

“Noticing The Holy Spirit Working”

By Scott Runyon

First Baptist Church Birmingham

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Ephesians 1:15-23

How do we recognize God’s Holy Spirit working in the world today? This is a question many have pondered, especially in the last century.

I want to share a bit today about the Age of Enlightenment, then add a bit about a man named Paul’s understanding of the Holy Spirit. After that I’ll give some history to what we call Pentecost that will hopefully allow us to deepen our appreciation for this celebration.

At the end, I’ll offer some questions for reflection that can open a window for us to see the Holy Spirit working inside our lives and all around us in the world. As you leave, I’ll give you a sheet of paper with these questions for more reflection at home.

First, the Age of Enlightenment, sometimes called the Age of Reason. During the mid 1700s there was an intellectual, philosophical and scientific revolution that altered the way

people thought and what they expected from their lives.

This was all about what was provable, factual, and logical. Reason was king and knowledge ruled the world. The Enlightenment pierced the world of philosophy, art, culture and politics to highest ranking leaders through Europe and the United States. It also made its mark on nearly every expression of the Church throughout the world.

We are talking here about a major shift in the way people saw the world.

If something rested outside the parameters of logic, people would consider it less than trustworthy and less valuable as things that could be proven by science.

The Age of Enlightenment set us up for the ages of Industry, Technology, and Information. All of this was possible because we doubled down on science to create new ways to think, communicate, relate, and do things. This brought us a huge wave of new businesses, new government structures, new jobs, new ways to travel, to communicate and so much more.

Every one of us has benefited from the foundation given us by the Age of Enlightenment.

However, if we are honest, much of our experience in life does not fall inside this realm of provable science. Important things in life can't be figured out with a mathematical formula, measured and studied by an assortment of gauges, or given meaning with a double blind study.

These things rest in a different dimension of human experience, and are probably the most important things in life.

For example, do we need a formula to prove God, in order to believe? And how can we give a statistical number to something as foundational as love, kindness or compassion. But these are the things that Jesus said were the bedrock of God's character and the nature of human beings.

One cost of only seeing through the lens given us by the Age of Enlightenment is that it can prevent us from seeing God's presence in our world today. It does this because God's Spirit works in this dimension of love and relationship which isn't measured by science or sorted by reason.

You know how this goes. Something extraordinary happens and we give reasons for it. We look for the scientific explanation, but if we can't find one, we sort of set it

aside, call it an anomaly. We say that there has to be some logical reason or explanation that perhaps we don't understand yet, but will someday.

This event hangs in limbo in this category that holds less weight and importance because it has not yet been fully understood.

If we are truly authentic, we will acknowledge that the experiences we have that lie outside the rational, reasonable, and provable are just as valid or perhaps more than the ones that are provable.

If we get curious, perhaps we can allow ourselves to explore beyond the framework given us by the Age of Enlightenment to see if the Holy Spirit might be up to something in that other dimension.

A very short time after Jesus died and rose from the dead, Jesus' closest friends and community got together on a day called Pentecost and had an amazing experience that changed their perspective.

The Holy Spirit came upon them! We need to step outside of our "enlightened" minds to understand the life changing experience they had. It can't be proved by science, as most experiences of the heart.

They also had no language or framework to understand what happened to them, so they described it like tongues of fire resting on each of them, because it felt like it set something on fire inside them and opened them up in an amazing new way, allowing them to see God at work not only around them but within them.

A handful of years later, the Apostle Paul knew this Spirit of God that began working in people's lives on Pentecost as well. He knew that the Spirit gave people wisdom, power and a new orientation to life.

This is what he wrote to the people in a city called Ephesus.

READ EPHESIANS 1:15-23

We most often talk about Pentecost being the day when the Holy Spirit gave power to the small group of Jesus' closest friends and empowered them to start the Church. This certainly is found in the biblical stories, but I want to go back to the origins of Pentecost to give us a bigger, deeper picture. This may seem like a sidetrack at first, but hang with me.

The celebration of Pentecost came much earlier than Jesus, perhaps 1500 years before his time. It came from the ancient Jewish celebrations called the Festival of

Weeks, and The Feast of Harvest, or Shavuot. These were celebrations of God's provision in nature that sustained them as physical human beings who needed to eat.

In Jewish symbolism and celebration there are always layers of meaning, so we have to go a bit deeper.

The Hebrew people understood all food that sustained life to be God's provision. Food was scarce in the wilderness where they lived for 40 years after being freed from slavery in Egypt. So God's provision of food was routinely celebrated through these and other food festivals.

They celebrated the barley harvest at a point when their bodies physically ached for food. Seven weeks later came the wheat harvest, which as a bigger harvest and sustained them through the rest of the year.

The seven weeks between the harvests equates to 50 days, and "penta" means 50, thus the name Pentacost.

Then they added into the same pattern of celebration to the experiences of being freed from slavery in Egypt and receiving the

law 50 days later from Moses in the wilderness.

So, they celebrated the Festival of Barley Harvest on Passover, when they were freed from Egypt, and they celebrated the Festival of Wheat Harvest on Shavuot 50 days later, parallel to when they received the law, on Pentecost.

The ancient Jews wanted to routinely remind themselves who they were and who their God was, so they kept telling these stories and celebrating every year in the cycle of harvest in nature.

This also reminded them to place their trust in God to continue working on their behalf individually and as a community in the present and future.

If you consider your own life, perhaps you will also find this pattern.

The 50-day pattern begins with some kind of restriction, bondage, or slavery. Then there is an act of deliverance that provides freedom. This is followed by a wandering or waiting period of 50 days during which a yearning or desire builds for what's next. At the end of the 50 days, a provision is given that sustains the people long-term.

One might call this the process of salvation with God as the prime mover of the story, the source of freedom and sustaining life.

We find this cycle happening again in the first century beginning with a people who were bound religiously, socially, and politically. Jesus came and acted to free the people through his death and resurrection. We call this Easter. This is parallel to the barley harvest and being freed from slavery in Egypt.

After the resurrection there was a 50-day waiting period when Jesus' closest friends and community were yearning and feeling lost. They wanted to understand what had happened and what might be next.

After these 50 days, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and enlightened them with a more complete picture of God's salvation, sustaining and empowering them for what was next.

We celebrate Pentecost today as the culmination of Jesus' work on the cross. Perhaps knowing some of the rich history and context given by the Jewish people can help us to see greater depth for us individually and as a community.

The Holy Spirit is here to feed us and sustain us through this wilderness life. The Holy Spirit now is bringing us understanding not only about the resurrection, but about what it will take to live in this new world as people who are free.

It is for this reason that we talk about the Holy Spirit as the author, sustainer, and empowerer of us, the Church. It is the Holy Spirit who has given us our new vision of the future ministry here. We can trust that the Holy Spirit will also provide the ability to live it out for the sake of the world!

Let's fit this in to what we talked about earlier. Our current challenge, in the midst of the cultural framework given us by the Age of Enlightenment, is to notice where God is at work in us, in others and in the world around us, and then to tell the stories. This allows us to recognize God's work and participate in what the Holy Spirit is already doing.

Here are some questions that can prompt this curious endeavor as you look within yourself and your life ...

* Have you experienced feelings of being bound or held back by fear from living a joyful life — and then you experienced the lessening of the power of that fear and there

was a new opening for joy in your life? That is the Holy Spirit working in you.

* Have you been interested in being involved in a faith community? Or, have you felt a nudge toward taking on some leadership or service role, even though you might fight it? That is the Holy Spirit working in you.

* Have you experienced a nudge toward giving of your time, money or energy to those in need, not out of obligation or a desire to look good in anyone's eyes? That is the Holy Spirit working in you.

* Have you experienced a sense of connection and unity with other Christians even though your life experience is very different from theirs? That is the Holy Spirit working in you.

* Have you found within yourself an increased capacity for or interest in: love, joy, peace, patience, or kindness? That is the Holy Spirit working in you.

As you might notice, none of these things can be proved with science, so the questions are asked outside the framework given us by our Enlightenment heritage.

Here are some other questions that you can ponder to see God's work in others...

* Have you observed another person deepen their commitment to God and/or doing the work of God? That is the Holy Spirit working in them.

* Do you know other people who have found greater freedom in life around work, parenting, recreation, or relationships? That is the Holy Spirit working in them.

* Have you witnessed another person experience a breakthrough in authentic joy in their life? That is the Holy Spirit working in them.

* Have you heard people singing with gusto, expressing enthusiasm either in worship or walking down a path in the woods? That is the Holy Spirit working in them.

* Do you know another person who has expanded their concern for others to include people very unlike themselves? That is the Holy Spirit working in them.

* Have you watched someone risk in order to stand up for someone who is being belittled, ridiculed or hurt? That is the Holy Spirit working in them.

These are only a sampling of ways that you can notice the Holy Spirit working. I'm sure that you can think of others.

Now I am going to give you some homework. Your homework is to be intentional and curious in the next week to listen and watch for the Holy Spirit working in your life and in the lives of others. Telling stories is very powerful and part of our Jewish heritage. So, when you notice the Holy Spirit working, I invite you to risk by telling someone about it.