

A Meditation on the Holy Spirit

A proper understanding of the nature of the Holy Spirit is critical to the Church, because so much of the life of the Church hinges upon the operation of the Third Person of the Trinity.

It has been rightly said that the Book of Acts could also be entitled “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” as much as “The Acts of the Apostles”, because the Spirit is ever present throughout the narrative of the early Church. These pages are filled with excitement and dynamism, as any read-through of them will reveal. It could also be said with full conviction that during the last two millennia of Church history, any significant periods of church expansion, of the preaching of the Gospel, and the maturing of God’s people, have also been characterized by this same sense of energy and empowerment. Would it not be reasonable to state, as well, that the absence of these evidences of divine life from the Church has been characteristic of times when, for any number of reasons, the Holy Spirit has not been allowed the full measure of His capabilities?

That it is within the power of men to stay the hand of God’s Spirit is directly inferred from Scripture. *And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption* (Eph. 4:3) were the Apostle Paul’s words as he admonished the Ephesian Christians to good behavior. Elsewhere he pleaded that believers *quench not the Spirit* (1 Thess. 5:19). These two verses are in themselves telling. How can one *grieve* an impersonal force? Jesus’ promise to His disciples of the Holy Spirit in our Gospel is filled with allusions to His personhood. And does not the word *quench* (*Thayer*: “to extinguish, suppress, stifle”) immediately bring to mind today’s Epistle (Acts ii. 1 ff.), and the tongues of fire that signified the arrival of this Heavenly Presence? It takes very little to put out a lovely flame. St. Stephen the Martyr, facing a crowd of immensely hostile and unbelieving Jewish leaders, in righteous anger cried out to them: *...ye do always resist the Holy Ghost* (Acts 7:51). How sobering are such examples!

As we study the Spirit, we must establish some premises. First and foremost, the Church is inoperative without the agency of the Spirit. No Spirit, no Church. Now, this being said, nothing prevents any organization, including religious ones, from operating off of appearances, and even very convincing ones. If a machine were to go on merrily working after it had been unplugged, one would conclude that it had some other power source. Could it be so with the church? If our goal is to put on a production, both for our own benefit and for others, we can find a myriad of ways to contrive it, especially in times when a good shows rate very high. But contrived experience only leads to the emptiness that provokes a hunger for more of the same.

How long will God permit such a state of affairs? St. James, never one to mince words, gives us these perplexing and troubling verses:

Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy [NIV: “envies intensely”] (4:4,5)

The Spirit “envies intensely”! This is an amazing verse, indeed. The implications are clear. In St. John 14, Jesus had said that the *Comforter* [Greek: “Paraclete”] *will abide with you forever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you* (vv. 16, 17). The Holy Spirit strives and wrestles with the Church when it wanders from its mission, when its habits and customs serve to repel His presence, when it gives its heart to other masters, whatever they may be.

The continued free and willing operation of the Spirit in the Church, then, is not a given. It requires the active participation of His human recipients in keeping themselves readily available to Him. As a Person, He possesses all of the attributes of personhood, and as divine, He deserves appropriate deference. If He can be grieved, He can also be pleased. If He can be resisted, He can also be fully welcomed and yielded to. He is no autocrat, nor does He abridge anyone’s rights in the process of asserting His own. He can easily be rebuffed. Oh, what a great burden of deportment and carefulness this places upon you and me!

Until this point, we have stressed that He dwells intimately and personally among us. But He is the *Holy Spirit*, and this also calls for our close attention. *Holy*...possessing all of the characteristics of God: purity, lofty majesty, separation from all that is wicked and defiled, utterly free of any of the tainting influences that beset unholy man, and on goes the list. It is among the chief miracles of the New Covenant that this Holy God, through His Spirit, has condescended to bestow His presence in the hearts of sinful humanity. His intention is to make His people also holy, just like Himself. He will use any and all means toward this end. It follows clearly that His active agency within the Church will be in direct proportion to the degree of holiness that the Church exhibits and enjoys. A church which is at home with the world, which is careless in its religious exercises — its prayer life, its attention to Scripture and the Sacraments, its obedience to the commandments — cannot at the same time expect any measure of the Holy Spirit.

Now comes the most pertinent question for all of us: should the Holy Spirit be allowed to fill the Church in these, our own, times, what might this mean? We cannot expect any exact repetition of the past, and must set aside sentimentality and wistfulness for times that cannot and should not be repeated. In the Book of Acts, the Spirit commissioned His people toward certain ends, and empowered and enabled them to complete them. In subsequent ages, His strategies varied according to the need of the hour. There is no library that could contain the record of His acts throughout the world, since apostolic times. In each instance, Spirit-filled men and women placed themselves at His disposal, and so became the successful agents of His wonderful works.

In these days..., let's at least allow ourselves to imagine, perhaps even to venture an informed guess, what the ongoing "Acts of the Holy Spirit" might be.

Christendom is woefully divided. Surely this state of affairs grieves our Lord Jesus, who prayed thus for the Church: *That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me* (John 17:21). Could it not well be that one of the chief desires of God's Spirit would be to effect this very thing? No conscientious Christian soul can behold the state of the church without the realization that greater damage to the Gospel message could hardly be done than to render it meaningless and empty by the failure of its proponents to live it out in demonstrable ways. It's not as if the work of God is brought to a standstill. It goes on in some measure, though we hardly know how different it might be should the Holy Spirit have full sway. But the world, I suspect, is tired of religion, though they are still desperately in need of Christ. They have no more patience with the visible church, and are actively turning away from it.

So, if the Spirit were attempting to fulfill Christ's prayer in a manner sufficient to the times, it would be our choice to resist, to grieve, to quench, or to become active, cooperative parts of His plan. We would need to lay aside sectarianism, long held hostilities, and staunch independence. There would need to be repentance of all uncharitableness, and a willingness to part with any obstruction to this process, including cherished distinctions that we have been quite sure unequivocally certify us as the only one, true church in all the world, among all others.

And what would He commission us to do here in the Ellsworth area? Together, as we encourage each other to yield to His place and presence among us, He will surely reveal it. As we ask for this continually in prayer, and do our best to prepare ourselves, He will make the steps known to us.

Without Him, the church is nothing. He was sent to literally dwell within us. He is a Person. He is holy.

Let us pray:

Heavenly King, Paraclete, Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things, the Treasury of good things and the Bestower of life, come and dwell in us, and purify us from every stain, and save our souls, in Thy goodness. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (from Ancient Collects)