

There's an old story where the angel Gabriel asks Jesus what plans he has for carrying the message of God's love to the world. Jesus explains that he's asked Peter, Mary, John and Thomas, and some others to carry that message wherever they go. As others hear and respond, they'll carry the same message until the whole world knows of God's amazing forgiving love. Gabriel listens rather sceptically, and then asks Jesus: *But, Lord, what happens if Peter goes back to fishing, or the disciples get busy with other things?* And Jesus replies, *Gabriel, I've not made other plans. I'm counting on them!*

This story reminds us of our responsibility to be witnesses to the grace we have received in Jesus Christ. But the truth is that we do not work alone. Jesus emphasized the importance of the Holy Spirit! Jesus said: *You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8).* Jesus never meant us to start His mission without the resource of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning, he promised his followers that He would send a Helper; one who would not only convict us of our sin, but would convince us of God's amazing grace!

If we can understand the transforming power of God in human life, then we must be clear about the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, records the experience of an early Christian called Philip, who through the power of the Holy Spirit, brought about a dramatic turning point in the life of an Ethiopian eunuch.

The work of the Holy Spirit is evident in four ways, the first is **Calling**: Philip finds himself on the road to Gaza in response to the call of God's Spirit. The early Christians were a brave bunch and perhaps the church today should work at recovering the courage of these first Christians.

The first believers didn't close themselves away in churches with like minded people, instead they followed God's calling to go out into the world with their life changing message of Christ. To be saved in Christ, means to be saved from the evils of this world. But that doesn't mean we remove ourselves from the world, but rather we are to live in the world and be distinct as Christians. *Jesus' message to us is come and see; then go and tell!* Our calling today, is the same as that of the first disciples, and many of us like Philip will have no peace in our hearts until we respond to that call.

Note that Jesus calls us to be witnesses in the world, and that doesn't always mean where we are most comfortable. The disciples were often called and led by the Holy Spirit to witness in places foreign to them, or to work with people who were very different to them. Often, the Holy Spirit calls us to situations we would not naturally choose. The Holy Spirit works in the lives of all women and men who follow Christ; and calls to be Christ's witnesses in the world.

The second way the Holy Spirit is evident is through *Communication*: The Holy Spirit communicates God's truth through us. This Ethiopian was obviously seeking a sense of purpose and meaning in his life. He had been to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship. Perhaps he'd been attracted to the moral law he found in the Ten Commandments of Judaism. We know that his heart hungered to know God in a personal way, and as the Ethiopian rode in his chariot, he was reading from the prophet Isaiah....not that I am suggesting that reading while driving is the ideal way to get to know God better!

Let's look more closely at how Philip is used by God's Spirit. Philip does not begin his conversation with the Ethiopian by delivering a set speech or sermon. Rather he begins right where the Ethiopian is in his understanding of God. This is an important point and something that many of us would be evangelists miss.

Its not our responsibility to convince people to believe the Gospel! Our calling is not to approach people and sell Jesus as if we were door to door salesmen! ***Our task is to let the Holy Spirit shine through us, so that God can communicate with those hearts that long to hear.*** If we are open to allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us, then God will communicate through us the news of His saving grace in Jesus Christ.

The third way the Holy Spirit is evident in our lives is through ***Commitment.*** It was the Holy Spirit that enabled that life-changing commitment to take place in us, just as it did in the life of the Ethiopian. Christianity is more than just correct theology, devotional discipline, and moral magnitude. A person in Christ is expected to become a *new creation*. That means a person who had come to Christ will have new aims in life, new expressions of love to demonstrate and new directions in which to move. This change in a person is always more than human effort and will power. ***It's the work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to a fresh understanding of what it means to commit our lives to Christ!***

I knew someone who was a minister for 12 years. He did an effective job of preaching and caring for the needs of the congregation. But within his own heart there was no peace. He constantly struggled with his doubts and with the burden of feeling that everything that happened in that church depended on him. After 12 years he was worn out so he left the ministry and took a nine to five job in business. He attended his local church and joined a house-group who were studying the work of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts. And he discovered that what he had lacked was the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in his life. He'd worked so hard trying to convince people to believe in Christ, but he'd failed to see that commitment to Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit, not human persuasion. The change in that man's life was dramatic, and his ministry as a lay person is now twice as effective as it was when he was a minister!

Philip didn't convert the Ethiopian anymore than we can convert people. The conversion was through the Holy Spirit awakening in the Ethiopian's heart, when Philip told him of Jesus suffering death on the cross for the sins of the world. But without Philip sharing his faith in Christ, this conversion is unlikely to have happened. We always work in tandem with God's Spirit, we tell our story and God does the rest in bringing someone to faith.

The fourth aspect of the Holy Spirit's work is drawing us into *Community*: As Christians we were never designed to practice our faith in isolation. When Philip baptized the Ethiopian, that man became part of the community of God's people throughout the world. *The Christian life was never meant to be a private affair 'between me and the Lord!'* God calls us into fellowship with one another, and in that community of faith we experience forgiveness, love and the fruits of the Spirit.

Tradition has it that this Ethiopian went home and evangelized in his country for Christ. Which is probably true because when the Spirit moves in our lives, it's difficult not to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. It's the Holy Spirit that unites us with others, who have experienced that same gift of amazing grace.

One of the most remarkable testimonies to the work of the Holy Spirit was given by the Rev Ernest Gordon in his book *Through The Valley Of The Kwai*. He tells of the British soldiers imprisoned in the Japanese prisoner of war camp on the River Kwai during the Second World War. He graphically describes the appalling picture of men being exploited, starved, tortured and degraded through the brutality of their captors. Reduced to skeletons and riddled with disease, these prisoners survived by the law of the jungle. They hated, they cursed and they stole from one another, and they watched each other die without even lifting a hand to help. All these men did was try to survive.

Then, Gordon describes the spiritual awakening that took place in the prison camp. A few of the prisoners had been studying Mark's Gospel, and they were inspired to build a church which was just a simple shelter used for worship. Slowly, increasing numbers of men gathered to worship and this re-awakening of faith brought about a miraculous change in the morale of the prisoners. Suddenly, people began to care for one another, and to share what meagre rations they had. Gordon wrote: *Ours was truly a Church of the Spirit. It was the beating heart which gave life to the camp, and transformed it from a mass of frightened individuals into a community of faith. It seemed to be a literal in-breathing of the Holy Spirit that enabled us to live nobler lives and to survive in a place where human strength was simply not enough.*

The Book of Acts makes it clear that the identifying mark of the Church is not doctrinal correctness or liturgical excellence, but rather the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. If the renewal of the Church is to happen in our time, it will come through a renewal of our understanding of the work of the Spirit. It's God's Spirit that calls us to get involved with a broken and needy world. It's the Holy Spirit that communicates God's saving truth to hungry hearts. It's His Spirit who enables people to respond in commitment. And it's the Holy Spirit who draws us into the community of faith, and sends us out to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. *May each of us today be open to the Holy Spirit working in and through our lives: Amen*

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