

BURNED-OUT CHRISTIANS

Acts 1:6-9

A man went to the doctor complaining of fatigue. He described how he just felt burned out all the time. The doctor asked him to try to identify the things in his daily routine that might be contributing to his condition. After some thought, the man wrote down five things on a piece of paper. The doctor took the piece of paper, studied it for a moment, said "Ah-ha" and "Um-huh" and then wrote a prescription. He handed the prescription to the man, shook his hand and wished him well. The man left the office with a great sense of relief. When he got in the car, he looked at the prescription the doctor had written. It simply said, "Don't do these five things--and repeated the list the man had written himself."

Have you noticed lately how weary people seem to be? I see many people through the week that just seem to be exhausted--physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The pace of their life is killing them. They find their energy is gone. They are simply "burned out." Being "burned out" used to be about age. That doesn't seem to be true any longer. I used to think Geritol was for old people. Now, the marketplace is full of products to make us peppy again. There are vitamins, hormone patches, special diets, high powered drinks--all designed to perk up burned out people.

Over the years, I've seen people whose professions cause them to burn out. Ministers are becoming highly vulnerable to burnout. A recent article listed the top five reasons for clergy burnout:

1. Professional isolation and loneliness.
2. Overextension because of the avid needs of dependent people.
3. Overload of demands--and inability to balance congregational needs with personal and family needs.
4. Having too many critics.
5. Pressure to reach unrealistic goals and play too many roles.

In many respects, "ministry" as defined today has become too broad and unmanageable for just one person to do. Preachers burn out because people today expect them to be proficient in too many areas.

It's not just preachers that are burned out, churches are too. I've served some burned out congregations in my time. I attended a ministry seminar a few years ago. In my group, questions like "Describe your experience of serving churches" and "How has your experience in the local church shaped your model of ministry?" were asked. I told our group leader that I felt like an ambulance worker. The number one ministry issue I've faced time and time again is the church's need for resuscitation. The first job is to stabilize the patient (the church) and keep it from dying. Then, if the congregation makes it through the crisis, your job then is to begin the healing process that hopefully leads to health and wholeness.

Of the many churches I have served in my ministry, two have died, four are gradually declining, one is in the final stages of death and only my current congregation seems alive and desirous of growing. The preceding minister of my very first congregation told me that the congregation was dying and that I was sent there as a student to help them accept their terminal status. He described a hopeless situation. I soon discovered one reason why the church was dying. I moved in on Thursday and started on Sunday. I walked into worship that first morning to find about forty of the saddest, least energetic people I had ever seen. There was an atmosphere of death. A brother in the Lord asked me what I thought I could do. I told him that I was determined to perk those people up and help them to discover joy in the Lord again! By the time I left three years later, they had reclaimed a sense of joy and enthusiasm for being the church of the living Lord and for sharing the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, today they are back on the critical list. The reality is that there are far too many dying churches around today. If a church is reasonably alive today, far too often it has lost its credibility or life-changing influence because it dwells on trivia too much.

This can be described as "majoring in minors." Rather than offer people the power of the gospel, many churches have lost their focus and constantly deal with distractions. Sermons are more like tranquilizers than energizers. Do you know what most secular, non-church going people say first about the church? **It's BORING**. They can sleep at home. It just seems too trivial to them. There's no power. When we major in the minors, much of the church's life becomes trivial pursuit. We might as well just publish a list of trivia each week like:

- Tabasco sauce is a terrific silver polish.
- The average American eats 18,216 bowls of cereal in a lifetime.
- You can not belch while you are lying on you back.
- Many dentists use diamonds in their drills.
- Sleepwalking runs in families.
- All animals yawn, even fish.
- Pigs are the only animals susceptible to sunburn.

Trivia may be amusing. It may even be interesting. But, it's not life changing. There is no power in trivia. The reality of deadness, triviality and just being burned out by so many churches today stands in stark contrast to the early church. As you read through the book of Acts, there is energy, excitement, drive, purpose and power that leaps off the page. That aliveness of the early church all goes back to Pentecost.

Pentecost is about power - it is about spiritual vitality. You see, Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for power from the Holy Spirit. This gift of power was given for a specific purpose. This early community of disciples was told by Jesus that this gift of the Holy Spirit would propel them into the world in ever broadening circles to be "witnesses" for him. Jesus' last words to the disciples before his ascension to Heaven:

“You shall receive power when the Holy spirit comes on you: and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”. (Acts 1:8)

The Holy Spirit is a promise of power for a God-given purpose. Between the promise and the power, the disciples were asked to wait expectantly. Once it came, they were filled with an energy and a drive and a passion to tell the story of the gospel that could not be contained.

So, why are so many individual Christians and local congregations so burned out today? Maybe it's because we've lost our purpose and passion. Jesus tells the disciples their purpose is **to be witnesses**--to share the good news of His triumphant grace with the world. Maybe our burned-out condition is because we haven't provided the kindling for the Holy Spirit's fire to catch and burn within us. If we are honest, we must admit that far too few churches live and gather together with expectancy of the wonders **God can work through us!** Maybe we are just simply too distracted by the things in the world that cause us to major in the minors, so, God has allowed the fire of his spiritual energy to move on somewhere else.

When I played sports, my dad told me to play with "fire in your belly." It took me awhile to figure out exactly what he meant. What he meant was that if I didn't play with passion, don't play at all. So often, I just want to get up and shout to Christians: "Where's the fire in your belly?" Don't you know Jesus has promised us power? The problem usually is that people have no interest in being a witness for Jesus.

Several years ago, in East Tennessee, Norris Dam was constructed. As part of the huge network today called the Tennessee Valley Authority, Norris Dam was one of many projects designed to bring electric power to the rural south. Shortly after the dam began operations, a night worker remarked how strange it was to see nearby cabins still being lighted by kerosene lamps. Although the people were living within the shadow of the greatest source of electric power in the region, they were not connected to it.

That same tragic circumstance exists today for many Christian's and local churches. They're simply burned out because they have chosen not to link up with the source of power Jesus makes available to them.

I for one believe it's because they have lost sight of their God-given purpose--to live as witnesses for Jesus Christ. So, what's the solution? What we need is a prescription for a burned-out daily life.

The story of Pentecost is a prescription for burned out Christians today. It reminds us that Jesus has promised us power for the purpose of being his witnesses in ever widening circles in the world. Let's reclaim that purpose. Let's rekindle the expectation of the early church that assured them the power would come to enable them to continue Jesus' mission and ministry. Just remember this prescription if you're feeling burned out--rekindle your expectation of power to be a witness for the living Christ and the "fire in the belly"--the passion the Holy Spirit provides for the fulfillment of God's purposes--will return.

I want to close with Ephesians 3:14-21: *¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees to the Father [a]of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, ¹⁶that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - ¹⁹to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, ²¹to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*