

Wildfire: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

by [John Killinger](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

Like a fire out of control, the Holy Spirit leapt from the Jews to the gentiles, amazing Peter and his fellow Christians from Jerusalem. The Spirit was wild, unpredictable, totally beyond human restraint.

Opinions vary about how important the Spirit was in Judaism before the Christian era. The Spirit had some connection to Sophia, the spirit of wisdom in the Old Testament, and to the creative aspect of God, as seen in Genesis 1 and sections of Ezekiel. The Spirit was also often related to prophetic utterance.

But in the early church the Spirit became the only explanation for the way the embers of the Jesus movement were miraculously fanned into a worldwide conflagration. And in the text from Acts, the Spirit is cited as the reason that movement easily surmounted racial barriers to ignite an incredible burst of enthusiasm among non-Jews.

The other texts are inadequate supporters, even tame by comparison:

“All the ends of the earth have seen / the victory of our God.”

“This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.”

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” As marvelous as each of these texts is, the image of the unrestrained Spirit is more dynamic, more exciting.

Ironically, the church was already in the process of quenching the Spirit, or if it wasn't, it soon would be. The Spirit is always most visible to us when we're beaten, broken and in despair; the Spirit is less visible and less important when we're winning, prosperous and in charge of the world. The Spirit works well for movements but fares poorly in institutions.

Aside from his remarks in the fourth Gospel, which arguably were supplied by the theologians of the nascent church, Jesus didn't say a lot about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descended on him at his baptism “like a dove” and led him into the wilderness

to be tempted. Luke adds that he was “filled with the power of the Spirit” when he returned to Galilee, and that when he read from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth he began with the passage that said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:14-18).

Yet, in the fourth Gospel, we are told that when Jesus joined the disciples in the upper room after the resurrection “he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22), establishing a direct (and almost too obvious) connection between him and the amazing Power of the early church.

While we may believe in the Holy Spirit as a manifestation of God’s presence in the world, we sometimes wonder if the church’s early theologians invented this connection as an explanation of the continuity between Jesus and themselves, and if this invention didn’t in turn and inadvertently lead to orthodox formulations about the Trinity that belied the Spirit’s reality, much as the Kinsey Report misleads readers about the real joy and meaning of sex.

Maybe it ought to be a rule, perhaps called Flannery’s Rule for Flannery O’Connor, who wrote frequently about manifestations of the Spirit in backwoods preachers: the more eloquently and confidently we discuss the Holy Spirit and commemorate the Spirit in our high holy days, the less we are truly in touch with the Spirit. There is no more distorted reflection of the power of the Spirit than Pentecostal services in so-called liturgical churches, which embroider Christianity’s memory of great historical moments with the pomp and circumstance of banners, dramatic proclamations and unsingable hymns and anthems.

When I was a boy in Kentucky, I sometimes went down to the court house on Saturday night to watch the Holy Rollers, who held their meetings in one of the large court rooms. They sang and played guitars and rattled castanets until somebody, often a short, middle-aged woman of remarkable girth, felt seized by the Spirit and began to moan, gyrate and writhe on the floor. Others soon followed, and the shouting, praising and hullabaloo often escalated into ear-shattering pandemonium.

Later I wondered why these people had to wait until Saturday night for these feverish episodes to occur. Why weren’t they pneumatically beset during the week, when they were at work or sharing a family meal? As happy as O’Connor might have been with their Spirit-filled behavior, they were finally as institutional in their management of the Spirit as the Baptists, Methodists and Episcopalians.

None of this is to disparage belief in the Holy Spirit. It is only to remind us, as we celebrate Pentecost and design our sermons on the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit is always much bigger and more “other” than we—or the Pentecostals—normally think, and is capable of violently upending our worlds when we aren’t expecting it. Maybe Annie Dillard’s *Teaching a Stone to Talk* ought to be required reading at every Pentecost season, reminding us to fasten our seatbelts and wear crash helmets when we step into our pews, lest God decide to move among us again.

If and when it happens, we might even start baptizing people from alien backgrounds, as the early Christians did, and find our comfortable traditions shattered by the disconcerting presence of strangers in the faith—including Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus.

Then and only then—when we find ourselves in situations totally beyond our capacity to manage comfortably—can we truly proclaim a new age of the Lord, the way Peter and the early Christians did.