



RESURGENCE

Introduction to the Holy Spirit

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“The grand thing the church wants in this time is God’s Holy Spirit. You may get up plans and say, ‘Now if the church were altered a little bit, it would go better.’ You think that if there were different ministers, or a different church order, or something different, then all would be well. No, my dear friends, it is not there the mistake lies; it is that we want more of the Spirit.... That is the church’s great want, and until that want is supplied, we may reform, and still be just the same. All we want is the Spirit of God.”

The words of a modern charismatic Christian? No. A tract written by a modern revivalist? Not at all. These words were written in 1857 by a 23-year-old Baptist minister named Charles H. Spurgeon. Then, as in every age, the one thing needed for the life and vitality of the church is the Holy Spirit.

For far too long we have treated the Holy Spirit as a kind of optional power source for those who go in for certain experiences. On the one hand we stress the recovery of vital evangelism through church growth techniques and strategy, while on the other, we stress recovering the miraculous in day-to-day operation in order to bring down God’s power upon our efforts for Christ. In many traditions, and in much practice, the Holy Spirit is virtually ignored! One wonders if we, like the Ephesian disciples in an unusual set of circumstances in the first century, might not say, “We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 19:2).

The Holy Spirit actively participated in the work of creation. He worked mightily in giving divine revelation and in guiding the writing of, recognition of, and preservation of, the Holy Scriptures. He still works in illuminating every careful effort to understand and preach the true sense of Scripture. He convicts men of sin, draws them to the Savior and regenerates them in their spiritually dead state. He does this in the same manner as in earlier ages, right down to the present moment. He grants assurance of salvation, empowers believers for service and witness, and gifts and graces Christians of every kind of background.

We must note, first, that the Spirit is a *person*, not an it or a force, as some are prone to say. He is revealed to us in the New Testament as a person who can be lied to, grieved and quenched. He intercedes for the redeemed believer night and day, helping him frame his requests before God and pray rightly in accord with the will of God. As the third person in the triune Godhead He is properly called *God*.

But should we talk about the Holy Spirit the way we so often do today? Should we focus so much of our conversation, attention and music on His presence and ministry in our midst? Dr. J. I. Packer has written:

The New Testament leads us to picture our relation to the Spirit like this. Christ stands before us, addressing us, while the Spirit stands behind us, with access to our innermost being. The Spirit shines light over our shoulder so that we see Christ and know Him to be real, and with that whispers into the ear of our heart the words that Christ speaks to us. “Do you hear Him saying,

'Come to Me ... learn of Me ... you shall find rest...' Go to Him; He is saying those things to you." This is the formula, not only for conversion, but for our entire Christian life: beholding, approaching, trusting, loving, adoring, and serving the Lord Jesus is the essence of it. ¹

As Packer adds, the Spirit is "the floodlight, illuminating the Lord Jesus; He is the contact lens that enables us to see Him clearly...." He remains out of sight, a kind of "shy sovereign," causing our attention to be drawn to Jesus. This is precisely why so much modern claim to experience with the Spirit is spurious: it leads away from the Christ of the New Testament and the gospel of "Him crucified." Where is Christ being most powerfully preached, worshipped and considered in one's affections? Here the ministry of the Holy Spirit is plainly in operation.

But back to Spurgeon's observation made above. The church is feverishly busy, speaking to a thousand issues of modernity. Yet the church seems powerless. In the words of an old rural preacher, "As straight as a gun barrel, but just as empty!" What is missing?

The sovereign power of the Holy Spirit!

In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is described in terms of wind (Acts 2:2), fire (Acts 2:3) and liquid (i.e., "poured out," as in Acts 2:17-18). This does not detract from His personality, but rather explains something of His work. It shows that He is dynamic, sovereign and active. There is an expansiveness about the Spirit's work seen in these words. The incarnate Son was powerfully present from one place to another, but the Holy Spirit is presently working in London, Chicago and rural India simultaneously. There is tremendous force in His operations (wind), and amazing effect (fire). He often overwhelms and inundates people (liquid); thus people were baptized by the Spirit (Acts 1:5) at Pentecost, where the same verb is used that refers to water baptism. But these symbols all point to His personality. Writes Walter L. Liefeld:

To be occupied with the effects of the Spirit's work, powerful as they are, but not to recognize His full deity and divine personality, is to miss the very reality to which the signs are pointing. It is the same immature error as a child clamoring for a gift and ignoring the giver. Further, to think of the Spirit as an impersonal influence, even in terms of power, is to miss the force of the word "holy" in His name, the *Holy* Spirit. When we think of the holiness of God we sense that we are dealing with the very center of God's character. The place that represented God's presence among His people in the Old Testament times was called "the holy of holies." Today God dwells not just among, but actually *in* believers. To be indwelt by the Holy Spirit is not just to be under the influence of God, or to be controlled by some kind of extension of God, but to be the holy temple where God Himself, the Holy One, lives. ²

But the Holy Spirit, as God, and thus as personality, not merely force and effect, is also the *Holy* Spirit. He is holy as to the active mode of His operation upon the earth. As transcendent God, as the person in the Godhead who points all who believe to the incarnate Christ, He does so in making us holy. This is why the doctrine of sanctification can never be far removed from discussions about the Spirit. Luther, in his *Larger Catechism*, wrote:

To this article ("I believe in the Holy Spirit ...") I cannot give a better title than "Sanctification." In it is expressed and portrayed the Holy Spirit and His office, which is that he makes us holy.... How does this sanctifying take place? Answer: Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through

His birth, death, and resurrection, etc., so the Holy Spirit effects our sanctification through the following: the communion of the saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. In other words, He first leads us into His Holy community, placing us upon the bosom of the church, where He preaches to us and brings us to Christ.

Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in Him or take Him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by His sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain....³

And the *Westminster Confession of Faith* refers to the Spirit's work in believers with the following summary of careful biblical thought on the matter of sanctification:

They who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life; there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. In a war, although the remaining corruption, for a time may much prevail; yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome; and so, the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of the God.⁴

The Holy Spirit worked in the incarnate Son of Man during His earthly ministry, from His virgin conception right through the whole of His earthly life and ministry. That self same Holy Spirit now works in the disciples of Christ by giving them birth, by enabling them to walk in holiness of life, and by the renewal of their minds. His abiding presence (1 Cor. 6:19) makes them His temples, and His seal assures them of their final salvation (Eph. 1:13). The deposit of multiplied blessings throughout all ages is experienced through the Spirit's work as well (Rom. 8:23; Col. 3:10).

How then can we underestimate the importance of the Holy Spirit's present work in the believer and the church? This blessed person of God is ever with us, giving us a "spirit of adoption" and empowering us to life and godliness until we see the Son face to face.

And the Holy Spirit, in His powerful activity and ministry, is continually calling the church to reformation in her practice and revival in her experience. Dare we ignore the Spirit's person and work and at the same time labor for reformation and pray for revival in our generation? God forbid!

Notes:

¹ Packer, James I. "Shy Sovereign," in *Tabletalk*, Vol. 12, No. 3, June 1988, 4.

² Liefeld, Waiter L. "Do You Know the Holy Spirit?" in *Voices* (1987), a sometime publication of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

³ Luther, Martin. *The Larger Catechism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 59.

⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1976 edition), Chapter 13, Sections 1–3, 61–63.