

# Pentecostal Church

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Acts 2

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Today is the birthday of the church. The day of Pentecost marked the beginning of the church. Before that day there was a small group who followed Jesus, but that day they became something more.

Long before the day of Pentecost, at a crowded festival, Jesus told them that the Spirit would come. In John 7:37-39 Jesus said "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" The Bible goes on to say "Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was not Spirit because Jesus was not yet glorified".

On the day of Pentecost we are told that the followers of Jesus were all in one place when they heard the sound of an incredible wind. There was something that appeared like flames around them and on each one and at the same time they were given different tongues – different languages that were understood by the many Jewish people who were in Jerusalem from many different countries. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered to spread the message of the transforming love of Jesus: the church was born.

We are a Trinitarian church. We believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Like most main-line churches we're quite comfortable with God the Father, the Creator and we're comfortable with Jesus. But for the most part we're not so familiar or comfortable with the Holy Spirit. That's maybe not too surprising because the Holy Spirit is the least concrete and understandable part of God. Sometimes when we talk about the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) we compare it to water in its three different forms: water, ice and steam. They are each H<sub>2</sub>O but they appear and feel so very different. If the Holy Spirit were represented by one of these forms it would definitely be steam—not something very tangible, not something you can see well, but boy you can feel it and wow is it ever powerful!

One thing you might find interesting: the animal normally associated with the Holy Spirit is the dove. However the early Celtic church had a different animal and image associated with the Holy Spirit. It was the wild goose. That's right, a goose; those messy, noisy and often annoying animals. The ones the city puts plastic coyotes in the parks to scare off. My hair dresser was telling me that he once saw a goose standing on top of one of those coyotes. I guess the view was better from up there.

So why did the Celts choose a wild goose as an image of the Spirit? It's a good question, but wild geese are, well, *wild*. That is, untamed, uncontrollable. The Spirit of God has a habit of breaking free and flying where the Spirit wills. I'm not sure I would have chosen a wild goose, but I can understand what they were thinking. The wild, persistent, powerful side of the Spirit is the precise reason that many in the church are not comfortable in talking about the Holy Spirit, the least comprehensible, controllable and predictable member of the Trinity.

The thing I find interesting is that while typically our institutional churches have not tended to emphasize the Holy Spirit, if you look around at our modern society, many younger people in particular are more comfortable with talking about the Spirit than they are with God or Jesus. Let me show you a DVD clip. Erwin McManus is a well known speaker who is a passionate, visionary Christian. I would call him a Pastor, though his own bio describes him as the "primary communicator and cultural architect of Mosaic in Los Angeles". Recently he came to Vancouver and produced a documentary called "Crave". In it he is basically trying to understand how Christians can better reach others with the love of Jesus. Take a look.

*In the video, McManus interviews first an older, well-dressed white-haired man. He asks him to express his initial reaction to a word or name with a one-word answer: either "positive" or "negative." The gentleman says "Positive" after each of the following: **religious, church, God, Jesus Christ, spiritual**. McManus then interviews a few younger people, late teens, twenties and thirties, using the same key words. They say "positive" after only one word – **spiritual**. To all the rest, their answer is "negative."*

For today's young adults, it's okay to say you're "spiritual" but not okay to say you're "religious". Certainly that's been my experience. If I hang out with people my age not connected to the church they tend to be uncomfortable talking about church and religion but quite comfortable talking about "Spirituality." To be clear, many who use the term spiritual are not familiar with Christianity's Holy Spirit. Spiritual can mean a whole lot of things. But I can't help but wonder: could it be that as we look to reach younger people with the love of Jesus, that the Holy Spirit may be the person of the Trinity we should emphasize? The Holy Spirit can certainly be attractive.

There's a story of two people who were overheard talking as they stood across the street from a large church which was being destroyed by fire. The one man said to the other: "This is the first time I ever saw you at church." Without missing a beat the second responded: "This is the first time I ever saw the church on fire."

By the power of the Holy Spirit we are called to be on fire with the love of Jesus and to reach out with that transforming, healing love to a broken and lonely world. Erwin McManus goes on in the documentary to say that people all crave intimacy (relationship, belonging) and meaning (belief in something greater than themselves) and destiny (sense of purpose and desire to make a difference). All of us crave a little more. McManus believes like St. Augustine before him that that craving has been put inside each one of us by God – that just like we're hard-wired to want and need food and water and oxygen, so too we are just as hard-wired to want to satisfy the deep yearnings of our soul.

The Holy Spirit is moving in this church. I feel the Spirit in this space even on a weekday when it's empty of people, but especially on Sunday mornings when there are many people here to worship. I feel it during the holy buzz and during the 'Go Now in Peace' – which someone called the bookends of our service. I felt the Spirit last week when this place was a happy hive of garage sale activity. The Spirit was so present as people worked with joy knowing that this chaos was going to bring tremendous life and blessings to people and children in Kenya. Where you feel a little bit of fire inside you is a very good clue as to what your Spiritual Gifts are and what you are likely called to do.

Our society has changed a lot. The majority of the population no longer finds meaning or healing in going to church... certainly not the way church has been done for the last century or so and the way it continues to be in many churches still today. A character in John Updike's novel, *A Month of Sundays*, reflecting on his youthful experience of the church, says, "Churches bore for me the relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola; they promoted thirst but did nothing to quench it." There is a thirst in the world. That need has not changed. In fact I think that the need and the thirst is even greater. The number of depressed and anxious and lonely people seems to be increasing not decreasing. The purpose of the church has not changed either.<sup>1</sup> Neither has the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit urges *us* to change so that there can be life: life for us individually and life for us together – as the church. The more we try to control and contain things to suit our own needs, the more we can feel the energy of the Holy Spirit breaking free like a wild goose, a wild fire or rushing water.

Is the Holy Spirit something to be afraid of? No – it is the life power, the engine of God. Power can be used in at least two ways: it can be unleashed, or it can be harnessed. The energy in ten litres of gas, for instance, can be released explosively by dropping a lighted match into the can. Or it can be channelled through the engine of a fuel efficient vehicle in a controlled burn and used to transport someone maybe 100 kilometres. Explosions are spectacular, but controlled burns have lasting effect, staying power. The Holy Spirit works both ways. At Pentecost, the Spirit exploded on the scene; and the presence of the Spirit was like "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:3). Thousands were affected by one burst of God's power. But the Spirit also works to bring life in a steadier, day by day strength kind of way. Either way, you want to make sure you leave room for the Holy Spirit in your life and in this church because you'll find yourself stuck on the side of the road without the Spirit—I think that's the case with many people and many churches.

If you want a little more meaning, more purpose and more life inside, then open yourself to the Holy Spirit and you will find that life. When you experience it you'll want to share it. The Church, the Bride of Christ was created by the power of the Holy Spirit and together – this force that is so powerfully felt, but so hard to describe or see along with a very concrete and imperfect group of believers called the church—together we can bring much healing and life to each other and to the world.

The Holy Spirit was there at the beginning of life, "hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2) at creation and at the beginning of your life and our life as a church. At the end of the Bible the Holy Spirit invites us into the life of God. Revelations 22:17 says: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'. And let the one who hears say, 'come' and let the one who is thirsty come'; let the one who desires take the water of life without price."

Amen

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