

The Age of the Spirit  
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Today is Pentecost, when the Christian Church begins. Today we think of the Holy Spirit bestowing some gifts on the disciples—gifts Paul describes like wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, speaking or interpretation of tongues, discernment of spirits. Not spiritual gifts we all may be super familiar with today in our context, but nevertheless, gifts of the Holy Spirit that could turn the timid bold. There's the great wind and the tongues of fire and Peter testifying, as he's full of the Holy Spirit.

The miracle of Pentecost as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles isn't that the gathered crowd all of a sudden understood Peter's language or even that the disciples were speaking in tongues, they weren't. The miracle is that each person hears the Gospel in his or her own language. It's a story of the blessings of diversity and multiculturalism and people of every tribe, language, race, nation coming together to be the body of Christ. "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." [1] Pentecost is such a cool day in the life of our global Christian faith, celebrating unity as the Body of Christ and diversity of believers and the spiritual gifts bestowed on us.

The truth is that faith these days in our diverse world and our diverse American society is really complicated. In America, we have what's been termed the "rise of the nones." Not like Catholic nuns rising up somehow! No it's nones as in people with no religious affiliation, n-o-n-e-s. Now one out of five American adults don't identify with any religion at all and one out of three adults under the age of thirty are religiously unaffiliated. If you want to geek out over these numbers, or get depressed, either way, you can look at the extensive research done by Pew Research, their Religion and Public Life Project. [2]

When we really examine what's going on with these nones though, we discover something really interesting and not that depressing after all. The unaffiliated are a diverse group—5% of those who say they have no religious affiliation do go to worship weekly, they just don't claim their faith for whatever reason. One third of the unaffiliated say that religion is somewhat important in their lives, and two-thirds of them believe in God. So you have all these folks who say they have no religious affiliation, but most of them believe in God. When you really look at these statistics, there's some interesting things going on in our society today. [3] Think about it, two-thirds of these folks believe in God! So why aren't they in the church, or the temple, or the mosque when the conventionally religious, that's us by the way, are worshipping?

Some historians are calling our current times the Age of the Spirit. There are increasingly people who are spiritual but not religious, and many of them are practicing their spirituality sometimes just as intentionally as people who come to communal worship every week. Many performers and business leaders and thinkers have deep spiritual sides. Steve Jobs was a practicing Zen Buddhist—he went to India to find himself and came back with a message of self-realization and the desire to actualize himself. When Ellen DeGeneres came out in the 90s, her career took a big hit at first and she decided to look for happiness from within. She came to practice Transcendental Meditation which still grounds her today. Gabrielle Bernstein, a guru to young professional women, hit rock bottom after a lifetime of partying and drug abuse when she was a PR person in New York City. She had an intense religious experience where she heard a voice say, "Get your life together, girl, and you will live beyond your wildest dreams." She went onto write a self-help book called *May Cause Miracles*. [4] I don't know that we would see these folks sitting next to us in the pews on Sunday morning. But there are

increasingly people who are living deeply spiritual lives grounded in spiritual practices, who do believe in God.

These times we live in are fascinating. All of these cultural changes and the way folks are expressing spirituality can't be lost on the Church. And here's the theory put forth by Phyllis Tickle, an authority on religion in America, to help explain our current conundrum on the religious side anyway. Tickle explains that every 500 years, give or take a decade or two, the Latinized cultures of the world go through a major cultural upheaval. We begin asking ourselves questions like—where now is our authority and how now shall we live?

Five hundred years ago, it was the Protestant Reformation. All of a sudden we had humanism, nation-states, a middle class, capitalism, translating the Bible into our spoken languages and printing them to eventually have in our homes to actually read. And we had these really bizarre people called Protestants come onto the scene, claiming that religious professionals were not be the only people with direct access to God and we're saved by our faith and God's grace and we should all know our Bibles and you know the rest.

Let's go back further. In 1054 we had the Great Schism of Eastern and Western Christianity. Now you had Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics who disagreed on nuanced theological issues and split up over these disagreements and so much more. Fifteen hundred years back you had the Great Decline and Fall, when the classical world fell away and ushered in The Dark Ages. Ordered governments were no more and chaos ensued in the Latinized world. Really the monasteries and convents were some of the only institutions that rose from the ashes to save the culture.

And let's go back one more time. Around two thousand years ago, you had the Great Transformation—the world fell apart in some ways and came together in new ways. Rome moved from being a kingdom to an empire, the known world that was once scattered and disconnected became member-parts of a cultural and economic and political whole. All roads led to Rome. And in this chaos was born a humble Jewish teacher who, because of his impact, would one day change the very way we date and mark time itself in the West! We now use the terms Before the Common Era and the Common Era to not be so Christo-centric in our multicultural world. But our dates once read (and still have as their starting place) Before Christ and Anno Domini (In the Year of our Lord.) The Great Transformation indeed!

So now we're in this time period that Christian historians like Phyllis Tickle are calling the Great Emergence or The Age of the Spirit. Some are predicting that these changes we're undergoing in the Church and in our global society will be equal to The Great Transformation itself in its impact on changing everything we've always known.[5] To quote the wise folk singer Bob Dylan, "The times they are a-changin'." But how can we predict what this is going to look like and what this means for our beloved Christian Church, whose birth we celebrate today on Pentecost?

Tickle flat out says, "We find ourselves alive and Christian in a time of almost unprecedented upheaval." [6] I mean, did you know that the fastest growing expression of Christianity in the world is Pentecostalism? Moreover, Christianity is growing the most in the Southern Hemisphere, not in America and certainly not in Europe.

Pentecostalism has at its center the Holy Spirit. If you ever speak to a Pentecostal, you will hear a marvelous discussion of the gifts of the Spirit and the Baptism of the Spirit much like we heard in our passage from 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 this morning—the gifts of the Spirit that have been bestowed on members of the community. Pentecostals are known for being open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, emphasizing direct and personal experiences of God.

It's not a coincidence that we have all these people who believe in God and are spiritual but not religious, and simultaneously, we have an expression of Christianity known for its deep spirituality and direct personal encounters with God growing at the same time.

Maybe this is truly the Age of the Spirit. And maybe we can be part of a renewal movement in our expression of Christianity to get back to meaningful and intentional spirituality which is what makes us grow and thrive not just as the Church but as people. It's like the great theologian Howard Thurman once said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." If we are people who have truly come alive, we can find meaning in how we live out our Christian faiths—through prayer, exploring the Bible, relationships with each other, testifying to how we've met God in our lives, inviting others to be part of our church family, by giving back, by serving others.

Are you good and nervous yet? We can't predict the future of the Church anymore than we can predict the future of our lives. It's impossible to write history when you're in the middle of the story. But what we should know is that we're living in incredibly diverse, interesting, complicated, fascinating times. And if we buy the argument that our time will be as monumental in the history of Christianity and the Western world as Jesus' time, then we can really look out on our world with wonder and be a little gentle on ourselves if we have trouble adapting to all this change. Yes, we are the body of Christ, that is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body. And a body has to move and breathe and adapt to survive and thrive and grow. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] 1 Corinthians 12:13, NRSV.

[2] "Nones on the Rise," Pew Research, October 9, 2012<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Carolyn Gregoire, "How Some of the World's Most Successful People Discovered their Spiritual Side," October 16, 2013, The Huffington Post, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/16/10-people-who-came-out-of\\_n\\_408...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/16/10-people-who-came-out-of_n_408...)

[5] Phyllis Tickle and Jon M. Sweeney, *The Age of the Spirit: How the Ghost of an Ancient Controversy is Shaping the Church*, 9-13.

[6] Tickle and Sweeney, *The Age of the Spirit*, 20.