

When the Church Fails to Launch

Acts 2:1-21 | 6/4/2017

Picture a rocket on a launch pad. A clear blue sky. The white shell of the spacecraft, gleaming in the sun. Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... blast-off! A thrilling moment. Except when the rocket experiences a failure to launch.

Exactly 21 years ago, on June 4, 1996, a cluster of four spacecraft were launched on the maiden flight of a rocket called Ariane 5. Unfortunately, the rocket flew off course just 37 seconds after launch. Disintegration began, and then its flight termination system caused it to self-destruct. The four spacecraft were lost. Fortunately, no people were aboard.

The problem? An error in the software design. It became one of the most expensive software bugs in history, resulting in a loss of more than \$370 million. Since that time, the Ariane 5 has become one of the most reliable of rockets, with more than 90 flights.

Of course, not all rocket failures are tragedies. Anytime North Korea fails to launch a missile, people in the US, South Korea and Japan breathe a sigh of relief. They routinely conduct missile tests in defiance of resolutions passed by the United Nations Security Council. When their missiles fail to launch, the world rejoices.

On the day of Pentecost, the apostles of Jesus were all together in the city of Jerusalem. The word "apostle" means "messenger" or "one who is sent forth." The apostles were on the launch pad, ready to be sent forth.

Five ... four ... "Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind".

three ... two ... one ... "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them".

Liftoff! "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4). The apostles began to lift off, causing amazement and astonishment among the people gathered in Jerusalem. This international crowd heard the apostles using a variety of languages, "speaking about God's deeds of power" (v. 11). But not everyone was impressed -- some sneered and said that the apostles were "filled with new wine" (v. 13).

Then the apostle Peter took a bold stand in front of the crowd and told them that the coming of the Spirit was a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. The launch of the Christian church was the beginning of a new era, one in which "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 21).

On the day of Pentecost, the Christian church experienced a successful launch. It escaped the gravitational pull of a skeptical crowd and achieved an orbit that it continues to inhabit today. But we each have a role to play in keeping the church from crashing and burning.

Have you heard of "failure to launch syndrome"? Rockets are not involved in this one. Instead, this problem is quite common among young adults who cannot leave the parental nest. According to the *Cottonwood* website, "it is characterized by low levels of motivation, poor work ethic, lack of vision for the future, inability or unwillingness to take responsibility when appropriate and an inability to manage daily household chores."

The Christian church also sometimes faces its own "failure to launch syndrome." Note that I'm not suggesting that the church did not launch at Pentecost. It did. The power of the Holy Spirit was present. Full, complete countdown and launch. But I *am* suggesting that sometimes, the local expression of the church universal has trouble getting off the launch pad. It happens when Christians are not adequately fueled, properly programmed and on the right course. *Only when all three are in place can the church complete its mission.*

So let's do a countdown:

Three: Christians need to be adequately fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us that the apostles blasted off successfully in Jerusalem because "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 4). Without the inspiration of the Spirit, we're never going to get off the ground.

So where can we get this high-octane, highly volatile spiritual fill-up? In worship, for starters. We can pray for the Holy Spirit to help us hear God's Word. We can ask for the Spirit to heal us, touch us and transform us. We can trust the Spirit to make Christ present to us in the bread and cup of Communion. Worship is not simply a human activity; instead, it is an activity that is both human *and* divine, with Jesus really present through the power of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual fueling begins with worship.

Two: Christians need to be properly programmed to connect with their neighbors. No bugs in the system. On the day of Pentecost, the apostles "began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4). These backwoods Galileans did not expect the international crowd in Jerusalem to learn Aramaic, the language that each of them had grown up speaking. Instead, they used the diverse languages given to them by the Spirit to speak to the people around them "about God's deeds of power" (v. 11).

We can program ourselves to make connections, learning new languages and new communication tools to reach our neighbors. Richard Lindsay, the co-editor of PopTheology.com, says that we need to make use of creative multimedia, "actual popular culture that people interact with every day." I am happy to say that prospective members I have spoken with over the last two weeks have been quite excited about the idea that we now have our own YouTube channel, as well as a website, a Facebook page, and business cards you can scan with your smart phone to get to our website! The Holy Spirit is helping us speak the language of technology.

One: Inspired by the Spirit and programmed to make connections, we can embark on a mission of sharing good news with people around us. In Jerusalem, Peter stood up and promised that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 21). He gave his hearers a message of inclusion and hope. While we may not join Peter in preaching on street corners, we can follow his lead by knocking on doors and building relationships based on authentic concern.

But wait. Knocking on doors? Many of us are reluctant to reach out to our neighbors, fearing their judgment or rejection. But the truth is that many people today are feeling isolated and alone, and will welcome a visit that is honest and respectful. When visiting a neighbor, there are two simple questions that can get a conversation going: "What do you like about living here? What would make it better?"

Such questions can open the door to spiritual conversations. When people tell you what they like about living in the community, you can get a sense of what matters to them, and where their values and interests lie. When they tell you about what would make the community better, you are given an opportunity to talk about what your church can do for them. You can explain how you are involved, and why your faith inspires you to take action. Plus, you can get ideas for new ways to meet the needs of your community. Before you say good-bye, let them know how much joy and inspiration you get from worship, and tell them that you would love to welcome them and sit with them in an upcoming service. From two simple questions, you can begin to build a relationship based on authentic concern.

Even the way we dress can start a spiritual conversation. You would be amazed how many people I have had the opportunity to invite to church because they first admired my BHC – Big Honking Cross.

The Pentecost countdown includes the fuel of the Holy Spirit, a program to connect with neighbors, and a mission to bring good news to the world. Three, two, one ... blast-off! These qualities were in place when the church first launched, and they will keep us flying on the right course today.

Pastor Keith

Children's Sermon

Put a birthday cake in front of the children, with 12 candles on it. Ask them if they can guess whose birthday it is. Tell them that it is the birthday of the church! Explain that the church was born when the Holy Spirit came to 12 followers of Jesus in the city of Jerusalem. Begin to light the candles and ask them if they know how the Holy Spirit appeared. Say that "divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them" (v. 3). Describe how the Holy Spirit's fire did not burn them, but gave them the ability to speak in other languages, which they used to tell a big crowd of people about "God's deeds of power" (v. 11). See if the children can guess what some of these deeds of power were, and suggest that God has shown his power by creating the world and all of its people, rescuing Moses and the Israelites from the Egyptians, and healing people through the ministry of Jesus. Encourage the children to tell their friends about God's deeds of power, using whatever words they can. Then invite the children to join you in singing "Happy Birthday" to the church, followed by blowing out the candles. Tell them that after the service they will be able to have a piece of the cake to eat.