

Taking The Holy Spirit Seriously



by J.I. Packer



The Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, SERIES EDITOR

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Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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Pentecost

“It’s a very important day,” chirruped the disc-jockey as he looked ahead to May 11, 2008. “It’s Fathers Day!” Well, so it was, and who would wish to deny its importance as such? But it was also Pentecost Sunday, and that aspect of its importance was not mentioned at all. Isn’t Pentecost very important, then, after all? To judge by the way many churches and Christians behave at Pentecost, not very. But are they right to make so little of it, treating it as hardly different from any other Sunday? I do not think they are, and I want to tell you why.

Pentecost, or Whitsunday as it used to be called, looks back to the momentous morning when Jesus’ disciples, meeting for prayer, heard the roar of a tornado; saw flames shoot down from the ceiling on to each person’s head; found their mouths working, and sounds coming out that later proved to be languages they had never learned; ran out on to the street, where they found that some bystanders visiting Jerusalem from far away, were hearing the disciples proclaim the dying, rising and reign of Jesus in their own local tongue; gathered round Peter as, at the top of his voice, with an authority and clarity that he had never shown, indeed had never known, until this moment, he preached the good news of Jesus (probably in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Roman world and of the international Jewish community); and watched, amazed, and doubtless also assisted, as some three thousand hearers embraced Peter’s message, professed their repentance, lined up for baptism, and threw in their lot with the fellowship of the faithful, Jesus’ former disciples, the nucleus of the new community.

Pentecost was the day of the Spirit’s *outpouring*. (Joel’s, Peter’s and Luke’s chosen word — Acts 2:17, 33 — implies overwhelming abundance, as water flows in a cloudburst or when a river bursts its banks). It was the birthday of the church as we know it (that is, as a company of believers in Jesus, the international society of the born-again). And in God’s great scheme of salvation this was as epoch-making an event as was the incarnation of the Son of God, which we celebrate each Christmas, and his sin-bearing death and life-imparting resurrection, which we celebrate

every Holy Week and Easter. Each was an event that changed the world, by reason of the new reality that it added to what was there before.

Yet Pentecost does not catch the imagination, nor call forth the major commemorative action, of God's people in the way that Christmas and Easter do. Why is that? Focusing now specifically on the Anglican Communion, about which I can speak with some confidence, I answer my question thus: Pentecost does not mean much to us because, speaking generally, the ministry of the Holy Spirit does not bulk large in either our thinking or our living. And that, be it said, is something that urgently needs to change.

Minus the Spirit

For what we have in the church in the absence of a vivid and challenging awareness of what the Holy Spirit does to us and through us is one or more of the following travesties of Christianity:

institutionalism, for which the top priorities are the upkeep of church buildings; the regular performing of the worship services; the organisation, administration, and stability of the congregation, the diocese and the global Anglican Communion; and an unwillingness to rock the Anglican boat locally, nationally or internationally

formalism, for which the top priorities are church attendance; correct behaviour during the public praise, prayer and preaching; correct behaviour out of church; a personal routine, skimpy perhaps, of daily prayers; and a strong confidence that going through these motions brings spiritual stature and so pleases God.

moralism, for which the top priority is conforming to what is understood as the code of Christ, in the belief that this is the essence of Christianity and the way of salvation.

traditionalism, for which the top priority is preserving the comfort zone of time-honoured old paths in church life, and fighting for them against all would-be revisionists.

There are, to be sure, grains of truth and wisdom in all these attitudes. Real Christians do share deeply in church life and care deeply about its quality. They do discipline themselves to pray, both privately and publicly. They know that from one standpoint the Christian life is a life of prayer, and that keeping in touch with God is its very essence. They know that they are called to be Christlike in obeying God's laws, and labour to do their best, though at the same time they know they are sinners who constantly fall short and who can only live by being constantly

forgiven. And they know that the church's heritage is to be valued, for wisdom from the Holy Spirit permeates it, whatever else it may contain. The problem with the attitudes listed is simply that they bypass the gospel, marginalizing the ministry of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and with it the reality of life in and with Christ through the Holy Spirit — the life, that is, of worshipping, praying, moving and ministering “in” the Spirit, as the New Testament often puts it. (What a weight of truth that little word “in” carries when so used!) This bypassing, however, means that they miss the real heart of Christianity; to adapt words from Paul, they have the outward form of godliness without its inward power.

When I was a theological student, nearly two generations ago, discerning teachers used to lament the marginalizing of the Holy Spirit, calling him the displaced person of the Godhead and the Cinderella of theology. Since those days, a significant minority of Anglicans and others have been impacted by the charismatic movement, with its insistence that we must be open to God and uninhibited in our expression of praise, gratitude, joy, hope, confidence and excitement Christ-ward. Much of this was in fact a recovery of the spiritual liveliness that had marked the seventeenth-century Puritans and the eighteenth-century Evangelicals, though (shall we say) differently orchestrated, in a different key, and with certain changed emphases. Distinctive to the charismatic movement was the Pentecostal idea that God is restoring in the modern church most if not all of the apostolic sign-gifts (prophecy, tongues and interpretation, and healing), plus Spirit-baptism with tongues, as on Pentecost morning — a claim that many Christians, like this writer, find dubious. When this dogma is deleted, however, what remains is a renewing of something that Anglicans once knew, that Anglicanism should never have lost, and that all Anglicans today need to find once more — namely, the experience of being searched by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures to learn our own deep need, and of being led hereby into a face-to-face relationship with Jesus Christ our Saviour and our Lord, whom the Holy Spirit through the same Scriptures makes present to us.

Plus the Spirit

“Theology,” said the fourth-century teacher Gregory, bishop of Nazianzus, who in his lifetime was hailed as “the theologian,” just as Calvin was centuries later, “reaches maturity through additions.” He was thinking, of course, of additions that reflect the progress of revelation in history. In Old Testament times, God proclaimed himself in his exclusive oneness, with only obscure hints at his intrinsic triunity, and faithful Israelite theology was monotheistic to the core. Through the witness of the incarnate Son to his relation with his Father, the plurality of persons within the

divine unity was laid open, and the church spent its first several centuries augmenting Jewish theology by seeking appropriate agreed ways to verbalize the Trinity and the Incarnation. The book of Acts, which narrates Pentecost and its consequences, and with it the apostles' pastoral letters, set forth the ministry of the third divine person, the Holy Spirit, very fully, but prior to the Reformation era this topic was not explored in any detail. Since then, however, study of the Spirit (pneumatology, as it is called) has moved steadily forward, with John Calvin's *Institutes*, John Owen's *Pneumatologia*, and Abraham Kuyper's *Work of the Holy Spirit* being perhaps the highlights. (Anglicans? No, but we must not be too proud to learn from Christians not of our own stripe.)

Now, therefore, standing on our predecessors' shoulders, let us take a good hard look at the biblical presentation of the Holy Spirit of God.

(1) **The name of the Holy Spirit.** In the Bible. God-given names are not just labels; they are revelations. Thus, Yahweh (Jehovah), God's covenant name for himself which he told to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:13-15), is short for a Hebrew phrase meaning "I am (and/or, will be) what (and/or, who) I am (and/or, will be)," which declared his eternal, self-sustaining sovereignty in face of a hostile and seemingly chaotic world. And when Jesus named the one he loved and served as "Father," that word declared authoritative love, care, direction, provision, and protection — Fatherhood to perfection, as we might say. Jesus' own human name, given him by angels (Mt. 1:21; Lk. 1:31), the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua, which means "God is Saviour," was a defining declaration of his ministry — "You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." "Holy Spirit" is also a declaratory revelation. "Holy," carrying the basic idea of separateness, signifies those qualities in God that set him in contrast with ourselves, namely transcendent majesty and full moral purity: qualities that can make him awesome, indeed fearsome, to encounter, as Isaiah found (Is. 6:5), and as all impenitent humans will one day find (Rom. 2:5-16; Rev. 6:13-17). "Spirit" (Hebrew *ruach*, Greek *pneuma*) carries the basic idea of wind blowing, as in a storm, or breath puffed out, as when extinguishing a candle, and so signifies divine power in energetic action. The name thus declares the repleteness of omnipotence at work, creating, controlling, transforming, and moving out in retributive judgment.

(2) **The Personhood of the Holy Spirit.** There are about a hundred references to the Spirit in the Old Testament, and each time the phrase is "the (holy) Spirit of God (the Lord)" or "his (your) (holy) Spirit." The thought on each occasion is of the powerful resources that God possesses and deploys, as when Scripture speaks of the eyes, or hand, or arm of the

Lord. There is, however, no suggestion as yet of the Spirit being a distinct person. From all eternity he was so, of course, but this was not made known till Christ came. But in Jesus' last talk to his disciples before his betrayal, the Spirit's separate personhood was made unambiguously clear.

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth...

The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak... He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

(John 14:16-17; 26; 16:7-8, 13-14)

The Spirit is here said to speak, teach, witness, guide, declare, and convince. He is named a "Helper:" that is, a *paraclētos*, which word can mean a comforter in the sense of a strengthener, an encourager, an advocate and a supporter. He is presented as "another (a second) Helper," in Jesus' place — evidently, then, one who exists on the same footing and in the same order of reality as Jesus himself. Testimony to the divine personhood of the Holy Spirit could hardly be clearer. The accounts of the Spirit's ministry in the history that Acts records, and Paul's references to the Spirit interceding for us and sometimes being grieved by us (Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 4:30) further confirm this testimony. The Holy Spirit is as truly a divine person as are the Father and the Saviour.

The Spirit at Work

(3) **The work of the Holy Spirit.** In the Old Testament we read of the Holy Spirit

- sharing in the creation of this world-order and in control of what we call its natural and historical processes (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:29-30; Is. 34:16);
- revealing God's truth and will to his messengers by both direct communication and the wisdom of distilled insight (Num. 24:2; 2 Sam. 23:2; 2 Chr. 12:18, 15:1; Neh. 9:30; Job 32:8; Is. 61:1-4; Ezk. 2:2,

11:24, 37:1; Mic. 3:8; Zch. 7:12), and teaching God's people through these revelations the way of faithfulness and fruitfulness (Neh. 9:20; Ps. 143:10; Is. 48:16, 63:10-14);

- eliciting personal response to God — knowledge of God in the Bible's own sense of that phrase — in the form of faith, repentance, hope, joy, obedience, holiness, openness to God's instruction and direction, and fellowship with him through praise and prayer (Pss. 51:10-12, etc.; Is. 11:2, 44:3; Ezk. 11:19, 36:25-27, 37:14, 39:29; Joel 2:28-29; Zch. 12:10);
- equipping individuals for service, both as community leaders and as community craftsmen (Gen. 41:38, Joseph; Ex. 31:1-11, 35, Bezalel and Oholiab; Num. 11:17, Moses; 11:16-29, seventy elders; 27:18, Joshua; Jg. 5-10, Othniel; 6:34, Gideon; 11:29, Jephthah; 13:25, 14:19, 15:14, Samson; 1 Sam. 10:10, 11:6, see also 19:20-23, Saul; 16:13, David; 2 Kgs. 2:9-15, Elijah and Elisha; Is. 11:1-5, 42:1-4, the Messiah; Hag. 2:5 and Zch. 4:6, temple builders).

The New Testament builds on all this, but expands much of it by relating it directly, on the one hand, to the person and work of the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended and glorified Son of God, and on the other hand, to the persons who are brought by the Spirit through faith in Christ into union and communion with Jesus in his risen life.

The Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ the Saviour. The Spirit, whose creative power effected the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb (Lk. 1:35), was with and within the incarnate Son throughout his life on earth. He disclosed his presence to Jesus, to John, and perhaps others by the apparition of the dove at Jesus' baptism (Mt. 3:16-17; Jn. 1:32-33), which convinced John that "this is he, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." The Spirit-bearer, so John was told, would in due course be the Spirit-giver. The Spirit at once led Jesus into the wilderness "to be tempted by the devil" (Mt. 4:1); he participated in all the Saviour's ministry (Lk. 4:14), empowering his miracles (Mt. 12:28), prompting his joy (Lk. 10:21), and sustaining him through the agony of Gethsemane for the greater agony of his atoning death (Heb. 9:14). As we Christians are upheld by the Holy Spirit in the life that we live with God and for God, so was our Saviour before us. As we live in a simultaneous relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who are always together and never apart from each other, so were the Father and the Spirit together with the Son when he was on earth, as they are still, and always will be.

The Holy Spirit and those whom Jesus Christ saves. The perspec-

tive here is fixed by Jesus' own declaration: "He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn. 16:14). As the Son's prime goal in all his dealings with our sinful race was, and is, always the Father's glory — that is, that the Father be praised for the revealed praiseworthiness of his deeds, so the Holy Spirit's prime goal in his ministry to us who become Christians was, and is, always the Saviour's glory — that is, praise for the love and compassion, wisdom and humility, faithfulness and endurance of pain, and every other virtue that Jesus showed as he lived, died, lived again, and lives still, for the fulfilling of the divine saving purpose towards us. From this standpoint the spirit's ongoing ministry may be compared to a floodlight trained on a building of grandeur, picking out all the manifold details of its dignity and beauty. Highlighting Christ for praise purposes is central in all aspects of the Spirit's ministry to Christian people.

Teacher and Transformer

Within this frame, the Spirit ministers to us in the following main ways:

First and fundamentally, he *teaches us* the truth about God — his being, his ways, his plans, his goodness and grace, and his will for our lives. He does this through the apostolic witness to Christ (Jn. 17:20), which we have written in the books of the New Testament for our permanent use. These books are to be read as organically one with the Jewish Scriptures, which we call the Old Testament, for they set forth the completion of all the theological disclosures and historical processes whose beginning the Old Testament records. As the Spirit is in a real sense the author of all these Scriptures, so in a real sense he now acts as their interpreter, constantly leading us into deeper understanding of their message and application to us than we had before (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Heb. 3:7-11, 10:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). Here, again, following Christ's own focus on the Old Testament as pointing to himself (Lk. 24:27, 44; Jn. 5:39), the Spirit unfolds an understanding to us that glorifies Jesus the Lord.

Second, the Spirit *renews our hearts*, that is, the inner core of each Christian's being, the source of all the thoughts, desires, motives, purposes, creative urgings, ambitions, concerns, convictions, reactions, relational attitudes, loves, hates, hopes, fears, and whatever else contributes, in personality terms, to making us the people that we are. Whereas, before our contact with Christ, our hearts were naturally bent on self-service and self-aggrandizement, and so were bent in another sense — bent out of true in terms of what God made us for, the Spirit, using the word of God as both scalpel and exercise machine, straightens out our inner crookedness and energizes us for spiritual understanding, spiritual

response to God, and spiritual, love-led, Christlike, God-honouring behaviour as one's lifestyle henceforth.

The New Testament message in sum is like an ellipse, that is, an oval outline, with two focal points. The first focal point is the person, place, and past, present and predicted work, of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, Saviour, Lord and Friend, lion of Judah and lamb of God, who is to be glorified by angels and humans for all eternity. The second focal point is the momentous transformation that takes place in the lives of those whom Jesus saves — from the initial renewal of our heart, through the ongoing remaking of our character in Christ's moral image by the Spirit who now indwells each of us, to the final full conforming of us as perfected souls in resurrection bodies to our exalted Lord, in whose company we shall live for ever. Linking these two focal points is the active agency of the Spirit, who works the change in us by creating and sustaining union between ourselves and our risen Lord, such that the new life that we live is at the same time Jesus Christ living his resurrection life in us and through us. The books of the New Testament — Christ and his apostles, that is — frequently tell us that Christians live “in” Christ, and Christ lives “in” us; what has just been said is what is meant.

In relation to ourselves, this momentous inner renewal is pictured by Jesus (Jn, 3:3-8), James (1:18), Peter (1 Pet. 1:23) and John (1 Jn. 2:29-3:9, 5:1, 4, 18) as a *new birth* that involves the implanting in us of God's imperishable “seed,” which is an image here for a triggering, energizing, transforming divine force. The thought is of being made radically and permanently different from what we were, on the inside first and then in the outward expression of a changed heart. Theologians call this work of the Spirit regeneration. Jesus told Jewish pundit Nicodemus that without being born again in this way none can see or enter the kingdom of God, and he added that persons so born would be beyond the comprehension of others, just as whence and where the whirling wind comes and goes is beyond our own comprehension. Perceptually and motivationally, Christians find that new birth by the Spirit's action supernaturalizes their whole life. They live their life in a new dimension, with God, for God, under God, by the power of God, and the watching world, which does not know God, cannot tell what it is that makes them tick. No longer spiritually blind, deaf and indeed dead (that is, utterly unresponsive to God; see 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:1-7, 4:17-24), their heart's desire is now to find and follow a Christ-centred, God-honouring way of life. But that takes them out of the world's world of thought, even as they continue in the world, seeking to serve it according to what they see as its real needs.

So we should not be surprised that the world cannot make them out, and often resents them for their supposed superiority complex.

Third, following on from what has just been said, the Spirit *changes our lives*; for he moves us along the path of *faith* and *repentance*, as principles of daily life. While these two realities are often thought of separately, they belong together, being two aspects of the same thing, namely, *turning to God*, as we shall now see.

Faith begins as the realisation, which the Holy Spirit generates, that God our Creator, in whose hands we always are and by whom our destiny will finally be decided, is really real, and that Jesus Christ the Saviour, once crucified now glorified, who invites us to himself for salvation, is really real too. Faith blossoms into a response of belief and trust, credence and commitment, to the grace of God in the apostolic gospel, the promises of God in the Bible, and the personal approach to us through the Spirit's agency of the Son of God himself. Faith is a whole-souled response to this threefold manifesting of mercy. The response combines intellectual acceptance, emotional embrace, and resolute submission, with a re-ordering of our life-pattern so as to put ourselves always at our Saviour's service, as his dependants and disciples. *Hope* then is faith looking ahead by the light of God's promises, *joy* is faith reflecting on its knowledge of the Saviour and its prospect of eternal glory with him, and *repentance* is faith renouncing the errors and shortcomings of the past.

Repentance means forsaking sin. So it is more than regret and remorse, though that is its usual starting-point. It is an actual abandonment of what has been wrong, in order to replace it by what is right. Recognizing that things we have done and habits we have formed are sin in God's sight, we say good-bye to them, asking forgiveness of them through the cross, and seeking strength to leave them totally behind, even when we think that doing this is going to feel like cutting off one's hand or one's foot or gouging out one's eye (see Mt. 5:29-30; 18:8-9). The life of faith in Christ does not start until true repentance begins, and because, despite our best efforts, slippage into sin regularly recurs, true repentance needs to become a daily discipline. Christians live by being repeatedly forgiven, and we are forgiven, precisely, when we repent. This leads on to our next point.

Fourth, the Spirit *conforms us to Christ* — in character, that is. Jesus lived out love of God and love of neighbour, God's two great commands, to perfection, so becoming a model for us all. The born-again begin their discipleship in a state of spiritual infancy, with their powers of discernment and self-discipline not yet fully developed, and sin within them, dethroned but not yet destroyed, still actively marauding and seeking to recover control of them. From this starting-point, the born-again

are to grow up into Christlike maturity through the power of the Spirit sustaining their own conscious efforts to live as they should. The whole of this process is usually called sanctification. It involves being energized, on the one hand, to cultivate new habits of virtue, and on the other hand, to squeeze the life out of existing habits of vice. With regard to the latter process, Paul uses two vivid verbs, both of which signify putting something to death, and both of which have traditionally been rendered *mortify* (Rom. 6:13; Col. 3:5). With regard to the former process, what should be said is that virtues are supernaturally vivified and increasingly practised through the vital power of the Spirit enabling us to be what otherwise we never could be. “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,” viewed as met together in a single character — the moral profile of Jesus, now reproduced in each of his loyal disciples — constitute, says Paul, “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-25). To display such Spirit-wrought Christlikeness must ever be the Christian’s positive goal: a goal that the Spirit, if not resisted but relied on, will powerfully help us to achieve.

Death to Sin

Sin within is however a lifelong problem for believers. The root system of morning glory, the bindweed that fills hedges with trumpet-shaped white flowers which fade as the day moves on, is a sprawling tangle of interlinked tubers that is virtually impossible to clear away once it has taken hold. Similarly, the anti-God, anti-wisdom, anti-human drive that Scripture calls sin is hydra-headed and formidably tangled in its expression. Devious and deceptive to the last degree, sin, acting like a Satanic second self, keeps finding new ways of expressing itself in us. From Augustine to C.S. Lewis, with a great cloud of witnesses in between them confirming what they say, sin’s essence has been diagnosed as pride, the craving always to seem right, always to get ahead, and always to end up on top; and pride, subtle and self-effacing, has countless ways of expressing itself in a person’s life while remaining unnoticed by that person, and concealing its true viciousness from their view. And then, when we have detected, repudiated and, temporarily at least, mortified one outbreaking form of pride, another will have emerged behind our back, so as to speak — pride, perhaps, at our sensitiveness to sin, and our zeal for mortification — so that the whole process must be gone through again; and again; and again; as long as life lasts. Hence a basic move in the war with sin must be to pray repeatedly: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there is any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Ps. 139:23-24).

For holiness, like sin, starts in the heart, and actually advances only as

it discerns and counters ungodly attitudes and desires lurking there. In this connection, Jesus' words to the disciples who slept in Gethsemane take on a wider relevance: "Watch [stay awake and on guard] and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Mt. 26:41). The Spirit's contribution in all this is to do the searching and make us aware of what he has found, to sustain our prayerful alertness to the pervasive forms of evil, to make us aware of each temptation as it arises and before we fall victim to it, and to keep before our minds the costly, constraining, humbling, motivating love of Christ for us. Hereby he increases our desire to please the Lord by showing our gratitude to him every way we can, and makes thoughts of careless, irresponsible disobedience to him increasingly abhorrent.

We need to be aware that age, health and circumstances cause temptations to vary; some vanish, others mutate, some are replaced, others recur. The symptoms of self-centred pride, from self-pity through the various forms of self-assertion to self-blinded stubbornness, are not the same in the young as in the middle-aged and elderly, nor are temptations themselves identical for the needy and marginalized on the one hand and the affluent and lionized on the other. It is possible to enter into a new form of temptation under the illusion that temptation is now being left behind. So the battle for true godliness goes on, in seemingly endless entanglements with the deceitfulness of sin.

John Wesley's questions to those who wished to join his Methodist fellowship groups (the "bands") included these two, which mark a two-stage advance into spiritual honesty: "Do you desire to be told of your faults? Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?" If we are serious in opening ourselves to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, this is what he will do for us, and by this means lead us on in the war with sin. But are we serious? For many in our churches, this question seems to hang in the air.

Much of the teaching that we have reviewed concerning the Holy Spirit's ministry to us as individuals comes from apostolic pastoral letters, which were addressed to local congregations and were centred, directly or indirectly, on the Holy Spirit in the church's corporate life. To round off our presentation, we must now move on to this.

Church Alive

The thoughts and prayers of the apostle Paul, church-planting evangelist and pastor extraordinary, were largely dictated by his "daily . . . anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28) — those little worshipping fellowships, ten, twenty, thirty, fifty, perhaps eighty strong (that's a guess, but a sober one, I think) that had come into being through his own and others'

preaching of the gospel. But when the time came for theology — that is, thinking God’s revealed thoughts after him, and learning to see things as God sees them — Paul viewed these churches as so many microcosms, specimens and samples of God’s global covenant people, the divine family, the true Israel, the new human race, the international association of born-again believers. Moreover, he focused on them as so many visible outcrops of a single invisible yet potent reality of interconnected life and energy — namely, the one body of which Christ is the head and director, and the one bride whose spiritual beautifier is Christ her bridegroom (see Eph. 1:22-23; 5:25-32). This organic unity of God’s people in, with and through, as well as under, Christ was foreshadowed by the Lord himself when he said that he and his disciples are as vine and branches (Jn. 15:1-8). As, now, the source of life to this one church of God is the risen Lord Jesus, so the ongoing flow of life through the union of each human unit with Christ and with each other in Christ is effected by the Holy Spirit.

Two pairs of key thoughts give shape and substance to Paul’s thinking about all of this. The first pair are the church’s *unity* and its *ministry*.

The unity of the church. It cannot be said too strongly that the true organic unity of God’s church, that is, its oneness in Christ as God’s global organism of spiritual life, is an existing, given, God-created fact, and that what fixes its boundary in each case is the presence or absence of faith and repentance, as described above. Analyzing “the unity of the Spirit,” Paul writes: “There is one body and one Spirit... one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:3-6). This means that the unity of the church embraces all believers, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, while paid-up church adherents everywhere who lack personal faith in Christ are still outside the church as God discerns it, however zealous for their own denomination they may be. This is a point that evangelicals have long used the distinction between the visible church (the church as it appears to us) and the invisible church (the church as God knows it) to highlight.

The ministry of the church. In the human body the parts are different from each other (hands, feet, eyes: bones, muscles, blood; etc.), and so it is in the church, says Paul (I Cor. 12:12-26). In both cases the diversity is for unified functioning. In the church, ministry, which means service, is precisely Christ serving his people, and the world with them, through the Spirit-prompted action of his human agents. The capacity for being used by the Lord Jesus in this way is called a gift, or manifestation, of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life (I Cor. 12:4-11; I Pet. 4:10-11). Everyone who is alive in Christ is called and equipped to be Christ’s hand, foot,

mouthpiece, smile, or whatever it may be, in loving service of others, and it is through every-member ministry that the body of Christ grows as planned (Eph. 4:11-16).

Apostolic thinking about ministry in the church follows two complementary lines. On the one hand, systematic teaching, leading in worship, discipling the faithful of all ages, disciplining the disorderly, keeping the peace, sustaining the sick, poor, and underprivileged and motivating zeal in the congregation, are constant pastoral tasks, for which competent persons should be appointed to serve as elders and deacons. On the other hand, gifts for service are given to every Christian (Rom. 12:4-8), and all gifts are given to be used, so each person's proper form of service must be found and fitted into the congregation's ongoing life, otherwise the Spirit will be quenched to a degree and the growth of the church towards the stature of Christ will be obstructed. Ministry is to be a matter of both-and, not either-or: we do not all have the same ministry, but we are all in ministry together.

The second pair of key thoughts for Paul have to do with the local church's *morality* and *vitality*.

The morality of the church. Living under the lordship of Jesus as his disciples, and counted as God's children, brothers and sisters of Jesus in the Father's royal family, Christians are called to live in humble, reverent holiness, both individually and corporately (1 Pet. 1:14-17). The royal family's lifestyle should always honour the monarch. The church is called to be "zealous for good works" (Tit. 2:14). The Corinthian Christians had lapsed into quarrelsomeness, internal rivalry, toleration of the morally intolerable, and total inconsiderateness toward each other — pure un-love, as we might call it; Paul belaboured them very hard for falling so very short, and letting pride in their giftedness exclude the practice of love from their way of life.

The vitality of the church. Disciple-making outreach constitutes the church's marching orders (Mt. 28:19-20), and inward looking inertia regarding this task is indefensible. Paul was glad to think of the Philippian church as "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" and as "children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life" (Phil. 1:27, 2-15-16). Paul's gladness shows us that this is how every church ought to be.

Conclusion

The three basic truths about the Holy Spirit are: **First**, he is a divine person, the third within God's tripersonal being and a distinct partici-

pant with the Father and the Son in every divine action. The holy Three always work together. **Second**, in the operational team that is God the Spirit is, so to speak, the executive facilitator, through whose hands-on agency all tasks in creation and redemption are performed. **Third**, the mark of the entire biblical presentation of the Spirit is a certain indirectness, since it is either the Father or the Son, or simply God in his fullness, who is the focus of attention, never the Spirit himself in isolation. His executive role is a supportive one; his task, and his achievement, is always to exalt the Father and the Son.

Taking the Spirit seriously means embracing this perspective, thinking with conscientious care and prayer about the Spirit's past and promised achievements that glorify the Father and the Son.

So among the signs that the Spirit is being taken seriously will be:

- **Christians conscientiously pursuing personal holiness**, practising the disciplines of discipleship and making full use of the means of grace and growth (Bible-reading, daily prayer, regular fellowship, active worship and witness, sharing in Holy Communion, and so on).
- **Christians conscientiously seeking congregational renewal**, in worship, fellowship, maturity and outreach, with pastor and people collaborating to ensure that all minister and are ministered to with the gifts for service that the Holy Spirit has given.
- **Christians conscientiously studying and adhering to sound doctrine**, because it is the truth that the Spirit teaches in and from Scripture and is the means through which he feeds, and brings health and strength to, believers' hearts.
- **Christians conscientiously working and praying for the spread of the gospel**, and the extension of Christ's kingdom throughout the world — the grand project that the Spirit has been given to energize (see Jn. 16:7-11).
- **Christians conscientiously trusting, loving, adoring, thanking, praising and aiming to please the Lord Jesus Christ**, their Saviour and Friend, whom the Spirit is with us and in us to glorify (Jn. 16:14).

Quietly and thoughtfully, now, let us ask ourselves directly: how seriously do we take the Holy Spirit? And how seriously are we going to take him from now on?

Questions for Study and Discussion

- 1 Do you agree that Anglicans generally do not take the Holy Spirit seriously? Why, or why not?
- 2 Would you say that your own local church honors the Holy Spirit? Do you see any features of its life as obstructing the Spirit's work?
- 3 Do you endorse the account of the Holy Spirit's ministry to individuals that is set forth in these pages? If not, why not?
- 4 Do you accept the analysis offered in the text of the Holy Spirit's ministry in the church? Do you see reason to add to it?
- 5 What seem to you to be the key elements of (a) personal renewal and (b) congregational renewal?
- 6 How may one know that one has received, and is indwelt by, the Holy Spirit ?
- 7 What do you see as the marks of personal holiness?



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