

I love this church, and I need your help in loving it. Would you set aside for a few minutes all you've heard about the Church and child abuse, and all you've heard about the hate mongering and bigotry of the Religious Right? Would you set aside the negative that comes to mind when you hear the word *Baptist*? I know you can't forget, but would you push back? Would you let me help you push back?

The Apostles' Creed helps us push back. In the face of disappointing and shameful behavior by Christians, the Creed declares: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins. Those unshakeable realities sustain the Church through dark times and rejuvenate its life and mission in the world. I'll talk about all four statements.

I will also help you push back against your disappointment and skepticism with a vision of what the Holy Spirit may be doing in this congregation that I have never seen in any church I have ever been part of. It's not anything we planned or even expected. It is unsettling at times. It is full of hope. Let's get started.

Spirit

Central to our experience today is the third section of the Apostles' Creed, which begins: "I believe in the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is God in person. We cannot see Him, but we can experience Him. Jesus gave us a picture of how we experience the Spirit. John 3:5-8: **Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."**

No one has seen the wind at any time; we see only evidence of the wind's presence in the movement of leaves or a piece of paper moving mysteriously across the yard or the cool you feel on a hot day as the wind blows across your face. The supreme evidence of the Spirit's presence is love. Romans 5:5 says: **God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.** The difference between a dead religion and a living faith is love. If your heart is filled with the love God has for you and with a desire to love Him back, then faith is a living power in your soul.

Worship here on Sunday offers a spiritual context in which we can experience again and again God's love for us. Here we can express again and again our love for God. Here we silence those clamoring voices that demand and deplete our energies, and we listen for His voice and trust His Spirit to renew in our hearts His love for us and our love for Him. Here heaven and earth intersect, and we hold communion with God.

Church

Another evidence of the Spirit's presence is the Church itself. "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church." The central New Testament passage that talks about this evidence is 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. **The (human) body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts, and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave**

or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

The key word is *baptized*. It means *united*. The Holy Spirit unites each person who believes in Jesus Christ with the worldwide body of Christians, which we call the Church. Baptism with water is the visible representation of what the Spirit does.

Why doesn't the Church die? Liberal Protestantism in its unholy alliance with the political left increasingly guts Christianity of anything that would distinguish it from the secular world. The Roman Catholic Church has brought shame on the name of Christ by its child abuse scandal and by covering it up. Evangelical Protestants in their unholy alliance with the political right have made the Church synonymous with hate mongering and bigotry. Is the Church in Europe and North American on its last legs?

G. K. Chesterton wrote a book called *The Everlasting Man*. The last chapter is called "The Five Deaths of the Faith." Here is a quote I thought you might enjoy. It speaks to the question, "Why doesn't the Church die?"

"It (the faith, the Church) was supposed to have been withered up at last in the dry light of the Age of Reason; it was supposed to have disappeared ultimately in the earthquake of the Age of Revolution. Science explained it away; and it was still there. History disinterred it in the past; and it appeared suddenly in the future. To-day it stands once more in our path; and even as we watch it, it grows.

"... it would seem that sooner or later even its enemies will learn from those incessant and interminable disappointments not to look for anything so simple as its death. They may continue to war with it, but it will be as they war with nature; as they war with the landscape, as they war with the skies. 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words will not pass away.' They will watch for it to stumble; they will watch for it to err; they will no longer watch for it to end." (Pp. 302-303)

The Holy Spirit, God in person, animates the Church. What looks like death is only the Church shedding its outer skin, making room for new growth and renewed energy. And as for the death of the Church in Europe and North America, we might remember two things. First, the Church is busting out all over in South America Africa, and Asia. And, second, in the Western world, especially the United States, repentance, reform, and resurgence all bear witness to the Holy Spirit's presence. You won't hear that in the media, because they are terrified of the Church's energy and power over people's lives in this country. The Holy Spirit makes you part of something unstoppable.

Communion

Another evidence of the Spirit's presence is the communion of saints. "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints." The central New Testament passage that offers this evidence is 1 Corinthians 12:4-6. **There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.** The Church is a treasure house of different strengths designed to build us up.

The apostle celebrated this diversity in a pointed way in verses 14-16. **Now the body is not made up one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.**

And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.

The communion of saints means sharing with our brothers and sisters the good things that we all bring into the common life of the Church. That's how we strengthen and encourage each other. That's how the Church grows. That's what gives each congregation its distinct personality and its unique strengths. And where BVBC is weak another congregation makes up for that with its unique strengths.

Here's a small example. Three weeks ago, I renewed my friendship with Jeff Emhoff, a friend from our ministry in Central New York in the late '60s and early '70s. We spent four hours together talking. We did very little reminiscing. We are both too immersed in the present to spend much time on the past. We talked about what it means to disciple the next generation of believers. We talked about the nature of the Church. We talked about the books we are currently reading and why they matter to us.

It was a rich time, made richer by the unexpected ideas that began to take shape as we talked. The communion of saints was a living reality at Macaroni Grill that day, as it is when I read *The Everlasting Man*, as it is when I read Augustine's masterpiece *On the Trinity*, as it is when I read scripture and when I pray for you each day of my life.

Forgiveness

Another evidence of the Spirit's presence is the forgiveness of sins. "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins." A central New Testament passage that offers this evidence is John 20:21-23. **Again, Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."**

The Church forgives sins. It can do this only because it has received the Holy Spirit. I say this with caution, because you can hear a thousand sermons in an Evangelical church and never hear a sermon on John 20:21-23 and its explosive truth. Let me put some understanding around this teaching of our Lord.

Mark 2:1-12 reports the story of a quadriplegic young man. Four of his friends thought Jesus could make him walk, so they brought him to Jesus. As he looked up at Jesus from his mat, he and everyone else wondered if Jesus could really make him walk. Jesus caught everyone off guard when **he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."** (Mark 2:5) He offended all the wrong people when He said that. The only way to calm them down (maybe) was what happened next. Jesus said, **"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ."** He said to the paralytic, **"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."** (Mark 2:10-11) And he did. The temporary miracle of healing ratified the eternal miracle of forgiveness.

The Father sent the Son into the world to forgive sins. So when Jesus said in John 20, **"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,"** He included the forgiving of sins in the mission of the Church. As a pastor in the Church, I exercise that commission in two circumstances. One is when a person confesses publicly that Jesus is Lord, and the other is in the context of the Lord's Supper after the time of confession of our sins.

No follower of Christ declares the forgiveness of sins on his own authority. It is done in the name of Christ, on His authority, and it is based on the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross as an expiation **for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.** (1 John 2:2) This declaration of forgiveness is another evidence that the wind of the Spirit is blowing across our experience.

Take-aways

I believe in the Holy Spirit, and I believe in the Spirit-powered Church with its communion of saints and forgiveness of sins. And I believe the Spirit is doing something in this congregation that I have never seen in any church I have ever been part of.

We have a chance to build something here that is unique. Could we work together intentionally to build a church that people would like to find but have given up looking for? Here's what I propose. You may have heard me and others talk about The Path. (Put up graph of the Path.) What is the path? It is BVBC's intentional effort to bring more and more people to Christ-centered maturity. Use the graph, and do a quick self-evaluation. Where would you place yourself on the Path? Maybe you don't think you are even on the Path. People who come here are all over the map, and that spiritual diversity in a church is part of what the Spirit is doing here that I've never seen before.

That and the fact that this church is a safe place for diverse people! If you are not on the Path at all, or if you are just trying to figure out what Christ has to do with you, this is a safe place for you. It's a safe place to explore Christianity or to try to reconnect with Christ after being away from Christ and the Church for years. It's safe, because this congregation has learned to take people as they are. You, the long-time stalwarts of this church, have made it safe.

People who are afraid of being judged if they go to church can come here, and they won't be judged. They are afraid of being judged for many reasons. They live together outside marriage. They are single parents. They can't have children. They are divorced. They struggle with same-sex attractions. They have addictions. They don't know the Bible. They are afraid they won't know what to do. They don't feel worthy for who knows why. If you have friends like that, would you ask them to come here with you? Whatever your experience has been, that's what theirs can be.

It's not that we don't have clear beliefs about God and Christ and about what's right and wrong; we do. But we know that we, the long-time stalwarts, mess up too. This isn't a place for perfect people. We know we need to help each other. That makes us patient with people who see things differently from us or whose behavior is different, sometimes shockingly different.

That's where the Path comes in. We are all over the place in our individual experiences. But the Path points all of us in the same direction. It gives us common goals to shoot for. If you think it would be appealing to move at your own pace toward those goals, and if you'd like to have a guided tour of the Path, I hope you'll be part of the conference we are hosting on April 12-13.

We are bringing in two godly, seasoned people, who will offer us practical, fact-based, groundbreaking insights into how people move at their own pace toward Christ-centered

maturity. You can get more information and register in the Gathering Place today. Friday night, April 12, is just for BVBC, and there is childcare that night for children birth-grade 5.

The Holy Spirit has placed this diversity of people in this safe church at this time in our history. People aren't hostile to Christ, but they don't like churches. Let's build a church that is breath-takingly different.