

Thank you for gifts

As most of you know ... Jan 19th after worship service ...
Feb 9th my last Sunday.

In the name ...

The Holy Spirit Had Not Yet Come Upon Them

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on the First Sunday after Epiphany, January 12, 1986 at Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-4; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

"Have you been baptized in the Spirit? Are you a Spirit-filled Christian?" That kind of talk makes most of us in main line denominations feel a little uncomfortable. In the minds of most main-line denomination Christians Spirit baptized Christians are so often associated with all sorts of bizarre behavior, judgmental attitudes, and a very critical attitude towards the institutional church. They say to us, "I know you have been baptized with water, but have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit?" Most of us don't know quite what to say and feel a bit defensive and put off.

Baptism and the Holy Spirit are always closely related in the Scriptures although the relation between the two is not always clear.

Isaiah said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has christened me or anointed me." John the Baptist said, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him." The believers in Samaria were baptized but didn't receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles Peter and John placed their hands on them and prayed.

Baptism and the Holy Spirit. Throughout the history of the church there have been conflicts between those who stress the importance of baptism and those who stress the Spirit. Baptism is a ceremony, a ritual. It's regulated by the church. Only ordained clergy are ordinarily permitted to baptize. In most churches a liturgy is followed and accompanied by formal ritual actions such as the dipping or pouring with water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is the entrance rite into

the church. You can't be a member of the church without baptism.

But the Holy Spirit works where and when and how it pleases. It's like the wind, Jesus said. You can't tell where it comes from or where it's going. The Spirit can't be formalized. The Spirit can't be controlled by a ritual. The Spirit can't be regulated by the church. The clergy have no control over the Spirit. As a result those who emphasize the Spirit often despise the church. The church is too formal and ritualistic. It stifles the work of the Spirit with its rituals and sacraments and liturgy. Those who emphasize the Spirit often despise the very idea of a preacher using a lectionary proscribed by the church. The minister should preach what the Spirit leads him or her to preach and not be bound by a lectionary. Those who emphasize the Spirit often despise liturgy as a formalism. Do away with the liturgy and let the Spirit take over. In its extreme form, the church is not needed at all. You don't have to go to church to be a Christian. The Spirit gives us direct access to God without any need of the church, its clergy or its sacraments. Sometimes baptism with water is dismissed altogether as a meaningless outward ritual which one doesn't need if they have been baptized with the Spirit.

On the other hand there are Christians who emphasize the church and feel uncomfortable with the spontaneity of the Spirit and want to institutionalize the Spirit's work. Those who emphasize the authority of the church often find it difficult to believe that God can do anything outside the church. That's why Church people were so upset when John Wesley preached the Gospel in the fields. "You're suppose to preach in churches, not in fields!" they scolded him. If you want to be forgiven, you must go to the priest. If you want to have communion with God, you must receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. The church controls the Spirit

in all its activities. The Pharisees were an example of those who emphasized church rules and regulations and had very little room for the spontaneity of the Spirit.

It would be interesting to see where each of you would place yourself on a continuum from one to ten. At the one extreme you would have those who emphasize the church and at the other extreme you would have those who emphasize the Spirit. Very few of us are balanced. Most of us emphasize one over the other. Evangelical protestants, for the most part though, disparage the church and emphasize the Spirit. Evangelical Christians tend to have a very unbiblical view of the church. But I believe a balanced Christianity includes both the church and the Spirit. Both the church with its outward forms and rituals and creeds and discipline and sacrament and liturgy ~~and the Spirit with its spontaneity and freedom.~~

The balance is seen in Jesus. He was baptized. He submitted to the sacrament of baptism, this formal outward sign of entrance into the church. And the Holy Spirit descended upon him. He was led by the Spirit. Empowered by the Spirit. Driven by the Spirit to do God's will within and for the church.

We see the two joined together again in our lesson from Acts. The Samaritans had believed the Gospel. They had been baptized. They were church members. But they had not yet received the Spirit. But the Spirit comes to them, not out of the blue, but at the hands of the church. The apostles Peter and John came down from Jerusalem, representing the church. They prayed and layed their hands on the Samaritan believers and they received the Spirit. There you see the two working together beautifully. You have the church and you have the Spirit. You have the order and ritual of the laying on of hands and you have the spontaneity of

the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

We need the church. We need the Spirit. Neither are added extras. Just as Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist and the Holy Spirit descended upon him, so also the church was baptized on the day of Pentecost with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit has never entirely departed. The church is the Body of Christ. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us because the Lord has christened us to preach good news. The church is the ordinary means God uses to channel his Spirit to believers. Through the ministers and elders and deacons, through the creeds, the liturgy, the discipline, the sacraments, and the fellowship of the church God wants his Spirit to empower us to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners, to ~~proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God,~~ to comfort all you mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion. We've been baptized to manifest the glory of Christ in the world. May our prayer be that this year we will see heaven opened and the Spirit of the Lord descend upon us as a church enabling us to carry out God's mission to Kenmore and the world.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.