

They Received the Holy Spirit

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on January 8, 1995 (The Baptism of the Lord). Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21, 22.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit."

They received the Holy Spirit. What it's like to receive the Holy Spirit? I think it's like something that happened to me in eleventh grade. Math has never been my forte. I struggled through algebra 1 in ninth grade with Ds and an E. I struggled through plane geometry in tenth. At one point my plane geometry teacher suggested that I take algebra 1 over again, but I struggled through. I had only the foggiest notion of what was going on. I dreaded class. I dreaded doing my homework. The only reason I took those classes was because my guidance counselors said I should take them. But something happened when I took Algebra 2 in eleventh grade. All of a sudden I began to understand. The fog lifted. I enjoyed working on algebra problems. I looked forward to doing algebra homework. I asked the teacher for extra work. I found intellectual excitement struggling with difficult equations. I found emotional satisfaction arriving at the correct answer. Algebra became a joy. I even told someone that I wanted to be an algebra teacher when I grew up. I don't know exactly what happened. The breakthrough didn't come as a result of working harder. Rather, I worked harder as a result of the joy algebra was giving me. Whatever happened to me, it was a gift.

Receiving the Holy Spirit is something like that. All of a sudden we begin to understand why God has called us into his church. The fog lifts. We begin to enjoy

God and God's people. We worship, not because somebody told us we ought to, but because we must worship God with God's people. We find emotional and intellectual satisfaction in seeking God's will.

Christian men and women who've received the Word of God sometimes find serving God within the church to be a drag. We who've been baptized into Christ often lose interest in Christ and his kingdom. We grow tired. We drop out. We become inactive. We struggle for years trying to do God's will without much joy - without much success - and then something happens to us - we receive the Holy Spirit. We have joy in Christ. Joy enables us to do God's will enthusiastically.

A church struggles for years just to survive and then something happens - they receive the Holy Spirit - and men, women, children come alive. Discouraged men and women find joy in following Christ. Men and women who've grown cynical - who've grown embittered - receive the Holy Spirit. We see visions and dream dreams of what God wants us to do.

This doesn't happen as a result of committees (although committee work becomes far more productive when it does happen). It doesn't happen as a result of working harder (although we work harder than we ever thought possible when it happens). It doesn't come as a result of emotional manipulation. It doesn't come as a result of new techniques. It's a gift. It's God's gift to revive lifeless Christians.

The Samaritan Christians had received the Word of God. They had been baptized. They were believers. They were Christians. But they had not received

the Holy Spirit. Their faith and their baptism made little difference in their lives. Then they received the Holy Spirit. They began to do things for Christ that they thought were impossible. The Samaritan Christians began to work wonders for Christ.

How did it happen? Two church leaders - just two of them - began to pray. Peter and John came and they prayed for them. They didn't come to criticize the Samaritan Christians. They didn't harangue them for being dead. They didn't say, "You've got to work harder. You need to study more. You need to tithe. You need to get more involved." They simply came and prayed. Two church leaders - just two of them - prayed for the believers.

We don't know how long they prayed. Maybe they prayed for months - just the two of them. Maybe these two leaders prayed together day after day, week after week, without any help from the believers in Samaria. They may have prayed for years. We don't know.

But they did something else beside pray. Peter and John laid their hands on the believers and they received the Holy Spirit. They didn't just pray. They got close enough to church members to touch them. There's something about a fellow Christian praying and placing their hands on a fellow believer that can work miracles. I imagine that Peter and John visited the Samaritan believers in their homes. When Peter and John met a believer on the street they'd greet them. "How are things going for you? How is your family? You seem sad, is something bothering you? I missed you at the worship service. Is everything all right?"

And maybe when they ended their visit Peter and John simply stretched out their hand and placed it on the head or shoulders of the believer and said, "I prayed for you this morning. I prayed for your husband. I prayed for your little girl. I prayed about your work." And maybe that's when it happened - "Peter and John laid their hands upon them and they received the Holy Spirit". All because two church leaders prayed and laid their hands upon them.

The two most important things our elders and deacons and minister can do for you is to pray for you and to get close enough to you to be able to touch you. What if each elder and each deacon took a membership directory? What if each of us did this. Single out three families each day. Mention each family member by name in prayer. Visualize their circumstances. Think of their work. Think of their difficulties. Think of their temptations. Especially remember any who've been growing indifferent and drifting away from the church. Bring them before the Lord in prayer.

Two results will follow when church leaders pray for their people. For one thing, those for whom you pray will receive a blessing. And receiving a blessing is very much like receiving the Holy Spirit. For another thing, we church leaders will begin to see people we've overlooked. We'll begin to discover practical ways to help. We'll begin to understand why a woman or a man who has been so active had fallen away. We'll begin to find new ways of showing that woman or man sympathetic understanding. We'll find opportunities to show men and women something of the kindness of God for Jesus' sake. And when we church leaders

look into their faces on Sunday, we'll be able to love and care and reach out and touch them with God's love and grace and mercy and forgiveness.

I believe that if church leaders prayed like this - if ~~they~~^{we} got to know all of you well enough to touch you - we'd all receive the Holy Spirit. God would work miracles through us. We'd spend time at session meetings, not wringing our hands in despair, but praising God for opening our eyes to new forms of ministry and service. We'd send teams of believers to mission stations to do volunteer work. We'd build Habitat for Humanity Houses. We'd develop new ways of ministering to people in this town to whom no one is ministering. We'd find creative ways of drawing back tired and depressed members. We'd complete our sanctuary and Christian education building. Men and women would be converted to Christ.

The Holy Spirit would set us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor. The Holy Spirit would bind us together. In a broken and fearful world the Spirit would give us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silent, to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we'd strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' (paraphrase of A Brief Statement of Faith).

Let us pray: Almighty God, who anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit and declared him to be your Son: send your Holy Spirit upon us who have been baptized in his name, that we may surrender our lives to your service and rejoice to be called your children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.