

1-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, James W. (2000) "The Holy Spirit in the Churches of Christ," *Leaven*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol8/iss3/7>

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The Holy Spirit in the Churches of Christ

BY JAMES W. THOMPSON

Several years ago a student from a Pentecostal church remained after class to follow up on our discussion of the Holy Spirit, which had been a major topic of the evening's lecture from Romans 8. During the conversation he expressed his amazement that the Churches of Christ, with their great emphasis on Acts, devote little attention to the Holy Spirit, particularly to the charismatic gifts. His canon-within-the-canon was also Acts. But instead of seeing Acts as the book of conversion stories and church order, he saw it as the book of the Holy Spirit and as the warrant for the Pentecostal experience as it is practiced in his tradition. For him, Acts was the book of the Holy Spirit, which is manifest through healings, divine intervention in human plans, and speaking in tongues.

In the Restoration tradition, Acts has been read another way. The primary canon-within-the-canon for the Churches of Christ has included Acts, the Pastoral Epistles, and Hebrews.¹ Although we have proclaimed ourselves to be the people of the New Testament, insisting on the authority of the entire New Testament as a constitution for church life, this canon-within-the-canon has influenced our reading of each book within the New Testament. This reading was largely shaped by Alexander Campbell's interpretation of the New Testament, for Campbell bequeathed to us a strong concern for an ecclesiology

that is primarily associated with form and structure. Hence our canon-within-the-canon has consisted of those books that are known in Protestant scholarship as "early Catholic."

This focus on the early Catholic literature has had significant consequences for our understanding of the Holy Spirit, inasmuch as our own hermeneutical principle has focused on those books in which the doctrine of the Holy Spirit recedes into the background. In the Pastoral Epistles, where the faith of the church is preserved through the teaching office, the Spirit prophesies future conditions in the church (1 Tim 4:1), equips Timothy for service (2 Tim 1:6), and renews the believer at baptism (Titus 3:5), but it is not the focus of attention. In Hebrews, where the author affirms that God's revelation in Jesus Christ surpasses the "many and various ways in which God has spoken," the community has "tasted . . . the powers of the coming age" (Heb 6:5 NIV), but the experience of the Holy Spirit does not play a significant role in the author's argument. Indeed, anyone who is familiar with the Pauline insistence on the role of the Holy Spirit as empowerment for Christian conduct will note a startling difference in Hebrews, where the author's pervasive appeal to "hold on" to the confession (cf. Heb 10:23) is made without reference to this empowerment. The Holy Spirit is sometimes mentioned as the author and interpreter of

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scripture (cf. Heb 3:7; 9:8), although in most instances either God or Christ has this role. The signs and wonders that confirmed the word spoken by the Lord appear to have belonged to the previous generation (Heb 2:3).

Acts is the book both of church order and of the church empowered by the Holy Spirit. No reader of Acts could dispute Luke's focus on the church's empowerment by the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit is the initiator both in the founding of the church and in the significant turning points in the narrative. The gift of tongues descends on the people at Pentecost, at the conversion of Cornelius, and at the conversion of those who had known only the baptism of John. God's spokesmen are filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus Luke's narrative celebrates the divine outpouring of the Spirit in the church and the charismatic experience. Nevertheless, as our own experience has shown, Acts can be read alongside the Pastoral Epistles as the book of church order, in which the elders at Ephesus function as paradigms for the ongoing leadership of the church. In this case the many references to the Holy Spirit are understood within the larger context of Luke's idealization of the church's origins. If we understand Acts as an apologetic in which Luke defends the divine origin of the church, the focus on the Holy Spirit would serve Luke's purpose of celebrating the experience of the first generation. Thus a canon-within-the-canon that takes the second-generation literature as its starting point is unlikely to emphasize the experiential aspects of Christianity that are attested in other traditions. This starting point has shaped our understanding of the Holy Spirit.

Taking the literature of the second generation as the hermeneutical key to the New Testament, we have formulated a canonical reading that has allowed us to synthesize into our system the passages

that emphasize the experiential aspects. This synthesis appeals to two exegetical traditions that involve the charismatic experience. The first exegetical tradition involves the book of Acts, which has been incorporated into this system through an interpretative tradition including both Acts 2:38 and Acts 8. In some circles in Churches of Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38 has actually been read as a subjective genitive, that is, the gift that the Holy Spirit gives. An interpretative tradition from Acts 8, which seems amazingly uniform in our churches, argues that the Holy Spirit that the Samaritans did not receive until the apostles laid hands upon them was actually the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit, which could be transmitted only by apostles. Thus Acts provides a welcome proof text for distinguishing the gift of the Holy Spirit from the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit and for a cessationist interpretation, according to which the miraculous gift ceased with the apostles. From my experience in the churches and in the classroom, I have always been amazed at the consistency of the catechetical instruction among Churches of Christ on points of exegesis that involve the Holy Spirit.

The second exegetical tradition involves the interpretative tradition of 1 Corinthians 12–14. The interpretation of *to teleion* as the completed canon has allowed us to limit the experiential aspect of the Holy Spirit to the first century. The exegetical traditions that involve these two passages provide a coherent system that has been widely influential in our churches. The gift of the Holy Spirit has been distinguished from the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. In keeping with this system, some of our church leaders have insisted that the Holy Spirit works only through scripture, although I am convinced from my own experience that the majority have held to a belief in the indwelling of the Spirit.

Today we are experiencing extraordinary changes. In recent conversations with my students and others, I have noticed in them a pressing desire to rethink our understanding of the Holy Spirit, especially our traditional cessationist view. This interest may reflect a variety of separate phenomena. One phenomenon involves the popularity of the believers' church model of the church as the community of the Holy Spirit. This model appears to employ as

its hermeneutic key, not the church of the Pastorals, but the model of the early Pauline churches that is most clearly reflected in 1 Corinthians 12, where each member of the body has received the Spirit's gift. This model places an emphasis on pneumatology that has seldom been given in Churches of Christ. Other phenomena may include a postmodern rejection of the traditional rationalist approach and the widespread influence of Pentecostal movements in American culture.

Despite the major shift away from the uniformity of understanding of the Holy Spirit, one aspect remains the same: our theology of the Holy Spirit has been worked out in a polemical context that has defined the issues for discussion. Our polemical interests have left us with a myopic understanding that runs deep within this movement. Whether motivated by a desire to reinvigorate the church with the charismatic experience or to maintain a cessationist position, mention of the Holy Spirit tends to be framed in terms of the charismatic experience that is best known to us from 1 Corinthians 12–14. Discussion of the Holy Spirit seems always to come back to the experiential phenomena and to be framed within a narrow focus. Such a narrow focus, I am convinced, is a major distortion of the biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Thus I suggest that we initiate a process of reflection that will move us away from the myopic nature of the discussions we have inherited. This process of reflection will engage the varied witness of the New Testament and the Christian tradition and will not be framed entirely by our own polemical interests. I suggest that our theology of the Holy Spirit should begin with an observation of both the unity and the diversity of the early church's experience of the Holy Spirit.

The Unified Witness of the Early Church

Our reflection on a theology of the Holy Spirit should begin with the acknowledgment that, despite the variety of the New Testament witnesses, the canon reflects a united witness to the conviction that God has empowered the church through his Spirit. This united witness suggests that the church, from its inception, has experienced the Holy Spirit as a power in its midst.

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The conviction that God had poured out his Spirit as a sign of the eschatological moment appears to have been uniformly held by earliest Christians. The earliest church attested its experience of the Spirit. It appealed to the words of Ezek 36:26–27: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. . . . And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (RSV). The importance of this eschatological experience of the Spirit is suggested in the significance attached to the Spirit in the Synoptic tradition, John, and the Pauline tradition. In all these traditions, the Spirit empowers the disciples for their ministry. According to the Synoptic tradition, the disciples can go on speaking in Jesus' name, not worrying about what to say, because the Spirit will tell them what to say (Matt 10:19; Luke 12:11). According to the Johannine tradition, the Spirit is the "other paraclete," who guides the church when Christ is absent, reminding the community of the words of Jesus. In the Pauline tradition, the Spirit is active in the community. Even in the early Catholic Epistles, which seem to celebrate form over the Spirit, the presence of the Spirit is assumed. The united witness to the presence of the Spirit in the New Testament writings suggests that the church, from the beginning, experienced the divine empowerment described in Joel and Ezekiel.

This unified witness suggests that the earliest church knew itself to be the eschatological people of God. It confessed that the Spirit was within its midst. The experience of the Spirit, therefore, was a constituent element of early Christian experience.

Paul and the Diversity of the Early Christian Witness

Although the New Testament appears to present a unified conviction of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church, it also points to a diversity in its articulation of the role of the Holy Spirit, a diversity that reflects the church's need to restate its confession under a variety of situations. A fruitful area of research would compare the theology of the Holy Spirit in the early Pauline communities, the later Pauline communities, the Gospel of John, and Acts. James Dunn has argued that these are four distinctive views and that these views reflect a church moving between the vitality of the experience of the Holy Spirit in the early Pauline churches, the attempt to maintain order in the Pastoral Epistles, and the later attempts in Luke-Acts and John to maintain the vitality of the Spirit in their churches.² Although I am not in full agreement with Dunn's analysis, I suggest that he has made valuable observations about our need to look at the diversity of the witness and to recognize that the New Testament moves between the celebration of the power of the Spirit and the need to stabilize the community under authoritative figures.

The Pauline corpus allows more insight into the range of understandings of the power of the Spirit. Paul knows the Spirit as experiential empowerment. When he is involved in a debate with the Galatians over works of law, an essential aspect of his argument is the one from experience: "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? . . . Did you experience so many things in vain?" (Gal 3:2-4 RSV). For Paul, the presence of the Spirit is assumed rather than argued. He assumes that his readers will acknowledge that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:5 RSV), that they will acknowledge that they were all baptized in one Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), and that they will recognize the Spirit as the guarantee of future glory (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5). The coming of the Spirit was, therefore, an identifiable event that was experienced in the community as empowerment and attested in a variety of ways.

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This empowerment was experienced through the variety of charismata that were active in the church, a variety that may be seen in the lists that Paul gives in 1 Corinthians and Romans. In addition to the charismatic phenomena of tongues, prophecy, and healings, the gifts involve faith, ministry, encouragement, acts of mercy, and other services to the community in the continuation of God's power. Paul wishes to go to Rome to impart a spiritual gift (Rom 1:11). The capacity to remain unmarried and avoid sexual temptation is also regarded as a charisma (1 Cor 7:7). Moreover, the abundance of gifts brought about through the collection is the result of God's capacity to multiply every *charis* (2 Cor 9:8). Spiritual gifts, therefore, were not limited to the phenomena of 1 Corinthians 12-14, but were experienced in every sphere of the community's existence. James Dunn has indicated that God's *charis* is not only a deed of the past but an ongoing power in the church's life.

[G]race describes not merely the past act of God initiating into the life of faith, but also the present continuing experience of a relationship with God sustained by divine power (Rom 5:2; cf. Col 3:16). . . . No one can read such phrases as "all grace abounding to you," "the surpassing grace of God upon you," "the richness of God's grace lavished upon us" (2 Cor 9:8, 14; Eph 1:7f.) without realizing that we are dealing with an experiential concept of great moment. . . . "Grace" was for Paul a tangible and verifiable reality as much as its correlative "Spirit" (2 Cor 8:1).³

Throughout the Pauline corpus, the Holy Spirit is the eschatological power for sanctification and the moral life. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the gospel that Paul's hearers first experienced the power of the Holy Spirit (1

Thess 1:5). The Holy Spirit is both the power and the norm of their new conduct, a way of life that they in turn offer as worship to their Lord (Gal 5:16–26; Rom 8:2, 4–14; 12:1–2). Thus Paul can admonish the Galatians, “If we live in the Spirit, then let us walk in the spirit!” (Gal 5:25), and can speak of walking *kata pneuma* (Rom 8:4–5). As the community of the new covenant, their lives are written, not with ink, but with the Spirit of God (2 Cor 3:3). The Spirit is thus the power for the ethical existence, for Christian conduct is determined by the Spirit, and Christian believers are those who walk by the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:4; Gal 5:16) and are led by the Spirit (Rom 8:14; Gal 5:18).⁴

Paul also recognizes that the mere claim to the possession of the Spirit is not evidence that one has the gift. Indeed, in 2 Corinthians he must counter the charge that he is not a man of the Spirit. Opponents have made an impressive case, based on their appeal to ecstatic experience, that they, and not Paul, possess the Spirit. Paul counters their claims by an appeal to his weakness as the demonstration of the power of God in his own ministry. Therefore Paul knows that the appeal to experience is not tantamount to possessing the Spirit. Indeed, God’s power can work through human weakness when the power of the Holy Spirit is not self-evident to observers.

Paul’s experience with the Corinthians is a reminder that the Holy Spirit was then, as it is now, both a gift and the occasion of major problems for the church, for the experiential phenomena are the source of division, acrimony, arrogance, and jealousy within the church. One may ask whether the charismatic community of Corinth lasted for an extended period. James Dunn wrote:

I conclude then that Paul’s theory of a Christian community bonded together into a developing unity by the diversity of charismata did not translate very well into practice. Out of the sparse information which comes to us from this period it would appear that three out of the four churches with whom Paul was in correspondence were in one degree or another threatened by the presence of (certain) charismatic phenomena. Charismata which were intended for the building up of community seemed rather to be destroying it (cf. 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10).⁵

The Pauline literature is a vivid testimony to the

difficulty of maintaining the living witness to the power of the Holy Spirit without surrendering the church to counterfeit claims to the Spirit’s power. Paul’s task was both to appeal to the experience of the Spirit and to protect the church from the forces that could have destroyed it. Thus the task of the church today, as it was in ancient times, is to seek discernment and wisdom.

Concluding Reflections

Our study of the New Testament texts on the Holy Spirit suggests certain approaches for the reflection on the Holy Spirit today. We have observed the near unanimity of New Testament witnesses in their understanding of the church as the people empowered by the Spirit of God. At the same time, we have also observed the variety of manifestations of the Spirit. The New Testament knows both the community of gifts in 1 Corinthians and the church structured by offices in the Pastoral Epistles. I suggest that the two models exist in continuity and that the model of the Pastoral Epistles was the natural development from the Corinthian model. We should be cautious, therefore, in our claim that either is the normative understanding of the Holy Spirit. If the New Testament attests both understandings of the Spirit, we should be open to both expressions of the Spirit’s activity. The traditional restorationist view, with its emphasis on order and structure and its understanding of the charismatic gifts as phenomena of the first generation, stands in a biblical tradition shaped by the Pastoral Epistles and Hebrews. This tradition is continued in the work of Ignatius, Clement of Rome, and the church fathers. The more experiential expressions stand in the tradition of 1 Corinthians and the early Pauline correspondence.

Our reflections from the New Testament should remind us that, in our preoccupation with our own polemical interests, dimensions of early Christian experience have been ignored in our discussion and practice. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the community as it interprets scripture was important to early Christianity, and it would offer a significant dimension for us today. The role of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying the moral life is also a forgotten aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit.

We will do well to recognize, with the Gospel of

John, that “the wind blows where it wills.” The Holy Spirit is not a matter of human manipulation. The Spirit’s coming does not depend on our own willing, but on God as the giver. We may pray for a renewal and sing the song of God’s renewal by the Holy Spirit, which may come to different generations in different ways. We live, nevertheless, with the consciousness that has empowered Christians of all ages, the consciousness that the believing community does not live by its own resources, but by the resources of the Holy Spirit.

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Notes (Notes from “Eschatology”)

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 314.

² E.g., “If ... the conception of the Kingdom of God is an eschatological one, then it is impossible to make use of this conception in dogmatics.” Julius Kaftan, quoted by his student Rudolf Bultmann in *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 13.

³ Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder, 1969), 90.

⁴ See Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), especially chapter 6.

Notes

¹ See M. Eugene Boring, “The Formation of a Tradition: Alexander Campbell and the New Testament,” *Disciples Theological Digest* 2 (1987): 5–62.

² James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 359.

³ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁴ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 305.

⁵ Dunn, 270.

(Notes continued from “Selected Bibliography”)

in Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Vintage, 1981), 573–76. A less accessible version is found in Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation. Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 204–10.