

Overcoming Holy Spirit shyness in the life of the church

Cheryl Bridges Johns

The contemporary church suffers from what James Forbes calls “Holy Spirit shyness.”¹ Most Christians know that the Holy Spirit exists, but in their day-to-day existence and in the life and worship of the churches they display hesitation about and even fear of the third person of the Trinity.

In his popular book *The Forgotten God*, Francis Chan comments: “From my perspective, the Holy Spirit is tragically neglected and, for all practical purposes, forgotten. While no evangelical would deny His existence, I’m willing to bet there are

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millions of churchgoers across America who cannot confidently say they have experienced His presence or action in their lives over the past year. And many of them do not believe they can.”²

The absence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians has made our churches places where the liturgy is void of what may be called “real presence.” Christians profess that Jesus is in the midst of two or three who are gathered together in his name, but in practice that presence seems more like the absence.

Contemporary Christians have grown accustomed to living with the absence and fearing the presence. We suffer from a bad case of what may be called Holy Spirit Deficit Disorder.

Holy Spirit Deficit Disorder is a serious condition. It is a condition that has created severe problems in the life of the Christian churches. According to Augustine, “What the soul is in our body, the Holy Spirit is in the body of Christ, which is the church.” In light of this statement it is safe to say that many of our churches are soul-less bodies. They lack the life that is found in the life of the Triune God. They hold on to profession of Christ,

assuming that this profession substitutes for the actual living presence of Christ, who comes to us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Not long before his departure, Jesus comforted his disciples with these words: “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. . . . Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:18, 23; NRSV). Jesus promised that the Triune Life would become our home and that we would dwell in the very presence of the God. These promises were given for here and now and not just for life in eternity.

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The promises Jesus gave his disciples include the sending of the Holy Spirit, the one who would in effect take up the ministry of Jesus after his departure. The Holy Spirit would continue to usher in the kingdom, speak the truth of God, and glorify Jesus

(John 16:4–15). It is the Spirit of God who makes the life of God known among believers. Just as Jesus was empowered and led by the Spirit, followers of Jesus will be led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We might say that the Holy Spirit is the link of continuity between the ministry of the incarnate Christ and the church.

In spite of these wonderful promises, many Christians live as orphans, and our churches are disempowered entities rather than forceful agents of the kingdom of God. How did we get here? And what shall we do to remedy the situation?

How did we get here?

The tragic neglect of the Holy Spirit is the result of several factors. First, Protestant Christianity is decidedly Christ centered (when it is not anthropocentric). The Reformation brought about an explicit focus on Christ, especially in the practices of preaching and teaching. This focus was necessary in order to correct the tragic neglect of faith in Christ as the way to salvation. But the credo “Faith alone” came to be narrowly defined as faith in Jesus alone, and Trinitarian faith suffered loss.

This loss did not go unrecognized. During the sixteenth century one of the criticisms that Anabaptists leveled against the Protestant churches was that “they do not have sword of the Spirit . . . and because they do not have it, it is manifest that they also lack the Holy Spirit as he who should wield that sword in and through them.”³

This focus on Christ alone and faith alone created a great imbalance in Protestant doctrine and practice. By separating Jesus from the life of the Triune God, a form of modalism developed, which resulted in a view of salvation that disconnected knowing Christ from knowing the Father and the Spirit.

An emphasis on scripture over against Spirit created a separation of Spirit and Word. This separation, while honoring the Word, treated the scriptures as a mere witness to truth rather than a truthful vehicle of God’s presence.

Today many Christians believe that they can have a compartmentalized relationship with Jesus, and that this relationship does not bring them into a direct relationship with the Holy Spirit. Or, putting it another way, they fail to see that it is the Holy Spirit who brings believers into relationship with Jesus.

Second, stress on the Holy Spirit is often associated with enthusiastic forms of religion, emotive worship, and a disregard of scripture. The Radical Reformation saw a flourishing of lay preaching and prophets. “Spirit-inspired speech” was common in worship services. The Zofingen Disputation of 1532 articulated a defense of “Christian order” that included spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.⁴

Over time, the abuses of Spirit-inspired speech provoked a reactionary movement. Over against those who disregarded the Bible in favor of the pneumatic work of the Holy Spirit, many church leaders became suspicious of Spirit. Instead, they made a turn to “Word over Spirit.” This turn had historic implications for the life of the churches of the Radical Reformation. They turned away from the Holy Spirit as the one who wields the sword of the Spirit. The Word became separate from the life of God.

Just as an over-emphasis on Christ created a loss of Trinitarian theology, an emphasis on scripture over against Spirit created another separation, the separation of Spirit and Word. This separation, while honoring the Word, treated the scriptures as a

mere witness to truth rather than a truthful vehicle of God's presence. Furthermore, the ongoing witness of the gifts of the Spirit, with the Bible as the standard of this praxis, was neglected in favor of scripture alone.

The separation of Word and Spirit furthered the Reformation's neglect of the Holy Spirit in the life of the churches. Together, Christ alone and *sola scriptura* left little room for a robust pneumatology in the life of the churches. For centuries the Holy Spirit was relegated to the margins, and Protestantism languished with its severe case of Holy Spirit Deficit Disorder.

Another reason for our tragic neglect of the Holy Spirit is the Enlightenment's separation of mind and spirit, reason and emotion. The modern age is characterized by a renewed emphasis on

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reason. The religious wars of the Reformation left many people skeptical of the supernatural. Thinkers such as Rene Descartes and John Locke understood reason as the only avenue for human flourishing and progress. The Age of Reason created its own emphasis on logic and reason as the primary means of conveying the gospel.

While there were Christians who dissented from the turn to reason (in movements of pietism and revivalism, in particular), Protestant Christianity found a home in the Age of Reason and joined in the modern project of rational progress. Even those who have roots

among the dissenters to the Enlightenment find refuge within its safe walls of logic. As a result, we fear anything that appears irrational and emotive. Failing to understand the difference between the transrational and the irrational, modern Christians limit the work of the Holy Spirit to that which can be understood and rationally explained. In doing so, we have further marginalized the work of the Holy Spirit from the life of the churches.

Hopeful signs

One can identify some hopeful signs that the neglect of the Holy Spirit is at last being addressed by contemporary Christians. First, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement of the twentieth century

helped to bring about a renewal of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the churches. While there were the usual abuses and extremes, as a whole the movement has shown signs of maturity.

Furthermore, Pentecostalism's growth in countries of the majority world shows no sign of abating. This worldwide movement of the Spirit is a key impetus for the growth of Christianity. It has affected all Christian denominations. And as we move further into the twenty-first century, Pentecostalism is becoming its own unique form of ecumenism. It has the potential to bring together Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic around a common experience of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual ecumenism may be able to break down long-established barriers within Christianity and to bring about a renewed joint witness that yields the "sword of the Spirit."

Second, among theologians one sees a renewed emphasis on the third person of the Trinity. We are now in what is being called a renaissance of Trinitarian theology. What is common to these theological discussions is a rejection of the tight separation between the immanent and the economic Trinity. Such discussions

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exhibit more openness about the person of the Holy Spirit and more attention to how the Spirit bridges the gap between the life of God and human existence. The *perichoretic* life of God, so often seen as unknowable and distant, is now being understood as available to humanity by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Theologians are coming to understand that emphasizing Trinitarian theology does not detract from a Christocentric gospel. In reflecting on the implications of the Triune Life for the church, Miroslav Volf observes

that the church, born through the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit, "presupposes that the exalted Christ himself is acting in the gifts of the Spirit."⁵ Furthermore, notes Volf, "confession of Christ as Savior and Lord is an essential dimension of charismatic activity."⁶

These two developments, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement and the renaissance of Trinitarian theology, are helping to address contemporary Christianity's Holy Spirit Deficit Disorder.

As we move forward, what might we expect this renewed emphasis to look like within the life of the churches? What difference will it make in our preaching? How will it affect our reading of scripture? What will characterize our worship services?

The Holy Spirit in the life of the churches

One of the first things that would result from a renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit would be a new vision of the church. The Radical Reformation's vision of the restoration of primitive Christianity centered around an understanding of the church as a pneumatically constituted community. In our time the church as a community of women and men who are endowed by the Spirit

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becomes the distinctive factor in a renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

This pneumatic vision of the church changes everything! It changes how we see the life and witness of believers. It changes the corporate gatherings of Christians. It means that the Holy Spirit is not a silent partner in the Christian life. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the overt, dynamic presence in the church, actualizing the living Word and making real the ministry of Jesus.

Also, in the context of the Spirit-constituted community, space, time, and people are made holy. The most ordinary spaces become sacred. Ordinary time becomes sacred time. Ordinary speech becomes Spirit-speech, and ordinary people become vessels of God's grace.

Another result of a renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit is the revelation of the mystery of Christ. The Latin word *sacramentum* is the primary translation for the Greek word *mysterion*, which means "that which is revealed." For the early Christians, *mysterion* was a term used to refer to the mystery of the incarnation and of Jesus Christ and the extension of that incarnation in the church (see Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7–8; Eph. 1:8–10). Whenever the Holy Spirit is actively present, there the great mystery of Christ is. This mystery is deep and wide and includes those who are being brought into the life of Christ. A Spirit-filled church is therefore a church filled with the mystery of Christ.

Another result of a renewal of emphasis on the Holy Spirit would be the unity of Word and Spirit. Preaching in a pneumatic community offers a fresh word that honors the marriage of Word and Spirit. This marriage results in a multidimensional understanding of the text wherein scripture is seen in the context of the ongoing witness of the revelation of God by the Spirit. In this context the text comes alive and the Word of God conveys the presence of God. It announces that God is here. It testifies and invites people into the very life of God.

The fullness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the churches would also result in a great baptism of love. By the power of the Spirit, the inner life of God—a life of love—comes to dwell within the

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body of Christ. This love transcends social, race, and gender barriers. In addition, the other fruits of the Holy Spirit—joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22)—are evident. A Spirit-filled church is marked by these fruits.

Finally, a Spirit-filled church hosts the precious gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts, or *charismata*, include wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy, discernment, and tongues. Perhaps it is fair to say that these gifts are mysterious, transrational expressions of the life of God as this life intersects with the life of the church. These gifts make the life of God

known. They make the will of God known. They sacramentally bring the presence of God into the lives of ordinary people and into ordinary time.

By the gifts of the Spirit the church can know what cannot otherwise be known. Gifts of the Spirit are mysterious and deep expressions of what at times seems inaccessible. The Holy Spirit brings the life of God into the life of the church. The gifts are expressions of the depths of God's grace.

In many ways, the gifts of the Spirit do not follow the standards of human distribution of gifts and wealth. The Spirit gives gifts without regard to race, gender, or social status. And it seems that the gifts of the Spirit are most profoundly seen among the dispo-

sessed. Indeed, these gifts often mock human rationality and human knowing. The illiterate can have great gifts of knowledge and wisdom. The inarticulate can speak profound words in an unknown language. By the power of the Holy Spirit, those who are poor and dispossessed find great wealth. For this reason, Spirit-empowered churches are thriving in poor communities.

Finally, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the churches allows for the reconstruction of life in the face of death. The Holy Spirit brings life to places that have been ravaged by sin. People with addictions are set free. Bodies are healed. Families are restored. Where the Holy Spirit resides, human life flourishes. It is the intention of God to restore creation, and the Holy Spirit is the agent of that restoration.

Everything must change

Inviting the Holy Spirit into the life of the church means that everything must change. Such an invitation is not a matter of adding a bit of Holy Spirit flavor to our worship services or changing the liturgy. Rather, to invite the Holy Spirit into the church's life calls for a radical revisioning of our relationship with God. It means embracing the third person of the Trinity so that we can experience the fullness of the Triune Life. After all, that life is our future.

Notes

¹ James Forbes, *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 21.

² Francis Chan, *The Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook Publishing, 2009), 15.

³ Shem Peachey and Paul Peachey, trans., "Answer of Some Who are Called (Ana)Baptists—Why They Do Not Attend the Churches: A Swiss Brethren Tract," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 45, no. 1 (1971): 10; see also Charles Byrd, "Pentecostalism's Anabaptist Heritage: The Zofingen Disputation of 1532," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 28, no. 1 (2008): 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 228.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 229–29.

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