

Sermon: "Experiencing an Energy Crisis?"
Scripture: Acts 2: 1-21
Pastor Jon Kraner
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A few weeks ago, I attended a conference in Los Angeles at Mosaic Church. While driving my rental car around that city, I looked at the gas prices and was stunned – gas in Los Angeles was \$3.47 a gallon. I could not believe it; in fact, I said to myself, "I'm sure glad I don't live out here! Gas prices will never get this high in the good old Midwest!" Yeah right! Just before the Memorial Day Weekend, I was back in Celina, and you know what happened on the Wednesday before – gas prices shot up over night to \$3.49 a gallon! So much for "that'll never happen in Ohio!"

While out in Los Angeles, I was talking with some people from L.A. and they were speculating whether or not they would experience roaming black-outs again like they did a few years ago when the demand for energy was higher than normal and whole sections of the city would be affected. One second everything was burning bright, and the next – no power for as long as three or more hours.

I've been listening to the various news reports about our country's ever-growing energy crunch. The more I listen to the media reports and all the political spin, the more confusing the whole issue becomes. On one side, the environmentalists want to protect vast wilderness areas and they urge us to quit using energy on unnecessary things. On the other side, there are those who tell us we are sitting on vast reserves of energy sources. They say all the power we need is right there. We are just not tapping in to it. And, the more I thought about this whole issue, the more I began to recognize that our energy situation parallels what I see happening in many churches. Simply put, there is a "Spirit energy crisis" and it manifests itself in one of three ways.

First, in some churches, there is a tremendous shortage of power. Nothing is happening except the predictable Sunday-to-Sunday routine and some programs that do not bring any significant transformation within the people that make up that body. Next, there are churches out there that I call "roaming black-out" churches. One minute the power is on and God is moving and people are being led to Christ and transformed into His Character and the community is being transformed as well. But the next thing you know – they are in a black out! Nothing happens for an extended period of time; then suddenly without warning, "Poof" they are back on-line, but no one knows how long it will last. Finally, there are other churches that have tons of power; but the problem is they are misdirecting it into unnecessary things. As a result, they are just wasting the power God gave them.

The reality is no where do I read in my Bible that God intends for His church to end up in a "Spirit energy crisis." I know that because, before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told his disciples in Luke 24, "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." What do you think of when you hear Jesus say that word "power"? Don't skip over that word too quickly – put yourselves in the disciples' sandals. Jesus says, "You will be clothed with power." Power – what does that mean? Whose definition of power are we talking about anyway? I know people who can bench press 300 pounds and – to me – that is powerful. Is that what Jesus means? Interestingly, the original Greek language of the New Testament manuscripts gives us a clue. The word for power in this text is "dunamis" – which means dynamite.

When Jesus says we are to be “clothed with power,” He means power with a capital “P”. And as we see in the book of Acts, when that power comes upon an individual and a church, miracles happen. Men declare the wonders of God speaking languages they have never studied. When the power of God comes upon His church, God’s people are bathed in His glory and filled again and again. Unfortunately, churches experiencing a power shortage never see God work in this way. They cannot because they are totally disconnected from the power source – God’s Holy Spirit – who makes this possible. Whether because of pride or fear or stubbornness, there is not much happening.

Now I know what you are thinking – there is a thought running through your mind that goes something like this, “Hold it there, Preacher. Don’t forget that we’re Methodists! We don’t go for that spooky Spirit stuff!” To which I say, “Really!” Ironically, even John Wesley – the founder of the Methodist Movement and the Anglican Priest – could not deny the power of God’s Holy Spirit because he experienced it! If you do not believe me, listen to a couple of John Wesley’s journal entries:

“About 3 in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground.”

Or how about this one:

“Immediately the power of God fell upon us; one, and another, and another sunk to the earth; you might see them dropping on all sides as thunderstruck. One cried aloud. I went and prayed over her, and she received the joy in the Holy Ghost.”

John Wesley operated in that power. He relied heavily on the Holy Spirit. By the way, do you know what Wesley’s greatest fear was? Do you think he worried that his movement would die? No, that was not his fear. Listen to his own words written in 1786:

“I do not fear that the people called Methodist shall ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. I only fear that they shall exist as a dead sect having the form of religion, but not the power thereof, and that will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast to the doctrine, disciplines and spirit with which they first set out.

Friends, the call of God to His church is simple – the problem is never adequate supply; God has an abundant supply of power through His Spirit. The problem is we have not plugged in to that Divine supply. If you are experiencing a “Spirit energy crisis,” get plugged in to God’s power by letting God’s Spirit fill this place and our very lives; but once we have plugged in, we must be careful that we do not become one of those “roaming black-out” churches. In other words, we dare not become a church that exhibits God’s power one week and nothing the next. As I read the book of Acts, I see people who exhibit God’s power in balance.

Illustrating this point, one writer says, “Power can be used in at least two ways; it can be unleashed, or it can be harnessed. The energy of ten gallons of gasoline, for instance, can be released explosively by dropping a lighted match into the can; or, it can be channeled through the engine of a car in a controlled burn and used to transport a person 250 miles. Explosions are spectacular – but controlled burns have lasting effect, staying power. The Holy Spirit works both ways. At Pentecost, He exploded on the scene – His presence was like tongues of fire. Thousands were affected by one burst of God’s power. But He also works through the church to tap the Holy Spirit’s power for the long haul. Through worship, fellowship, and service,

God's people are provided with staying power." So, not only must we plug in to God's Holy Spirit, we must also appropriate that power in balance.

That brings us to the last principle I want to share. As the text was read, did you notice how that power was utilized? For example, for whose benefit was the power of the Holy Spirit manifest – Christians or non-Christians? The way I see it, the ultimate purpose for the release of this power was for the non-Christians. If that's the case, why do so many churches who have definitely plugged-in to God's Holy Spirit power hoard it for themselves for their own benefit? Agreeing with this thought, one writer states, "When the apostles received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they did not rent the Upper Room and stay there to hold holiness meetings, but went everywhere preaching the gospel."

Friends, I do not know how many times I have heard stories of churches experiencing a mighty move of God's power and, for weeks to follow, every effort is thrown into keeping the explosive presence going so others can come and experience the same event. And nine times out of ten, who goes to those meetings? Not people walking far from God! Nine times out of ten, it is other Christians church-hopping. Funny thing is, that first Christian Pentecost, powerful miracles were given through God's Spirit so people walking far from God could be told the good news of God's love through Jesus Christ. For that reason, I would like to suggest that our last principle is this: The primary appropriation of God's power must be directed toward those outside the church – not those inside. When we follow this principle so many lives will be transformed! You want to know what that might look like?

Let me share a final story from the life of Tony Campolo that will illustrate this principle. For those of you who are not aware, Tony is a professor of sociology at Eastern College and he is also a very dynamic speaker. He tells the story of a visit to Honolulu for a Christian conference. On his first night there, he awoke some time after 3:00 a.m. because of the six-hour time difference that had confused his sleep schedule. So he left the hotel in search of a place to eat. Eventually, he found a tiny coffee shop. He walked in and sat down. Here is his description of the events:

The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me, "What do you want?" I told him a cup of coffee and a donut. As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door suddenly opened and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and rather boisterous prostitutes. It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place.

I was just about to make my getaway when I heard the woman sitting next to me say, "You know, tomorrow is my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." Her friend responded in a rather nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Do you want me to get a cake and sing happy birthday to you?"

"Come on," the woman sitting next to me said, "Why do you have to be so mean? I'm just telling you that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When I (Campolo) heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the woman left; and then I called the fat guy and asked him, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah", he said, "that's Agnes. She comes in here every night. Why do you want to know?" "Because," I replied, "I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say we do something special for her? What do you think about throw-

ing her a birthday party right here in the diner?"

A cute kind of smile crept over that fat man's chubby cheeks. He answered with a measure of delight, "That's a great idea. I like it. Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind. I don't think anybody has ever done anything nice and kind for her." "Well look," I told him, "if it's okay with you, I'll be back here tomorrow morning at 2:30. I'll decorate the place. I'll even get the birthday cake for her." "No way," he retorted, "the cake, that's my thing. I'll bake the cake."

At 2:30 the next morning, (Campolo writes) I was back at the diner. I picked up some crepe paper and other decorations at the store and made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated that diner from one end to the other. I had that diner really looking great. The word must have gotten out because, by 3:15 that next morning, every prostitute in Honolulu was in that place. There were wall-to-wall prostitutes—and me.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready – after all, I was sort of the informal master of ceremonies. It was my idea, so when they came in we all jumped up and screamed and we sang, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I've never seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open, her knees started to buckle, her friend had to offer her arm to steady her, and I noticed she had started to cry.

When the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, that's when she just lost it. She started sobbing. Harry, the fat guy, behind the counter gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Blow out the candles." Then he handed her a knife and ordered, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Cut the cake." Agnes looked down at that cake, and then without taking her eyes off of it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I – I mean – if I don't...? What I want to ask – is it okay if I keep the cake a little while? Is it alright if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure Agnes, that's fine. You want to keep the cake? Keep the cake, take it home if you want. "Oh could I?" she asked. Looking at me she said, "I live just down the street; I want to take the cake home – is that okay? I'll be right back, honest!" She got off her stool, picked up her cake, and she carried it out of that diner like it was the Holy Grail. She walked slowly toward the door, and we all stood there speechless. When the door closed behind her, there was stunned silence in that place.

Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray together?" Looking back on it now, it seems more than a little strange that a sociologist from Eastern PA would be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But I prayed. And I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her. And when I finished, Harry leaned over; and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of preacher are you anyway? What church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry thought for a moment, and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't; there is no church like that." "In fact," he concluded, "if there was, I'd join it!"

I share that long story with you to give a glimpse of what it would look like if we

could just get it right. You see, we must never forget that the primary appropriation of the Holy Spirit's power must always be toward those far from God. Furthermore, we must never be a "roaming black-out" church that exhibits explosive power one week and then nothing the next. Finally, none of any of this is even remotely possible, if we refuse to plug in!