

## I KNOW IT WHEN I SEE IT

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Grace Church in New York  
The Day of Pentecost  
June 9, 2019

*But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning." (Acts 2:14-16)*

Peter's defense of the Spirit-filled disciples on the Day of Pentecost reminds me of a famous Supreme Court case, and the particular quote that made it memorable. The case involved a 1958 French film called *The Lovers*, directed by Louis Malle, not to be confused with numerous other motion pictures by the same name. Malle's movie tells the story of a woman who leaves her emotionally incapable husband, embarks on an adulterous affair with another man, and discovers true love in the process. *The Lovers* was a smash hit in France and it won all sorts of awards at various film festivals.

By the time *The Lovers* was released in the United States, many people here already were calling the movie obscene. They insisted it should be censored. It should be banned. To be sure, the film today would hardly garner even an R rating. It would probably be rated PG. But in those days the brief and semi-explicit scenes of love-making, coupled with the suggestion that an extra-marital affair might have a good outcome were thought to be corrosive to morality and destructive to society. Nevertheless, a theater manager in Cleveland Heights, Ohio named Nico Jacobellis pressed on and showed the movie. The county promptly charged him with obscenity, found him guilty, and fined him. Jacobellis took the case all the way to the Supreme Court of Ohio, which upheld the conviction.

Finally, in 1964 Jacobellis appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States, and after hearing the case the highest court in the land reversed the ruling. *The Lovers* did not meet the criteria for obscenity. Why is *Jacobellis v. Ohio* still a famous case today? It is because of the opinion of Associate Justice Potter Stewart. Concerning whether *The Lovers* was an obscene, "hard-core" film that should be banned, Potter wrote: "*I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.*"

It could be that you think the subject matter of *Jacobellis v. Ohio* is out of kilter with the wholesome fun ahead of us today: Sunday School, baptisms, and our parish picnic. Point well taken! But it's portions of Potter's opinion that might bring us to a deeper understanding of the Day of Pentecost. Specifically: "*I know it when I see it,*" and "*this ... is not that.*" Believe it or not, today is one of the three highest feasts of the Christian year. Not that it's a competition, but if Easter is first and Christmas is second, then Pentecost is third. What happened to make the Day of Pentecost the important day that it is?

We've heard in the Book of Acts (2:1-21) how the first followers of Jesus were gathered together in Jerusalem. It was ten days after the Ascension, and fifty days after the Resurrection. The events of the previous seven weeks had left the disciples completely confused and uncertain about what to do. Then suddenly, they all shared an experience that was essentially indescribable. Nevertheless, the writer of Acts reached for images to explain it. It was like being in the rush of mighty wind. It was like being the conductor of fire. Whatever it was, the phenomenon compelled

them to begin shouting praise to Jesus in many languages, so that people on the streets heard the gospel in their own native tongue. Some who witnessed the event thought the disciples were “filled with new wine;” they were drunk and disorderly. This was not religion. This was not proper spirituality. This was obscene and should be censored.

It was Peter who rose to the defense of his fellow disciples: “*Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.*” Peter was a rough-and-tumble fisherman who over the years probably had consumed more than his share of wine and other alcoholic beverages. Drunkenness was hard to define in his day, but he knew it when he saw it. So what it seems he was saying to the critics in Judea is “this is not that.” *This*, he went on to say, *is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.’* This was the Spirit of God. This is what Jesus himself was talking about at the Last Supper, on the night before he died: *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.* This was the Spirit of God that was alive in Jesus and brought him back from the dead. The same Spirit was now alive in the disciples, and can be alive in us too.

Many people are understandably wary about receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. They fear it’s like playing with fire. Recently I read a news story about a man in China who for 25 years had been cracking walnuts with a tool that looked like a hammer and seemed perfect for the job. It turned out to be a particular type of surplus army hand grenade that could have blown up at any time. The man was playing with fire. Or, people fear that receiving the Holy Spirit will make them too religious, causing them to embrace antiquated ideas. You’ll become a young-earth creationist, a disbeliever in scientific truth, and a prude who wants to censor any art with an edge.

You may remember *The Far Side* cartoons by Gary Larson. Each edition was a single, often surreal picture with a caption. One of my favorites showed a woman surrounded by dinosaurs as she turns the dials on what appears to be a laundry machine. The caption reads: *Disaster befalls Professor Schnabel’s cleaning lady when she mistakes his time machine for a new dryer.* And so it is with the gift of the Spirit. You like your life perfectly balanced, as all things should be. But here comes the Spirit to throw things all out of whack. The Spirit will take you places where you don’t want to go. It will blow up in your hands. You will lose control. Please, not that.

On the other hand, thoughtful Christians fear *not* having any experience of the Spirit. Surely, life in Christ must be more than a code of morality or a set of propositions. Therefore, some churches, out of fear that they are lifeless or to prove that they are not, offer an array of liturgical gimmicks on the Day of Pentecost. Some say Pentecost is the birthday of the church, so let’s have helium balloons. Let’s wheel a giant birthday cake down the center aisle of the church and have the organist strike up the tune of Happy Birthday. When I was first out of seminary, the parish I served as curate rehearsed and performed a dramatic reading of the Pentecost story in Acts. Instead of one person to read the lesson, six or seven would come to the lectern and they would all begin reciting it in a simultaneous cacophony of different languages. One by one each would drop back into English until, by the end of the reading, we could all understand. The rector would then preach a stirring sermon about how Pentecost reverses the curse of Babel, as if all the world’s problems would be solved were only everyone to speak English. It was supposed to be a fresh and vital experience, but it turned out to be the same thing every year. Is that what Pentecost means? No, this is not that.

We misunderstand the Holy Spirit. If Pentecost is the third most important day on our calendar, then it is a distant third because we misunderstand the Spirit. True, the Holy Spirit is

hard to define, but we should know it when we see it. Shall we look for sparks to fly and wind to blow? Shall we expect people to speak in languages not their own anytime the Spirit comes near? For some people, receiving the gift of the Spirit is indeed a dramatic experience. But for most, the Spirit is not that. Instead, the Spirit comes silently, steadily, gradually, perhaps over a lifetime of prayer and contemplation. You lie on your bed on a sleepless night and you sometimes fleetingly grasp in yourself a presence that is more than yourself, distinct from yourself, yet impossible to disentangle from yourself and your history. What is it? *Who* is it? Who is this close companion of your inmost thoughts and ways? Is this just the ambient noise from the firing of your neural network? No, this is the Spirit of Christ abiding in you.

If we still misunderstand the Spirit, we are in good company. The disciple Philip didn't understand. Philip, who had been with Jesus from the early days of his public ministry, who had heard his words and seen his works, still didn't understand. In today's reading from the Gospel of John (14:8-17) we've heard how Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus replied to Philip with a tone of exasperation in his voice. It's as if he said to the disciple, *Yes, Philip, the life that I'm trying to convey to you is hard to define, but you should know it by now. You've seen it. If you've seen me, you've seen the Father. If you've heard me, you've heard the Father. If you don't trust my words, then trust the works that you've seen me do. Philip, you don't need more proof. You need more faith.* Philip had seen Jesus heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and even raise the dead. Is this life in the Spirit of God? Yes, this is that.

When the church talks about the Holy Spirit, what we mean is the ceaseless activity of God in the world and in the lives of people. When the Psalmist (104:26-27) looked out over the great and wide sea, he saw and dared to name the ceaseless activity of God in the world. He saw living creatures too many to number, and he wrote: *There move the ships, and there is that Leviathan which you have made for the sport of it.* When Jesus himself returned to his hometown of Nazareth to preach in the synagogue (Luke 4:16-19), he borrowed words from the prophet Isaiah to help the people know the works of God when they saw them: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.* Christians don't own the Spirit of God, any more than we can define the Spirit of God. But we know it when we see it. We believe that every act of liberation, kindness, mercy, and peace is an expression of God's Spirit. Any deed that builds up people who have been torn down is a work of the Spirit. "Every aspiration towards social righteousness, every creative artistic impulse, every scientific quest for truth is a movement of God's Spirit in the world."<sup>1</sup> *There move the ships*, is what we can sing with the Psalmist when we see the works of the Spirit.

But how about us? Is the Spirit of the Lord upon us in the fellowship we enjoy, in the songs of praise that we sing, in the welcome we extend through the open doors of the church, and in the work of outreach that we do? Are these, too, an expression of the Spirit? Are we a Spirit-filled church, even a Pentecostal people? Well, if Jesus could borrow from the prophet Isaiah to teach about the work of the Spirit, perhaps I can borrow from and paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart, and give him the last word. Are the gifts of the Spirit among us? *I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and any church that loves the Lord and does the will of the Father, this is that: a Spirit-filled church.*

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Richardson, *Creeds in the Making*, Fortress Press, 1935, p. 124.