

30 Years of Experiencing the Holy Spirit

Rich Nathan
September 2 & 3, 2017
30 Years of Following the Spirit
Acts 2:1-4

This September, as I mentioned, marks the 30th anniversary of our church joining the Vineyard movement and of me being our first senior pastor. You know, before our church met the Vineyard we were a small, inoffensive, nice little church that wasn't bothering anyone. We had about 100-150 folks and the way that I've always described the church back then is that we were like puppies in a box licking each other all day – cute and cuddly, warm, not making much of a difference anywhere in the world.

Years ago, I read a question. It's been so long I don't remember who originally posed this question, but the question was incredibly convicting when I read it. The question was this: if your church ceased to exist, would anyone in your community cry? Like many churches, the sad answer before we met the Vineyard would have been no. No one would cry if we were gone. At the time, no hungry people were being fed by our church, no refugees were being resettled by our church, few people far from God were finding Jesus through our church, virtually no one in prison was being visited by our church, and very few women in crisis pregnancies were being helped. If I was honest about the impact of our church on the community, I would say that outside of our own members, if the church ceased to exist no one in the community would notice because very few in our community were being impacted or helped by the church.

Our church radically changed. We're not what we were! The reason why Vineyard Columbus is what it is today is not because we decided to hire a high priced consultant or read a book that gave us a prescription about how to influence our community. The reason why our church became the church that it is now is because of 30 years of experiencing with the Holy Spirit.

Let me tell you how the experience of the Holy Spirit really began in the church we now call Vineyard Columbus. The year was 1985 – before many of you were even born. Our little church was part of a tiny association of equally small, inoffensive, nice little churches that didn't bother anyone. There were about seven of these churches in this tiny association. The men in those churches decided that we'd have a men's conference. So we pulled together about 200 men from these seven churches for a men's conference in Mansfield, Ohio.

From our church, there were probably three or four dozen men who attended. The meetings featured a speaker from the Vineyard movement which at the time, was a

growing movement of churches based in California. I was completely unfamiliar with the Vineyard, as were most of the guys there.

In any case, the message was alright. It was nothing spectacular. It was certainly nothing on the order of listening to our own Dr. Charles Montgomery or Shane Huey or Lorie Rees from this church. But after the message, the man said, “Now, we’re going to model what I’ve been talking about.” He asked, “Will you all stand and open your hands.” And then he prayed, “Come, Holy Spirit.”

I thought, “That’s an interesting prayer. I thought the Holy Spirit was already here, but OK. Come Holy Spirit.”

Then he said, “The Holy Spirit is touching some of you right now.” He called a guy up who he said the Holy Spirit was touching. This particular fellow, I didn’t know who he was, came up on the stage. The speaker asked the Holy Spirit to increase his presence in this guy’s life. The guy began to shake. As I watched it, I thought, “That looks really weird!” Then he said to the guy, “Hold up your hand and bless the audience.” So, the guy picked up his hand – and it was shaking – as I watched it it was like a lightning bolt jumped off his hand and hit Craig Heselton, a guy who is now our Executive Pastor. At the time, Craig was running a chemical company here in town. He’s a chemical engineer. I watched Craig begin to violently shake.

I thought, “Craig Heselton is one of the most stable, sane people I have ever met.” I’ve always thought of Craig as one of those children’s punching bears. You know, those inflatable plastic bears or clowns that you punch in the nose and they fall but come right back up to center. That’s Craig. He’s really, really stable. He lives within a mile or two of where he grew up. He has a great, solid family. He has a great marriage. Everything in his life is really together. As he began to violently shake, I thought, “Not Craig!” Then pandemonium broke out in the room.

Some people began to scream, some were falling down and knocking over chairs. Others were violently shaking. Just as an aside, I want to say that the thing about the Holy Spirit coming in power is that it’s messy. You’re not going to have a powerful experience of the Spirit in your own life or in the life of a group or a community without it being messy. If you like everything neat and tidy, if you hate emotion, if you are freaked out by any noise, you don’t want the Holy Spirit in your life or in our midst. Because, you see, life with the Holy Spirit is loud and messy. Just go visit a hospital nursery. Wherever there is new life, there is going to be mess and noise and crying. If you don’t like noise, if you want everything to be really quiet, visit a cemetery. The dead don’t make any noise at all. Spiritually dead individuals and spiritually dead churches are very, very quiet.

I'll tell you what happened to me. As I watched this, I didn't like what I was observing. I thought, "You know, this feels like mass hysteria." I'd done reading in mass psychology as an undergrad and I thought, "I'm not going to get caught up in all of this." So, I stepped away from the crowd and moved towards the stage and watched.

I wondered to myself, "What is this? What's going on here?" Then from out of nowhere, I felt this gigantic weight pressing on my head. It was like an invisible hand pushing me to the ground. In my mind, I was thinking, "Calm down, Rich, you're becoming a bit overwrought here. You're getting swept up with this. Sit down and just relax." So, I sat down but this invisible hand was pushing me down. I thought, "This is not going to happen to me." So I put my elbows in back of me to brace myself. But this invisible hand was too strong and felt myself being pushed down to the ground, into the carpet. I was trying to push back against it.

A friend from another Vineyard church came over and looked at me and said, "Rich, why are you resisting the Holy Spirit?" When he said it, it was like a spear went into my chest and I just began to weep. I thought, "Lord, how did I ever get to a place where I really didn't like your activity. And even though I frequently prayed that you would bless and you would come, when you did come and it was in a package that was different than I wanted, different than what I liked, I despised your coming. How did I ever get to a place where you wanted to touch me, I pushed against it?"

Friends, that meeting was a turning point for our nice little inoffensive warm cuddly church which didn't bother anyone. We experienced the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit redirected us so powerfully that it was like he changed our DNA. The Spirit made us bold. The Spirit gave us courage and power to make a difference in our community and in our world. Over the next couple of years, we investigated the Vineyard. We had Vineyard speakers in. Many of us went to Vineyard conferences. And in September of 1987, I left my job where I was teaching at Ohio State. The Sunday that I was ordained as our first senior pastor we formally joined the Vineyard movement.

This weekend is 30 years that we've been part of the Vineyard and 30 years that I've been senior pastor here. We're going to have a month of celebration as we talk about the impact of the Spirit on this church. And we'll celebrate God's work in our midst. Today, I've called my message, "30 Years of Experiencing the Holy Spirit". Let's pray.

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now in verse one we read:

Acts 2:1

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

What is Pentecost? Why did God sovereignly choose the Day of Pentecost to give birth to the church and to pour out his Spirit on this group of Jesus followers?

The Pentecostal experience

The Day of Pentecost was the most popular and celebrated annual festival in 1st century Judaism. In the Mosaic Law, what is called the Torah, there are three annual festivals or feasts in which Jewish men living near Jerusalem were required to go to the temple – Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Now, Pentecost is a word that comes from the Greek

Pentecoste = 50th

It means 50 days after the Sunday following Passover. So, you have Passover then you go to the next Sunday after Passover and then 50 days after that including that Sunday is Pentecost.

What was Pentecost all about in first century Judaism? Why did God decide to pour out his Spirit on that particular day? Pentecost was an agricultural festival. It involved the offering of first fruits.

Offering first fruits

Pentecost was a day when farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop and offered it to God – partly as a sign of gratitude, partly as a prayer that all the rest of the crop would be safely gathered in.

It is appropriate that on this festival of first fruits, the church came into existence. So there was always a people of God, but now the church – the people of God were not just made up of one ethnicity, Jews, but Jews and Gentiles. The people saved on the Day of Pentecost were a kind of first fruits of the newborn church.

Pentecost was not just celebrated as an agricultural festival, offering first fruits. In first century Judaism, and to this day, Pentecost is celebrated as the day that God gave the law to Moses.

Giving the law

Moses ascends to the top of Mt. Sinai and he comes down from the mountain with God's law. Just as Moses in the Old Testament ascended and descended with the law, so in the New Testament, Jesus ascends to the Father and then descends down to us through the Holy Spirit who writes God's law in our hearts.

Another thing, Pentecost involves the restoration of community

Restoring community

Acts 2:1

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

In the Old Testament, God pronounced a curse on sinful pride and rebellion at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 by confusing their languages. The curse was that people would not be able to understand each other. Folks stopped being able to communicate with each other. In the very next chapter in Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that he's going to reverse the curse and create a new family of God. What you see on the Day of Pentecost is people were able to hear and understand what the apostles were preaching in their own language.

Acts 2:8

Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?

You know, whenever the Holy Spirit leads a group of people, there is unity, there is understanding. There is peace. You can always tell when folks are not submitted to the Holy Spirit because you are going to see a lot of conflict, lots of misunderstanding, lots of miscommunication. But when the Spirit is there, people can understand, they can talk, they can sit down and listen to one another. They get what the other person is saying. There's humility there.

Pentecost is an offering of first fruits. It concerns the giving of the law, the restoring of community, and finally Pentecost involves:

Reaching the world

In Jewish tradition, and even today, Jews read the book of Ruth in synagogue on Pentecost. Ruth is a book about how God reached beyond the national borders of Israel to incorporate into the nation a young Gentile woman, a woman from the nation of Moab. God brought this woman, named Ruth, into the covenant. Here in Acts 2, much of the Holy Spirit's activity has to do with incorporating the nations into God's family.

Pentecost is a world missions holiday. Whenever the Spirit of God comes, he doesn't just come to give us an experience. The experience of the Spirit is designed to produce

a result and the result is the building up of the church and the reaching of the nations. And, friends, over the last 30 years, as Vineyard Columbus has experienced the Holy Spirit, we have heard God's call on us to reach the nations – to send out missionaries all over the globe – to North Africa, to the Middle East, to central Asia, to Amsterdam and Brazil and Indonesia and Tanzania. World missions is one of the main expressions of experiencing the Holy Spirit.

What kind of experience was Pentecost experience? Let's read verse 2.

Acts 2:2

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

What kind of experience was this Pentecost experience? It was a sudden experience.

A sudden experience

The initiation was from God. For the past 30 years, I have heard from hundreds of people, literally hundreds, who had somehow made their way to Vineyard Columbus and they told me, "You know, I came to one of your services and I had an experience of God. I can't explain it." Some of them will say, "I really didn't want to be there. My sister took me. My friend from work kept nagging me to go. I finally couldn't avoid it and I agreed because they were getting baptized or their child was being dedicated. And completely unexpectedly, I felt God's presence. I started to cry. I knew that when I walked into the building or when we began to worship that God was here."

The experience of God is not something we initiate. The coming of the Holy Spirit is not under human control. It's always struck me as an odd thing that in some church traditions, the church schedules a revival. How about if we have our revival June 4-9? Well, that won't really work because Pastor Joe is going to be out of town attending his son's graduation. How about if we schedule the revival the next week, June 11-16. Is the church building open? Yes, it is. Will the pastor be in town? He will. Do you think we can get the speaker? Yes. Great! Then revival will come to our church the week of June 11.

I know that mostly what folks mean by scheduling a revival is what here at Vineyard we call a conference. I don't have huge problems with the language. I'm just wanting to point something out here. The Holy Spirit comes *as God wills*, like a gust of wind that suddenly blows. It says this in John 3:

John 3:8

⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

I deliberately titled this anniversary series “30 Years of Following the Spirit” because as I look back at Vineyard Columbus’ history, the initiation of virtually every big thing that I can think of was from God. We do what we do. We work. We plan. We pray. We fast. We serve. We give. But only God can bring about the results.

I love this text in 1 Corinthians 3:

1 Corinthians 3:6-7

⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

Yes, we plant. Yes, we water, but only God makes things grow! Now, I want you to say with me, “Only God!” Turn to your neighbor and say, “Only God!”

I’d like to do a little bit of a responsive reading for you. I have some questions and then I’d like you, church, to respond, “Only God!”

Why did Vineyard Columbus grow from 150 people back in 1987 to 8,000 people today?
... Only God

Why did the face of the church change from an almost entirely white Anglo church to a church that’s made up of 125 different nations? ... Only God

Why in the last 10 years has Vineyard Columbus been able to help over 3,000 women who are facing unintended pregnancies? ... Only God

Why did our church stop being a nice little inoffensive church that had no impact on our city to today having 10,000 visits a month to our community center? ... Only God

Why do our food pantries serve over 3,000 people a month? ... Only God

Why has Vineyard Columbus been able to start about 30 new churches through church planting in the last 30 years? ... Only God

Why have over 300 couples who were intending to divorce gotten reconciled through our Marriage and Family ministry over the last 14 years? ... Only God.

I could go on. But brothers and sisters, tell me now in the loudest voice possible why is it that anything has worked at Vineyard Columbus over the last 30 years? ... Only God!

Pentecostal experience. It was a sudden experience and it was:

A felt experience

Acts 2:2-3

² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

We live in a society where many people fear being touched. There's so much abuse and fear of abuse, of unsafe touch, that we've become afraid of anyone touching us or touching one of our children. The head of the teacher's union in New York said, "We don't touch children. We teach them." Even a warm touch on the shoulder, a gentle pat on the back – teachers are afraid to touch and parents don't want teachers touching their kids. We've stopped touching each other even in safe ways, even in appropriate ways.

A sociologist did a study of 20 different countries and how often people of those countries touched each other. What he did – it was a fascinating study – he went to different coffee shops around the world and he watched two friends interacting. He literally sat there and counted out the number of times that people touched each other in the course of an hour. How many times do you think friends in England touch each other sitting over a table with coffee in the course of an hour? Zero. How many times do you think friends in the United States touch each other in an hour? Two. How many times do you think friends in Puerto Rico touch each other in an hour? 180.

All that we know about people through medical research tells us that we need way more touch! Not less touch, more touch – it's basic to human communication, bonding and health.

Research tells us that preterm newborns who receive just three 15-minute sessions of touch therapy each day for 5-10 days gain 47% more weight than preemies who receive standard medical treatment without touch. Babies in particular need to be loved and nurtured and develop trust and attachment. That's why these days, very often after a baby is born the doctor will place a baby on a mother's stomach skin-to-skin. The baby is comforted and oxytocin is released in the mother's brain and the baby's brain. Oxytocin is the bonding chemical. But babies are not the only ones who need to be touched. In research on touch for an elderly person who is suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's, gentle therapeutic touch reduces the need in nursing homes for anti-psychotic medication. It calms the person down. It reduces anxiety and fear and insecurity.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus touches people? We all need to be touched by the Holy Spirit. If you have never experienced the felt touch of the Holy Spirit, we've got some opportunities for you this month to experience the Spirit.

Meeting God 302: Discerning God's Voice, Thursday, Sept. 7 @ 6:30pm at Cooper Road
Meeting God 303: Power Healing and Evangelism, Thursday, Sept. 14 @ 6:30pm at Cooper Road

At the end of the month, we're having a conference called "Light the Fire". We're bringing in someone who is really prophetically gifted. He moves in power to heal. The conference will be on September 27-29.

The Pentecostal experience is an experience that's sudden. It's felt. And it's

A powerful experience

The Spirit comes as wind. He comes as fire. The wind communicates life and the breath of God coming into a person. When the Holy Spirit enters a person's life it makes that person born again. He brings spiritual life with him. A person goes from being spiritually dead to becoming spiritually alive. The Spirit also comes as fire. Fire in the Bible is purifying. When the Holy Spirit comes he purifies our lives. He sanctifies us. He also sets us on fire. Fire is powerful. It's uncontrollable. A Christian who is full of the Holy Spirit is someone who has been set on fire.

Look at the state of the church in America. Right now in the 21st century, with declining church attendance everywhere, with attacks from without and divisions within – all of the partisanship, the noise, the cynicism about institutions and the moral corruption. What does the church in America need? What the church needs is not a more powerful website, a better marketing campaign or more slick graphics. What the church needs is not a more amazing show on Sunday mornings with smoke machines and revolving lights. What the church needs is men and women and children who are set on fire by the Holy Spirit. Our supreme need, the need of the church in this hour is to be set on fire again by the Holy Spirit.

Let me ask you an important question. Do you have the Holy Spirit, friend? If you've asked Jesus into your life by surrendering the management of your life to him he's given you the gift of the Holy Spirit. But if you've never surrendered the management and control of your life to Jesus, you may be a wonderful person but you do not yet have the Holy Spirit. Why not surrender control of your life to Jesus? Why not invite him to take up residence in your life instead of trying to do life by yourself in your own strength? Why not do life with Jesus?

Now, if you have the Holy Spirit, would you say that you have as much of the Holy Spirit as you need? One of the marks of the great men and women of the Bible and in the history of the church is that they always wanted to experience more of the Holy Spirit. They wanted more of the Spirit's power. They wanted more of the Spirit's holiness. They wanted more of the Spirit's comfort. They wanted more of the Spirit's love. Jesus certainly thought it was possible for a Christian believer to have more of the Holy Spirit than they presently have. Indeed, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus commands us to ask, seek and knock, that we might experience a greater filling of the Holy Spirit. Here's what we read:

Luke 11:9-13

⁹ "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Jesus is talking to Christians and he's saying: son or daughter, ask for more of my Spirit. Come to God and say "Lord, set me on fire. Fill me up. I want to experience you."

If you already have the Holy Spirit, ask for more. Maybe you say, "I had a dramatic experience of the Holy Spirit several years ago" – ask for more! I prayed for someone and they had a dramatic experience – ask for more! I've seen miracles – ask for more!

Church, as individuals, never rest content with your present experience of the Spirit, ask for more! Vineyard, together as a church, never be satisfied with our present experience of the Spirit – ask for more! We've been in the Vineyard for 30 years, it started with someone praying "Come, Holy Spirit." If the church is here in 100 years, my prayer is that Vineyard Columbus will always cry out, "More, Holy Spirit! More love, more power, more of you in my life!"

Let's pray.

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