

Church Identity: A PECULIAR PEOPLE!

4th in the Series: 5 Keys to Healthy Churches

I ISAIAH 52: 4-12; ACTS 2: 1-4; 1 PETER 2: 1-12

Most all of us could tell why we have come to be in church, and how we have come to be in this church. I hear it all the time from you, that this is a friendly church, an accepting family feeling, a good bunch of people. But most of us would be hard pressed to give a detailed account of the identity of the church: its beliefs, its major stands, what we do and why we do much of what we do. We can just say, we like it!...most of it!

By now we are pretty well acquainted with some of our basic ways. 1. We stand for the autonomy of the local church, that each church is free to govern itself and follow the leading of the Spirit of God as we discern it. Sometimes that is just enough rope to hang ourselves, or it may prove to have not enough strings attached, so that some think they have the freedom to just do as they please!

2. That does lead us to stand strong for religious freedom, each individual's right AND responsibility to seek God and follow as they perceive God leads! It is a glorious freedom for the truly dedicated and highly motivated, but it can prove, again, to give others not enough direction. Face it, some people want or need for somebody else to tell them what they need to do or must do to stay in the good graces of our God. That freedom strengthens the resolve of the sincere, but weakens the ways of the wayward.

We have learned that we must have clarity in our churches about our ways. Some churches decide to take a hard line approach. Others can't face up at all to the need to talk straight and tough to their own, so they wait until often it is too late to try to teach the real joys of building lives of

commitment. So often we pay too high a price, if we lose our 2 children from the faith that has given us the greatest reasons to live. Aaah, Baptist life!

3. We know too, that we are a people of the Book. Not the book of methods, nor the book of principles, nor the book of order. We love the Bible, and we teach its stories, its lessons, its truths, and the God of the Bible reveals Himself through the pages of the Book to all who truly seek Him. We center our congregational life, our educational ministries, our call to mission work and service, and our worship and fellowship around the message of the Bible. And when anyone asks us for a list of the requirements of being a member of The First Baptist Church of Tryon, all we can offer them is the Bible. We can say as St. Augustine said, "Take it, read it, love it! It will reveal to you all that you need to know to live and to follow The Lord."

AAAhh, Baptists! It is a life of real responsibility! One, that if its responsibilities are relegated to the shelf because we are too busy, will lead us into nothing more than a happy family that gathers, eats a lot, goes through many familiar motions, but one that will leave us empty and without anything really to say about those weightier matters, like, "What does God Require of Thee?!" And that is the question that everybody wants to know. And now, all the nations coming to our door step, as the Bible says, are asking the same question: "What must I do to avoid a life of waste and useless wandering? What must I do to be free from a life of guilt and shame? What must I do to find the greatest joys of life, real life? What must I do to find and have the promises of God? What must I do to be Saved?!"

We must learn about the church, God's church. We must then build God's church, and build it to the maximum of her strengths and God given potential. Then we must love the church as God's instrument of life, peace and strong lives.

Then we must teach our children to love the church, to know 3 and love her life giving truths. To learn her traditions that offer hope and purpose in life, to know the great hymns that proclaim the goodness of our God, to know them and love them as their own. Then finally to hand the church over to the next generation, that they may discover for themselves the depths and height of the great love of God and the relevant answers to the needs of their own generation.

Let me now reach into the description of the early church through the eyes of the scriptures in Acts 2. As we think of our own church identity, think of these 3 words used here: WIND, FIRE, and FILLING.

In Acts we learn about the birth of the church, that the church was created not as a building for people to go inside, but as a people bursting with life, a people who were filled up with the Spirit of God dwelling inside of them! Recently a pastor of a nationwide TV program took a poll of his listeners, seeking their deepest needs and questions. Many of their answers had to do with the lack of excitement in their lives. Then the word DULL was used to describe the multitude of churches across this nation. We have the same need today. We need God's transforming Spirit, giving us life and vitality. The birth of the church shows that this was the original recipe ! It is still the greatest need.

The 2nd chapter of Acts describes 3 ways the energy of the Spirit transformed those early disciples from a group of fear-filled followers to an exuberant group God would call HIS PEOPLE. The Spirit manifested Himself as wind, fire, and a filling up.

FIRST, there was a mighty rushing WIND, (v.2). As we sit in here this morning, we can think about the blowing of the wind

outside. Crack! Boom! The lights flicker then go out! When 4
the church was born it was crack, boom, then the lights came
on! Wind can be constructive or destructive. The church that
God designed was a people where the wind of the Spirit was
blowing, and they had their sails so high that they caught the
power and were moved out from where they were comfortably
resting, out to where people were starving for hope,
languishing for help, dying for answers to every conceivable
issue and need of life! They were there because they had
something to give! They were overflowing!

If everything else is perfect, the building is right, the
organization is smooth, the people are all in place but the wind
of the Spirit does not blow, or it blows, but no sails are hoisted
up to harness it, then we are nothing more than a dull, lifeless
form in need of burial. Where the Spirit of the Lord dwells in
the hearts of people, we become full of life and vitality, full to
overflowing! Then church is fun! Then church magnetizes
people, because they come where they know real help is
offered to real needs.

The Spirit of the Lord blows, or works in people's hearts when
we pray, "Lord whatever you want me to do, show me, direct
my steps, and I will serve you with all my heart. Lord, let the
wind of your Spirit blow!"

2. The second dynamic when the church was born was FIRE!
Verse 3 says, "Then there appeared tongues like fire, resting
on each one of them." Fire is a word picture used in the Bible
by Moses about the burning bush; by Moses about light in the
wilderness; by Isaiah about the voice of God in the temple; by
Jeremiah about the Word of God; by John the Baptist about
baptism; by Jesus about the fires of Hell; by Paul about God's
Presence as a consuming fire! This is used as the symbol of
God's voice, a judging, purging power, resting on us, purifying
us.

The church needs God's judging power, purging, refining and inspiring us for His service. We invite it when we study His word together and the church

We hear the word 'fire', and we can almost hear John the Baptist proclaiming that "God comes to gather the wheat into His Granary, but the chaff, the useless outer covering of the good grain, He comes burning with unquenchable fire!"

The church needs the purging fire of the Spirit. We need the Spirit to burn away anything that would cripple us in His service. The Spirit comes with a refining and inspiring fire. Like a smelting fire, it burns off the dross, the impurities and leaves the pure metal. The fire of the spirit rekindles enthusiasm, gives a boldness from a heart purified and filled with awe for the greatest power ever seen, the love of The Lord.

3. The third identifying factor of the church at birth was that filling up of the believers. Verse 4 speaks of them being filled with Holy Spirit. When it speaks that they used other tongues, languages, let's not jump the track and over-focus on that only. The Wind filled the place, and the Spirit filled the people! As we come to this step in the church's life, we need both. The life giving force is the spirit, as essential as the breath of life. If the spirit doesn't fill us up, we are empty, lacking enthusiasm. We may talk about empty pews, but it is empty people that kill a church.

The distinctive identity of the church is that the spirit invades every facet of our lives. The wind of the spirit brings purpose, direction and the power to do it. The fire of the spirit purges away the wrong attitudes, giving life to our reluctance and self-centered ways. The filling up within settles the matters we otherwise withhold from God. He can have our whole hearts, because God has convinced us again of His mercy and love, of His peace and His plan.

The miracle of the birth of the church was the deep and 6
profound confidence that God was truly there, and that they
had their marching orders. It was a boldness that did not occur
until the church was born, but it is a boldness that is essential
to really be the church.

Peter told the story of Jesus and thousands came to trust Him.
Generosity and openness became the order of the day, an
outward expression of an inward certainty. The Spirit energized
the disciples and He energizes us. We don't build the church,
Christ builds the church by filling our lives to overflowing, and
we overflow into the lives of other people!

When we know who we are as a church, it will be because we
know and are convinced who He is. We must let Him into This
place, His place. Our greatest need is not that we would fill this
place, but that God would fill each of us. That is what makes a
church really God's people!

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