

“Earth, Wind & Fire”

Introduction: Back in the 1970’s, when a singer named Maurice White was searching for a name for his new R & B band, he wanted a name that would communicate the electricity and energy the band’s unique sound and rhythm generated, an electricity and energy, as he described it, that would flow so forcefully through the air that no one would go untouched by it. With hits like September, Shining Star, and Got to Get You Into My Life, the band, named Earth, Wind & Fire, certainly shook things up in the musical world of that day!

So, too, did the Holy Spirit, shake things up when he arrived on the earth with wind and fire. Devout Jews had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Weeks, a feast that began the wheat harvest, fifty days after Passover. It was also a time when the giving of the law, the Ten Commandments was marked. In the midst of all this, the giving of the Spirit created an electricity and energy that began a harvest of souls which would spread not only throughout the holy city but throughout the world.

“What does this mean?” is the operative question, asked by many who were there. Let’s begin by stepping back a few days when the disciples of Jesus were waiting for the Spirit who had been promised by Jesus, and then we’ll consider his dramatic arrival.

I. Waiting

A. We left the disciples last week staring up at a blank sky, having just witnessed Jesus being taken up by the Father to the heavenly realm from which he had come, and where he is now seated at the Father’s right hand. We said that the ascension, as it’s known, served to validate the mission of Jesus, vindicate that he is Lord of all, and set the stage for his heavenly vocation, a vocation that includes interceding for us, preparing a place for us, and sending his Spirit to guide and empower us as we join him in his ongoing mission to the world.

B. An important part of this last bit, as Jesus had instructed his followers, was to wait for this gift of the Spirit. It was an indicator that to step out and seek to do what Jesus was calling them to do, under their own power and wisdom, would end up like a fishing expedition they had recently experienced – out all night but catching nothing (Jn. 21). Jesus seeks to make the point early and often that we need God’s empowering presence if we are going to carry out his purposes. Working hard is not the answer. I say that because we can easily slip into thinking that with Jesus now ascended into heaven, it’s our turn. Jesus did what he was going to do on earth and now we’ve got to pick up the baton and run the next leg.

We might imagine Peter, after reviewing his copy of *Robert’s Rules of Order*, calling the believers together (Luke tells us there were about 120) and directing them to take note of Article I, an article calling for the formation of the church. “You’re of course aware as you read it,” Peter might explain, “that Jesus is no longer with us, so it seemed to some of us that we need to get organized in order to carry out his work. So, do I have a motion?” And then James makes a motion to form the church, Andrew seconds it, and a vote is taken which passes by the necessary 2/3d’s majority and they all troop out of the room to do they’re not sure what, or how!

C. But that's not how it went. It didn't go according to good congregational fashion! Rather, Luke tells us that there was a room in Jerusalem in which they gathered, after the ascension, and where the 11 remaining disciples "all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Ac. 1:12-14). While the call to wait, in other words, warns us against stepping out in our own power, it also doesn't mean doing nothing. It means, rather, putting ourselves in a position in which we can hear and sense God's guidance, through the Spirit, "raising our sails," as it were, so that when the wind of the Spirit begins to blow, we are ready to have him move us.

Jesus wants us to know that not only can we not run well without him, he doesn't intend for us to do so. In no way does Jesus want to leave us. In fact, through the Spirit, he comes intimately to be with us as together, we enter into the next leg of his mission to the world.

II. Coming

A. And blow, on the day that came to be known as Pentecost, the Spirit did! Luke seems at pains to describe it. There was a sound like the blowing of a violent wind. There were what seemed like little flames of fire that came to rest on each person's head. And everyone there, though they were all locals, began speaking the wonders of God in foreign languages, sounding like natives. Some who were observing concluded that these followers of Jesus were under the influence. Well, they were! But it was the influence of the Spirit.

B. Maybe the best we can say is that wind as revealed in God's word, describes God's life-giving power, and fire his purifying, guiding presence. The ability to speak in another language reveals the multi-cultural nature of God's kingdom as well as highlighting that the Spirit enables us to do what might not be natural for us to do on our own. Bottom line: the Spirit is powerful, uncontrollable, transformative, and even surprising. "What does this mean?" might be our question as well.

III. Promises

A. As Luke's description of that day continues, we see Peter standing up to begin to give the answer. This in itself is a demonstration of the Spirit's power as Peter was the one who had denied knowing Jesus before his crucifixion, and had been hiding from the authorities after it. Yet, here this formerly timid man was, explaining to all who would listen, that what they'd been seeing was a different kind of influence than they'd been imagining. He directed them to what they knew – God's promises in the OT, specifically from the prophet Joel – and then linked them with the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, followed by the pouring out of the Spirit by him, which they were now experiencing (vv. 17-36).

B. This pouring out of the Spirit affirms, Peter explained, that we are in the last days, the final period of redemptive history inaugurated by the first coming of Jesus which will be consummated when he returns. In these days, as Joel describes it, the Spirit will now fill not just particular people at particular times for particular and temporary purposes (like a Gideon or Sampson or David or Elizabeth), but all people without distinction – male and female, young and old, upper class and servant – and all will prophesy, all will speak about the wonders of God in both word and deed.

C. While not all of these signs and wonders that Joel describes, like the sun turning to darkness and the moon to blood, have taken place yet (reserved, likely, for the return of Jesus), they do point out that the coming of Jesus, and his subsequent sending of the Spirit, have begun the healing and restoration that this broken world needs. At the end of these days, on that “great and glorious day of the Lord” as Joel describes it (Ac. 2:20), blessing and deliverance will be available for those who have entered into a relationship with this Jesus and accepted his offer of new life.

Those who took this to heart were “cut to the heart” Luke tells us, and asked what they should do (2:37). Repent, join in (be baptized), and join together, was Peter’s response (vv. 38-47).

D. I appreciate the way pastor and author Tony Evans sums up the Spirit’s ministry in a three-fold way:

The role of the Holy Spirit is to make the truth of God experiential in the life of people. For the unbeliever, it’s to make them aware of the reality of sin and then lead them to salvation (Jn. 16:8-11). For believers, it’s to transform us more and more into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:17-18). For the life of the church, it’s to equip and guide us so that we can infiltrate the culture with the presence and power of God. [*The Power of the Holy Spirit’s Names*, 188]

Above and beyond Earth, Wind & Fire, the Holy Spirit’s coming on earth with wind and fire was assuredly unique and certainly shook things up!

So there really is no vote as we consider how to proceed. May we instead prayerfully “lift up our sails” that we might catch the wind of the Spirit and be led by him in the way we should go. For, as our closing hymn declares: the God who has spoken by His prophets, and by Christ Jesus, yet speaketh by His Spirit... (#239).