

Last weekend we began our new series called Uprising! Over the next five months we will be journeying through Luke's account of the early church – the book of the bible we know as the Acts of the Apostles. Along the way we will experience discover how the Holy Spirit equipped and empowered those early disciples for incredible adventures in mission. And here is the great news: the Holy Spirit who was active then is still active today and longs to empower us for mission as we become more and more like Jesus.

Now when we begin to explore the work of the Holy Spirit we get into dangerous territory. There perhaps has not been a more contentious subject in the life of the church over the last two thousand years. The church has divided over different understandings of who the Holy Spirit is and how he works. The schism between the Eastern – the so-called Orthodox churches, and Western churches – of which we are a part, 1500 years ago was due in large part to a major disagreement as to how the Holy Spirit fits into our understanding of God being Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

With all of the division and debate it is tempting to put to one side any exploration of or discussion about the Holy Spirit. But we can't. As we will discover, the Holy Spirit is not an optional extra of the Christian Life, but is essential to living in relationship with God.

So today we are going to do some more preparation for our exploration of Acts, which will start in earnest next week. There are a lot of common myths about the Holy Spirit. Today we are going to do some Holy Spirit Myth busting as we explore what the Holy Spirit actually says about himself in the pages of scripture. As we prepare to do so, will you pray with me...

The first myth we will explore is this:

MYTH ONE: The Holy Spirit is a New Testament phenomenon

That is, the Holy Spirit truly arrived on the Day of Pentecost, having made a preview performance as a descending dove on the day Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan. But before these events, the Holy Spirit was a non-event; was either non-existent or at least, very quiet.

But when we read the pages of the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament we will see this view is wrong. In the Old Testament there is a Hebrew word that is pronounced Ruach. Literally it means wind, or breath, or spirit. No matter which word is used to translate Ruach, its meaning is the same. Ruach is God's power in action.

Ruach appears 500 times in the Old Testament. It is there right in the opening words. And so we see, that God's power – the Spirit of God – was **active in creation**.

The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1:2)

In a similar way the Spirit of God was active in breathing light and life into being, so the Spirit of God – Ruach – **animated human beings**.

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

Then through the rest of the Old Testament we discover that Ruach – God's Spirit **empowered God's people** for particular acts of service. For example, God's Spirit empowered Joseph to interpret dreams. While Joseph was languishing in prison, Egypt's Pharaoh had dreams which no-one could interpret. Eventually he hears of Joseph's gift and calls for him and is astonished at Joseph's ability to unlock the riddle of his visions.

Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God? (Genesis 41:38)

Having said this, it seems that God's Holy Spirit worked in Old Testament times in a more limited way, a more focused way than what we will discover in Acts. But in the Old Testament there was a prophetic expectation that Ruach – God's Spirit –

would one day be even more obviously active. The prophet Joel looked forward to the Day of the Lord – the Last Days when God says:

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. (Joel 2:28-29)

God's Spirit is not a New Testament phenomenon, but has always been active in the world from the dawn of time. Myth busted.

The second myth we will explore is more contentious.

MYTH TWO: The Holy Spirit ceased working supernaturally once the Church was established and Scripture written

This argument goes like this: the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit – like prophecy, healing, deliverance, speaking in tongues – were active once, but are no longer required. That is, that while the Holy Spirit is active, the Holy Spirit has ceased to work supernaturally. People who argue this position are called Cessationists. It needs to be said that some of my greatest heroes in the faith like Augustine and Jonathon Edwards have held this position. Jonathon Edwards once famously said:

Since the canon of Scripture has been completed, and the Christian church fully founded and established, these extraordinary gifts have ceased. (Jonathon Edwards)

Cessationists argue their position on two grounds, the first one biblical. A key text is found in Paul's letter to the Corinthians:

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears (1 Corinthians 13:9-10)

The argument goes that the 'perfect' that Paul refers to is the church being firmly established in the world and the scriptures having been written and agreed to. And so, by the end of the second century after Jesus, the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit were no longer required.

The second cessationist argument is empirical. They argue that if you explore church history you discover that evidence for supernatural gifts diminished and then disappeared as early as the end of the second century. Any claims for supernatural gifts since then are mistaken at best, or lies, or at worst, the work of the devil.

I do not hold to the cessationist view. I believe passionately that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit are still available and active today and that God still give these gifts to His children.

And so in my view, the 'perfect' that Paul refers to in his letter is the return of Christ. Until Jesus returns so-called 'signs and wonders' will point to the reality of his kingdom come now and the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. Added to this, I believe that any honest exploration will show that church history is replete with verifiable miracles. Having said this, the Holy Spirit is not a genie in a bottle, but blows where and how He wills. And so in different ages miracles are more and less evident. We will hear more about these miracles over the next five months.

God still delivers people from demonic oppression and possession. God still heals. God still speaks- all of this by the Holy Spirit. Myth busted.

The next myth is just plain dangerous. Some offer the sloppy argument that there are two types of Christians, those who have the Holy Spirit and those who don't.

MYTH THREE: Not all Christians have the Holy Spirit

This myth is quite simple to debunk. In John's gospel Jesus teaches a religious man called Nicodemus. He tells him:

I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. (John 3:5)

No one can join God's family apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, even before we come to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, I believe the Holy Spirit is active in our lives. Another hero of mine, John Wesley, argued that in the process of conversion:

The Holy Spirit **Convicts** a person of their sin (e.g. crowd at Pentecost)

The Holy Spirit enables the cry of **Faith**

The Holy Spirit leads a person to true **Repentance**

The Holy Spirit offers a person **Assurance** of their salvation (cry out 'Abba Father')

In God's family there are no second-class members. If you have acknowledged Jesus as Lord and Saviour – if you have received God's free gift of grace and love and forgiveness – you could only have done so through the work of Holy Spirit in you. You have been born again by the Holy Spirit of God.

Myth busted.

Now we turn to the most controversial of the myths we will explore today.

MYTH FOUR: The evidence of being filled with or being baptized in the Holy Spirit is speaking in tongues

Before we investigate this myth we should note that we mean by being baptized or filled with the Holy Spirit. Essentially I believe they mean the same thing. Baptized literally means to be immersed – to be drenched. To be filled is to overflow. In other words, to be filled with or baptized in the Holy Spirit is to be overwhelmed by the power and presence of God. John Piper puts it this way:

Being baptized with the Holy Spirit is when a believer in Jesus Christ receives extraordinary power for Christ-exalting ministry.

Now some Pentecostal denominations believe that the sign of being baptized or filled with Holy Spirit is the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. The argument continues that if you have not spoken in tongues, while you still can be a Christian, you have not been baptized or filled with the Holy Spirit.

So if 'speaking in tongues' is so important, what is this particular spiritual gift?

Very simply, I would say that speaking in tongues is a gift of the Holy Spirit whereby a person speaks or prays or sings in a language otherwise unknown to them.

It may be a language that is a dialect of this world, just as happened on the day of Pentecost, or it may be a heavenly language that is otherwise unknown to us.

It may be spoken in public for the building up of the church or in public worship, or it might be used in private prayer times for personal edification.

In a public setting, a word spoken in tongues may be interpreted by someone with that gift and that God's message conveyed to the whole congregation.

Now when we read the New Testament we discover very quickly that speaking in tongues was a very common practice. In fact the Apostle Paul wrote the church at Corinth and said this:

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues... (1 Corinthians 14:5)

In my late teens I earnestly desired to have this gift. I was part of a church where this and other supernatural gifts were exercised regularly, and I prayed that I would be filled with the Holy Spirit. For some months after praying this I wrestled with the fact I did not have any big experience, I was not 'speaking in tongues' as many, but not all of my friends were. But after a while I came to the point where I believed that God had filled me with the Holy Spirit and I could trust him to give me the spiritual gifts best for me.

Then one Friday night I was at worship. We were singing our hearts out and after a while I recognized I was no longer singing the words on the overhead projector, nor was I singing in English, but a language I could not recognize. And I could not stop. While my voice was singing, my heart was soaring in wonder, love and adoration for God.

Since that time 25 years ago I have regularly spoken, prayed and sang in tongues. It has been one of God's great blessings to me.

Soon after that first experience I was at a youth camp when in the middle of a worship service I felt compelled to publically speak in tongues during a time of quietness. The room was full of 200 people. As much as I did not want to step out in faith, I knew God wanted me to speak – and I did. Straight away, someone else interpreted that message which we all heard as God speaking directly to us. That is the only time in 25 years I have exercised this gift in this way. I hope and pray it won't be the last.

It seems to me we can fall into two traps when it comes to the gifts of the Holy Spirit in general, and speaking in tongues in particular. First, we can dismiss supernatural gifts and tongues as delusional, or irrelevant, or even demonic. On the other hand, we can elevate gifts and tongues way beyond their importance. Paul said to the church at Corinth, who seemed to be divided over the gift of tongues, that he wished all of them had it. But he goes on to say:

...but I would rather you have the gift of prophecy. (1 Corinthians 14:5)

He says this because unlike tongues which are often are not interpreted; the gift of prophecy builds up the whole church and not just the speaker. Implicit in Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians is that each of us is given different spiritual gifts out of God's sovereignty. Just because we do not have a particular gift does not mean we are not filled with the Spirit.

How then do we know if we are 'filled with the Spirit'?

Paul says to us that if we are able to speak with the tongues of angels but we do not love then we are just a resounding gong. Very simply, we know we are filled with the Holy Spirit if - day by day, step by step we are becoming more like Jesus. Put another way:

The primary evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is not the exercising of a particular gift, but the bearing of Spiritual Fruit.

Myth busted.

The next myth is relatively straight forward.

MYTH FIVE: The Holy Spirit is a ghost

Many years ago I heard a children's talk that likened the Holy Spirit to the cartoon character, Casper the white ghost. The message seemed to be that the Holy Spirit was God's slightly spooky side.

Now, when we use the terms Holy Spirit and Holy Ghost we are talking about one and the same thing. Holy Ghost is simply the term that was most commonly used before the 20th century. For example, the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, both landmarks in English literature, use Holy Ghost where we would use Holy Spirit today. When these books were written the English term 'ghost' simply meant soul or spirit. It was only in the 20th century that the term 'ghost' began to mean the disembodied spirit of a dead person.

The Holy Spirit is not the spirit of a dead person. Nor is the Holy Spirit God's spooky side – God does not have a spooky side!

Myth busted.

In a similar vein, there is a myth about the Holy Spirit that says:

MYTH SIX: The Holy Spirit is a presence and not a person

Over the last 2000 years the church has hammered out various creeds and catechisms or doctrines to state the boundaries of orthodox Christian faith. One of the foundational documents of our reformed tradition is the Westminster Catechism, which is a series of 107 questions and answers that spell out the essentials of Christian faith. This document dates back to 1640 and the time of the English Reformation. This sixth question of the catechism asks:

How many persons are there in the Godhead?

The answer, boldly and simply put is:

There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

Here we get to the heart of one of the profoundest mysteries of the Christian Faith – the doctrine of the Trinity – that God is One, but known in three persons. This doctrine is not just dreamt up or made up, but is reflected in many passages of scripture. For example, the Apostle Peter opens his first letter with these words:

(You are) chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood. (1 Peter 1:2)

The Holy Spirit has an identity as distinct and unique as the identity of God the Father and God the Son. The Holy Spirit is not simply an ethereal presence, but a person whose presence we can enjoy or ignore, whose divine nature we can honor or grieve.

Very simply put, the Holy Spirit is a person whose presence we experience.

Myth busted.

MYTH SEVEN: The Holy Spirit is the third part of a Trinitarian hierarchy

This myth assumes that there is a ladder of importance or status within the Trinity. On the top rung is God the Father, then the next rung is God the Son and then on the bottom is God the Holy Spirit. This assumption does not hold up when we look at the words of scripture, in particular what Jesus himself says,

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father...Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me. (John 14:9-10)

God is a community of three persons in such close relationship that to encounter one person of the Triune God is to encounter the others. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are so closely in relationship that although they are each unique, to encounter one is to encounter them all. One of the church Fathers puts it this poetic way:

'No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One. . . When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light.' (Saint Gregory Nazianzus)

When we conceive of the mystery of the Trinity words and formulas fail us. Metaphor, symbolism and poetry are the only languages that can do justice to the wonder of this fundamental truth. The church fathers of the early centuries knew this and so they used a little known Greek Word to point towards the reality of the Trinity.

The word is Perichoresis. It is a composite Greek word that literally means 'dancing around'. There is a profound truth that is at the heart of this word.

When we conceive of God, we cannot and should not think of God in static form. Rather, God is dynamic, ever-moving, ever-active, unpredictable and joyous – a lot like a dance.

I like to think that God is a Dance of Love. That the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are forever weaving in and out of each other in mutual submission and love. And God has always been this way. This dynamic love has been God's identity before even Creation existed. The Apostle John very simply stated that:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:16)

When you reflect on this statement for even just a moment it starts to break things open inside of you. You have one of those divine 'a-ha' moments. Think about it.

God was love long before we were conceived or the Creation emerged from the dark void

God knew and experienced love even before he breathed the Creation into being
In fact, Creation is the inevitable and outward expression of the loving nature of God.

Every flower we smell, every tree that offers us shade, every wave we catch, every animal that frolics, every fish that darts, the sun that warms our back, the rain that refreshes our gardens, the stars that speak of the enormity of our Universe – all these things are an expression of the loving identity that is at the heart of the Trinity.

As mind-blowing as this is, it gets better.

You see, God invites us to dance! God invites us to participate in the perfect love that is at the heart of the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God invites us not just to experience part of Him, but all of Him! We are not invited into God's outer courts, but his inner sanctuary. CS Lewis put it this way:

'The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us.'
(CS Lewis, *Weight of Glory*)

Some of you have heard me share before how when she was younger, my daughter Emily loved to dance with me. Bed time would roll around, and as a stalling tactic, Em would say to me, 'dance with me daddy!' Even at four years of age she knew how to manipulate her father. What dad could ever refuse to dance with his daughter? So the Hillsong CD would go on to our favorite song, and we would dance and jive and laugh our way around the lounge room. And I would be completely caught up in it all. These are the moments you treasure as a parent – when your child is caught up in the love and joy and delight of being your son or daughter.

As it is for me and Emily, so much more it is for God and me – for God and you.

You see, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit issues us an impassioned invitation. God pleads with me 'dance with me Stuart!' Dance with me...

God issues us this invitation through the life, death and resurrection of the Son. And we dance in the power of the Holy Spirit. And we come to the dance not as strangers, but as sons and daughters and brother and sisters – as full participants in God's family. Paul says this in his letter the Ephesians:

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

(Ephesians 1:4b-6)

As God's sons and daughters we have a new name, a new identity, a new inheritance. This is God's incredible gift to us, mediated through the death of the Son and experienced in the power of the Holy Spirit. God invites you to dance – will you accept the invitation?