tabernacle. And yet he says himself—and I’m getting this from Catherine Marshall’s book The Helper—that in those years he was “*a great hustler,*” and that his work was being done “*largely in the energy of the flesh.*”

But there were two women who came to his meetings, Auntie Cook and Mrs. Snow. They always sat in the front row, and when he was preaching they were praying for him. He was very grateful for that. One day he had a chance to ask them, “*What are you praying for?*” And they said: “*We are praying for you.*”

He was quite offended. He said: “*Why aren’t you praying for the lost? Why aren’t you praying for conversions?*” And they said “*Because we are praying for you. You need the power of the Holy Spirit.*” Mrs. Snow and Auntie Cook told Moody what they knew about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Then the three Christians prayed together and the women left.

“*From that hour [these are Moody’s words] there came a great hunger in my soul. I really felt that I did not want to live if I could not have this power for service.’ One late autumn day in 1871 Dwight L. Moody was in New York, on his way to England, walking up Wall Street. Suddenly in midst of the bustling crowds, his prayer was answered. The power of God fell on him so overwhelmingly that he knew he must get off the street. Such joy came upon him that ‘at last I had to ask God to withhold his hand lest I die on the spot from very joy.’”*

From that hour Moody's ministry was never the same. The sermons were not different, Moody said. *"I did not present any new truth, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world."* We need to know God by experience.

The Pentecostal stream insists that we have an answer to the questions: Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? And are you enjoying him now?

Secondly, we must worship God with fervor.

Evangelical worship tends to be cerebral, filled with doctrine, teaching, and hymns that are rich with doctrine. That's good! I'm not saying this in any critical way! Catholic worship tends to be devotional. It's focused on symbols and liturgy—enacted drama.

But in the Pentecostal tradition, the witness is that we need to worship God with everything. *"Let everything that is within me cry out to the Lord, everything within me praise his holy name. Praise the Lord oh my soul, all that is within me bless his holy name."* That's the Pentecostal witness of worship. It's not cerebral. It rises out of our hearts, out of our bodies. Our hands become involved: we clap them, we lift them, we wave them around. We don't do this because we are out of control emotionally, but because when God engages us, and we engage him, we can't *help* but get into the action.

This stream isn't content with sitting still and appreciating him devotionally, rationally and analytically, or aesthetically. Worshipers have to get into the action and become fully involved. That can only flow out of experience! The Pentecostal witness is that if we have experienced the living God and the power of the Holy Spirit, then something wells up within and flows out from us that we cannot contain.

That doesn't always happen spontaneously. We can come to church feeling stale, tired, or disengaged. But it doesn't take more than the striking of a match before God begins to warm our hearts strangely again, and we find ourselves moving into a realm far different from where we entered into the meeting or the service.

And thirdly, Pentecostal worship is expectant.

One of the great things, one of the great witnesses, of the Pentecostal stream is that there's a high level of expectancy that the God who is transcendent—

Pentecostals have a great idea of transcendence—is also the God who becomes immanent. There's always the expectation that the transcendent God is going to break through, and things are going to happen.

One Easter day some years ago, the Lord gave me a word of knowledge during the worship. I sensed that somebody had come to church to make their peace with God, and afterwards planned to go home to commit suicide. The Lord then gave me a prophecy for that person.

In those days we did the prayers of the people in small groups. At the end of the service, a member of the congregation told me, *"I was in a small group with the person that word of knowledge was about. He had indeed come to church today he had just to make peace with God before he went home and put his head in the gas oven to end his life. God saved his life today."* When God shows up and does things it's not just so we can say, *"Wow, we are charismatic here."* It's because the gifts are *necessary*.

If God hadn't shown up that Sunday morning, a man would have taken his life. Maybe one day the Lord would have asked me, *"David, I was trying to tell you that. Why couldn't I get your attention on that Sunday? Why were you so focused on other aspects of the service that you ignored that still small voice?"*

It's an awesome thing to be in the presence of God, but also very challenging to be available to him. And as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, in chapter 14, *"When you come to the service, let each one come prepared, with a hymn or a revelation or something like that."* It's not just those in leadership God wants to use; we all need to come with that *expectancy* in our hearts. But if you are stale, and no longer come with that expectancy, pray that God will light the match in your life again, and cause a great *whoosh* in your life of what God wants to give to you and to all of us.

Here's the final witness: We must use the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They're not just there to lift off the shelf if we have nothing better to do. Jesus said: *"if anyone has faith in me he will do the works I have been doing, and he will do even greater works, because I am going to the Father."*

Why did he say, *because I am going to the Father?* Because he said elsewhere, in John's gospel (I quoted this earlier, from [John 14](#)), that *"when I go from you I will ask the Father and he will give you another com-*

forter.” The very first prayer that Jesus, our great intercessor prayed after his ascension was “*Father, pour out your Spirit on the church.*” That’s why we will do greater works, because in going to the Father he’s prayed “*Come Holy Spirit, move upon your people now, bring them into that place where they can be in this world as I was.*”

The gospel is not just words, which is the evangelical tendency—though that is a caricature: the evangelical stream is about much more than that. The catholic stream tends to focus on proclamation by deeds. The Pentecostal stream says to each, “*There’s more! There has to be a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.*” Listen to what Paul writes in I Corinthians, chapter 2: “*I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.*”

That’s the Pentecostal witness: *Yes we need to preach the gospel evangelically. Yes we need to do the works as the catholics testify, but all that needs to be wrapped within the power of the Holy Spirit.* Martin Luther, the great evangelical, rejected the gifts of the Spirit for most of his life. He saw no use for them. But what turned him around was when his friend Melancthon recover from a serious illness.

Martin Luther had prayed for him, perhaps without much expectancy. But he was totally awed when Melancthon recovered. It was miraculous. He was actually brought back almost from the point of death.

Five years after that miracle, and not long before his death, Luther was asked by someone, “*What are we to do for a man I know who is mentally ill?*”

Luther wrote instructions for a healing service based on the New Testament letter of James, adding: “*This is what we do, and what we’ve been accustomed to do...*” At the end of his ministry, five years before his death, Luther discovered that the gifts of the Spirit are ours. No wonder that he wrote in his great hymn, A Mighty Fortress is our God, “*...the Spirit and the gifts are ours.*” He understood that when he discovered that the gifts are the means by which we minister to one another. Paul would say that the gifts are the means through which we build one another up and bring people into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

We believe in healing at this church, not just because we happen to like that kind of thing. It is because healing was not only how Jesus *pastored* people: it was how he *evangelized*. The good news that people experienced was by *seeing* the kingdom of God being *demonstrated* through signs and wonders following the preaching of his word. Church, God is calling us to embrace this stream. He’s calling us today to freshen our experience of it. And if your experience has become stale, a little bit flabby, something you taste, and it doesn’t taste the way it once did, cry out to him this morning and say “*Come Holy Spirit, fill me again.*”

Let’s come this morning into worship with expectant fervor, knowing that he, the living God, is among us. And then ask him to help us to stir up those gifts, so that we can be his faithful people.