

If Jesus needed the Spirit, then so do Christians today, says U.S. pastor

July 30, 2010

HONOLULU — Today's Christians need the Holy Spirit's guidance, just like Jesus did 2,000 years ago, a U.S. pastor told participants at the Baptist World Congress.

Julie Pennington-Russell joined 26 other Bible scholars to teach Scripture lessons in eight languages during the Baptist World Alliance's gathering in Honolulu July 28-Aug. 1.

The lessons mirrored the conference theme, "Hear the Spirit," and focused on Jesus' first sermon, recorded in Luke 4.

The Holy Spirit continually accompanied Jesus as he launched his earthly ministry, observed Pennington-Russell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Decatur in metropolitan Atlanta.

At Jesus' baptism, "the Spirit descended as a dove," she said, noting the Spirit's presence signaled divine favor upon Jesus.

Then, the Spirit led Jesus to a desert retreat, where Satan tempted him and tested his identity to be the kind of Messiah who would confront the sins of the world, rather than yield to human expectations for a religio-political leader.

Next, the Spirit led Jesus to his home region of Galilee, where Jesus performed the first of his miracles, or "signs," as the Gospel of John calls them.

In the town of Cana in Galilee, Jesus attended a wedding, where he turned ordinary water into extraordinary wine. “Jesus points to the wine jugs, which represent joy and abundance,” she said. “This is Jesus letting us know the kingdom is full of joy. This is a major launching point in the ministry of Jesus. People are taking notice of him.”

When he preached his first sermon, in his hometown of Nazareth, he read from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me”

“The folks in Nazareth didn’t know Jesus as the Messiah, but as the carpenter—the one who fixed their doors ...,” Pennington-Russell said. “They remembered him when he used to hang out at Sonic with the synagogue youth group.”

But in his hometown, among the people who attended his own synagogue, Jesus claimed the prophet’s description as his own, she reported. To them, Jesus said: “This is my sacred task. This is God’s agenda. This is what I’m about to do: Preaching good news, freeing prisoners, opening blind eyes, releasing the oppressed and proclaiming God’s blessing for everybody.” In announcing his job description, Jesus talks about the Spirit, she observed.

“Why?” she asked. “Why do we need the Holy Spirit at the church where I am pastor? Why couldn’t we appoint the appropriate committee ... for writing up the agenda for 2010 and present it to the church for a vote?”

“Why couldn’t we do that? We have plenty of smart, capable people who can get the show on the road. There’s only one reason: Without the Holy Spirit, we can’t do it.”

Pennington-Russell cited four reasons Christians need the Holy Spirit’s power and involvement in their lives:

- “It’s our nature to lean toward self-centeredness,” she said. “We say, ‘I

can do this.’ ... Self-preservation is such a powerful impulse, and we don’t act on it only individually. We dress it up and bring it to church. ... Most people who claim the name of Jesus operate almost exclusively by preference.”

Fortunately, some people “come alive” in their faith, Pennington-Russell said, crediting the transformation to one source: “It’s the Spirit of God.”

- “Without the Spirit of God, we often make the mistake of believing if we do enough, we can haul in the kingdom of God, and won’t God be grateful?” she insisted.

Of course, rolling up sleeves and getting to work is a benefit, and Christians should do good deeds, she agreed.

“But inevitably when we’re working hard, cancer, divorce, abuse and war still will come,” she added. “All our efforts can’t heal some hurts and can’t right some wrongs. A supernatural force is needed; that force is God.

“Jesus never told us to try harder. He told us to surrender more. We need the Spirit to do that.”

- Without the Spirit, Christians try to shrink their ministries down to human size, she claimed, recalling her frustration following a three-hour church staff meeting that focused on whether to raise the price of the Wednesday-night meal by a quarter.

“Jesus didn’t die for this,” she asserted. “This crisis became a catalytic moment. ... Other people in our church felt the same way. We didn’t know exactly what to do, but we turned it over to God.”

The Holy Spirit gave them the freedom to re-think what their church should be and do, she recalled.

“Apart from the Holy Spirit, we’ll never get past church-as-usual and get

hold of God's agenda for the world," she said.

- Without the Spirit, Christians naturally try to escape the poor and outcast—those who are gathered up in God's agenda, she said.

"Why all this talk about the Spirit?" she asked. "Well, without the Spirit, we resist God's agenda. We really do."

-Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard.