

# What if the Holy Spirit had not come?

## Introduction

Let us suppose that the second chapter of the book of Acts reads a little differently from what we have in our Bibles "When the day of Pentecost was come, they were all together in one place. Suddenly Peter stood up and said Hallelujah, I believe the Holy Spirit has come just as Jesus promised. Let us begin the task of evangelizing the world as Jesus commanded us to do." Would it make any difference if the Holy Spirit had not actually come at Pentecost?

## Effect on the early church

First of all there would not have been the miracle of the 120 speaking in tongues and attracting peoples' attention. Then we may wonder if there would have been much response to Peter's sermon since Jesus promised in John 16 that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin.

It is clear that the evangelization of the world would have been up to the imagination and enthusiasm of the disciples since they could not expect the Holy Spirit to actually lead them. Peter's visit to Cornelius would not have happened since it was the Holy Spirit who convinced him to go. Even if he had gone, then it is doubtful that he would have baptized Cornelius and his friends since he only did it after seeing evidence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Philip would not have met the Ethiopian eunuch since it was the Holy Spirit who arranged the meeting and told him to speak to the eunuch. Similarly Paul's conversion and his being met and prayed for by Ananias probably would not have happened because both were initiated by experiences that were not invented by the minds of the men involved.

Peter and John would not have gone to Samaria after Philip's preaching there and prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit if they had not expected something visible as evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence. That "something" was not a response to the gospel, nor baptism, nor enthusiasm about the gospel. What it was we are not told, much to the frustration of many Bible students. It was however visible enough that the magician Simon wanted to add the trick to his collection of magic.

Also in Acts 19 Paul would have had no basis for asking the Ephesians if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed, since there would have been nothing to which he could have expected them to point as evidence of having received the Spirit.

To summarize, we could conclude that if the Holy Spirit had not come then the book of Acts would have just described the activities of a few Jewish enthusiasts who started a new sect based on the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

## **Effect on the disciples' experience**

What about the disciples' own experience? Well, we know that they had a good knowledge of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, having been taught by Jesus for three years and having met him after his resurrection. We know that their eternal destiny was sure because in John 14 Jesus speaks about the homes being made ready for them in heaven and that they themselves were pure through the words he spoke. We know that the thief on the cross went to paradise after he died without receiving the Holy Spirit, as did the poor man Lazarus in the parable Jesus told about. We know from the same parable that Abraham was there and we may readily understand that all the Old Testament saints were there without having received the Spirit in the way he was given at Pentecost.

However, whereas the disciples had known Jesus physical presence for three years plus occasionally after his resurrection, if the Holy Spirit did not come they would have then been left only with a memory of Jesus and praying to a Jesus in heaven, but in practice they would have been left to themselves.

They could have remembered Jesus and written down what he said and looked forward to his coming again, but they would have been alone.

They could never have said "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us". They could only say "it seemed good to us and we think Jesus would have approved." So they would be alone and the whole responsibility of spreading the gospel and convincing people would have been on their own shoulders.

They would have been sound in doctrine and would have gone to heaven but they would have been alone. They would have been able to write Romans 7 about the struggle with and defeat by sin, but never chapter 8 about the victory over sin that comes from the Holy Spirit.

1Cor 12 and 14 about the manifestations of the Spirit could never have been written. All church activities would have depended on the natural ability and intelligence of the members. Paul would have only been able to bring to the Corinthians words of persuasive wisdom, not a demonstration of the Spirit's power. There would have been no teaching about the Holy Spirit being like an engagement ring or seal for Christians if the Holy Spirit was only a theory because invisible engagement rings are not very convincing.

So we see that the New Testament would have been radically different if the Holy Spirit had not come in a way that produced evidence. The basic doctrines would have been the same and salvation, in terms of getting to heaven would have been the same, but the life of the NT church would have been different.

## **How about today's church?**

How about the life of today's church? How about my life? Can I point to anything in my life or in the life of my congregation that is evidence of the Holy

Spirit, or is he just an article in the creed where we say "I believe in the Holy Spirit" but he remains just an object of faith? I suggest that the vast majority of most of Christian activity today would be just the same as it is even if the Holy Spirit had not come.

### **A look at church history**

How did this state come about? Two Catholic theologians made a very interesting study of the role of the Holy Spirit in the teaching of the church in the first few centuries of church history. They found that whereas at the beginning a convert was prayed for at his baptism and expected to show some visible sign of the coming of the Holy Spirit, as time passed the liturgy changed and the Holy Spirit's coming became a matter of faith with no visible evidence.

For the next 1500 years visible evidence of the Spirit's presence was rarely seen or expected although there were occasional signs. These were invariably violently opposed by the established church and those involved called heretics and persecuted. This often became a self fulfilling prophecy because those involved, being separated from the teaching ministry of the church and being subject to persecution often ended up in all sorts of excesses.

However things have changed. In the last 30 years there has come into the mainstream churches an increasing expectation of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit's presence. This has built on the Pentecostal movement that started at the beginning of this century but due to opposition remained outside the mainstream churches until the middle sixties.

The Pentecostal movement and now the charismatic movement have seen an explosive growth world-wide in the past few decades. In contrast Bible based but non-charismatic churches have only seen moderate growth, and other churches have shrunk in size. For example in England in 1981 the growth rate of charismatic churches was 25%, of evangelicals 5% and of other a contraction. Based on the New Testament this is what we should expect. It is quite reasonable for Christians to be active without the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, but the results will be hard to come by. On the other hand when the Holy Spirit is expected and allowed to manifest his presence, especially through healings and words of knowledge, then the response is much more.

### **Should the Spirit be known?**

I know that some Christians feel that the Holy Spirit's presence is identical with the liturgy of the church and the exposition of scripture, but I really cannot find that in the New Testament. It is not that he does not work through the liturgy and scripture exposition, he certainly does, but the New Testament shows him manifesting himself in a way that allows people to say "That is the Spirit" its not just my intelligence or natural abilities. Similarly I think the Bible teaches that every believer has the Holy Spirit in him Rom 8v9,10. But it also teaches that believers have the possibility to know the Spirit manifesting

himself through them in a way that allows them and others to say "this is not me, it's him". Paul was able to say to the Corinthians "To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good". But the list he then gives in 1 Cor 12 is of the charismatic gifts not of natural sanctified abilities.

### **Hindrances to knowing the Spirit**

To conclude then, if the Holy Spirit had not come there could still be a church of believers with sound doctrine who would go to heaven. If you are content with that then that is your choice. On the other hand Jesus offered, and the New Testament church demonstrated, that more is possible. The Holy Spirit can be known to be personally present and can manifest himself if we will let him. He will not force himself on us but he will come if we ask him.

There are usually three main reasons why the Spirit is not manifest, Ignorance - we don't know to ask, Sin - we don't want him to have a real place in our lives, Inner wounds - fear or some other emotional hurt may lead us to suppress our inner life and consequently also the Spirit within. Through teaching and study ignorance can be removed, through repentance sin can be cleansed, through prayer and counseling inner healing can come.

### **A chance to know Him better**

I want to finish by reading Acts 2 as it was actually written. The Holy Spirit did actually come. He did actually make a difference in the early church. He is manifesting himself throughout the world today in the greatest spread of the gospel the world has ever known. He can be manifest in your life in greater way than you can ever imagine if only you will ask him to and be willing to let him show you how.