

In the Power of the Spirit

Acts 2:1-21

I came across an interesting (although meaningless) poll the other day. “The top single superpower adults would most like to have.” Did you ever think about that? Maybe in a dream? I don’t really, but then again, I do like movies like “IronMan” and “X Men”, so, maybe... anyway, the top single superpower adults would like to have:

28 percent: *Mind reading*
15 percent: *To fly*
Invisibility: 11 percent
Super Strength: 9 percent
To walk through walls: 1 percent¹

I guess if I could pick just one, I would have to go with ‘flying’. That’d be kind of cool. Climb up a mountain with some friends, and say, “Hey, watch this!” [Woosh!] I really don’t think I’d want to be able to read minds – I might be a better pastor, but I’d also end up pretty depressed rather quickly, I think.

This is a special day in the life of the Christian Church. It is Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost is the day that we celebrate and remember the coming of the Holy Spirit, fulfilling a promise that Jesus made to his disciples. There are instances of the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout the entire Bible – even in the Old Testament – but on the day of Pentecost, when the disciples were gathered there in that Upper Room, the Holy Spirit came in a different way.

See, now that the sacrifice of Jesus had been completed, now that the ‘door to heaven’ was wide open, the way to God was clear (it would be through Jesus), the Holy Spirit came to live permanently in the hearts of every believer. This was a fulfillment of a number of ancient prophecies, like Joel’s (the one that Peter quoted in Acts 2).

[*] In Luke 24:49 Jesus told the disciples – “*I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*”

¹ Mary Cadden and Suzy Parker, "Snapshots," USA Today (7-18-06), 1A

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So, on the day of Pentecost something significant changed in the way we human beings relate to God. God – from that moment on – promises to live *in* us. And not only live in us, but on Pentecost, the church (meaning the people of God) would be ‘clothed (covered, or filled) with *power* from on high.’

Power. From God. Supernatural power... We may fantasize about superpower, but the Bible tells us that we already have it. Now. If we are children of God.

[* **pic of dam**] There was a guy who was visiting the Grand Coulee Dam in the state of Washington, with his family. This dam is over a mile wide, and is the largest electric producing facility in the US. So this guy was surprised to see that the visitor's center there was dark. It was a sunny day, so he said, they thought the center might have tinted windows, but as they got closer they realized there were no lights on. They went in and saw that none of the displays were working, either. Suddenly it became clear: there was no power to the center. Due to a technical difficulty of some kind, the visitor's center that sat only hundreds of feet from a huge hydroelectric dam had no power.

How could something be so close to the power source, yet not be “plugged in”?

That's the sad story of too many of today's Christians.

Does anybody recognize this word?

[*] Eyjafjallajökull (Can any of you pronounce it?) You may not recognize the word, but you know the story – this is the name of that volcano in Iceland that has been messing up air traffic for the past month in Europe, as well as affecting an already shaky world economy. Take a look at this video. [*] This is a time lapse video of the first day of the eruption.² This thing is spewing out 750 tons of smoke – ash and dirty ice – a *second!* 750 tons a second...

You know what I think of as I see this? On this day of Pentecost? I think of that guy at the Grand Coulee Dam – where there's a lot of potential, but not much else. I don't mean to be crude, but to be blunt: in the Christian church, too often, we blow a lot of smoke, but I wonder sometimes where the power is.

² *On line readers, you can check out the video @ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3d0PG99Joqw>*

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I've quoted from the book UnChristian before. If you're not familiar with it, this book is the result of extensive surveys of the perception of Christianity in young people between the ages of 16 – 26. It is definitely an eye-opening and troubling study, that I pray will be a wake up call to the church. (And for me, too.)

In chapter 3, (*Hypocritical*), let me just read you one paragraph:

In virtually every study we conduct, representing thousands of interviews every year, born-again Christians fail to display much attitudinal or behavioral evidence of transformed lives. For instance, based on a study released in 2007, we found that most of the lifestyle activities of born-again Christians were statistically equivalent to those of non-born-again. When asked to identify their activities over the last thirty days, born-again believers were just as likely to bet or gamble, to visit a pornographic website, to take something that did not belong to them, to consult a medium or psychic, to physically fight or abuse someone, to have consumed enough alcohol to be considered legally drunk, to have used an illegal, nonprescription drug, to have said something to someone that was not true, to have gotten back at someone for something he or she did, and to have said mean things behind another person's back.

No difference.

Now, we know (thank God) that it is not our behavior that makes us children of God. (It is not by works, but by faith.) But on the other hand, Jesus talks frequently about his children being 'known by our fruit', and so does Paul. In other words, there should be some evidence, there should be *something* noticeably different in our lives – something that sets us apart from the rest of the world as changed, transformed people.

The Power from on high – the super power – that Jesus promised is not about having the ability to impress the people around us, its not about being able to do things that will make us popular, or make our lives easier. It is all about giving us the ability to love the world *just like Jesus does*. So that people can know by our witness, who God is – the most important thing that anyone will ever know. They will know who God is by what *we* say, and what we do.

This 'super-power' is the ability to have the guts/ courage to be different at times from those around us. Its the ability – the courage - to set our goals, and our agendas by God's standards, and faith, and not by letting the world do that for us. The world is very willing to teach us how to treat other people, to showing us what is important, and what isn't, to teach us how we should

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use our talents, and our money, and how we should respond to needs that we come across, and how we should treat people who sin against us... and what the world will teach us in those circumstances is very different than what God wants us to know. And DO.

There's a song by the Christian singer Steven Curtis Chapman, called "The Change"... listen to these lyrics:

*Well I got myself a T-shirt that says what I believe
I got letters on my bracelet to serve as my ID
I got the necklace and the key chain
And almost everything a good Christian needs, yeah
I got the little Bible magnets on my refrigerator door
And a welcome mat to bless you before you walk across my floor
I got a Jesus bumper sticker
And the outline of a fish stuck on my car
And even though this stuff's all well and good, yeah
I cannot help but ask myself--*

*What about the change
What about the difference
What about the grace
What about forgiveness
What about a life that's showing
I'm undergoing the change, yeah
I'm undergoing the change*

What about it? At the end of the 2nd verse, Chapman makes the same point I'm trying to make: where does this change come from?

'Cause if God's Spirit lives inside of me, yeah, I'm gonna live life differently.

We have a choice. We can let the power of the Holy Spirit control us, or (as J. B. Phillips translates Philippians 2) we can 'let the world squeeze us into its mold'. But Jesus promised that when we live in the power of the Holy Spirit – the power that is available to every one of us, friends, the world will notice.

Chinese Christian leader Brother Zhong tells this story:

I was attending a training course for my house church network's council members and youth leaders. The Public Security Bureau (PSB) raided us the first day. All the leaders were arrested.

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The prison authorities shaved our heads and interrogated us. We were warned that the hardened inmates would beat us. So with much trepidation, another brother and I entered our cell.

We were greeted by the sight of 16 other inmates, lined up in two rows and thumping their fists. My heart beat rapidly as I sent prayers up to God.

The leader of the gang asked, "Why are you here?"

"Because we are Christians," I replied.

"You don't beat people up?"

"No," I assured him.

"Do you sing?"

"Yes," I answered.

The leader ordered me to sing a song. I wept as I sang. The Holy Spirit moved in our midst, and by the time I finished singing, every prisoner was also in tears. To my shock, the gang leader then asked to hear the gospel.

After that, my cellmates hungered to hear the gospel every day. One Sunday, we held a worship service. The prison guard demanded to know who was behind it. He threatened to punish everyone if no one spoke up. I stood up and confessed.

I was forced to remove my clothes and stand at an inclined angle to the wall. The gang leader couldn't bear it anymore. He asked to be punished with me. All the others volunteered to do the same. The infuriated guard stormed out. I was moved by my cellmates' act. One of them, who had been there for three years, became a believer that day.³

It is not likely that God is going to require us to stand in a prison cell in front of 16 violent gang members. But how are we doing in the *easier* tests?

The power of the Holy Spirit is what enabled Brother Zhong to do what he did. And it is the same power that enables *us* to things that are different than what the world would expect from us. The Holy Spirit gives us the ability, for example, to stand up for someone that is being bullied, or to walk away from a gossip session – and not take part. The Holy Spirit gives us the courage to step out in faith and do crazy things (from the world's perspective). Like, tithing our income, (or making a pledge to a mortgage fund beyond a tithe). Or like forgiving someone who is clearly in the wrong. Or, taking the time to listen to someone who is in trouble – getting involved – when we're really too busy.

³ "China—Where God Is Behind Bars," Today's Christian (September/October 2004)

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The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to share our faith with someone, by opening a door of trust with them, and then providing us with the words to say ... so that we can convey faith in a way that they can understand, and perhaps, accept.

Where is the power of the Spirit evident in your life? As we are people who claim the name of Jesus, what is something in your life that you could clearly identify as “Spirit driven”? I.e., something in your life, something you’ve done, or said, or believed, that you know, *didn’t come from you?*

What’s it like to live in the power of the Holy Spirit? Well, let me share an illustration to close that might make the point...

[* video] This video starts with famous surfer Laird Hamilton, somewhere off the coast of Australia...

You see, like this 65’ wave, God's kingdom is on the move. What God is doing in our world right now is enormous beyond our comprehension, and unstoppable; the wave is there whether we’re ready to catch it or not. Should we want to ride this wave, we will soon learn that it travels so fast, we can’t do a thing on our own power. Our little paddling simply won’t do. We need the Holy Spirit to tow us along to get up to speed. Even when we catch it, we still don't do the bulk of the work. We just simply need to be willing to ride the wave of what God is doing, let him lead us, exhilarated all the while by the awesome privilege of being ‘in the zone’ with God.

Today is Pentecost. Superpower is ours!