

You will receive power

My beginning exposure to faith was in the mainline Protestant church world with its dignified ways, formal worship, doctrinal statements and age-graded Sunday School.



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By the time I began high school, I had become active in an Air Force base chapel youth group and met young people from many different denominations. I wondered if I really understood what it means to be a Christian. My junior year in high school I experienced an intense private encounter with the Holy Spirit (salvation) and suddenly God was real!

Dissatisfied with my former religious world I began visiting churches my friends attended. The differences were remarkable: music without instruments, complicated liturgies, conflicting beliefs and a wild experience called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Each group claimed a biblical foundation for their beliefs, which pushed me to study and ask many questions.

There seemed to be two basic groups: (1) those seeking some kind of wild filling of the Spirit, and (2) those focused on a program. Although my judgments were influenced by ignorance, I was pushed to deal with how I should live out my faith in Christ. Acts continues to be a key influence on my understanding of how to live until Christ returns.

Pentecost in Acts grabbed my attention but I saw it as “the beginning,” the turning point that launched everything else in Luke’s fascinating book and the developing story of early churches in the New Testament letters. There is so much more I want to learn before my life in this world is concluded.

Keep in mind that Jesus’ disciples were Jews with a strong foundation in Old Testament writings about the coming Messiah, plus long-established traditions for Israel’s restoration. As Jesus’ followers listen to the risen Christ, they are not hearing anything about rebuilding their nation, becoming rulers of the world or receiving blessings (v. 6).

Instead, Jesus tells them to stay in Jerusalem “to wait for what the Father had promised.... John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will

be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (v. 5). The apostle John, in his gospel, reveals a deep understanding of this transforming truth that after Jesus ascends to heaven the Holy Spirit becomes our source of truth, comfort, strength and power. Next Sunday we will study the incomparable story of God’s Spirit filling the disciples and working miracles at Pentecost.

Jesus is very careful to point his followers away from the restoration of Israel and their ideas about occupying key leadership positions (Luke 22:24-27). Their joy at his return from the grave to be with them was about to be upset by Jesus ascending to the Father. But they will learn, as must we, that although Jesus is with the Father, we have the companionship of God’s Spirit who will guide us and help us in every challenge of life.

Contrast those disciples’ lives before and after Pentecost. They were unsure and afraid but when the Spirit came as God’s abiding presence they became courageous witnesses. The text does not teach Jesus’ followers to replicate the experience of Pentecost, but to “be (Jesus’) witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (v. 8).

The other idea Jesus points his followers away from is the time of his appearing: “It isn’t for you to know the times or seasons (of Jesus’ second coming) that the Father has set by his own authority” (v. 7).

Repeatedly, when our world has been plunged into tragedy and violence, there has been a resurgence of “end times theology.” We are fascinated by John’s book called “Revelation.” In our generation this topic has enriched some individuals through their novels, movies and second-coming seminars.

After being asked repeatedly to lead a study of Revelation, I did a Sunday night series. Almost every Sunday night a church member asked, “When will we be raptured?” I never answered her question and further disturbed her dispensational theology by explaining the point is not when we get out of here but what are we doing to share the good news with all the world while we are still here!

Luke makes sure we get the point when he describes “two men in white robes” appearing and prodding the disciples: “Why are you standing here,

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Scripture: Acts 1:1-14

looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven” (v. 11). In other words, marching orders have been issued so what are you waiting for? They seemed to get the point, for our next picture is of the believers gathered at the scene of the last supper, “all were united in their devotion to prayer” (v. 14).

We can learn much about what it means to be a church expecting Christ to return. Instead of sitting in our comfortable sanctuaries, we are to be actively anticipating by actively living out the gospel. Those early Christians had every reason to be afraid but one overwhelming reason to share their faith.

Numerous books and strategy papers have been written to teach effective church organization and growth. The New Testament is so much more than an operations manual. From it we discover how to grow close to God, how to see people through the eyes of Christ, how to overcome fear and rejection and how to allow the Holy Spirit to work through us.

Acts shows us the church as family, ministering within and without. Acts reveals God’s Spirit using the gifts of each person in God’s service, opening doors of opportunity, turning hardship into blessing and bringing the gospel to the edge of the known world.

This Thursday is Ascension Day on the Christian calendar. That is an opportune time to thank God for placing you here to share his love. Set aside some time to read today’s text and examine your spiritual condition, asking God to use you to share Christ with a friend or neighbor.

As you are looking forward to Christ’s return think about getting involved in a community ministry that models the grace of God with those who suffer or are pushed aside in our society. As you are waiting for his appearing, show your world the hope of Christ.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmstead enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.