

FOR THE CHURCH TO BE BORN AGAIN

April 10 Devotional Sermon

Introduction

“If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of our midst today, about ninety-five percent of what we are doing in our churches would go on, and we would not know the difference.” These words by Carl Bates, a onetime Southern Baptist Convention president, may be frightfully more relevant to *our* church today than in years gone by. Bates added: “Yet if God had taken the Holy Spirit out of the midst of the first Christian community, about ninety-five percent of what they were doing would have ceased immediately.”ⁱ

How clear is the evidence of the Holy Spirit in our church? How much of the power of God can *unbelievers* perceive in our daily lives and ministries?

Albert Einstein was considered by many the most influential person in the 20th century. He was in sheer awe of the order and beauty of God’s universe. But it was interesting what he said about Christian preachers. Karl Meissner, the famous physicist who worked along Einstein for many years, once gave a very intriguing explanation about why Einstein could not buy what typical Christian preachers would “sell.” He said, “He must have looked at what preachers said about God and felt that they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined. [The preachers] were just not talking about the real thing.”ⁱⁱ

Since the second century, the world has wondered if we’re talking about the real thing. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul calls Christ crucified a “scandalon,”—a stumbling block—literally “a scandal” something that should grab people’s attention, yet the shame of the church is that the

world—our communities—are not being “scandalized” by the Three Angels Message.ⁱⁱⁱ

Something is just not quite working out the way it should.

The Early Church

When you read the book of Acts, you can’t help get the impression that the first-century world was, indeed, scandalized. Acts 3:9, 10: “And all the people saw him walking and praising God; and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.” Acts 5:12, 13: “At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord . . . [and] the people held them in high esteem.” Acts 4:13: “Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.”

How often could people say that about our church today?

The Spirit of Prophecy adds to this marvelous experience of the Early Church. “The outpouring of the Spirit in the days of the apostles was the beginning of the early, or former, rain, and glorious was the result.”^{iv} How glorious, exactly? The gospel was carried “to the uttermost parts of the inhabited world.” “Hearts yielded to the power of this message. The church beheld converts flocking”—note the verb, *flocking*—“to her from all directions. Backsliders were reconverted. Sinners united with believers in seeking the pearl of great price. Some who had been the bitterest opponents of the gospel became its champions . . . Every Christian saw in his brother a revelation of divine love and benevolence.” Pretty amazing, isn’t it? A true *scandalon*. No wonder, she says, “thousands were converted in a day.”^v

The Problem

The problem, of course, is that we are no longer the church of Ephesus. We've lost our first love and have become the church of Laodicea. And to date, evidence is not yet compelling that we recognize ourselves to be poor, blind, and naked. The truth is, most days, we're pretty satisfied with our progress. Why, after all, we are seventeen million strong, we have work in over 200 countries of the world, we rival the efficiency and organization of the largest faith community in the world with a membership of one billion, and our health and educational institutions are held in high esteem. We even hold ourselves in high esteem.

In fact, less than a month ago, *USAToday*, the largest daily newspaper in the United States, published an article where we are lauded for being the fastest-growing church in America! And we feel pretty good about that, even though our growth rate is barely over 2% a year. This is what I call "righteousness by comparison,"—as long as I do better than others I'm OK. You know what the growth rate of the Adventist Church was in the decade of the 1870s, just after it got itself organized as a church? It was 18.6% per year.^{vi} Had that yearly growth rate continued unabated, instead of having almost 17 million members, the Seventh-day Adventist Church today would have had—ready?—13, 289,837,704 members worldwide, by last year's GC session in Atlanta! Yes, that's twice as many members as there are people in the world today. So, mathematically, every person on earth would have become an SDA by about the year 2006 or 2007. And we would have gone home.

Now, that's a scandalon!

We noted that the problem is our Laodicean condition. And Jesus' solution to that condition is to 1) Buy from Him gold, raiment, and eyesalve, 2) Repent, and 3) Open the door as we hear His voice (Rev 3:18-20).

But I'd like to focus this morning on the book of Acts. Is there a solution inherent in the narrative of the marvelous experience of the Early Church? What actually led to Pentecost? What made that

church be born, to begin with? If we discover what brought about its birth, we'll have the clue to our church's rebirth.

The Birth of the Church

Here is the message today: *BEFORE THERE IS EVER AN ACTS 2, THERE IS ALWAYS AN ACTS 1 or BEFORE THERE IS NEW BIRTH, THERE IS A COMING TOGETHER TO FOCUS ON ONE AGENDA ITEM—JESUS CHRIST.*

Christian theology has always understood the birth of the New Testament church to have been on Pentecost of AD 31. That's recorded on that wonderful chapter 2 of Acts—the descent of the promised Holy Spirit. From that point on, everything changed for the disciples. You would expect for everything to have changed as they worked along with Jesus for three and a half years. But even though that time with the Master, no doubt, deeply impacted them, they did not yet change a great deal. We find them still jockeying for political advantage, wishing to burn ungrateful Samaritans (James and John), and having holier-than-thou attitudes (Peter). You would at least expect them to change as the result of Christ's agony in Gethsemane and sacrifice at the cross. But that didn't happen. They "all scattered and fled" (Mark 14:50), Peter denied the Savior, Thomas doubted His resurrection, and all were hiding in fear—just as if God was powerless on their behalf.

The real birth of the church happened because of Acts 1. And Acts 1 gives us two factors that made the birth of the church possible. *BEFORE THERE IS EVER AN ACTS 2, THERE IS ALWAYS AN ACTS 1, or BEFORE THERE IS NEW BIRTH, THERE IS A COMING TOGETHER TO FOCUS ON ONE AGENDA ITEM—JESUS CHRIST.*

Let's look at Acts 1, beginning with verse 4. "Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'" Verse 8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My

witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:4, 5, 8).

So, what is the factor—the premise—the non-negotiable thing necessary for the church to be born at Pentecost? The temptation will be to say: the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But that’s not quite accurate. The answer is Christ. The necessary factor, the non-negotiable, was Christ.

Factor Number One—Christ

Christ? You may ask, didn’t they already have Him? They did, and yet they didn’t. Most people think the book of Acts is all about the Holy Spirit. It is true that the Holy Spirit is mentioned about 55 times, 42 of them in the first 13 chapters alone! But when you look deeper, the book is all about Jesus. And that is seen also in its first chapter.

Verse 3: How Jesus showed Himself for 40 days to many disciples after His resurrection

Verse 4: How He commanded the disciples to tarry in Jerusalem to wait for the promise

Verse 8: How the disciples will be *His* witnesses throughout the world

Verses 9, 10: How He ascended to heaven

Verse 11: How angels promised the disciples Jesus would return “in the same way”

Verse 12: How they returned to Jerusalem with *joy* (Luke 24), filled with the love of Jesus

Verse 14: How they spent time praying, and focusing on Jesus in the Upper Room

What they did during those 10 days—by the way, Jesus never said: “Tarry ten days,” He said “tarry until”—is well described in Ellen White’s *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp.35 to 38. After analyzing what she says in those pages, it becomes clear the disciples engaged in twelve distinct acts. As you listen to this list—and you may want to take notes about it—I’d like you to think what we tend to do when we gather with other disciples in the church:

1. They gathered together to wait for the promised Holy Spirit

2. They humbled their hearts in true repentance
3. They confessed their unbelief of their Savior's words
4. They recalled the words of Jesus regarding His sacrifice
5. They repeated to one another the truths they remembered Jesus taught them
6. They meditated upon Christ's holy life
7. They determined to share Jesus to the world
8. They prayed with intense earnestness to lead sinners to Christ
9. They put away differences and came close together in fellowship
10. They praised Jesus in song for sins forgiven
11. They contemplated the love of God with wonder
12. They took hold of the imparted gift of the Spirit

Isn't this a remarkable list of activities? Are these actions comparable, in any way, with most of the church meetings we engage in? The disciples did *not* focus on the Holy Spirit to receive the Holy Spirit. They focused on Jesus, and that's why they received the Holy Spirit.

Christ and Christ alone will change us forever. Only He can melt the hardness of our hearts. Only He can whittle away at our unwillingness to surrender all, the selfish tendencies to look after number one, ourselves. Only He can fill us with joy indescribable, with peace like a river, and love like an ocean.

The result of that tremendous growth in the Adventist Church of the 1870s led to the establishment of many needed institutions during the 1880s and 1890s. The young church began its "professional" face. Pastors became able debaters of distinct points of doctrine. But the church became dry "as the hills of Gilboa," Ellen White said. When Waggoner and Jones, in spite of their imperfections, were used by God to highlight the all-sufficient love and work of Christ on our behalf, Ellen White rejoiced. God had broken through His people. *BEFORE THERE IS EVER AN ACTS 2, THERE IS ALWAYS AN*

*ACTS 1 or BEFORE THERE IS NEW BIRTH, THERE IS A COMING TOGETHER TO FOCUS ON ONE AGENDA
ITEM—JESUS CHRIST.*

When you focus on Jesus and are broken by His love for you, doesn't that just change everything? Don't you feel like a new you? Don't you have this expectation that everything is now possible *in Him*? Don't you have new visions of what He will do in and through you, and an unbeatable confidence that with Christ you will walk to the ends of the earth and fear nothing at all?

Years ago, when I taught at Southern Adventist University, one early morning I went to my office to do needed research. My eyes casually stumbled on a well-known picture given by Ellen White, of Jesus' sacrifice *for me*. It spoke of Christ being brutally abused *for me*: His head, His hands, His feet. She then pointed to the "unutterable anguish that filled His soul at the hiding of His Father's face" because of *my sin*. And then, in a crescendo of painful reality, she seemed to speak to my own soul: "It is for thee that the Son of God consents to bear this burden of guilt; for thee He spoils the domain of death, and opens the gates of Paradise."^{vii}

I couldn't finish reading it. I started bawling right then and there. I tried to finish the paragraph but I could no longer see. My eyes turned into rivers of pain, sorrow, mixed with relief. I dropped to my knees, reduced to a violent heaving that would not stop. I cried aloud, "Why, Lord, why would You love *me* so much? Who am I that You'd give Yourself up for *me*?" I cried and cried that morning, until tears ran dry. The love of my Savior, my Master and Lord, was presented to me in a way I had never fully grasped before. I had been a pastor and Bible teacher for years. I had grown up in the Church, constantly exposed to the work of Christ on behalf of sinners. I led hundreds of people to the foot of the cross. I had read that passage a number of times before. But that morning, the windows of heaven opened with a flood of light on God's grace I did not suspect coming. On that floor I stayed for the better part of an hour, weeping my sorrow for having caused His death on my behalf, for living so long without fully appreciating what God had done for me, for wantonly sinning without taking a care of what sin

does to Him. How could the God of heaven, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the One to whom we owe *everything*, from our every breath to eternal life, yield His life, His all, *for me*!

To tell you the truth, I was so overwhelmed by the love of God that day, that I dared not move nor speak for a while. It seemed to me blasphemous to even say Thank You. My holy God gave Himself *for me*. I silently prayed He'd stay His hand, because if I were to discover more of His grace on my behalf, I could only imagine exploding, unable to contain it.

The key to Pentecost has always been and will be always be, Calvary. Without Calvary, we will never appreciate nor be ready for the blessing of Pentecost. And this is the number one prerequisite to be born again as a church. And born again we need to be. We must remember that the teaching by Jesus on the new birth is found in John 3, and the person He addressed was Nicodemus—a theologian, a church leader. *We* need to be born again!

Ellen White writes that “After the descent of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were so filled with love for Him and for those for whom He died, that hearts were melted by the words they spoke and the prayers they offered. They spoke in the power of the Spirit; and under the influence of that power, thousands were converted.”^{viii}

The Derailing of Factor # 1—The Church

But not everything went smoothly about that first prerequisite to focus on Christ. There was a significant hiccup I believe the Holy Spirit would have us notice.

In verses 4 and 5, we find Jesus telling them to tarry in Jerusalem for the promise of the Holy Spirit. Why? Only with the fullness of the Spirit could they witness for Jesus. But verses 6 and 7 present a serious departure from Jesus' intention: “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” Instead of moving forward with the birth of the New Testament church by the Holy Spirit, all they could think about was Israel and its glories. So, instead of focusing on Jesus, they immediately gravitated to focusing on the *church* of Jesus—Israel.

Here lies the subtle temptation. We think engagement in the church, concern for the church, concern for the church's future—such as the disciples demonstrated—is the equivalent of concern for Jesus. Yes, it is true that if we love Jesus we will be concerned for His church, but that will never be at the expense of listening exactly to what Jesus is saying! And what Jesus was talking about was not Israel, or eschatology, or the kingdom, as such. What we see here in Acts 1 is Jesus telling them to tarry while they respond by asking about something totally different! They are simply not listening to Him!

It is like the experience of Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration. Instead of listening, he is quick to make a proposal, he suggests an “initiative”—in church lingo—to make three monuments to honor Christ, Moses, and Elijah. The Bible says that he was still speaking, when a cloud overshadowed them and the Father broke in, as if rebuking Peter's impertinent, though sincere, proposal, by saying, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!” (Matt 17:5).

If we as a church wish to be born again we must focus on Jesus, before we focus on His church.

Factor Number Two—Community

But there is a second factor, a second premise without which the church cannot be born again. And that factor is *community*. Let's review Acts 1 again.

Verse 4: Gathering them together

Verse 5: You (plural) will be baptized

Verse 8: The Holy Spirit will come upon you (plural)

Verses 9-11: They were together at Christ's ascension

Verse 13: They went to the Upper Room together, in obedience to Jesus, in spite of recent differences

Verse 14: They were praying in one accord

Verse 14: They were together with the women and Jesus' family was with them

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We must realize that this experience of community was not at all what the disciples had practiced in the past. If it wasn't for their love and admiration for Jesus, the disciples would have continued to exhibit petty jealousies and differences with one another. But they stuck together for the sake of Christ.

This sense of community is embedded in the very nature of God. God could have chosen to reveal Himself as one Nature but He chose to do it as three. This way, angels and human beings would understand better the giving and receiving dynamics of community. John 16:14-15 gives us an example: "He (the Spirit) shall glorify Me (the Son); for He (the Spirit) shall take of Mine (the Son's), and shall disclose it to you (the church). All things that the Father has are Mine (the Son's); therefore I said, that He (the Spirit) takes of Mine (the Son) and will disclose it to you (the church)." God in all His greatness and transcendence lives in community.

When he created the world He created community among all living creatures, and this was pronounced "good" (Gen 1:22,28), except with Adam. In his case, God waited for him to figure that it was "not good" to be alone (Gen 2:18). So, when Eve was created, mankind (Heb. *adam*) became two in order to become a community of one. "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (v. 24). Mankind was made so it cannot exist without one another. It is only as male and female unite that mankind can multiply. Without becoming one there is no life to beget. The premise of new life (child) is accomplished by two (father and mother) becoming one.

When sin entered, the immediate result was the destruction of community. Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed God's creation, and the earth no longer responded to mankind in the way it was

intended (Gen 3:11-13, 17-19). Even the seed of the whole problem was individualism: Eve wondered by herself, thinking she would be OK, and ended up alone before the serpent.^{ix}

Jesus' great longing for His disciples was that they "love one another" as He had loved them (John 13:34). Real love is demonstrated not so much when you love strangers but when you love brothers. The faults of strangers you may not know, but the irritations brought on by your brothers you do. In His great prayer of intercession for the disciples the night of Christ's betrayal, He asked seven things of the Father, but only one of those petitions was repeated three times: "that they may be one" (John 17:11, 21, 22).

The truth is this is another reason the world is not scandalized, that is, is not impressed. They see us deal with each other in a way not particularly different than decent people do in the world. The famous quote by Tertullian describing the heathen's impression of the early Christians could not be easily applied to our church today: "Look, how they love one another, . . . and how they are ready to die for each other."^x Sometimes our members are more ready to *kill* each other than die for each other!

And what about church leadership? How often envy and gossip and innuendo are present in our hallways or discussions after committees are over? Do we demand resources with a sense of entitlement, thinking of ourselves before other fields? Are separate conferences the best reflection of unity in the body of Christ?

We may have a way to go yet. The most common New Testament metaphors referring to the church are the body (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 1:22, 23; 2:16; 5:23; Col 1:18), a building or temple (1 Cor 3:9-16; Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:4-6), and the bride (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25-27), and their common denominator is *interdependence*, not *independence*. Paul appeals to the Ephesians to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit," he says (Eph 4:3, 4). When you look carefully at the four major New Testament sections teaching about spiritual gifts, you soon realize the gifts have three

purposes: 1) the unity of the body, 2) the work of ministry, and 3) the glory of God. But the most important of the three is unity.

It's as if God were saying, "It is simple. You want new life? You must come together—really together."

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"The secret of unity is found in the equality of believers in Christ. The reason for all division, discord, and difference is found in separation from Christ. Christ is the center to which all should be attracted; for the nearer we approach the center, the closer we shall come together in feeling, in sympathy, in love, growing into the character and image of Jesus. With God there is no respect of persons."^{xi}

The Derailing of Factor # 2—Church Politics

But just like the first factor had a distraction, a temptation, so does this second one. It's the election of Matthias. There is no time this morning to exegete the text, but you know the story. Peter stands up and announces it is time to elect Judas' replacement, saying it is "necessary" that "one of these" men become the twelfth disciple (Acts 1:21, 22). So, they chose two, and then they prayed to God which of *the two* should be the new apostle. After drawing lots for them, the "lot fell to Matthias" (Acts 1:26).

It is true that Ellen White says that "The Spirit of God selected Matthias for the office." But she also says that "To cast lots for the officers of the church is not in God's order."^{xii} So, I think this is more a case of God's *permissive* rather than *explicit* will. Had the church been a bit more patient, God may have supplied the need for a twelfth apostle with Paul. But since the position was already taken, Paul had to always defend his apostleship before the brethren. Yet, the irony is that God clearly used Paul much more and in more significant ways than He did Matthias.

So, the distraction from church unity is church politics. An election year can cause quite a stir in the office, and one wonders if much else is done aside from the preoccupation of getting re-elected. We all know that “GC session years” are not extremely productive.

Implications for the Church

What are the implications of these two factors necessary before the church can be born again? Let’s review. The first factor is Christ, the need to listen to Christ and uphold Him always. What’s the distraction? The church. The fact that we may be more interested in the business or even welfare of the church rather than listening to the Lord of the church.

The second factor needed for the rebirth of the church is community—or unity. And the distraction? Church politics, specifically, elections.

You may wonder about my analysis, since Acts 2 clearly shows that the church *was* born by the Spirit, in spite of the so-called distractions in Acts 1. True. But that was *in spite of* such distractions. Only eternity will reveal how much better or more efficiently or sooner would have God’s will been carried out if we had not been in the way. God often works *in spite of* us rather than *thanks to* us.

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So, here is the formula: C + C = NC. Christ + Community = Newborn Church

The factor of community implies *death* to self. I must be willing to yield my personal choice for the sake of the body.

The Christ factor implies *life* to self. That is, Christ’s life must live in me. He must become my treasure and joy.

Whenever these two factors become priorities in the church, we will see a church reborn. And the finishing of the work will no longer be a wish but a reality. And the return of Jesus in power and glory will not be just a blessed hope, but a blessed experience.

ⁱ Cited by David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Eerdmans, 1978), 166.

ⁱⁱ Quoted by John Piper, "Training the Next Generation of Evangelical Pastors and Missionaries," paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society conference in Orlando, November 19-21, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Insight borrowed from Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1992), 84.

iv. *The Acts of the Apostles*, 54, 55.

v. *Ibid.*, 48, 38.

^{vi} Based on deductions from church statistics. See <http://www.adventiststatistics.org>.

vii. The entire paragraph is found in *The Desire of Ages*, 755, 756.

^{viii} *The Acts of the Apostles*, 22.

^{ix} See *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 53, 54.

^x As reported by Tertullian, an early Christian apologist in his *Apologeticum*, ch.39, p.7 (in CSEL 69, trans. by Glover, Loeb edition). Accessed from <http://www.tertullian.org/quotes.htm> on January 30, 2011.

^{xi} *Selected Messages*, vol.1, 259.

^{xii} *Spiritual Gifts*, vol.3, 264, and Letter 37, 1900 in *Seventh-day Adventist Commentary*, vol.6, 1054, respectively.