

**Out of Gas**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
The Day of Pentecost  
*Acts 2:1-21*

Back when I was in college I had a motorcycle. Or maybe I should say back when I was *out of* college. At the beginning of my junior year I had declared a pre-med major, and signed up for courses like Calculus, Organic Chemistry, and Microbiology. Halfway through the semester I realized I was in deep trouble. I didn't like any of those classes and thought, "If this has anything to do with the medical profession then I'm not sure I want any part of it." I began to talk to my classmates about dropping out of school, taking a semester off to herd sheep somewhere. They thought that was a wonderful idea, but when the next semester rolled around I was the only one who actually did it. I went to work on a sheep farm in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, up in the high mountains in the eastern part of the state. I couldn't afford a car, but my cousin Robert had sold me his old motorcycle—a Honda CB360—not much more than a glamorized motor scooter, really. Still, it got me around. At least it did until that day in the spring of 1979 when I just couldn't get it to start.

It was a Friday afternoon. I was planning to take the weekend off to go see this girl I knew in Charlottesville. I was eager to get underway but my motorcycle wouldn't start. I kicked the starter down until my leg went numb, and then, after I had recovered, I tried pushing the motorcycle down the gravel drive there on the farm, running along beside it until I had built up some speed and then jumping on and popping the clutch to see if I could get the engine to catch. The farmer I was working for saw what I was doing and offered to help. He tied a rope to the back of his tractor, looped it around the

handlebars of my bike, and together we started off down the drive. When we got up some speed he looked back and shouted, “Try it now!” So I did. I popped the clutch and the back wheel locked up and slid sideways on the gravel and the bike went down and I jumped clear just in time to avoid a bad scrape. But my left front blinker was badly bent and the gas tank was scratched up. The farmer got down off his tractor, took off his cap, and came back to survey the damage. I was wrestling the bike back to its upright position and trying hard to keep my cool. Things weren’t going well at all. And then that old farmer did something I hadn’t thought to do earlier: he unscrewed the gas cap, looked down into the tank, and said, “What are you trying to do, Jim, wean it?”

It was out of gas.

Here’s the thing about internal combustion engines: they need gas. In a typical four-stroke engine a piston inside a cylinder is cranked down, creating a vacuum that sucks a mixture of gasoline and air inside the chamber. It’s mostly air, with just the tiniest drop of gasoline. The piston is then cranked upward so that the mixture of gas and air is compressed until it is highly volatile. A spark plug then ignites the mixture, creating an explosion which drives the piston down and starts the crankshaft spinning on its own, so that the piston is forced up again, an exhaust valve opens, and the smoky waste of the explosion is pushed out of the chamber. And then the whole cycle starts over again, with a fresh mixture of gas and air being sucked into the chamber, compressed by the piston, ignited by the spark plug, and exploded in a way that drives the piston back down again—hard—giving the engine its power. When everything is working as it should, these explosions occur with such frequency and regularity that the

linear, up-and-down motion of the pistons can be converted into rotational motion by the crankshaft, which ultimately turns the wheels and moves the vehicle down the highway.

Please let me know if I'm getting too technical here, but what I'm trying to get across to you is that without that tiny drop of gasoline, without that whoosh of air rushing into the chamber and the brief, bright spark that ignites that powerful explosion, well, without that all you have is a beautiful hunk of motionless machinery.

Now close your eyes and make the leap from the mechanics of the internal combustion engine to the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Here were all these believers gathered together in one place, an upper room that was about to become a combustion chamber. They had been waiting and praying for the power Jesus had promised them, but they didn't know how it would come, or what it would feel like. Nobody heard the intake valve open, but suddenly there was a sound like the rush of a mighty wind and the combustion chamber was filled with just the right mixture of God's people and God's Spirit to produce a powerful reaction. When the spark was struck—when tongues of fire popped up over the head of every believer—something happened, something huge—an explosion of spiritual power that left everyone praising God in other languages, rushing out into the streets of Jerusalem, sharing the good news of Jesus in the tongues of the Parthians, Medes, and Elamites so that, by the end of the day, 3,000 people had been converted.

Internal combustion engines need gas, and the church of Jesus Christ needs the Holy Spirit. That's just the truth. But for the last 2,000 years Christians have been trying to wean the church off its dependence on the Spirit, and I'm not sure why. Take, just as an example, the Lutheran church. There's young Martin Luther, out there on Halloween

night in 1517, nailing his 95 complaints against the Catholic Church to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral as the wind howls and the clouds scud across the sky. That's bold, isn't it? Prophetic! But now, 500 years later, the Lutherans are up to their belly buttons in bureaucracy, no more than any other denominational body, but certainly no less. The Constitution and Bylaws of the Central States Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is 40 pages long, with stirring passages like this one, from chapter 15, paragraph 32: "This synod shall maintain adequate, continuous insurance coverage in accordance with standards recommended by the churchwide organization." I know insurance is important; I just can't imagine it was the most important thing on Martin Luther's mind when he started the Protestant Reformation.

It seems to be a fact of church history that movements which begin in a burst of prophetic energy soon bog down in the deep mud of bureaucracy. Maybe it's just that in order to use the power of an explosion you have to learn how to...control it. And so you set off your small explosion inside a combustion chamber, where it forces a piston down a cylinder and pushes a connecting rod that rotates a crankshaft and turns an axle. You build a functional, perhaps even a beautiful, machine. You stand back and admire your work. But if you forget at any point that it takes gas to keep the thing going, to keep those pistons firing, then, again, all you have is a beautiful hunk of motionless machinery.

In the church you could build an impressive organizational structure. You could have a constitution and bylaws, a policies and procedures manual, you could have officers and committees, administration and staff. You could house the whole engine of this organization inside a big, beautiful building and step back to admire your work, but without the whoosh of air and fuel rushing into the chamber, without the click of the plug

and the flash of the spark, you can have committee meetings from now until never but the church of Jesus Christ won't budge.

Engines need gas, and the church needs the Spirit. So, what can we do? How can we get some of that? I didn't see it coming when I started to work on this sermon, but the four-stroke cycle of an internal combustion engine makes a dandy outline for a four-point Pentecost sermon.

First, there's the **intake stroke**. The piston is pulled down by the crankshaft, creating a vacuum. The intake valve opens allowing a mixture of gas and air to rush into the chamber. Now, imagine your church sanctuary as a combustion chamber. The first thing we have to do is open the intake valve—open the doors—to let the people of God and the Spirit of God fill the room. At my church we're pretty good about opening the doors to people, but do we open them up to the Spirit? Do we ever open up that little intake valve in our own souls and let the Holy Spirit rush in to fill the vacuum? I'm not sure that we do and I'll tell you why: we're afraid. Have you heard the story of Pentecost? Those believers were filled with the Spirit, they started speaking in unknown tongues, and everybody thought they were drunk. We'd really rather not risk the embarrassment, thank you. We'd rather not lose control. And so we clamp down on that intake valve to keep it from opening, to keep the Holy Spirit from getting in. But what if we could get over our fear? What if we could trust God and open ourselves and our church to his Spirit? What if all of this, and all of us, were filled with that rich mixture of fuel? Then maybe we would be ready for the next stroke in the cycle which is:

The **compression stroke**. I would like to think that we compress the rich mixture in this combustion chamber through the force of concentrated worship and prayer. We

spend an hour together in worship each week singing the hymns, pouring out prayers, hearing God's word, and in all of that the mixture that is present in our sanctuary is compressed, and, just as in the internal combustion engine, compression makes the eventual explosion that much more powerful. Imagine the results of our concentrated efforts in worship and prayer if we weren't just going through the motions Sunday after Sunday but really expecting God to do something amazing. Is it possible that we could move on to the next stroke of the cycle?

The next stroke is the **combustion stroke**, when a spark from the plug ignites the compressed mixture of air and gas, creating a powerful explosion. It's not something we can force. The spark comes in its own time. Those believers in the book of Acts waited ten days, compressing the fuel mixture in that upper room through their persistent prayers, getting ready for whatever God would do next, but certain that it was God who would do it, and not them. In the same way, no matter how reverent our worship, how fervent our prayers, until that divine spark strikes the explosion will not occur. That's why we wait for it. That's why we pray for it. But when it comes, it comes with enough force to change everything—the spark ignites the Spirit and the church explodes into the world.

The most impressive part of the internal combustion engine is not the big bang that takes place in the combustion chamber, but the way that raw power is harnessed by pistons, connecting rods, and crankshafts in a way that converts linear motion into rotational motion that can move a motorcycle down the highway. And to be sympathetic, that's what all that church organization is about; it's about trying to convert the raw power of the Spirit into forward motion. It's about trying to get some traction, and

sometimes it really works. But not without the Spirit. Without the Spirit all you have is a beautiful hunk of motionless machinery, like that motorcycle of mine.

The last stroke of the cycle is the **exhaust stroke**, and I have to tell you that at first I thought this is where the analogy breaks down. I didn't want to imagine us taking in the rich mixture of the Spirit, compressing it through worship and prayer, exploding it by the spark of God's power, and then going out into the world as . . . exhaust? Into the world, yes, but not as exhaust! I thought I might have to discard the analogy altogether, or turn a four-stroke cycle into a three-stroke cycle, but then it occurred to me that this stroke, the exhaust stroke, may be the most important one of all. But rather than coming at the end of the cycle we may need to put it at the beginning. Maybe before we can take in our first, sweet breath of Holy Spirit we need to get rid of some of the smoky exhaust in our lives. If the combustion chamber is full of that, there won't be any room for the Spirit. So, maybe through the work of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and tears we could clear the chamber for the full intake of Holy Spirit. Maybe we could do that as individuals. Maybe we could do that as a church. And maybe then, we would be ready in a way we haven't been ready in a long, long time.

In the end, I took the rope off the handlebars, pushed the bike back up the gravel drive to the corner of the barn where the farmer had a gas pump. I unscrewed the cap, put the nozzle in the hole, squeezed the trigger, and shot about a gallon of gas into the bone-dry tank of that motorcycle. And then I put on my helmet, tightened the strap, kicked the starter and heard that engine roar into life and then settle into a steady rhythm of intake, compression, combustion, and exhaust. I kicked the shift lever down into first, twisted the throttle, let off the clutch, and felt the gravel spurt from under the rear wheel

as I started off down the driveway and headed out toward the highway, where I would kick the shift lever up into second gear, third gear, fourth; where I would watch the speedometer climb from forty, to fifty, to sixty; where I would feel the wind in my face, and my frustration dropping away behind me in a puff of blue exhaust. Now, that's what a motorcycle was made for—to move. And that's what the church was born for—to move. On the day of Pentecost we remind ourselves that without the help of the Holy Spirit the church of Jesus Christ will never be anything more than a beautiful hunk of motionless machinery.

May it never be so, and so, let us pray:

*Come, Holy Spirit. Fill the combustion chamber of our churches. Be compressed through our worship and prayer. Explode in a burst of energy that moves us out of our safe sanctuaries and into the streets, praising the name of God. We ask it in the name of the One who promised to send us power from on high, for the sake of the world he loves, and for our own sakes. Amen.*

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