

Sermon for Sunday, September 9, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"HOLY SMOKE OF A CHURCH ON FIRE"

Acts 3:1-10

Text: "And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God." Acts 3:8

Peter and John were going to the temple. It was the hour of prayer. And there at the gate of the temple sat the beggar. Over in chapter four of Acts we are told that this man was over forty years old. How many years had he been sitting there! Probably everyone familiar with the temple always pictured that particular gate to the temple with him sitting by it. Over the years he had become such a fixture he was just a part of the scene. So when Peter and John were passing by he held up his alms bowl. They both stopped and Peter said to him, "Look at us." The beggar's eyes must have lit up with anticipation and the Bible says he gave his full attention to them, expecting to receive something. But then Peter speaks, "I have no silver and gold." How that beggar's face must have fallen! He had been lame from birth and he was totally dependent upon the charity of those who passed by. His need was very real and very pressing and now these two men were going to fail him. They were broke, "I have no silver and gold." But Peter was not through. He speaks again. He says, "I give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk." With that, Peter took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet. As he did, the Bible says his bones were made strong. He began walking and leaping and praising God.

Now, when that happened, a lot of things began to happen in a hurry! First, a crowd began to gather around because of all the excitement. Second, when the crowd gathered, Peter began to tell them about Jesus. Third, the priests at the temple had them arrested. The next day they were to order them to stop their street preaching or else. Fourth, in spite of this, the Bible tells us that many who heard the word believed and the number of men came to about five thousand. And finally, in retrospect, the beggar who asked some turned-on Christians for help got a lot more than he ever dared to ask or dream.

I would like to describe this picture of the early church as the church on fire. Those early Christians were on fire for Jesus Christ. Back when I was in seminary, one of my seminary professors used to say, "Boys, if you are on fire for Jesus, the whole world will come to see you burn." And that's what happened! With the church on fire, a crowd immediately turned up. One of the problems with many churches today is that the church isn't on fire for Jesus. A lot of people today are buying the "uncola" drink, but did you ever hear of people showing up for an unfire? And that's what is happening today. People are not showing up in droves! That's because the church isn't on fire for Jesus. Some of us preachers can get excited about Cambodia or Viet Nam or Watergate, but we can't get excited about Jesus.

There is a story about one of the early popes of Rome. It seems he was showing a visitor around the Vatican, displaying for him the great pieces of art, the fine pieces of silver and gold, and all of the wealth that had flowed into the Holy City. Laughingly the pope said, "I'm afraid that we can no longer say with Peter and John, 'silver and gold have I none.'" "Yes," replied the visitor, "and neither can you say 'rise up and walk.'" Now, the point is this, when the church gets its eyes off Jesus--when the focus of its life is anything except our Lord, the fire goes out and the power is turned off. Yes, when the church is on fire for Jesus, people are attracted. They sense that here is something they are searching for. Here is something that will meet the deepest needs of their lives.

So, the first comment I want to make is that the church ought to be on fire for Jesus. I want to make a second comment by reversing an old cliché. That reversed cliché is this: Where there is fire there is smoke. Or, as someone has humorously put it, "Church on fire--holy smoke." What I mean by that is this: When you have got a church on fire for Jesus, it is going to produce some holy smoke. The problem with smoke is, it gets in somebody's eyes or it gets down somebody's windpipe and gags them; or somebody begins to worry about their Sunday suit smelling like holy smoke. So, the next thing you know, somebody is trying to put out the fire so there won't be any smoke! As a matter of fact, every minister I've ever talked to who had a church on fire also had some members who were self-commissioned firemen trying to put out the fire because of the smoke.

All of this is to say that when a church is on fire for Jesus, when things are really happening, there are going to be some smoke problems. That's exactly what happened to Peter and John. Right away smoke got in the eyes of the priests at the temple and they had them thrown in jail. The Bible tells us they tried to put out the fire and commanded them not to teach or preach in the name of Jesus.

You know, there are some people who say that a church ought never to have any dissension or disagreement. They say a church ought to always be sweetness and light, peace and harmony. But I want to tell you a secret. The only church where there isn't some smoke getting in somebody's eye from time to time is a church where the fire has gone out! You see, God didn't give us an ideal church or a perfect fellowship. As a matter of fact, by the time we get to chapter five of Acts, one of the leading elders has lied to the preacher and died of a heart attack as a consequence. By chapter six, they have a fight over family night church supper.

Yes, if a church is on fire, there will be some holy smoke in somebody's eye or down somebody's windpipe. The reason is simple. Even a church on fire for Jesus is still made up of men who are sinners. We are still a fellowship where there is little faith, much weakness, and great difficulties. We are still a fellowship where there are inadequate people, stingy givers, reluctant workers, petty people. We are a fellowship of people who still sin, gossip, lie, cheat, steal, and commit adultery. As somebody has said, the church is sort of like Noah's Ark. You could not stand the smell inside if it wasn't for the water outside!

So a church on fire has some holy smoke. So if anybody has any smoke in his eye this morning, he ought to rejoice. It means that there is a Jesus-fire burning! Now there are three characteristics of a church on fire that I want to share with you. These three characteristics are depicted in Peter and John. First, a church on fire is a church where people have had a first-hand encounter with Jesus and have been filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter and John had met the risen Lord. They had a personal encounter with the living Jesus and at Pentecost they had been filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told them they would receive power from on high and when the Holy Spirit came, they got their extension cord plugged in. They were turned-on for Jesus. The first requirement for a church on fire is for men and women to know Jesus by personal experience and to be filled with His Spirit. And let me say this about our experiences with Jesus: Every Christian ought to have a fresh new testimony about Jesus. It isn't enough to have had an experience once upon a time. One of my favorite stories that I'm sure many of you have heard me tell before is about the man who had an experience with the Lord. Every chance he got he shared what he called his "blessed experience." But, as the months went by, he decided he had better write the experience down so he wouldn't forget it. Finally, he put it away in an upstairs dresser drawer. Years went by. Then one night a visitor came and they got to talking about religion. Suddenly he remembered

what had once happened to him. "Wife," he said, "Go up stairs and get my blessed experience out of the dresser drawer." Soon she was back but her face was sad and worried, "Dear," she said, "I don't know how to tell you, but the mice have eaten your blessed experience." Well, that happens to us. The mice of time and worry and trouble eat up our blessed experiences. We need to have fresh, new encounters with Jesus. We need a new testimony every day of our walk with the Lord.

So, the first characteristic of a church on fire is that people have a first-hand encounter with Jesus and are filled with his Holy Spirit. Dr. Hendry, a professor at Princeton Seminary, rightly observes that the Apostles' Creed misses the point when it states, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." The real question is not whether you believe, but have you received the Holy Spirit. Have you been filled with the Spirit--has your extension cord been plugged in to the power of God.

The second characteristic of a church on fire is that it has got its priorities straight. The first business of the church is to share Jesus by telling other people about him. That day at the temple, when the crowd gathered over the excitement of the healed beggar, the first thing Peter and John did was to tell them about Jesus. Then, after spending the night in jail and being called before the temple officials, the first thing they did was to share Jesus with them. When commanded to cease, they replied, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." Yes, they had their priorities straight. One of the most serious problems I see in the denomination and in Christendom generally today is that we don't have our priorities straight. The first business of the church is to tell about Jesus. Jesus himself said, "And I, if I be lifted up, shall draw all men unto me." The church that truly holds up Jesus will draw a crowd because it will be a church on fire.

The third characteristic of the church on fire is that it is evidencing by its deeds and its love for men for whom Jesus died. I have never known a church on fire for Jesus but that it was also involved in what we call today social action. But notice the order of priorities! Some people try to put social action first. But social action is not the gospel. Jesus is the gospel--the good news. Social action is the fruit of the gospel. And a church on fire for Jesus is going to have some fruit.

Let me share with you an experience I had a number of years ago. I was doing some post-graduate work in counseling at the San Francisco Seminary in California. One evening a fellow student who lived in that area took me down into the night club district. Well, I felt like the little old lady who told her preacher one Sunday morning after a particularly firey sermon, "Pastor, we didn't know what sin was until you came here." All of the night clubs were "topless" and prostitutes walked the streets. The girls in the nightclubs danced, but their smiles were painted on and their eyes were dull and disillusioned. The musicians played bright, loud music, but they looked like robots with no joy or expression. The bartenders looked cynical and bored. The prostitutes put on a happy face to proposition a prospect, but when he turned away the mask of gaiety fell off and she was just another tired, hopeless person whose feet probably hurt and who hoped she could pay her rent tomorrow. I watched the people in those crowded bars and nightclubs--people who drank too much, laughed too loud, tried too hard to have a good time. They looked like people who down deep wished they had some place to go and somebody to go to.

When we got back to the seminary which is actually across the bay from San Francisco,



