



## **Turning the World Upside Down: The Holy Spirit, Rage, and Righteousness • Evelyn L. Parker**

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**W**hat happens when we place our rage and our indignation at the disposal of the Holy Spirit? This question presses me as I recall the anger many teenagers expressed to me in their life stories. When I conducted interviews of young people, they spoke of the helplessness they felt when confronted with racial profiling, unfair employment policies, oppressive school/education policies, and exploitation. They yearned for power to rectify the wrong they experienced. Some harbored deep and sometimes paralyzing anger. Some teens were also concerned about the powerlessness of other children, women, and men in society who were neglected, abused, exploited, and misused. They were angry about these injustices, and they wanted to make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others.

The research of Henry Giroux concurs with the injustice experienced by youth that generates the anger described above. He argues that the post 9/11 climate, with its antiterrorist laws, incubates ill feelings and ill will against teenagers. Youth are demonized by the popular culture and ridiculed by political leaders searching for quick solutions to crime. Giroux argues that the United States is at war with all youth, especially those marginalized by class and color.<sup>1</sup>

The rage teens feel while embattled with exploitation and dehumanization could lead to hopelessness if not channeled into positive and productive methods of seeking justice. The power of the Holy Spirit can change the rage youth feel into holy indignation that transforms injustice. In this sense, teenage rage is good and holy when placed within the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> The work of the Holy Spirit among the leaders of the first church following Pentecost will illuminate this point.

### **Rage Among Post-Pentecost Apostles**

Pentecost is one of my favorite times of the Christian year. It is our commemoration of the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus Christ that the Holy

Spirit would come to his faithful believers. Jesus Christ promised that the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, would baptize his followers with power to continue his ministry. In the Gospel of John 14:15–26 Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will be an Advocate, present with the disciples forever; that the Spirit of truth can be received only by true followers of Christ; that the Spirit teaches us all things.

Now, if your experience is similar to mine you grew up hearing this biblical story with emphasis placed on the believers speaking in other tongues. I had images of crazed people spinning about speaking uncontrollably in words they didn't understand. Time, exposure, and a little learning corrected these misunderstanding of the Acts 2:1–13 passage. Clearly, there was a glitch in my mind regarding the gift of tongues and speaking in "other" tongues or languages. Recently, I find the preceding events and those that followed the miracle on the day of Pentecost most important to celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us. I'm referring to the preparation of the disciples for receiving the Holy Spirit through patient and prayerful waiting followed by the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the world.

Just prior to his ascension on Mount Olivet (Acts 1:6–8), the apostles asked Jesus a question about the restoration of Israel. He responds by clarifying that only God has authority for such knowledge. Jesus then redirects their attention to a more important matter. He promises them the coming of God's spirit and with it each one will receive power to witness on behalf of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and all the world (Acts 1:8). After making this promise Jesus was lifted up into the heavens and the apostles stood there gazing until he was out of sight. After his departure the apostles are left to wait for the promise of the Spirit to empower their mission.<sup>3</sup> It was a company of about 120 believers who waited, devoting themselves to prayer. For Luke, "true believers gather together for prayer to wait upon God to act at critical moments of their history."<sup>4</sup> They were Peter, James, John, the other eight disciples (Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon, and Judas son of James) along with the election of Matthias. There were certain women, most likely Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and other women as well as Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers among the company patiently waiting, fervently praying. And then it happened: "...suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of

them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1–4).

As the apostles and the believers were speaking in languages of the devout Jews from far and near Jerusalem about God’s deeds of power, some of the Jews who were amazed and perplexed asked the meaning of this miracle. Others sneered and accused the believers of being drunk. Everyone knows Galileans are lacking in linguistic talent.<sup>5</sup> I bet that accusation made Peter indignant. “I dare they say such a thing about Christ’s disciples” he probably grumbled under his breath. “We have been waiting and praying patiently for the coming of the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised. How dare they mock us!!” And in the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter, standing with the eleven apostles, audibly and eloquently clarified what was taking place as well as proclaimed the risen Jesus Christ.

Now let us fast-forward from the Day of Pentecost to the early days of the Church and the work of Peter. In Acts 4 Peter and John were witnessing in the Temple, teaching the people, and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. They had just healed a crippled beggar. This was much to the chagrin of the Sadducees so they had Peter and John arrested. I bet they were outraged about being arrested on a trumped-up charge fabricated by those who had a problem with their healing and teaching in the name of Jesus Christ and who ignored the fact that about five thousand people who heard what they had to say became believers. The next day the rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem with the high priest and other members of the high priestly family. In their presence, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, explained the series of events, again giving testimony to the risen Jesus Christ. They were amazed at the boldness of Peter and John, two uneducated and ordinary men. After the high priestly council deliberated together they decided to release Peter and John with a warning not to speak any more in the name of Jesus. “But Peter and John answered them saying, ‘Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.’ After threatening them again, the high priests let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened” (Acts 4:19–21). After they were released they went to their friends and reported what they had experienced. When the friends, probably angry and dismayed, heard what had happened they raised their voices and fervently prayed. “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered

together was shaken; and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

Again let us fast-forward to an angry Saul, who was giving the believers a severely hard time in Jerusalem and took his anger on the road to Damascus. Confronted by a compassionate Jesus Christ, who was curious about the reason Saul was persecuting him, Saul was knocked to the ground. Yet this forgiving Christ lifted Paul from his anger and rage against the disciples of the Lord. Within days Saul is converted and receives the power of the Holy Spirit from God through the disciple Ananias, who was somewhat reluctant to attend to Saul because of his reputation.

Fast-forwarding again to Acts 16: Paul meets the young disciple Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. Timothy was well spoken of by Jesus’ disciples in Lystra and Iconium. As such, Paul invites Timothy to join him and Silas. Paul, Silas, and Timothy traveled together giving testimony about the risen Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. In Thessalonica, the Holy Spirit empowered Paul with boldness to confront the violent rage of the Jews.

Acts 17:1–9 reads:

After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.” Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplace they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason’s house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.” The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

Threatened, angry Jews fabricated a disturbance because they could not deal with the power of the Holy Spirit demonstrated in the boldness of Paul. How ironic. The angry Jews caused the riot, not Paul, Timothy, and Silas. Yet these disciples of Jesus Christ were shaking up the status quo, turning the world of the people of that community upside down with the gospel.

What are the identification marks of a church that incarnates the passion of God? What characterizes the church that will satisfy the longing of today's teenagers? It is a church that turns the world upside down through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a church that honors the anger that teenagers feel and helps them channel that anger into positive and productive action that transforms society of injustice.

### **Rage and the Holy Spirit at the Movies**

The intersection of rage/indignation and the Holy Spirit might be illustrated through the 1998 movie *The Apostle*. As early as 1983, Robert Duvall wanted to make this movie. He felt the motion picture industry hardly ever depicted spirituality with such a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit, and when it did, it tended to be patronizing, filled with charlatans and snake handlers. Duvall wanted something more with *The Apostle*; he wanted to realistically portray a preacher who was fully human yet also captivated by the Holy Spirit. During an interview Duvall commented that what he really wanted to do was understand what preachers go through and what they believe, and portray that in an accurate way. Many studios wouldn't produce *The Apostle* because of its politically charged nature. It was fifteen years later that he finally financed the movie with his own money. Well, the rest is history. The movie was enormously popular and earned Duvall an Academy Award nomination for his portrayal of the preacher Sonny Dewey.<sup>6</sup>

Although Duvall was raised in a Christian home and taught to believe in Jesus Christ, he never knew much about the Holy Spirit until he made *The Apostle*. While he was doing research for the movie he says that he tried to not pass judgment, to just try to understand how the Holy Spirit moves. One day, as he sat in a church in Harlem, the Holy Spirit touched his life in a way he will never forget. From that experience Duvall was able to portray Sonny Dewey as a preacher who was at times filled with rage at God and the people around him, yet usually submissive to the power of the Holy Spirit at work in his life.<sup>7</sup>

*Newsweek* writers argue that in many ways, Duvall's movie, made the Holy Spirit mainstream to the American public. The *Newsweek* article further exam-

ines the resurgence of the Holy Spirit in American churches. At the writing of the article 47 percent of U.S. citizens claimed to have had experienced the Holy Spirit in their lives.<sup>8</sup>

### **Hip-Hop, Rage, and Rap**

Hip-hop culture, especially rap music, can be considered an expression of rage in contemporary society. Its history and artistic expressions emerged out of the need to express anger in the midst of the social and economic decline experienced by its creators. Consider this brief description of hip-hop culture: “Hip-Hop first emerges as a cultural and creative response to the matrix of industrial decline, social isolation, and political decay endemic to New York City’s Bronx section.”<sup>9</sup> Together young Puerto Rican and African American artists of the Bronx assessed their creative abilities as they faced fewer and fewer socioeconomic opportunities and accompanying marginality. Hip-hop culture emerged as an ontological and epistemological alternative for New York youth. It includes its own language, dress code, movies/videos/video games/TV shows, visual artistic expression, dance style, and musical forms. The language of hip-hop culture can be illustrated with terms such as MC, mix, remix, The Benjamins, Thugged-out, Thug’s-life, Word-up, beatsmith, and spit rhymes. Gear, another word for clothing, includes sagging and low-rise jeans, combat boots, oversized pants, shirts, and jackets, and labels such as FUBU, Tommy Hilfiger, Southpole, GOD, and FJ560 clothing (FJ stands for Fat Joe). Early movies in hip-hop culture include John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood*, Albert and Allen Hughes’s *Menace II Society*, and Hype Williams’s *Belly*. These were followed by a group of movies starring Tupac Shakur including *Juice* and *Gang Related*. Recent movies include *Save the Last Dance*, *8 Mile* starring Eminem, and *You Got Served*. The Toe Jam and Earl series I, II, and III are examples of hip-hop video games. An early TV reality show titled *Making of the Band* has been followed by Puff “Diddy” Combs’s reality show about the making of a rap band. Also, a choice of any reality show from MTV is an example of hip-hop on TV.

Graffiti art or tagging (writing names, symbols, and images on public facades) emerged as early as 1971 as hip-hop’s visual artistic expression. It’s interesting to note that tagging did not originate in the inner-city ghetto but in Manhattan by a Greek teenager named Demetrius in the late 1960s. He took on the moniker of Taki 183. While working as a messenger, traveling by subway to all five boroughs of the city, Taki wrote his name all over the

subway cars and stations. Ghetto youth were fascinated with tagging and adopted this art form as a rite of initiation for gangs as well as a way of revealing their existence to a society that renders them invisible.<sup>10</sup>

Break Dancing, presented as early as 1973, is a unique dance style in hip-hop culture.<sup>11</sup>

In essence, hip-hop culture is resistance to mainstream dominant culture in North American society. However, the influence of hip-hop culture has not remained in North America but has impacted youth culture in all sectors of the world. The primary global influence of hip-hop culture lies in its musical voice-rap music.<sup>12</sup>

Rap music contains a powerful display of wordsmith abilities of poets that overlay their poetry/rap lyrics on top of music from other prominent musicians and strong beats. *Time Magazine's* Christopher John Farley defines rap as a form of rhythmic speaking in rhyme overlaying a collage of "samples" from other songs. Pinn argues:

rap lyrics present a postmodern articulation of themes, lifestyles, and behaviors found in Black oral tradition: for example, heroes such as "Bad Niggers," Brer Rabbit, Signifying Monkey, Stagolee, and Dolemite. Using these figures and their adventures as a model, rap music develops ways of circumventing powerlessness, outsmarting and temporarily gaining the upper hand over the dominant society. Hip-hop's verbal expression provides invaluable affirmation of identity and critique of the larger society while rehearsing the realities of Black urban life.<sup>13</sup>

Pinn also argues that rap music has roots in African-influenced music techniques and oral practices.

### **The Potential of Rage in the Power of the Holy Spirit**

Consider the following two cases studies as examples of rage in the power of the Holy Spirit.

1. The Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church
  - The rage of oppressed blacks in the southern United States could no longer be contained.
  - During 1968 this youth group evolved out of a response to teens

who wanted to make a contribution to desegregation in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. They were a core group of about twenty-five teenagers who were members of the CYO of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church. Their parish priest, Father Peter Quinn, a European American, also served as the youth leader.

- It was a loosely structured youth group. The only requirements were no smoking and no drinking allowed at any youth functions. The penalty would be expulsion from the youth fellowship.
  - The leaders were teenagers, who utilized a process of participatory decision-making. Activities included sit-ins, voter registration campaigns, boycotts, and participation in civil rights mass meetings. The primary fundraiser was their Saturday night dances, where two to three hundred senior high teenagers would pack the church's recreation center. Many members of the CYO were also members of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Junior NAACP.
  - Sunday nights were youth meetings. They started with prayer lead by one of the youth. Something said in the prayer usually ignited theological reflection. On one occasion the prayer led to a lengthy discussion about the skin color of Jesus Christ. The youth group decided to paint all the statues of the church black. So they gathered the following Saturday and did so. Members of the parish and the surrounded community were outraged. Nevertheless, Father Quinn stood behind their decision and the statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus on the cross bore faces, arms, and legs resembling people of color.
  - I believed that all the cool teens attended the CYO youth group.
2. The Oakhurst Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which Charles Foster and Ted Brelsford write about in their book *We Are the Church Together*:<sup>14</sup>
- "Approximately half of the members of this congregation are white, 45 percent according to a March 1992 membership report and half black, 54 percent. There are few Hispanic and Native American members. The membership numbers around 140 and is slowly climbing from a low of eighty in 1982."<sup>15</sup>
  - Historically, this church has been in troubling situations in a troubled neighborhood.

- In 1983 the congregation called Gibson “Nibs” and Caroline Stroupe to be pastor and associate pastor, respectively. As a young man in the 1960s Nibs became conscious of his identity and social location as a white man from the South whose life was changed by his recognition of racism in the U.S. society, in his own family and friends, and in himself. This recognition of systemic racism continues to characterize his worldview and his ministry and to provide leadership for Oakhurst’s ministry.
- Nibs and Caroline offered deep commitment to nurturing genuine cultural diversity in this church and ultimately to “overcoming the barriers which separate us.”<sup>16</sup>
- “The people share a commitment and dream: a commitment to make this counter-culture community of diversity work; and a dream that one day they will not be counter-culture, that unity and justice among all people will prevail.” But they are eminently realistic. They proclaim that in Jesus Christ “the dividing walls of hostility are broken down.”<sup>17</sup> Yet they see walls constantly being erected and re-erected in “the world.” The walls must be dealt with everywhere, every day.
- The Oakhurst Web site header reads: Multicultural, forward-thinking, Jesus-centered, biblically based ([www.oakhurstpresbyterian.org](http://www.oakhurstpresbyterian.org)).
- National Public Radio said this of Oakhurst: “Oakhurst Presbyterian Church is unremarkable on the outside, but the congregation inside is quite remarkable...people from the most divergent backgrounds—middle-class professionals, blue-collar and pink-collar workers, welfare recipients, old, young and very young, black, white, Asian, gay, and straight. All seem to feel comfortable there and speak their minds.”

### **Vignettes of Rage and the Holy Spirit**

Allie, a seventeen-year-old girl from Chicago, found herself filled with rage as the policeman violently searched her boyfriend and whirled racist insults at both of them. Once again she had experienced the dehumanization of racial profiling from the Chicago Police. Although she was tempted to return verbal insults to the policeman, she channeled her rage into gathering information, writing down the officer’s badge number and other information from his

police car that would help her report the incident to proper authorities. This experience launched her crusade against racial profiling and her commitment to transform society from this form of injustice.<sup>18</sup>

In *Freedom's Daughters*, Lynne Olson writes about other teenaged girls who experienced dehumanization from racial injustice thirty years earlier. Outraged by the many Jim Crow laws and racial slurs from white adults and youth, fifteen-year-old Brenda Travis from McComb, Mississippi, joined the SNCC because she wanted to make a difference in the way black people were treated.<sup>19</sup>

Cynthia Fleming's biography of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, tells of Ruby's participation in "kneel-ins" that targeted segregated white churches in Atlanta, Georgia, during the 1960s. Ruby joined SNCC as a teenager and eventually became instrumental in the success of SNCC's voter registration campaigns in several southern states. Fleming indicates that Ruby, an active member of the West Mitchell Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, was disconcerted when white ushers refused her admission to their churches. At one kneel-in Ruby quieted her rage but admitted she wanted to scream, "...this is the Lord's house!" Instead she refused to leave the church and pulled up a chair in the lobby and participated in the singing and liturgy. She commented that she enjoyed the worship service immensely, even though it was from the marginal location of the white church's lobby.<sup>20</sup>

The above vignettes frame questions about the relationship between rage from injustice, the Christian spirituality of adolescent girls, and their commitment to transform society of its injustice. How does a teenaged girl bridge her rage, piety, and social activism? How does she practice "holy indignation" or express her anger against injustice in the church and society? What are some key markers in the life of Christian teenaged girl political activists? What is the nature of their spirituality? How is their spirituality connected to their commitment to make a difference in society so that all people flourish?

Recall Sabine and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's righteous indignation that I discussed in the previous lecture. Sabine said: "This made me indignant and I befriended her. My former friends tried to draw me away, but at that time I already thought such conduct very unkind, and after some time I succeeded in bridging the gap between them and this child. The little girl was accepted."<sup>21</sup> Sabine's rage pressured her until she found a way to transform the prejudice of her classmates. Years later, on June 24, 1922, Dietrich expressed

a similar outrage as he heard the assassination of Walther Rathenau while sitting in class. Dietrich's classmate recalled:

I particularly remember Bonhoeffer on the day of Rathenau's murder. The average age of our form in the Grunewald grammar school was seventeen, but he [Dietrich] and G.S., who ended by committing suicide in exile, were only sixteen. I remember the shots we heard during the lesson, and then, in the playground during the break, we heard what had happened...I still remember my friend Bonhoeffer's passionate indignation, his deep and spontaneous anger...I remember his asking what would become of Germany if its best leaders were killed. I remember it because I was surprised at the time at its being possible to know so exactly where one stood.<sup>22</sup>

As I close let us revisit the question I asked at the onset of this lecture: "What happens when we allow teenagers to place their rage/their righteous indignation at the disposal of the power of the Holy Spirit? Teenagers are empowered to channel their anger into positive and productive action whereby the Holy Spirit working within them transforms the world of injustice.

Hear again Acts 17:5b-7:

While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus."

## Notes

1. Henry Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).
2. Evelyn L. Parker, "I Snapped, Man: Teenage Rage," in *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003). In this chapter I offer the idea of holy indignation as a way of channeling teenage rage into spiritual edification and political efficacy.
3. Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 10 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002).
4. *Ibid.*, 44.

5. Wall, *The New Interpreters Bible*, p. 55.
6. Timothy Peck, *What Christians Think about the Holy Spirit*, <http://www.sermoncentral.com>.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Anthony Pinn, "Blues, Rap, and Nitty-Gritty Hermeneutics," in *Why Lord: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995) p. 122. For an expanded and comprehensive review of hip-hop culture and rap music, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) and Pinn, *Noise and Spirit* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).
10. Rose, *Black Noise*, pp. 22, 34, 41–42.
11. Ibid.
12. Pinn, *Why Lord*, p. 122.
13. Ibid.
14. Charles R. Foster and Theodore Brelsford, *We Are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).
15. Ibid, p. 67.
16. Ibid, p. 68.
17. Ibid.
18. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always*.
19. Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Scribner, 2001), pp. 202–210.
20. Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 56.
21. Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait of a Family* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), p. 37.
22. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970), p. 19.