

In December 1900 a Methodist minister named William Parham founded a small Bible college in the south. He and his students embarked on a study of Baptism in the Holy Spirit. That's what this scene in our reading from Acts is called. It's a prominent theme in Acts.

Parham's students came to the conclusion that speaking in tongues was the definitive sign of God's indwelling in believers – the definitive sign of Baptism in the Holy Spirit.

After reaching that conclusion they prayed all night. In the morning one of the students actually began to speak in tongues. That event was the seed of modern-day Pentecostalism.

Parham himself was not given the gift of tongues, but he was apparently given the spiritual gift of supernatural healing. He embarked on a series of revival meetings through the south, preaching and healing.

William Seymour, a son of former slaves, heard him and was inspired to start his own preaching tour. A powerful preacher, he was invited to Los Angeles to start a congregation there. The group rented a dilapidated former stable on Azusa Street near the heart of downtown LA.

Near continuous prayer meetings were held with people speaking in tongues or receiving the gift of healing or other supernatural gifts. Sometimes hundreds of people gathered there. There were people of all races and ethnicities – something unheard of in those Jim Crow years. The sounds of speaking in tongues and weeping and all the things you think of when you think Pentecostalism must have created quite a din.

That run-down building on Azusa street is considered the birthplace of Pentecostalism. It was set apart from traditional denominations by its diversity and particular relevance to the poor, but even more by its unmediated outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's outpouring on those people was not dependent on any church structure or hierarchy. Wild and unruly, it was met by great resistance from the more stately denominations.

It's still often met with skepticism and derision by other Christians. We can critique it all we want, but today, Pentecostalism is the fastest growing Christian movement in the world. The Holy Spirit is up to something.

At the other end of a continuum are those people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious. They too have been met with criticism...criticism that their spirituality is really just self-absorbed navel gazing. However, that tends not to be the case when researchers actually look at it.

What it tends to mean for many who identify as spiritual but not religious is that they want a spirituality that really matters in everyday life.

They want a spirituality that takes the sacredness of the everyday seriously. They want a spirituality that makes a difference in the world.

Some of it adopts the Celtic style spirituality – rooted in creation and less dependent on doctrine and structure than most of the Western church. It's a spirituality that celebrates the connectedness of everything.

What seems to be common between Pentecostalism and the spiritual but not religious, is the desire for a true experience of the presence of God...one not necessarily mediated by a priest or pastor and certainly not one that has to take place in a formal church building. They want to experience God, not just check off boxes on statements of belief.

Both movements have their drawbacks. Pentecostalism is sometimes too easily drawn into the prosperity gospel. Spiritual but not religious can be pretty light on sin and how God deals with it. The cross of Christ, central to Lutheran theology, can be hard to see in either one.

But still, it seems that The Holy Spirit is up to something.

Earlier in the series I gave you a handout of works of the Spirit. But before the Spirit can do much with us, she needs to get our attention, often in a way that makes us uncomfortable.

In Phyllis Tickle's book, *The Age of the Spirit*, she suggested that maybe the decline in the American church right now is not the work of some evil power, but rather is actually the work of the Holy Spirit. Maybe the Spirit is stirring things up because something new is struggling to be born.

The Holy Spirit is up to something. But for right now we seem to be primarily in the discomfort stage and we're a little short on the enlightenment side.

Theologian Cheryl Peterson wrote a systematic theology book on the Holy Spirit in *Christian Life from a Lutheran perspective*.

She talks about the three movements of the spirit in the lives of Christians. The Spirit for us, the Spirit in us, and the Spirit through us.

The Spirit for us is justification. We are justified by Christ's work and the Holy Spirit makes that justification real to us by faith. We Lutherans are all over that, but we often get stuck there. Yes, we're saved by grace through Christ's death and resurrection. But that work is done. What's next?

We're not just left to our own devices once we're justified. We've got a new life to live.

That leaves us the other two movements – the Spirit in us and the Spirit through us. The Spirit in us is a process called sanctification, or the work of making us holy.

The Spirit works in us through the Word and the Sacraments so that we grow in faith and love...so that we become more Christ-like.

And perhaps, with the Pentecostals and the spiritual but not religious, we also believe that the Spirit can work in us in other ways as well – that a direct experience of God's presence is possible, whether we speak in tongues or not.

And then there's the Spirit through us. The Spirit empowers us for mission and witness so that we work to build for God's kingdom.

So, what about our witness? That's the question we raised last week. How do we witness to the gospel in a true and effective way in our time and place?

As I've spent time over the last several weeks reading different things, listening to different things, and wrestling with what the Holy Spirit might be up to in and through us, I think a clue might be in something I said earlier – people are hungry for a spiritual life that treats all of creation as sacred. They're hungry for a spiritual life that celebrates our connectedness... a spiritual life that makes a difference in the world.

In a world that is hungry for a spirituality that transcends what is visible but is still close enough for intimacy, we can speak of the God who both dwells in us as the Spirit and who reigns over heaven and earth as the ascended Christ.

We can speak of God whose reign broke into our world in the person of Jesus.

And then we point to what it means to live in the kind of kingdom over which Jesus reigns.

That, we have to live. Maybe our best witness is to actually live lives that strive to be more like Jesus.

We live in a time of upheaval, change, and anxiety. There are lots of competing voices, just in the church alone. Some of those voices in the church are very strident. There are big egos speaking loudly. Some are very convinced they have all the answers.

With so many competing voices, how do we know which is the voice of the Holy Spirit – in us and through us?

Well, Paul himself has some answers for us in his letters to the Corinthians and Galatians.

The Corinthians were a difficult lot. They had big egos, and the people who were given the gift of tongues thought they were better than everyone else. But Paul said no. No matter what our spiritual gifts might be, no matter what our convictions, if we don't love, it's just noise.

When the Spirit is working in and through us, it looks like what Paul wrote to the Christian church in Galatia – the visible signs of the Spirit working in and through us are an increasing ability to show love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

At the heart of any spiritual growth is always prayer...prayers with words and prayers that listen to God...prayer steeped in God's word. The basics. I don't know what to think about the supernatural gifts Pentecostals seem to get, but I'm willing to maintain some humility and just say that...I don't know.

But I do know that the Spirit does wish to work in and through us for the good of God's kingdom. And so we pray, let it be so.