



Preaching With the Holy Spirit

By: Craig Brian Larson

Several of our church leaders missed the Sunday worship service, and our meeting felt dramatically different. Their faith and vocal prayers, emotion and devotion to Christ are so strong that when they miss a service we feel like a different church. We could have mentioned their names or delivered a message from them, but there is a huge difference between presence and absence.

There is also a big difference between the presence and absence of the Holy Spirit. He is always present in every square inch of the universe, but He does not always manifest His presence to us — that is, make His presence known to us — in the same way or to the same degree. When we not only believe He is present, but also sense His manifest presence, a sermon is an entirely different experience.

Think of the difference in a room when you play gentle music in the background versus no music. Consider the difference when you have family members in the house versus when you are alone. Reflect on the difference when the sun shines versus when gray clouds fill the sky. We feel these experiences physically and emotionally. In the same way, we sense the difference when a sermon is charged with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 4:33 says, “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all” (*italics mine*). Those who preach with full regard for the Holy Spirit believe His presence and power can and should be experienced.

WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS OF THE LORD’S MANIFEST PRESENCE?

We are convinced what Scripture says is true.

We do not try to believe; we believe. Humans cannot fully understand and believe any spiritual truth apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Even with doctrine as basic as the lordship of Christ, we need the Holy Spirit to convince us of its truth. First Corinthians 12:3 says, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Christians are convinced of the truth of Scripture. This conviction is so universally accepted by Christians that we take it for granted or assume that we can believe the truth of Scripture without God’s aid. Not so. When the Spirit of truth manifests His presence, the preacher and hearers do not have to try to believe the Scriptures; they know they are true.

Our spirit senses God’s manifest presence.

Obviously this is subjective, but subjective does not mean unreal. I cannot describe what God’s presence feels like, but over time and with experience mature believers become familiar with what God’s presence feels like to them.

We express our feelings.

Although God’s presence involves far more than emotion, it does typically stir up feelings, both in the preacher and hearers. How could it be otherwise when the infinite Creator impresses himself on His creatures in a way they can sense? Light a flame under a pan of water, and the water boils. Put an ice cube in the sun on a summer day, and it melts.

Let the God of infinite joy, peace, holiness, love, and all hope manifest himself, and we will feel something. “Deep calls to deep” (Psalm 42:7).

In the Old Testament God promised to give His people a heart that would be responsive to Him. Ezekiel 11:19 says, “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.”

Galatians 5:22 says two characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit are feelings: joy and peace.

In Luke 10:21 notice the source of the emotion felt by Jesus: “Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit.”

In God’s manifest presence, we feel wonder and reverence. Hard hearts melt. Preacher and hearers may weep. Paul says, “For three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31). Paul was not emotionally unbalanced; his intense feelings were the work of the Holy Spirit.

We preach with urgency.

When the Spirit of God has convinced us of spiritual truths, caused us to sense in our spirits that He is with us, and moved our emotions, the natural result for the preacher is to feel with intense urgency the importance of the Scriptures he is proclaiming and the condition of the souls seated before him. He is, then, gripped by the importance of preaching, the certainty of Judgment Day, the precious value of the gospel, the terrors of hell, the pleasures of paradise, the glory of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Different preachers vary in how they express that urgency in their delivery — urgency does not require the high-powered proclamation we commonly associate with an evangelist — but both preacher and hearers will feel it. When God is present in the preaching, a responsive person will not be looking at his watch or thinking about the ball game.

We have spontaneously inspired thoughts and speech.

These may be described as prophetic. In our preaching, the Spirit of God may spontaneously bring thoughts to our minds for our hearers.

We preach with boldness.

Again and again, the Book of Acts describes the apostles’ preaching by using the word boldly. “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31). When the Spirit of God is manifested, our fear of how people will react to the truth drops away, sacrificial love for them takes over, and the proclamation of God’s life-giving truth becomes our highest priority — even when we know we will be persecuted for the truth.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW WE PREACH

When we believe the Holy Spirit manifests His presence in preaching in a way that can be felt, charging a sermon with power, several guidelines for how to prepare and preach can be suggested.

In delivering the message, not just in the study, we should expect the supernatural inspiration of ideas.

Luke 12:11,12 says, “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” It is possible to prepare our thoughts ahead of time in a way that predisposes us not to hear or follow spontaneous inspiration.

When spontaneous inspiration comes that we sense is from the Spirit, we should flow with it.

We must be willing to leave our outline temporarily. This does not mean we abandon our prepared thoughts, but we expand our ideas as we are led or follow ideas that had not originally been planned.

We should pay attention to whether we sense the presence of the Lord or not.

If we do not, we can pray quietly in our heart or pause the message to pray aloud that God will come in power. Perhaps something else needs to happen in the meeting. When we do sense His presence, we should follow His leading.

We should preach our way into the Lord's presence.

In my experience, I often have to speak for a while before God's manifest presence is strong.

We should follow God-given emotions.

Emotions can be taken to an extreme, but Paul apparently did not resist the welling up of his tears. Not all emotions are from God, and we do not seek emotion for emotion's sake; but we can, by quenching emotion within ourselves, quench the Spirit. We need discernment and maturity. When we discern that a stirring in our soul is from God, we should embrace emotion and express it in a fitting way.

The following scene does not involve preaching, but it shows Jesus feeling deep emotion and freely expressing that emotion rather than quenching it. At the tomb of Lazarus, "When Jesus saw her [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb" (John 11:33–38).

In another situation, we also see Jesus freely expressing His emotion: "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean'" (Mark 1:41).

We should not be satisfied with anything less than the manifest presence of God.

If we do not sense the Lord's presence in our preaching, we should fast and seek God. We should ask Him to manifest His presence, and we should ask if something in our lives is causing Him to stand afar.

We should develop spiritual disciplines for the hours before preaching that bring us personally into God's presence.

A vital part of these disciplines is the preparation of our heart. We should thank God from our heart, not just our mind, until we feel thankful. We should worship God from our heart, not just our mind, until we feel worshipful and joyful. We should pray for our hearers from our heart, not just our mind, until we feel love for our people. We should pray in tongues. We should confess sin. We should meditate on our sermon text. We should sing before the Lord. We should set apart time for these spiritual exercises.

After preaching, we should thank God for His presence that attended the message.

We should expect nothing less than His presence — but never take it for granted. We should pray daily that God will manifest His presence in our messages. In addition, pray daily that God will take you by the hand and teach you how to preach with His presence. God is unpredictable, beyond our control, and full of wise surprises, so be ready to learn for the rest of your life.

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