

THE CHURCH IS BURNING!

by John Fairweather



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The Church Is Burning!

A one-act play for Pentecost

by John Fairweather

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR/PREACHER

At the beginning:

Same character later:

MR./MS. GRUMP

MR./MS. PRAISE

MR./MS. PIOUS

MR./MS. WORKER

MR./MS. BLAME

MR./MS. CARING

MR./MS. STATUS QUO

MR./MS. VISION

MR./MS. WORRY

MR./MS. JOY

MR./MS. STINGY

MR./MS. GIVING

PRODUCTION NOTES

Setting

A long, rectangular table and six chairs are at Center Stage.

Props

Nameplates for the board members. The letters should be as large as possible so the names are visible to the congregation. The character's "changed name" should be on the reverse side. For example, Mr./Ms. Grump's nameplate should say Mr./Ms. Praise on the other side.

Staging

The Narrator/Preacher is at Center Stage for the narration. He/she moves to the pulpit for the sermons.

When all the board members are seated around the table, take care that the action doesn't become too static. Members can stand up, pace, lean across the table, etc. They should be seated four across and one at each end so no one's back is to the audience. Those at the ends should sit in a diagonal, "open" way so they are more visible to the audience.

1 *(The BOARD MEMBERS are seated in the front pew. The*
 2 *NARRATOR/PREACHER is at Center Stage.)*

3 **NARRATOR:** Our story begins in the sanctuary of First
 4 *(Insert your denomination)* Church in Niceville, State of
 5 MassAmerica. The preacher is preaching his usual
 6 sermon. *(NARRATOR/*

7 *PREACHER goes to pulpit and uses a “pious” voice.)*

8 **PREACHER:** Blah, blah, blah. Do good stuff. Blah, blah,
 9 blah. Let’s move forward. Blah, blah, blah. Let’s have a
 10 vision for this church. Blah, blah, blah. Now that you’re
 11 inspired, let’s talk about the future of our church at the
 12 next board meeting. *(NARRATOR/PREACHER exits. The six*
 13 *BOARD MEMBERS come up to the table and place their*
 14 *nameplates in front of them, facing the congregation.)*

15 **MR./MS. GRUMP:** We come now to new business. I guess
 16 that means we’re supposed to talk about the future of the
 17 church. Probably won’t do any good, but does anyone
 18 have any ideas about how to improve things around
 19 here?

20 **MR./MS. STATUS QUO:** Don’t need improvements, if you ask
 21 me. Except it would be nice if we could go back to some
 22 of the things we used to do.

23 **MR./MS. GRUMP:** Like what?

24 **MR./MS. STATUS QUO:** Can we get rid of the children’s time
 25 in worship? Darn kids are so noisy. Why can’t they just
 26 sit quietly in the pews with their parents? When I was a
 27 child, the rule was that children were to be seen and
 28 not heard.

29 **MR./MS. WORRY:** But the kids would just fidget. You can’t
 30 expect little kids to just sit quietly for a whole hour.

31 **MR./MS. STATUS QUO:** Why not? I did when I was a kid. Not
 32 a peep out of me! I was a perfect child in church. Had to
 33 be, or my dad would’ve whupped me up side the head.

34 **MR./MS. STINGY:** You obviously got whupped up side the
 35 head too much. If we don’t have children’s time in

- 1 worship, we might lose some young families. And we
2 need their money to pay the bills.
- 3 MR./MS. WORRY: Don't we need to make some changes? I'm
4 worried that our little church is going to dry up and blow
5 away if we don't attract more people. Every church in
6 town has been getting smaller. What are we going to do?
- 7 MR./MS. PIOUS: I think we all need to pray.
- 8 MR./MS. BLAME: It's not our fault people don't come to
9 church. Young people today don't have any commitment.
10 All they want is a good time.
- 11 MR./MS. PIOUS: I think we need to pray for young people,
12 that their hearts might turn to God.
- 13 MR./MS. BLAME: Nothing is going to work to get people to
14 come to church. What with TV and sports and young
15 people spoiled rotten, they will never take time for
16 church.
- 17 MR./MS. PIOUS: *(Standing)* I think we should pray for our
18 whole society. America needs our prayers.
- 19 MR./MS. GRUMP: All you ever suggest is prayer. Open your
20 eyes and look around!
- 21 MR./MS. PIOUS: *(Looking up)* O God, forgive this dreadful
22 man for what he said to me. I won't. Amen. *(Sits.)*
- 23 MR./MS. STINGY: Look. We've got to get more people coming
24 to this church — people with money. We have a beautiful
25 church. If we're going to protect our investment, we've
26 got to get the numbers up.
- 27 MR./MS. WORRY: The whole town of Niceville seems to be
28 going to the dogs. We just don't seem to have the
29 community spirit anymore. Nobody supports the
30 churches, the schools, the government, or anything else.
- 31 MR./MS. BLAME: Our church would grow if the preacher
32 would attract new people. Isn't that what we hired him
33 to do?
- 34 MR./MS. STATUS QUO: The preacher should be preaching
35 good sermons and taking care of weddings, funerals, and

- 1 family crises. I don't want a preacher who changes things
2 just to draw a crowd.
- 3 MR./MS. PIOUS: Maybe if we prayed for the preacher...
- 4 MR./MS. GRUMP: (*Interrupting*) Yeah, yeah, yeah. We'll pray
5 for the preacher. But what do you want him to *do*?
- 6 MR./MS. PIOUS: (*Standing, gesturing broadly*) Maybe he could
7 do something dramatic to bring people in the doors.
8 Maybe he could stand on top of the church steeple and
9 yell to passing cars. (*Sits.*)
- 10 MR./MS. GRUMP: He would just fall off the roof, and then
11 we'd have major medical bills.
- 12 MR./MS. BLAME: (*Pacing*) If the church isn't growing, it's the
13 preacher's fault. Let's fire him and hire someone like they
14 have on TV. (*Sits.*)
- 15 MR./MS. STINGY: That would cost too much. Besides, TV
16 preachers only want to get more of our money.
- 17 MR./MS. STATUS QUO: Let's not make any changes. Let's
18 just wait and see what happens. Meanwhile, can we use
19 the old hymnals instead of the new ones and get the kids
20 back in the nursery where they belong?
- 21 MR./MS. WORRY: Next week is Pentecost. Let's ask the
22 preacher to tell us how a church can get on fire again. I
23 think we're just smoldering ashes.
- 24 MR./MS. GRUMP: Lot of good that will do, but I'll tell him.
25 [Mr./Ms.] Pious, I know you would like to close us with
26 a prayer.
- 27 MR./MS. PIOUS: (*Standing*) O God, we know we can do
28 nothing. It's all up to you. And I pray these knuckleheads
29 will just turn everything over to you. All we need is a
30 miracle. Amen. (*He/she sits, action freezes, and NARRATOR/
31 PREACHER comes to front of church.*)
- 32 NARRATOR: The preacher worked hard that week for a
33 message about Pentecost that could inspire the church.
34 The church was on fire, but it wasn't the fire of the Holy
35 Spirit. (*NARRATOR/PREACHER goes up to pulpit. The six*

1 *BOARD MEMBERS return to the front pew.)*

2 **PREACHER:** Good friends, I have worked hard to find a
3 way to inspire us all. I have read every text about the
4 Holy Spirit and that extraordinary birthday of the
5 church, Pentecost. I confess to you that I cannot explain
6 all these texts. And I confess I desire deeply to set this
7 church afire with the Holy Spirit, but I am only an
8 ordinary preacher.

9 Let me try to share what it means to be set afire by
10 the Holy Spirit. But this is a dialog sermon. I will ask the
11 members of the board to give me their questions and
12 comments. We will explore, together, what it could mean
13 to set this church on fire with the Holy Spirit. Let's begin.

14 Fifty days after Easter, a large crowd gathered
15 together. We don't know why. Jesus had departed.
16 Everyone was confused. A few had begun to understand
17 the Good News, but the whole religious community
18 seemed to be like smoldering ashes: lots of smoke, little
19 fire.

20 Jesus had promised that when he left, his disciples
21 would not be abandoned. The Holy Spirit would come to
22 keep aflame the presence of God in their lives. The Holy
23 Spirit is not a Casper-like ghost. In the Gospel of John,
24 the Holy Spirit is an "advocate" or "comforter." Paul says
25 the Holy Spirit is "Christ-in-us" in a way that allows us
26 to live moral lives, even apart from the laws and rules
27 any particular society might teach. In Luke and Acts, the
28 Holy Spirit gives to Christians the same miraculous
29 power that Jesus had.

30 **MR./MS. GRUMP:** *(Standing)* What's with this Holy Spirit?
31 The Bible says Peter could raise the dead, disciples could
32 heal diseases, and everyone could do big tricks. We can't.
33 What's the deal? *(Sits.)*

34 **PREACHER:** I know I can't raise the dead or cure diseases.
35 I don't know, honestly, what was the case at the first

Pentecost. Rather than argue about that, can we agree that the biblical witness is that Christ is yet with us? Indeed, we can know more clearly about the love of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ than many of those who gathered at the first Pentecost. Many were there who had only heard Jesus speak once or twice. Others were just curious. We have the Bible. For those gathered at Pentecost, the New Testament had not been written yet. They needed preaching from the disciples and the leading of the Holy Spirit to understand a new relationship with God.

I believe that when we say we are led by the Holy Spirit, we mean that God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, has not left us. We are not alone. God's love is as close to us as when Jesus, himself, could take children into his arms. And the most important things Jesus could do...love, teach, serve...we can do, too. If we can't raise the dead or cure diseases for those we love so much, we can witness to the fact that death or disease can never conquer the spirit or deny the value of persons who belong ultimately to God. When we present this truth, we deliver healing — even when we can't cure.

MR./MS. WORRY: *(Standing)* Preacher, if we try to take on the Holy Spirit, does that mean we have to be weird? Do we have to talk funny? *(Sits.)*

PREACHER: No, it doesn't mean you have to be weird or talk funny. But the power of the Holy Spirit should make us bold in speaking the truth, in confronting injustice, and in sharing the message of God's love. Opening yourself to the Holy Spirit may not teach you to speak in foreign languages. But it might help you, and all of us, to speak more lovingly.

MR./MS. STATUS QUO: *(Standing)* Preacher, this "Holy Spirit" stuff bothers me. After two thousand years, isn't tried-and-true tradition enough to tell us what we ought

1 to
2 do? (*Sits.*)

3 **PREACHER:** Thank you for reminding us that tradition is
4 sooo important. But, when we say we are led by the Holy
5 Spirit, isn't that a way of saying that a living God is
6 leading us into the future in ways surprising to the
7 world? Don't we need imagination and inspiration?
8 [Mr./Ms.] Status Quo, can you be inspired to dream? Can
9 you be inspired to a new vision? Open your heart! Doesn't
10 God want more, and better, than this world has yet
11 dreamed of? Therefore, couldn't God even have some
12 small surprises planned for our church? To be led by the
13 Spirit means not to be stuck in the past or limited by the
14 cynical spirit of our culture.

15 **MR./MS. STINGY:** (*Standing*) OK. Bottom line, here. If the
16 Holy Spirit sets us on fire, or whatever, will it help us
17 pay the bills? Will the church grow? Will we get more
18 people and a higher offering to support the church? (*Sits.*)

19 **PREACHER:** No.

20 **BOARD MEMBERS:** (*In unison*) What?!

21 **PREACHER:** OK, I don't really know the answer to your
22 question about more people and more money. But I
23 believe it's the wrong question. The church of the first
24 Pentecost didn't have a church board, organized
25 committees, or pews and pulpits and stained-glass
26 windows. We aren't even told they took a collection!
27 Indeed, [Mr./Ms.] Stingy, I have to tell you that the next
28 chapter of Acts tells us that the three thousand people
29 who accepted Christ on the day of Pentecost sold
30 everything they had and gave it away to people in need!
31 They weren't looking to form an institution. They were
32 striving to inaugurate a kingdom!

33 **MR./MS. BLAME:** (*Standing*) Hey, Preacher! Are you telling
34 us this church isn't important? You telling us that we
35 ought to give everything away and close our doors?

1 **PREACHER:** No! I only mean that we need to *be* the church.
 2 It is less important to *have* a church. Let us love and
 3 teach and serve. Let us be who we are. If we are the
 4 church, many people won't want any part of us. Yet
 5 others will find in us the Good News of God's love.
 6 Whether we grow in numbers and riches or not, we need
 7 to be the church and let the world make its choices.

8 **MR./MS. STATUS QUO:** (*Standing*) I think we should do what-
 9 ever we have to do (*Pounds fist for emphasis*) to ... be ...
 10 *who ... we ... have ... always ... been!* I don't want any fads
 11 or fancy marketing plans! Can't we be what we have
 12 always been? (*Sits.*)

13 **PREACHER:** I think you are mostly right. We need to be who
 14 we are. We don't need fads and phony marketing. We
 15 don't need to sing so-so songs with shallow lyrics just
 16 because they sound "contemporary." On the other hand,
 17 young people today want to sing praises to God in music
 18 that expresses their hearts. Nearly all our favorite "old
 19 hymns" were brand new and modern in the mid-1800s.
 20 Can we look for new hymns with the rhythms and
 21 melodies of Africa, Asia, South America, and yes, even
 22 modern young America? The Holy Spirit blows where it
 23 wills. The Spirit is blowing in the wind of even today's
 24 modern age.

25 **MR./MS. PIOUS:** (*Standing*) If we just pray and have pure
 26 faith, can't we make this church grow?

27 **PREACHER:** No.

28 **MR./MS. PIOUS:** What? (*Sits.*)

29 **PREACHER:** Well, no and yes. We need faith and prayer. But
 30 the Holy Spirit moves us to take up the work of God. If
 31 we love people, we must listen, meet their needs, speak
 32 to their daily lives, and call upon the commitment of
 33 persons in a language they understand. After all, if the
 34 Holy Spirit gives us tongues, it should give us the ability
 35 to speak in the language of people today, including

1 young families and children who want us to speak in a
2 new, global, high-tech language. Translate your piety into
3 real action. Pray, but work!

4 **MR./MS. GRUMP:** *(Standing)* None of our folks can do what
5 you're asking! Us old dogs can't learn new tricks.
6 Preacher, don't you know the world has to come to us?
7 We don't know how to go to them. *(Sits.)*

8 **PREACHER:** [Mr./Ms.] Grump, you know more than you
9 think about reaching out to others! Look at this church!
10 You have served children and families throughout your
11 history. You're teaching children, sending them to camp,
12 welcoming new families, and reaching out to those in
13 need in your community. [Mr./Ms.] Grump, you ought to
14 be praising God for the wonderful work your
15 congregation is doing every day. You have *(List church*
16 *programs for children such as a preschool program, day care,*
17 *camps and conferences, Sunday school, etc.),* and you are
18 always looking for ways to express your love for
19 children. Give praise and thanks, and never be too
20 modest about what you are doing in God's name. Sure,
21 we worry about the future. But God is with us today, and
22 it shows!

23 **MR./MS. STINGY:** *(Standing)* I bet you want us to do more! I
24 bet you think we should give more money and do more
25 things, even if it is hard to pay for what we already have.

26 **PREACHER:** Yes.

27 **MR./MS. STINGY:** What? *(Sits.)*

28 **PREACHER:** Yes. And you know I'm right. We have so much.
29 More money can be given. That's a fact. But most
30 importantly, our extra energy can be given to be a
31 church afire with the Holy Spirit. The people who
32 gathered at Pentecost scattered throughout the world.
33 Many young families come to our church for a little
34 while, and then they move on. We can send them on their
35 way renewed with an experience of Christian fellowship.

1 Whether or not we grow in numbers in this church — and
 2 I surely pray we do — we can send forth people from this
 3 place into the world. They will carry with them what
 4 they have been given in this church, in this sanctuary,
 5 and at this table. (*PREACHER looks to whole congregation.*)
 6 Good friends, we can't lose! By the power of the Holy
 7 Spirit, which is the love of God in our midst, we can give
 8 more than we take. We can empower people to become
 9 who they were meant to be. We can comfort the sick. We
 10 can grieve with those who grieve, rejoice with those who
 11 rejoice, and serve with those who choose to join us in
 12 service. The church of Jesus Christ never loses. The fate
 13 of this local church is but a moment in history. God's
 14 love is eternal. Amen. (*Leaves pulpit and comes to center*
 15 *aisle as NARRATOR.*)

16 **NARRATOR:** I think it's time for another board meeting.
 17 (*NARRATOR/PREACHER exits. The six BOARD MEMBERS*
 18 *return to the table.*)

19 **MR./MS. GRUMP:** I have been [Mr./Ms.] Grump. I ask the
 20 Holy Spirit to let me be [Mr./Ms.] Praise. (*Turns nameplate*
 21 *over to show "Mr./Ms. Praise."*) From now on, I will take it
 22 as my ministry to praise all those who do their best to
 23 serve this church and other people. People need to know
 24 their work has made a difference to God and to other
 25 persons.

26 **MR./MS. PIOUS:** I have been [Mr./Ms.] Pious. I ask the Holy
 27 Spirit to help me to become [Mr./Ms.] Worker. (*Turns*
 28 *nameplate over to show "Mr./Ms. Worker."*) From now on, I
 29 won't ask God to do anything I'm not willing to help get
 30 done. My prayers will help my work, but I won't
 31 substitute prayer for actually doing God's will.

32 **MR./MS. BLAME:** I have always been quick to point out who
 33 messed up when things didn't go like we wanted. But
 34 now I ask the Holy Spirit to help me turn from [Mr./Ms.]
 35 Blame to [Mr./Ms.] Caring. (*Turns nameplate over.*) I would



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