

“Turned Loose!”

Acts 2:1-21

5/23/10

A sound like the rush of a violent wind. Tongues, as of fire. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and given the ability to speak in other languages. Unexpected yet awesome power, a power to which they began to testify to everyone around them.

And everyone around them understood. 3000 people—10 times what this sanctuary can hold—believed and accepted Christ that very day.

What a moment. To be part of that scene, what that would have been like! If only that would happen now. And yet, do we realize, do we know, that as Christ’s Church we are a part of this story? This power, this extraordinary ability did not end in that room on Pentecost. As believers the Holy Spirit fills us and alights upon us His power to speak the languages of those around us, to reach those around us with the Good News of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ.

God has given this to us in Jesus Christ. Do we truly grasp this awesome reality? Are we really, fully aware of what it is we have been given by God?

God fills these followers with the Holy Spirit—granting them power and courage and the ability to communicate with people of many races and nations. The devout Jews of multicultural Jerusalem are immediately amazed and astonished by what they hear from the apostles. “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” they ask in bewilderment. “Aren’t these just fishermen from the hill country?”

Yes, they are. That’s just it. We’re just a bunch of ordinary folks handed something beyond comprehension—the power of the Holy Spirit. And it is only by His power that others will come to hear and understand. It’s not only amazing what we are empowered to do, but just as amazing, if not more so, that others around us who do not even believe or know God will understand.

Peter raises his voice and addresses the crowd. He declares that God is pouring out his Spirit ... on all flesh, not just on the Man called Jesus ... on all flesh, not just on the prophets ... on all flesh, not just on the devout people of Jerusalem.

God is on the move. Then Peter concludes by saying boldly that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Not bad for a man who, only a few weeks earlier, wouldn’t call on the Lord or even admit that he was one of His followers!

Being entrusted with this new venture inspires Peter to rise to new heights of courage and passion, and it is through the Holy Spirit that this power is unleashed within him. He is given much, so he is going to give much in return.

The Holy Spirit empowers us for the work of ministry. It’s a Spirit that can inspire us to work harder and smarter, and to shape a more faithful and loving future. The prophets and apostles couldn’t do it all during their time on earth, so they are counting on us to carry their work forward, and to accomplish something great for the kingdom of heaven!

And as obvious as it may sound, we cannot do it without the power of the Holy Spirit. Because there are times we try.

Francis Chan is making waves. Cornerstone Church, which he launched in 1994 in Simi Valley, California, has grown to reach thousands. But the power behind Chan's wave of influence shouldn't be measured by its scope, but by its depth.

He is calling Christians, leaders, and churches to complete surrender to Christ. The ramifications in Chan's church have been significant.

“It's been a gradual thing over the last five years. For several years in my ministry, I really operated as though the Holy Spirit didn't exist. The truth is I trusted in the flesh—the natural abilities that God gave me—the same way unbelievers trust their natural gifts. With my natural communication abilities, I could probably gather a crowd even without the Spirit. But I realized that, with the church, there's got to be something more behind it. There's got to be something supernatural, something only the Holy Spirit can do.”

He says, for instance,

“I cannot make someone fall in love with Jesus. It really came home for me, literally, with my own teenage daughter, who, 18 months ago, was not in love with Jesus. I spent nights praying to the Lord. Here I am known for my ability to communicate, but there was nothing I could do for my own daughter that would make her fall in love with Jesus. Of course I could still guide and lead her, but I was powerless to convict her.

“I prayed, ‘God, either your Spirit comes into her or your Spirit doesn't. It doesn't matter how great a dad I am. I cannot bring her to life.’

“One day she came into my room and said, ‘You were right, Dad. The Holy Spirit was not in me. But now he is.’ She talked about how near she was to God and how everything had changed. My wife and I were skeptical. We wanted to see evidence of change. But 18 months later, I can say she really is a new creation. I didn't do that. It was the Holy Spirit.”

Chan says, “I equate it to surfing. Sometimes I'm out in the ocean and there are no sets coming in. I really don't want to paddle in, so I'll pray, ‘God, give me one nice set, one good wave to take me back to shore.’ I pray because I can't make a wave and I can't ask my friends to go further out and splash to create a wave. We're powerless. That's what I feel like in church. We think we can make waves, but in reality we're totally dependent on the Spirit.”

Are we fully devoted followers of Jesus? Is there transformation happening? Do we see ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves—a body with a mission larger than the individual?

What a celebration this morning we have in how God is using us to reach out. We heard what great things God has done through Dinner Theater. Hispanic Church. Haiti. Our own community. So many lives being touched, impacted with the love of Christ.

And yes, certainly if we were some secular charity organization we could raise that money and give it to these people just the same. But it is not the same. Because we know for whom we labor, the mysterious yet wonderful power that God breathes into the lives of those who receive. It's not something we can control or begin to take credit for. It's just the wave we get to ride as we experience God's awesome power at work.

You, and all of us, have been given the tools we need to succeed. God is with you in Spirit, giving you languages to speak across the barriers of nation and culture. God is with you in Spirit, giving you resources to feed the hungry and house the homeless. God is with you in Spirit, giving you strength and wisdom to work hard and work smart, overcoming the many obstacles you will face as you act out divine dramas in your own homes, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

Because God has given us the Spirit and turned us loose, we are free to do great things, for ourselves and for others. We can step up to a whole new level of performance and productivity, creativity and passion.

We have been given this awesome gift of power and love through the Holy Spirit. This is not a story from the past, but a continuing event in the life of all believers, within these walls of today's church.

The Holy Spirit is what pushes the church out from behind those closed Upper Room doors and into the marketplace, the public square and corporate boardroom.

What about the community around us? The United States is becoming more and more culturally diverse. We may not hear many languages from other countries here in our neighborhoods, but the many cultures and lifestyles of our modern day society have languages all their own. Language, how we communicate with each other, is probably the most important dimension to our lives as human beings. And today, in our society, in our culture, there are many different languages—music, words, dress, internet, artwork, video. And when one group does not understand the other, that is when relationships begin to break down.

What did Jesus' do as He ministered to the people around Him? When He met the Samaritan woman at the well, the "Outsider who was a woman to boot", He began talking to her about water and her thirst. Eventually He was able to communicate to her that He was the Living Water, able to quench her thirst for true life. When Jesus talked with the Pharisees, the religious leaders, He often talked with them about the Law, because that was the language they used. Jesus was ridiculed because He ate with the sinners and tax collectors and spent time talking with them, where they were in their lives. He went to them. He came to us. God spoke to us in our earthly language through Jesus Christ. And His message is that we are all loved, and all equal and precious in His sight. That is a message anyone can understand.

Because the key is that they need to hear the Good News. Romans 10:14-17 says, "And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim Him?" Paul says that faith comes from what is heard.

Isaiah 52:7 says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" The world needs to hear it!

Philip Yancey says, "The government can do everything that Christ calls us to do, yet only the Church can dispense grace." What I hear him saying is this: The government can feed the hungry, but it cannot give them unwavering hope. The government can give out clothing, but it cannot give dignity. The government can send social workers to visit the prisoners, but it cannot give self-worth. The government can legislate morality, but it cannot instill the values from which right living grows. The government can heal the sick, but it cannot provide the love that heals lives. Do you hear it? We are the ones who represent Christ to the world, and in so doing help people to come to know the One Who does give out hope, dignity, self-worth, values, and love.

God has given us the power of the Holy Spirit. His power. Let's turn it loose! Amen.