



BIBLE STUDY

ACT BOLDLY FOR MISSION
SESSION 3

In the Power of the Holy Spirit

by Kelly Fryer

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The message we have to share as missional and evangelical people is God's message. God sends the Holy Spirit to be at work in and through us, so that we can do it! We'll look at a few stories from the Book of Acts to learn what happens to and through people when the Holy Spirit is on the loose.

Introduction

Having grown up in the shadow of the steel mills in northwest Indiana, I didn't know what to expect when I received my first call as pastor of a rural congregation in northern Illinois. My only experience with "the country" was driving through it on the expressway, on my way from one place to another. And, frankly, that experience was boring.

I know this probably sounds ridiculous to many of you but I can't even tell you how surprised I was by how much *happens* in the country that no one ever sees whizzing by on the interstate. Just for starters, okay, there is so much *color* out there. I spent my whole first year utterly captivated while the fields taught me, first, what *green* looks like, pulsating with new life in the shape of fragile and determined crops sprouting up from that rich black soil.

Then I learned just how many vibrant shades of gold there are under the sun, as the harvest spun out in the fall. And nothing is more blindingly beautiful than the untouched white snow that blankets the earth in winter.

I'm not sure exactly what I expected to find when I got to that little piece

of God's beautiful earth, far from anything I'd ever known or experienced before. But what I found was life. And wherever there is life, there is change.

In other words, it was anything but boring.

A love-hate thing

None of us would really want to stop things from changing even if we could, because we know that if you're not changing you're dead. Change is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. But that doesn't mean we like it.

It's impossible to know for sure, but if I had to guess, I'd say that the earliest Christians probably weren't wild about it, either.

We get little hints of this in the stories we read about them in the Bible. For example, you may know how the story about Peter goes: He was one of Jesus' very first followers. He was there when Jesus pulled off the most unbelievable stunts, like feeding eight or ten thousand people at a crack—men, women, and children—with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. He was there when the rumors about Jesus started to fly and the crowds began following him around the countryside, eager to grab hold of whatever bits of wisdom and truth Jesus threw their way. He was there when Jesus healed the hopeless and battled the demonic and confounded the uptight religious rulers of his day with his teachings about God.

Peter knew his Lord was destined for greatness and that he would, in

fact, do great things for his people. Then, one day out of the blue, Jesus started talking about a plan Peter hadn't heard before. What's worse, Jesus revealed this plan to the mob that had been tagging along behind them before he even had a chance to talk it over with his disciples. He told them straight out that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31).

Peter was horrified.

"Jesus, stop," Peter hissed.

Jesus paused mid-sentence and looked at his friend, a question mark in both their eyes.

"Come here," Peter said in a loud whisper, trying not to make a scene in front of the crowd. "I need to talk to you."

When he had Jesus alone, Peter let him have it. We don't know exactly what he said to Jesus but it was sharp enough to tick Jesus off.

"Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus said to his disciple. "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then he turned back to the crowd and pretended like Peter wasn't even there:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," he said, even more fervently than before.

Peter may have been thinking, "But ... but ... but ..."

It wasn't the last time Jesus changed things up on his followers. In fact, you could say that life with Jesus was one change after another.

> GET TO WORK!

Turn to the story about how the church got its start. Stop and read Acts 1:1–11 right now. What kinds of changes happen to Jesus' followers in this story? How do they respond? Some parts of this story seem utterly fantastical—like Jesus suddenly ascending into heaven and

angels appearing. What parts of this story seem the most believable . . . the most real . . . the most true to life? Why? What else do you notice about this story?

Remember, after Jesus was put to death, his followers never expected to see him again. When he appeared to them on that first Easter, they couldn't have been happier. Then after a few weeks, suddenly, he was gone again.

First, he left them with an enormous job: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Then, as if this change in plans wasn't enough, Jesus virtually promises them that their whole lives will be marked by change. He tells them that he is going to send the Holy Spirit to them.

And, friends, *nobody* does change like the Holy Spirit.

> GET TO WORK!

Some people love being a part of the church because they feel like it's one of the few places that doesn't change. Or they think, at least change happens very slowly here. In fact, many people in the church actively resist change, thinking that it's their job to maintain tradition and make sure things happen the way we've always done it before. Do you know anyone like that? Does that describe you in any way? What are you thinking about this idea that change is both an inevitable part of life and a fundamental characteristic of life in the church? Is this conversation getting you pumped up with excitement or giving you sweaty palms? Discuss.

Anything but boring

The members of that earliest church quickly discovered that their lives would be anything but boring.

They went back to Jerusalem, like Jesus told them to do before he took off for the heavenly realm, and they waited. Even with a warning, though, that something big was coming, they couldn't have been prepared for what happened next:

“Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages . . .” (Acts 2:2–4).

Trying to make sense of it all, Peter remembers a snippet of Scripture, something from the book of the prophet Joel.

“Hey everybody, listen!” Peter said. “We should have known something like this would happen. Remember your Bible stories? Remember how the prophet Joel said that one day God would pour out the Spirit and that, when it happened, everything would be different? Remember how he said old people would dream new dreams and young people would see visions? That’s happening to us right *now!*”

> **GET TO WORK!**

This wasn't the last time Jesus' followers would understand their Bible in a whole new way because the Holy Spirit got into the mix. Check out Acts 4:10–11, where they quote another Old Testament passage (Psalm 118) in order to explain how Jesus—who had been rejected—could be the Messiah. Now read Acts 4:23–31. They are quoting the Old Testament again—this time from Psalm 2, which they believed was written by King David—in order to try and make sense of what's happening to them. What is happening that sends them back to their Bibles? Can you tell by reading this passage? What situation are they responding to in their own lives? What is their context? And how does this ancient bibli-

cal passage they're quoting—a passage that was from King David and about King David—help them understand it?

When the prophet Joel wrote those words about the Spirit, he could never have foreseen what was happening in the streets of Jerusalem that Pentecost day. Neither could King David have imagined that, one day, his words would be re-interpreted by a bunch of Christians gearing up to spread the Good News of Jesus in a hostile world. When David wrote the words to that song, he was complaining about people who had been hostile to him and to his rule. Neither he or Joel were writing about Jesus' followers. They were writing long, long, long before Jesus was even born. But, with the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the other Christians were able to understand these ancient biblical words in a whole new way. Yes, with the help of the Spirit, even the meaning of the Bible itself seemed to change for those early Christians as they were confronted by a strange new context.

> **GET TO WORK!**

Have you ever thought about the way our understanding of Scripture has changed over time? If not, think about it now. What examples can you give? If you're having trouble thinking of something, consider the role of women in leadership within the church. For centuries, Christians understood the Bible to say that women couldn't be in leadership. Today, some Christians still think this but many, many disagree. We believe the Bible not only allows women to be in leadership but that, in fact, there were women leaders in Biblical times. How do you explain the way in which our understanding of the Bible changes so much over time? How has your understanding of the Bible changed? What new insights or questions have you had

lately? What ideas are being challenged? How are you—and your understanding of the Bible—being changed?

Shaped for mission

The Holy Spirit had a way of turning everything upside down for the members of that earliest church. It might have started with their understanding of Scripture, but it didn't end there. The Holy Spirit was at work in and through the lives of those first Christians, changing them—and shaping them—for the sake of God's mission to love and bless and save the whole world.

Throughout the story, the Holy Spirit is at work making the church bold (Acts 4:31) . . . giving them wisdom (Acts 6:3, 10) . . . helping them endure persecution (Acts 8:55) . . . moving them outside of their comfort zone and into the company of strangers (Acts 8:29) . . . raising up new and unexpected leaders (Acts 13:2) . . . steering them into new directions (Acts 13:4) . . . filling them with joy (Acts 13:52) . . . challenging them when they tried to go their own way instead of waiting for God's direction (Acts 16:6–7) . . . and ordering their life together (Acts 20:28).

It's ironic that the story of the earliest church is called "The Acts of the Apostles" when you can see very clearly that it's actually all about "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit was on the loose in the life of that early church.

> GET TO WORK!

Would you say the Holy Spirit is on the loose in your life? How about in the life of your congregation? What evidence would you submit to support your answer?

How is the Spirit changing you—and shaping you for mission? How do you see the Spirit at work in and through your congregation? Look again at the list of things the Spirit did in the

lives of those early Christians (two paragraphs above). How many of those things is the Spirit doing in your life today and in the life of your congregation?

How open are you to the work of the Spirit, anyway? Do people in your congregation talk much about the Spirit? Do you think there is openness to the kinds of changes the Spirit brings? Or do you think you all need to be more open to the Spirit? If so, what would that look like? How do you get the Spirit, anyway? If you want to see how the first Christians did it, turn to Acts 2 again. What do you see there? What did they do? What can we learn from this today?

A surprise ending

Probably when we first started talking about being evangelical people and participating in God's mission to love and bless the world, you thought this was all about *us* changing *them*. A lot of Christians, in fact, believe that our job is to *take* Jesus to people so that Jesus can fix 'em. You hear these Christians talk about how we have to *save the lost*. And stuff like that.

Well, to be sure, when people hear the good news about Jesus, it changes them. God loves the world and every single person in it. God wants everyone to receive the gift of love and reconciliation and salvation.

But as we participate in God's mission, *the world* isn't the only thing that is changed. We are, too.

> GET TO WORK!

Spend some time reflecting together on one of the central stories in the life of that early church, the story of Peter's encounter with the Gentile named Cornelius. Turn to Acts 10:30–48. Read the story out loud. Remember that, up until now, only Jews had become Christians.

Then Peter gets in hot water for what he did and has to explain himself to the church leaders in Jerusalem.

After you read the story, spend time talking about these three questions:

- 1. What is this story about?***
- 2. What do you hear God saying to you in this story?***
- 3. What do you hear God saying to us, as a group or as a congregation or the whole church, together?***

Take as much time as you need doing this. It is the most important part of this whole session.

Peter discovered the truth that God really is on the loose *out there*. We don't have to take Jesus to people. Jesus has already gone before us into every place

that we are sent. The Holy Spirit is already present and doing stuff in and through the people we work with, go to school with, play with, and live with. Our job, as evangelical people, is to be on the lookout for what God is doing . . . and jump in. And when the Holy Spirit nudges us, our job is to tell people what we see. As we do this, the world will most certainly be changed.

And so will we. 🌿

Kelly Fryer, who holds master of divinity and master of theology degrees, is author of the best-selling *Reclaiming the L Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core* and writer for the *No Experience Necessary* Bible study series (both from Augsburg Fortress). She is executive director of A.R.E.: A Renewal Enterprise, a company that provides organizational consulting and leadership coaching.

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We hope Mina is recovering quickly.

So often we hear only from readers who are upset about something—they think the Bible study is too hard, or too easy, or they disagree with one of our writers. So we get a little discouraged sometimes (especially when we're struggling to meet all our deadlines). Your e-mail really brightened our day. This is a very busy time: We are preparing the Leader Guide and Companion Bible for the next study, as well as working on the magazine. So we're a little tired.

The next Bible study is on the Beatitudes and the first session talks about how we are blessed and how we bless others and how blessings leak . . . they splash and drip and get all over everything.

Your Bible study that night was that kind of blessing. Kate Elliott, editor, *LWT*

That, friends, is how blessings leak. Barbara blessed her group by leading the Bible study session and was blessed in return. Mina remembered the blessing of that lesson in her hour of crisis, and was comforted. The e-mail Barbara sent blessed us on the *LWT* staff, and now the blessings leak and splash onto you, our readers. In God's economy nothing is wasted.

Learn more about our upcoming Bible study "Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship" by Martha E. Stortz. You can read her reflections on page 44.