

Catch on Fire with Holy Spirit

Acts 2:42-47

Intro Fresh New Ideas?

When people first got to know my age, many people tell me that “you are well aged.” When I was appointed to my previous church, I met some church members at the transition workshop. After seeing me, one of them told the church, “the conference appears to have appointed a teenager to our church.” I know I look much younger than my age but this doesn’t mean I think like one. I belong to generation X and I probably think more like a generation X than a millennial. Many people at Asbury seem excited to have a young pastor who will supposedly have fresh, new ideas to bring younger generations back to the church. I am sorry to disappoint you but like you, I also need to learn how millennials and generation Z think and understand the world.

We definitely need to know more of the younger generation and their worldview. We also need to find fresh ideas and new expressions of our faith that connects with the younger generation to share the gospel. But I want to remind you that we don’t really need fresh new ideas to bring people back to the church. Maybe, an old truth in the Bible can show us a way forward.

1st Movement The Life of the Early Church

Today’s scripture describes a life of the early church. In short, they earnestly participated in worship, bible study, communion service, prayer meetings, and fellowship meetings. Their stewardship campaign had always exceeded more than they expected so the church could pay for all their apportionment, utility bills, ministry expenses, and abundantly contribute to charity works in their community. They gathered at the Temple every day for worship. After worship, they had small group meetings at home, having meals together and praising God with joyful and exuberant hearts. “People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved,” says the Bible.

What Christians in the early church did was not so much different from what we do today. Isn't it? Worship, prayer, communion, generous offerings, fellowship and charity works for people in need. While the early church rapidly grew in number, many churches today are struggling with declining membership and are running out of financial resources.

What has made this difference? Perhaps, parents in the first century Palestine did not have to bring their kids to soccer club or baseball club on the Sunday mornings so they might be able to come to the church. Perhaps people in Jerusalem did not have smart phones, Netflix, cable televisions, internet, Warwick Mall or Showcase so they had nothing to do but to come to church on Sunday mornings. Perhaps, they were more financially stable than us so they could generously share their possessions. Perhaps, they were more religious people than the people within our society today. These could be possible answers.

But you must know that the life of the people in first century Palestine was much more difficult than ours. Most people undertook physical labor for living at farms, markets or construction sites. They normally worked 11 hours per day for six or seven days a week. They didn't have social security benefits or retirement savings at all. They were busy as we are. They were physically tired as we are. They were not very affluent as we are.

But they were filled with overflowing joy and energy within their hearts. They followed a daily discipline of worship. They had fellowship and shared their possessions with glad and generous hearts. What makes the differences between the early church and the churches of today?

2nd Movement Catch on fire with Holy Spirit

The only thing we know is that Christians in the early church caught the fire of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, as Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit poured out onto the disciples and they caught the fire of the Holy Spirit. As they were caught on fire... as their souls were burning through the Holy Spirit, nothing could keep them in the dark upper room.

They began to shout out God's mighty works in different languages and people from every nation under heaven came to see what was going on... and they saw disciples burn in the Holy Spirit. The flame of the Holy Spirit teared down the wall that divided people. The high wall of language, the wall of cultural differences, the wall of economic divide, class division, racial inequality and gender inequality... all walls that divided and confined people were destroyed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As the disciples were caught on fire of the Holy Spirit, the divine light glared through them and this divine light pierced people's hearts and made them repent. And from the ash of people's repentance, the Holy Spirit had built a new community, known as the church.

It was not the power of the disciples that made people believe in the risen Christ. Rather it was the power of the Holy Spirit that had shone its divine light through the disciples and called people into a new life. What the disciples had done was to be caught on the divine flame of the Holy Spirit. That was all that they did.

John Wesley said, "Catch on fire and people will come for miles to see you burn." "Catch on fire and people will come for miles to see you burn." Maybe... this is what we have missed while we are struggling to keep our church alive. We have done our best to sustain our church. We have done our best to keep our church running. We have done our best to invite people into the church. Maybe we have done **OUR** best. But while we are doing our best, we may miss God's best, the power of the Holy Spirit within us. "Catch on fire and people will come for miles to see you burn."

Don't bother with soccer clubs or baseball clubs. Don't bother with thousands of reasons why people don't come to the church. But catch on fire with the Holy Spirit. Let the holy flame of God consume our souls and let the divine light of love shine through your words, through your actions, and through your lives. Then, "people will come for miles to see us burn in the Holy Spirit and Love of God."

This may sound too idealistic. But you and I are remaining evidence of how one person who caught on fire with the Holy Spirit has actually changed

the history of Methodism. What is our church's name? Asbury UMC. Francis Asbury was a man filled with the Holy Spirit. He was a leading figure of the "Second Great Awakening" in the 18th century.

Over the 45 years of his ministry, he traveled on horseback or in carriage about One hundred and thirty thousand miles and delivered some some sixteen thousand and five hundred sermons. An interesting fact was that he was a bad preacher. John Wigger, a professor in American religious history, said, "Asbury was a terrible preacher."¹ But his camp meetings were always crowded with people. Remember it's the 18th century. There were no cars, no paved roads, no telephones, no emails, and no Warwick Beacon. But hundreds of people traveled for miles to see a man burn in the Holy Spirit. And through Asbury's passionate words and actions, hundreds of souls caught on fire with the Holy Spirit. Under his leadership, American Methodism grew from 600 to 200,000. Jeremy Steele said, "No matter how difficult the task may seem, Asbury's legacy proves to us that diligent work empowered by the Holy Spirit can accomplish more for the kingdom of God than we could ever imagine."² I believe this is the true roots of our church and we share this spiritual legacy.

3rd Movement Celebration

The only way to awake people who fall into a deep spiritual sleep is by a dazzling light from the flame of the Holy Spirit. And we are firewood.

As firewood cannot shine by itself, we cannot radiate divine light by ourselves. But, as we are caught on the fire of the Holy Spirit, our body, our mind, our spirit, and our lives could be also consumed by this holy flame. As we are consumed by this holy fire, our souls will be filled with joy, gratitude, love, energy, and the power of the Holy Spirit. As we are filled with the Holy Spirit, as Jesus told us, we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14) and people will come to see us burn in the divine flame of the Holy Spirit.

¹ <http://www.umcom.org/learn/10-interesting-facts-about-francis-asbury-to-use-in-your-next-lesson>

² Ibid.

Don't worry about soccer club or baseball club. Don't worry about how much resources left we have. Don't worry too much about thinking whether or not young people will return to the church. Don't worry about the fact that our bodies are getting weak.

But think about the best thing within us. Think about God's best for us. John Wesley said, "the best thing of all is God is with us."

Though it seems there is nothing left within us, the divine flame of the Holy Spirit is still with us. The power of the Holy Spirit still resides among us and within every one of us.

Catch on fire and your age will be nothing but a number.

Catch on fire with the Holy Spirit and your spirit will be as young as our youth.

"Catch on fire and people will come for miles to see you burn."

Catch on fire and we will shout out God's mighty works without fear and without shame, on the main street of Warwick, Foster Road, Cranston, downtown Providence, New Port... you name it... wherever you are.

Catch on fire and our heart will be filled with joy and energy.

Catch on fire and we will do many wonders and signs as apostles did.

Catch on fire and we will see God's vision for our church.

Catch on fire with the Holy Spirit, then, the Holy Spirit will lead us our way.

Amen.