



Message from the Moderator

 Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

The Spirit in the Church

Pentecost 20 May 2018

At Pentecost, the Spirit of God comes in a manner that is both reassuring and completely alien; unless we understand this we will be doomed to look in the 'wrong way' for the Spirit moving amongst us today.

For centuries Christians have read the accounts in Acts of the Spirit's coming in Jerusalem, plus other towns in Israel and the Roman Empire, in a manner which has inured us to how strange these episodes are in the Church's life...but they are. The spontaneous breaking into praise in languages unknown to the speaker but known to those listening; two jail breaks achieved with no human intervention, including the spontaneous release from chains and the mysterious unlocking of prison doors; prophetic utterances which reveal information that could not have been known by the speakers. There are healings and various other miracles which all trace activity of the Spirit which is, frankly, alien. And yet, the fruit is an acceleration of the growth of the Church and of faith throughout the Roman Empire.

We are justified in looking for the Spirit to move again today and we should all be expectant that the Spirit is still moving through the Church to convince and convict those who do not know Christ's love and grace. The Spirit is in no way finished with the Church or, frankly, with the world which God loves. But the Spirit has not changed and so the Spirit's activity will not look like it once did. In other words, we can expect it to remain, in part at least, strange.

I too have made the mistake of looking, on many occasions, for the Spirit to move in a familiar way. I was involved in the great move of the Spirit in this country in the '70s and '80s and it was amazing and gave great heart to the Church. It introduced many young people to both the grace and the sovereignty of God and it convinced us of the desire of God for intimacy because we experienced in many various ways the closeness of God. But that was then and since then I have found many who are disappointed that God is not moving in the same way as God did then. And yet this is precisely what we should *not* expect.

In any revelation of God, and this is precisely what occurred during the revivals of the '70s and '80s, both the likeness *and* the unlikeness of God will be exposed and we must be prepared for that. God is like us in some respects but, as the theologians are fond of saying, God is also "completely other". We must take this into account when anticipating God working through the Spirit.

Now although we thought we could recognise the likeness of God in the '70s because it seemed like the Acts experience, in reality there were many things that happened then which were unlike anything in Acts. The rise of new and more modern music and the phenomenon of 'Spirit-filled worship' through this took things to a new level. The rise of people falling down under the power of the Spirit – something which had occurred in previous waves of revival - is not recorded in the New Testament. And there were many stranger things than this – things that many others in the Church could not accept were real - and I witnessed some of them.

The question is, where is the Spirit of God today? What is the Spirit doing today? I do not believe that the Spirit has gone into hiding. I simply think the Spirit is working strangely in a manner we do not recognise to bring about the same things – a glorifying of Christ in the world...and I do mean *the world*.

Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding about the Spirit's role is that we imagine that it is confined to the Church. It is not. Yes, the gifts are given to the Church so that the Church might operate to reflect Christ but the key goal of the Spirit's activity is to convict and convince the world of God's love and this is where we probably need to start looking for the next move of the Spirit. I say this because I believe that wherever the Church sets out to address the world's needs with any kind of real intentionality, the Spirit will attend that activity. The Spirit is the Spirit of God's mission first and foremost.

So, may you know the moving of the Spirit in your Pentecost celebrations but more so, may you be led by the Spirit to bring the healing love of Christ to the world, for through this are we more likely to witness the strange but powerful moving of God amongst us again.

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Dawson'.

Richard Dawson
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