

Be Fervent

Acts 18:23-28

Bryn MacPhail / Oct. 31, 2010

It has been suggested from this pulpit in recent weeks that we ought *not* to pursue congregational growth. It has been suggested that we resist the inclination to follow a formula or strategy that is aimed at “growing” a congregation.

Instead, the challenge put forward has been to *pursue that which advances our spiritual health.*

The principle, or the reasoning, in play here is that *healthy things grow.*

Growth is not something we can manufacture. Growth is the natural course for something that is healthy.

Accordingly, if we want to see growth at the Kirk—if we want to see the expansion of the Kirk’s ministry in this community, *our focus needs to be on our spiritual health.*

Within this sermon series we have talked about some of the *habits* which will benefit our spiritual health. We’ve seen in the early church exemplary habits related to prayer, exemplary habits related to their study of the Scriptures, and how they gave priority to the Lord Jesus Christ in all things.

In our passage this morning, however, we don't so much have *a habit to engage in* as we have *a trait to pursue*.

Following the example of Apollos, I submit that *it is vital that every congregation, and every Christian, be marked by a discernable passion for the Lord Jesus Christ*.

I realize that, as individuals, we have differing temperaments and personalities. Some of us are introverts, while others are extroverts. Some of us are extremely emotive, while others are as difficult to read as a professional poker player.

Nevertheless, relative to how God has wired us, there ought to be a discernable passion for the things of Christ.

Did you know that the Bible actually commands us to be zealous? Writing to the Romans, in chapter 12, verse 11, the apostle Paul gives the following imperative: **“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.”**

So you see, fervency is not some optional add-on, but is fundamentally important to our health and effectiveness as a Christian, and as a local congregation.

A similar rendering to what we find in Romans 12 is given by Luke in Acts 18 to describe Apollos. Luke describes **“a certain Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in**

the way of the Lord; and *being fervent in spirit*, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus” (18:24, 25).

Luke says that Apollos was fervent. Paul commands you and I to be fervent—but what exactly does that mean?

The Greek word used by Luke and Paul is the word *zeo* (pronounced ‘dzeh-o’). Literally translated, *zeo* means, ‘to be hot’. It is a word often used to describe boiling liquids.

We sometimes refer to a short-tempered person as being a ‘hot head’. This is *not* how Luke regards Apollos. And certainly Paul is not commanding the Christian community to resemble a group of easily agitated ‘hot heads’. And yet, let’s not miss the force of the word meaning, ‘to be hot’.

In some Christian circles you hear individuals described as being ‘on fire for the Lord’. Given what we read about Apollos, that description may not be all that far off what it means to be fervent.

A caution should be stated here. *Fervency without biblical prudence will not promote God’s glory.*

You have seen such examples on your television set. The preacher paces back and forth across a stage—when he’s not shouting, he’s wiping the sweat from his brow. He’s passionate, he’s excited about his message, and he does everything he can to get the crowd excited about his message.

But there's something fundamentally wrong with his exposition. The preacher has taken a single verse from Acts 19 (v.12) completely out of context, and is now insisting that the viewers at home call the 1-800 line immediately in order to purchase one of his green 'prosperity handkerchiefs', which he has personally blessed. Along with this handkerchief, comes a promise of physical healing.

No doubt about it—this particular preacher is fervent—but is this the fervency Paul calls you and I to? Is this what Apollos was like?

I don't think so. Luke presents Apollos as a very balanced individual. With Apollos, you get both *light* and *heat*; you get responsible biblical exposition and you get a discernable passion . . . **“fervent in spirit, (Apollos) was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus”** (18:25).

You could say that Apollos exemplified Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' definition of good preaching, which is “logic on fire.”

We want fervency—we want zeal—but our fervency must be accompanied by biblical prudence.

We have noted the danger of having heat without light. We should balance that notation with a warning about possessing light without heat.

As Presbyterians, we often pride ourselves with our scholarship.

We cherish the intellectual heritage from which we have come—from Calvin to Knox, from Rutherford to Bonar—we have benefited from many who have thought deeply, and have written extensively, about what the Bible is calling the church to do.

Presbyterians have a reputation of possessing a great deal of light, but other denominations have challenged us regarding the extent to which we give off heat.

Frankly, I am mortified by the nickname sometimes assigned to Presbyterians. Did you know that we are sometimes referred to as ‘The Frozen Chosen’?

Apollos was not the least bit frozen in his delivery of the biblical message, and neither should we be cold in our expression of the Christian faith.

Now, I admit, congregational fervency is difficult to measure. It’s not as if I can wander into the sanctuary on Sunday morning with a device that will measure the spiritual energy in the room. I lack a resource that will tell me what the exact level of spiritual fervency is at St. Andrew’s.

And yet, Luke is able to discern that Apollos is fervent. Fervency then, must be something we can reasonably detect; fervency must be observable in some regard. Otherwise, it would be cruel for Paul to command something of us that is impossible to confirm.

It should also be noted that Paul is not merely commanding fervency for Sunday morning, but he is *commanding fervency for everyday life*.

Paul is insisting that every part of our lives be marked by a kind of warm spiritual energy. Our Christian fervency, if it is deeply embedded within us, will not fail to give off heat within our homes, within our workplaces, and within our community.

By contrast, if our spiritual warmth on Sunday morning cools as we drive out of the church parking lot, we need to ask ourselves whether our fervency was genuinely from the Lord or whether it was merely manufactured within the excitement of Sunday morning worship.

Some of you know that I came to faith as a teenager while attending a Christian camp, even though I had spent considerable time attending a Presbyterian congregation as a child.

There were probably many things that differentiated my church experience from my camp experience, but one difference in particular stands out in my mind: The spiritual fervency of the camp staff.

What these young men and women believed transformed how they behaved.

I don't mean to sound unkind in describing my church upbringing when I say that my church introduced me to *religion*, and my camp introduced me to *a relationship* with Jesus Christ.

Twenty five years later, as a pastor of a local church, *I have a burden to keep us from delivering religion to those who gather here.*

My burden is to promote having a relationship with Jesus Christ—a relationship that will undoubtedly fuel our zeal for Divine priorities.

Parents of young children are often warned that, ‘it’s not what your children *hear* from you that impacts them, as much as it is what they *see* from you that affects their behaviour.’

The same can be said of the witness of a local congregation—our orthodox doctrine and our sophisticated forms of worship will not impress or compel anyone unless it is accompanied by a fervent faith.

Unless we are seen to be ‘on fire for the Lord’, our witness to the community around us will be diminished.

If you agree that fervency is vital to the health of a congregation, then we need to ask a rather basic question: How do we get this? How do we enhance our level of passion? How do we increase the temperature of our faith?

I submit to you that *increased fervency is gained by living in close proximity to Jesus Christ.*

In the same way the warmth of the earth is largely determined by the proximity of the sun, so too is the fervency of the Christian determined by his/her proximity to the Son of God.

If the light of the Lord is shining upon you, you will be fervent.

By contrast, if you keep your distance from Jesus, your spirit will grow cool. It is as simple as that.

In Luke's description of Apollos, I see more than just a warm and friendly man. It's not simply the case that Apollos was likeable and influential.

This is a man who is *hot* about his relationship with Jesus.

Apollos is bubbling over with enthusiasm; his zeal reveals a deeply embedded passion for the things of Christ.

I want us to covet that kind of fervent zeal for ourselves and I want us to covet that level of spiritual energy for St. Andrew's.

I'm reminded of a story I heard a number of years ago. Jack Nicklaus was participating in a celebrity golf tournament, and Jack's celebrity partner, was amazed at how consistent he was at sinking difficult putts.

Near the end of the round, Nicklaus sunk another long putt. This stirred his celebrity partner to exclaim, "I wish I could putt like that".

Jack immediately turned to his partner and gave him this curt response, "I didn't get to putt like this by wishing."

Friends, we cannot *wish* ourselves into closer proximity to Jesus Christ.

You have done well by gathering for worship, but our efforts to heat up our relationship must not stop here.

We need to be stoking the fire of our zeal by communicating frequently with the Lord. This means stepping up our commitment to prayer.

We need to aim at increasing our passion for the Lord by listening to His voice. I'm not talking about a whisper in your ear or a random thought. We listen to the Lord by giving ourselves to the regular study of Scripture.

As you hear the exhortation to be fervent, as you hear the imperative to have a passionate faith, I want you to remember that this cannot be put on, or manufactured.

Enduring zeal is the overflow of living in close proximity to Jesus Christ.

I urge you: Work at your relationship with Him, and begin setting the spiritual temperature for all those you connect with. Amen.

