

A Pastoral Letter Concerning the Experience of the Holy Spirit in the Church Today

A Pastoral Letter to the churches and members of the PCA adopted by the Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. [1975]

The General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church, being fully aware of the widespread notice being given to the question of the work of the Holy Spirit today, offers the following pastoral letter addressed to its churches:

The General Assembly rejoices in all evidences of new life in Christ's body. It prays earnestly that the spirit which Christ has poured out on His church may continue to affect radically the lives of men throughout the world.

At the same time, the General Assembly would express concern over an increasing emphasis on experience-centered criteria as they are applied to the life of God's people. The General Assembly would encourage the church as a whole to take most seriously its commitment to the Scriptures as the "only infallible rule of faith and practice" (B.C.O. 22-5), particularly as Scripture relates to current questions within the church.

In seeking to provide guidelines from Scripture to questions relating to the church's experience of the Holy Spirit, the General Assembly would offer the following observations:

I. Concerning the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism of the Holy Spirit was promised by Joel and other prophets in the Old Testament[1] as well as by John the Baptist and our Lord in the New Testament[2]. It found its fulfillment at Pentecost[3]. While public and external manifestations of the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred on occasion in the Apostolic Age[4], Scripture teaches that the normal experience of the Spirit's baptism coincides with regeneration[5]. It is therefore not to be viewed as a second blessing or a special work of grace enjoyed by some but not by all Christians[6]. The initial reception of Christ by faith is not to be separated from the total impartation of the Person of the Holy Spirit[7].

II. Concerning Life in the Spirit.

Life in the Spirit begins with regeneration[8]. The first manifestation of this life is the believer's calling on the name of the Lord for salvation[9]. Assurance of salvation is not based on any experience, but on the Word of God that promises eternal life to all who believe[10]. This assurance is to be cultivated by the continual use of the means of grace[11].

III. Concerning the Filling of the Spirit.

The filling of the Spirit denotes the dominion of Christ in our lives and occurs when one is led willingly by the Word through which the Spirit works[12]. By their subjection to the Word of Scripture, believers grow in grace and the benefits of the redemption they receive freely through Christ[13]. The evidence of this spiritual growth is seen in the fruits of the Spirit, which is proof of their abiding in Christ and His Word abiding in them[14]. By the filling of the Spirit they are enabled to speak the truth of Christ with great boldness[15].

The Scripture commands every Christian to be filled continually by the Holy Spirit, and to grow spiritually by obedience to God's Written Word and the proper use of the means of grace[16]. When we neglect or ignore His Word or are disobedient to it, we are guilty of quenching and grieving the Holy Spirit[17].

IV. Concerning the Gifts of the Spirit.

Spiritual gifts are granted to every believer by the Holy Spirit, who apportions to each Christian "individually as He wills"[18]. Christians are to use these gifts to serve Christ in the work of His kingdom and for the edification of the body of Christ[19]. All true believers receive some spiritual gift or gifts[20]. No spiritual gift is to be despised, nor is it to be misused to bring glory to any other than to Christ[21]. Specific spiritual gifts noted in Scripture are found in the following passages: Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-16.

Some spiritual gifts plainly have ceased, such as the founding office of apostle. Others are obscure and cannot be clearly defined, such as "helps." Others are clearly seen today, such as "teaching" and "giving." Some have received undue prominence in recent days, such as "tongues," "working of miracles" and "healing."

A. Tongues.

It seems evident that the tongues in Acts 2 were foreign languages known to the hearers there present. It is more difficult, however, to resolve the question of the exact nature of the tongues mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. It is also difficult to determine with certainty the relationship of the modern tongues phenomenon to the New Testament experience. The General Assembly suggests, however, that:

1. Any view of the tongues as experienced in our time which conceives of it an experience by which revelation is received from God is contrary to the finalized character of revelation in Scripture;
2. Any view of tongues which sees this phenomenon as an essential sign of the baptism of the Spirit is contradictory to Scripture; and

3. Any practice of the tongues phenomenon in any age which causes dissension and division within the body of Christ or diverts the church from its mission is contrary to the purpose of the Spirit's gifts.

B. Miracles.

Much discussion and debate continue throughout the church of Christ on the subject of miracles. In the Scripture certain clusters of miracles were associated with various servants of God and related to the giving of revelation, such as Exodus 4:1-9; 1 Kings 17:23-24; John 2:11, 3:2. Such miracles were signs by which God communicated divine truth or confirmed that the speaker indeed spoke from God. These miracles related to revelation have ceased, since revelation was completed with the closing of the Canon in the New Testament era.

Scripture also uses the term "miracle" or wonder to describe the acts of God in all areas of creation and providence[22]. The power of God in response to believing prayer to work wonders and to heal the sick cannot be limited[23]. Such wonders certainly do continue to this day and are all for the glory of God not man.

Finally, the General Assembly would speak a word of caution against an obsession with signs and miraculous manifestations which is not indicative of a healthy church, but of the opposite[24]. The Spirit provides all that is necessary for the equipping of the saints through His presence and power in the lives of the regenerate[25]. The true basis of faith and spiritual growth is the work of the Holy Spirit in believers as they are made subject to His written Word, which is sufficient in itself for spiritual growth to complete maturity[26].

The General Assembly would also urge a spirit of forbearance among those holding differing views regarding the spiritual gifts as they are experienced today[27].

As the church continues to study these matters, the General Assembly would recommend:

1. Prayerful study of the scriptural teaching on the Holy Spirit and His gifts;
2. Study of the church's Standards on such areas as Scripture, Trinity, Doctrines of Grace;
3. Careful training, examination and selection of officers and others in the place of teaching and leadership in the church to assure a consistency of commitment to Scripture and the Reformed faith and to the health and unity of the church;
4. Preaching and teaching of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and His work as taught in Scripture and the Standards of the church; and
5. The promotion of a charitable spirit in the whole church.

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[1] "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I would pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit" Joel 2:28, 29. See also Isaiah 32:15; 59:21; Ezekiel 36:26, 27; 37:14.

[2] "Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, from within him shall flow rivers of living water. But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believed on him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given; because Jesus was not yet glorified." John 7:37-39. See also Matthew 3:11; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-8; John 14:16, 17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-16.

[3] Acts 2:16-21.

[4] Acts 2:1-4; 8:14-17; 10:44-48; 19:6,7.

[5] "Not by works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly, through Jesus Christ our Saviour." Titus 3:5. See also Acts 2:38; Romans 5:5; 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12 - 13.

[6] "Wherefore I make known unto you, that no man speaking in the Spirit of God saith, Jesus is anathema; and no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit." 1 Corinthians 12:3. See also Romans 8:9-10; 1 John 4:2.

[7] "For he giveth not the Spirit by measure." John 3:34. See Titus 3:5,6.

[8] "And you, being dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you, I say, did he make alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses." Colossians 2:13. See also John 3:3-8; Ephesians 2:1-5.

[9] "For, whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" Romans 10:13-14. See also Genesis 4:26; Joel 2:32; 1 Corinthians 12:3.

[10] "For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there was borne such a voice to him by the Majestic Glory, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; and this voice we ourselves heard borne out of heaven, when we were with him in the holy mount, and we have the word of prophecy made more sure; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts." 2 Peter 1:17-19. See also Psalm 19:7; John 17:7, 8, 14, 17; 20:31; Ephesians 2:8,9; Hebrews 11:6; 1 John 5:13, 18-20.

[11] "So then, my beloved, even as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." Philippians 2:12, 13. See also Acts 2:41, 42; 2 Peter 1:3-11.

[12] "If we live by the Spirit, by the Spirit let us also walk." Galatians 5:25. See also Romans 8:4, 13, 14; Galatians 3:3; 5:16, 17.

[13] "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15. See also 2 Timothy 3:16, 17.

[14] "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; so neither can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit; for apart from me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you." John 15:4-7. See also Galatians 5:22, 23.

[15] Acts 4:13.

[16] "They then that receiveth his word were baptized; and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers." Acts 2:41, 42. See also Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 5:18.

[17] Ephesians 4:25-30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.

[18] 1 Corinthians 12:11; Hebrews 2:4.

[19] "What is it then, brethren? When ye come together, each one hath a psalm, hath a teaching, hath a revelation, hath a tongue, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying." 1 Corinthians 14:26. See also Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Corinthians 14:12.

[20] "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal." 1 Corinthians 12:7.

[21] John 16:14; 1 Corinthians 10:31; 12:21; 13:1-3; Ephesians 1:13-14.

[22] "They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep." Psalm 107:23,24. See also Psalm 139:14.

[23] "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall

save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, it shall be forgiven him. Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed. The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working." James 5:14-16.

[24] "But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet." Matthew 12:39. See also Matthew 24:24; John 4:48; 1 Corinthians 1:22,23; 14:22; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12.

[25] "Every scripture inspired by God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." 2 Timothy 3:16,17. See also Luke 16:31; John 14:16,17; 16:7-16; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; 13:1-14:1; Galatians 5:22-23.

[26] Romans 10:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:16-21.

[27] "But thou, why dost thou judge thy brother? or thou again, why dost thou set at naught thy brother? for we shall stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, as I live saith the Lord, to me every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess to God. So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. Let us not therefore judge one another any more; but judge ye this rather, that no man put a stumbling block in his brother's way, or an occasion of falling." Romans 14:10-13.

"Wherefore receive ye one another even as Christ also received you, to the glory of God. Now the God of hope fill you, to the glory of God. Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, in the power of the Holy Spirit." Romans 15:7. See also Romans 12:3, 16; 1 Corinthians 7:7; 1 Corinthians 13; Ephesians 4:7; Philippians 2:2-4; 1 Peter 4:8-11.

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According to Scripture, preaching the gospel is entirely a matter of proclaiming to men, as truth from God which all are bound to believe and act on, the following four facts:

1. that all men are sinners, and cannot do anything to save themselves;
2. that Jesus Christ, God's Son, is a perfect Savior for sinners, even the worst;
3. that the Father and the Son have promised that all who know themselves to be sinners and put faith in Christ as Savior shall be received into favor, and none cast out - which promise is 'a certain infallible truth, grounded upon the superabundant sufficiency of the oblation of Christ in itself, for whomsoever (fewer or more) it be intended';¹⁵
4. that God has made repentance and faith a duty, requiring of every man who hears the gospel 'a serious full recumbency and rolling of the soul upon Christ in the promise of the gospel, as an all-sufficient Savior, able to deliver and save to the utmost them that come to God by him; ready, able and willing, through the preciousness of his blood and sufficiency of his ransom, to save every soul that shall freely give up themselves unto him for that end.'¹⁶

The preacher's task, in other words, is to *display Christ*, to explain man's need of him, his sufficiency to save, and his offer of himself in the promises as Savior to all who truly turn to him; and to show as fully as he can how these truths apply to the congregation before for him.

p. 16. J. I. Packer's introduction to a 1958 reprint of John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Banner of Truth: London)

To the question; 'What must I do to be saved?', the old gospel replies: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. To the further question; 'what does it mean to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?', its reply is: it means knowing oneself to be a sinner, and Christ to have died for sinners; abandoning all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and casting oneself wholly upon him for pardon and peace; and exchanging one's natural enmity and rebellion against God for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of one's heart by the Holy Ghost. And to the further question still, 'How am I to go about believing on Christ and repenting, if I have no natural ability to do these things?', it answers: look to Christ, speak to Christ, cry to Christ, just as you are; confess your sin, your impenitence, your unbelief, and cast yourself on his mercy; ask him to give you a new heart, working in you true repentance and firm faith; ask him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write his law within you, that you may never henceforth stray from him. Turn to him and trust him as best you can, and pray for grace to turn and trust more thoroughly; use the means of grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to him; watch, pray, and read and hear God's word, worship and commune with God's people, and so continue till you know in yourself beyond doubt that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart which you desired has been put within you. The emphasis in this advice is on the need to call upon Christ directly, as the very first step.

Let not conscience make you linger,
 Nor of fitness fondly dream;
 All the fitness He requireth
 Is to feel your need of Him -

So do not postpone action till you think you are better, but honestly confess your badness and give yourself up here and now to the Christ who alone can make you better; and wait on him till his light rises in your soul, as scripture promises that it shall do. Anything less than this direct dealing with Christ is disobeying the gospel. Such is the exercise of spirit to which the old evangel summons its hearers. 'I believe - help thou mine unbelief': this must become their cry.

And the old gospel is proclaimed in the sure confidence that the Christ of whom it testified, the Christ who is the real speaker when the Scriptural invitations to trust him are expounded and applied, is not passively waiting for man's decision as the word goes forth, but is omnipotently active, working with and through the word to bring his people to faith in himself. The preaching of the new gospel is often described as the task of 'bringing men to Christ' - as if only men move, while Christ stands still. But the task of preaching the old gospel could more properly be described as bringing Christ to men, for those who preach it know that as they do their work of setting Christ before men's eyes, the mighty Savior whom they proclaim is busy doing his work through their words, visiting sinners with salvation, awakening them to faith, drawing them in mercy to himself.

pp. 21-22. J. I. Packer's introduction to a 1958 reprint of John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Banner of Truth: London)