

The Power is On

Debates over baptism are nothing new. From the earliest days of the church, there was confusion over what this sacrament was all about.

In 1st Corinthians, we learn that, to Paul's dismay, many people considered it an initiation into the cult following of some charismatic leader. In our reading from Acts today, we discover that one of the church's finest early missionaries baptized a lot of people without really knowing what he was doing.

Our Gospel reading adds to the confusion. John the Baptist talked about baptism as being a rite of repentance, of turning back to God, something that Martin Luther later picked up on in describing baptism as a washing away of sins.

Then we see Jesus being baptized by John, despite the absurdity of him having to turn back to God through the washing away of his sins. How do we make sense of all this?

Let's begin by taking a closer look at the little-known missionary who created the confusion in Acts. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, who became a disciple of John the Baptist, and then a follower of Jesus.

He is described in Acts 18 as "an eloquent man, well-versed in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm, and he taught accurately the things concerning Jesus." On his arrival in Achaia, "he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers."

But even with all of these wonderful qualities, he had a glaring blind spot. A blind spot so obvious that when a Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila, heard him speaking in the synagogue at Ephesus, they just about dropped their teeth.

Without causing a scene, Priscilla and Aquila quickly pulled him aside. As Acts says, in wonderfully diplomatic language, "they explained the Way of God to him more accurately."

Those denominations who are appalled at the idea of women's leadership in the church as a breach of tradition should take note that one of the greatest early missionaries in the Christian church got taken to the woodshed by a female lay leader and her husband.

What was Apollos' blind spot? Acts 18 tells us that "he knew only the baptism of John." In our Gospel reading, John the Baptist explained the difference between his

baptism and the baptism in the name of Jesus: “I have baptized you with water,” he says, “but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

It seems that Apollos wasn't into this Holy Spirit stuff. Paul came to Ephesus sometime after Apollos had left, and found there people whom Apollos had drawn into the faith. “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” he asks them.

They look at each other blankly, blinking like a tree full of owls. Finally, they say, “Holy Spirit? What Holy Spirit? We never heard anything about a Holy Spirit.”

In some ways, Apollos' ministry is a pretty accurate portrayal of many a solid mainline Christian pastor.

He's exactly the kind of person you would want to call to lead your church. He's highly educated, knows the Bible and theology. He teaches accurately the things about Jesus and displays a passion for the Word. He's an excellent speaker, a good teacher, and he has been a great pastoral help to those had become believers.

But he knows nothing about the Holy Spirit. Wouldn't recognize the Holy Spirit if it hit him over the head.

It's probably accurate to say that Christian churches, particularly ELCA churches, are filled with people who, if asked, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” could honestly answer, “I don't know. Was that supposed to happen? No one said anything about a Holy Spirit.”

The story of Apollos warns us about the dangers of low expectations in our faith walk. I am not talking about low expectations of ourselves; I'm talking about low expectations of what God can actually accomplish in our lives.

A long time ago, my dad wrote a book called *Anyone Can Teach (They Said)*. It is a humorous but pointed story about a guy who is recruited to teach Sunday School at his Lutheran church. In an effort to get him to agree to take on this task, the recruiter sets the bar of expectation so low that anyone with a pulse could handle the job.

The new teacher then discovers that attitude is pervasive not only in the Sunday School program, but in the congregation in general. In order to get leadership positions filled, expectations are lowered so far that you wonder what is the point of doing any of it.

That was true of John's baptism of water. It was a nice ritual that accomplished a purpose. But it set the expectations for what was happening so low that you almost

question whether it was worth doing at all. Paul tells those disciples baptized by Apollos that they have barely tapped the surface of what God can do.

His words could be directed at many Christians today. We barely tap the surface of what God can do. When we think of God's power, we think in terms of personal interventions God may or may not make to solve problems that arise. We harbor this notion that God's power is focused on orchestrating all the details of our lives that are part of God's inscrutable plan for us.

We fail to recognize that the spirit of God is so much more powerful than that, that its power is available to us, and that through that power we can accomplish much more than we think we can.

Those Christians who do take the Holy Spirit seriously too often treat the Spirit as something out of the occult. But the Holy Spirit is not a paranormal force lurking around that can be summoned with the right formulas, chants, and incantations.

The Spirit of God is not a powerful genie that can be coaxed into doing supernatural things for us. It is that prevalent view that causes so many to dismiss any mention of the Holy Spirit as some weird superstition.

Our alternate Bible reading for today was Genesis 1, written when the nation of Israel had low expectations of God. Their country and their temple had been destroyed. The people had been exiled and scattered, and had no hope of any glory as a nation.

They were poor, powerless, and homeless. Because all this had happened, they wondered where God was in the world. Many were asking if the God they worshipped really had any power, any relevance.

The Hebrew people continued their worship and traditions that tied them together as a community. But they didn't really expect anything to happen from it. They didn't expect much from God who either couldn't prevent bad things from happening or had no interest in doing so.

When asked, "Did you receive the Spirit of God when you became believers?" they might as well have answered, "Spirit? What Spirit? We don't know anything about a spirit. We have no reason to believe that it exists, or if it does that it has any relevance in our lives."

So the writers of Genesis answered them with this powerful declaration: "You don't know anything about the Spirit of God? Let's talk about that. In the beginning the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light.”
And there was light.”

The spirit of God swept over the darkness and there was light.
The spirit of God swept over the face of the deep and there was life.
The spirit of God swept over the formless void and there was hope.
Talk about power!

Then in chapter 2 of Genesis, they added a second story. A story in which this powerful being who changes darkness to light and emptiness to life, takes a special interest in humans. This God of infinite power shares creation and establishes a close relationship with people.

In writing this, they are saying that the Spirit of God does not just crash about on a grand cosmic scale; it works its effect on people. On me and you.

The creation story is not just about what the Spirit of God did once, long ago. It’s about what God continues to do today.

In our world today, the spirit of God sweeps over the darkness and there is light.
In our churches today, the spirit of God seeps over the face of the deep and there is life.

In our lives today, the spirit of God sweeps over the formless void, and there is hope.

That is what the spirit of God does. It is a power unlike anything else we have access to in the entire universe.

We hear heartwarming stories of courage and perseverance and self-sacrifice, of people who defy staggering odds to succeed:
quadrapalegic artists
neurosurgeons rising out of the ghetto
families bouncing back from staggering tragedy
people failing time and again and after years of struggle against all hope, finally succeeding
people who lose everything and yet remain generous and giving and joyful
people who give their lives for others.

We hear those stories and we marvel at the power of the human spirit. But if that were the case, those stories would be far more common than they are. Those stories are more accurately evidence of the power of the Spirit of God.

The reason they seem incredible is because people in them do so much more with their lives than we can imagine anyone doing.

The power of the Spirit of God is not just a concept but a real presence that enables us to rise above the ordinary and to do awesome and inspiring things with our lives.

Mainline churches today live with the curse of low expectations. Too often, Christianity is viewed as something that's probably good for you in some moral sense but isn't really going to change anything.

When that is the expectation, when we have low expectations of faith, of what involvement with a church is about, of what God can actually accomplish in our lives, that becomes the reality, and we *don't* change anything.

The power of the Spirit of God changes who we are and what we can do. The power is there, and yet so often we act as if we haven't heard of Holy Spirit.

We once had the thermostat on the electric baseboard heater in my in-home office go out. An elderly neighbor of ours who was very handy offered to come over and replace it. During the course of this operation I kept running down to the basement to shut off or turn on the circuit-breaker as instructed.

At one point, after I had turned the power back on, I saw him about to touch a live wire. He had forgotten where we were in the process and that the power was on. I shouted a warning, too late. He touched the wire and flew backwards so hard he almost knocked me over. It's a wonder he wasn't badly hurt.

That's the image I have of 21st century American mainline churches dealing with the Holy Spirit. Too many of our congregations assume the power isn't on. Nothing much is really going to happen. They have no idea they are groping in the dark, inches away from an incredible power that they don't even know is on.

There are other denominations who do understand the power of the Holy Spirit and who recognize that that power is on and close at hand. Too often, though, they are just playing with that power. They keep wanting to touch it to feel that incredible rush of getting zapped by all those volts.

But the power of the Holy Spirit does not exist to give us thrills and emotional highs. The Spirit exists to change us and to allow us to do things in the service of humanity we can't imagine people could possibly do.

Our mission statement says that St. John's is a people formed in the waters of baptism. That's important because *without* baptism of the Spirit, we're just another social

service. *With* it, we are tapped into the power that has promised to bring the Kingdom of God into the world, and indeed is already bringing it.

Today we remember our baptismal day. What happened on that day makes it an occasion to remember. What happened here (on Christmas Day in my family with the baptism of our granddaughter was a special time that we will never forget.

But baptism is not something that happened to us once upon a time. It's not something God did for us back then. It was the day we got connected to a power.

In light of that, Jesus' baptism actually makes sense. Jesus was baptized for that reason—to connect with that power.

Paul asks the question, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers? Did the power get turned on?”

In baptism, we connect with the spirit of God that gives us the power to sweep over the darkness and bring light,

The power to sweep over the face of the deep and bring life,

The power to sweep over the formless void and bring hope.

The power that lives and moves in us today, and transforms lives.

The power is on, it is available to us, and it is close. Which is why, on this baptismal renewal Sunday, we pray, “Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.”