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3 THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MISSION

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We will start by establishing some biblical parameters which will raise certain questions. These we will attempt to answer by further biblical study, and by reference to some concrete instances from missionary work.

Each significant advance in Acts is initiated by the Spirit

We should not be too pedantic in looking only for references to the Holy Spirit himself at work in Acts. There are less obvious expressions like ‘The hand of the Lord’ was with them (Acts 11:21) and then the references to the Lord appearing to Saul on the Damascus Road and subsequently, when it is the Lord Jesus himself who is at work. The implication is that the first book of Luke is about all that Jesus began to do and to teach (Acts 1:1), that Acts is about all that Jesus continued to do and to teach, and not only up to the point of his ascension. See Acts 9:5: ‘Who are you Lord? I am Jesus . . .’ Again, it is ‘the Lord’ who appears to Ananias and then tells him to go to Saul. Ananias explains, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ (Acts 9:17)

So we should see that in mission God may be at work not only through his Spirit, but through the risen-ascended Son, and sometimes also through angels. This is the experience of the New Testament church. So let us look at these several advances.

1:8 This is the general statement that the power of the Spirit which will be given at Pentecost is a centrifugal force that will fling the apostles out to the ends of the earth. It happens to provide a useful outline of the progress of outreach throughout Acts, but it also reminds us that skulking defensively in the safety of our assembly halls or other bunkers does not mark what professes to be a Spirit-filled church. The Spirit leads you out.

2:17ff The day of Pentecost saw the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy, and as Calvary fulfilled and superseded Passover so the coming of the Spirit fulfilled giving of the Law, celebrated at Pentecost each year. This was the

birthday of the new covenant church; the baptising of the church into one body. The prophecy also reminds us that the Spirit is poured out on all flesh, or all kinds of people without distinction, old men and young men, men slaves and women slaves, and sons and daughters. This last truth seemed to have remarkably overlooked by generations of Brethren, who in many other ways were quite biblical, yet had this blindspot!

6:1ff *The setting aside of the Seven* was at first sight a practical measure to reassure the Hellenistic Jews that they were not being discriminated against. In the event they appointed two men who exercised quasi-apostolic ministries. They were selected by the whole church, and the apostles then laid hands on them. We are left in no doubt: they were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom (v 3), while Stephen was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (v 5), full of grace and power (v 8), and critics could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke (v 10). He 'did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people' as also later did Philip in Samaria ('the miraculous signs he did', v 8 and 8:6). These signs had up till then been exclusively signs performed by apostles (2:43; 5:12 cf 2 Cor 12:12).

Stephen's enduement by the Spirit enabled him in debate and apologetic argument with Hellenistic Jews which must have included Saul of Tarsus (6:9, Jews from the province of Cilicia). It also empowered him for a theological advance in the theory of mission: God is not limited to Israel, Jerusalem or its temple: he spoke to the founding patriarchs and to Moses *outside of Israel*. The persecution then caused the church, which so far had shown little evidence of concern even for Judea and Samaria, to be scattered from Jerusalem. Though it appears to have been circumstances that drove them out, the repeated underlining of Stephen's enduement by the Holy Spirit forces us to recognize that God was at work. We see that advance in mission may be the Spirit gifting an individual to give clear biblical teaching.

8:4 *The mission to Samaria* was marked with miraculous signs (8:5) including healing, and many people were baptized on confession of faith. Mysteriously they did not receive the Holy Spirit themselves, until the apostles arrived and laid hands on them. This was not a paradigm for a two-stage Pentecostal experience, but authentication of Samaritans being sanctified by the Holy Spirit in spite of all the Jewish prejudice against them. 1:8 had earlier told us that it would be the power of the Holy Spirit which would make them witnesses in Samaria.

9:1ff *Saul's conversion and call to the Gentile nations*. We have already seen that Jesus himself appeared in a theophany to Saul on the Damascus Road, and then in a vision to Ananias. The three separate accounts of

Saul's conversion in Acts all underline his call to evangelize the Gentile nations (9:15; 22:21 and 26:17, 23). Advance in mission may be the calling of a gifted individual to go out to preach Christ.

10:1ff The conversion of the Roman Cornelius. God uses an angel (10:3), the vision given by God to Peter as he prayed (10:9) and the prompting of the Spirit to get Peter into the home of an uncircumcised Gentile, a soldier, symbolic of the oppressing power. 'The Spirit said' (v 19). The Holy Spirit is mentioned four times (vv 38, 44, 45, 47) in the narrative, and when Peter is replying to his critics back in Jerusalem, he mentions the Holy Spirit three times. (11:12, 15, 16). The Lord is so eager that he does not wait for Peter to finish his sermon before revealing his enthusiastic involvement. Mission advance here is conversion of a relatively small group through the prompting of the Spirit.

11:19ff The Gentile breakthrough in Antioch. This exciting development in the third largest city of the ancient world, with its reiterated 'large numbers' (vv 21, 24, 26) was because 'the Lord's hand was with them' (11:21). Whereas in the Old Testament 'the arm of the Lord' (eg Isa 53:1) is Messiah, this expression would seem to point to the work of 'The Lord the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:18).

13:2 The missionary sending from Antioch. This sending out of two of their own prophets and teachers to become missionary apostles (14:4, 14), is specifically said to be as a result of the Spirit saying, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them' (v 2). The Holy Spirit was behind this advance in mission, too: the call to the leaders to send out two men to evangelize the nations.

COMMENT: It is clear that God was active, as Lord of the Harvest in thrusting out labourers. His sovereignty is clear, especially in situations where churches or individuals seem reluctant and slow to become involved.

What if the churches are passive and lacking in vision?

There seems to be an intentional contrast in scripture between the eagerness of the Lord, and the reluctance of men: in the Old Testament, Moses is a remarkable example of this. In Acts the reluctance of Ananias to stick his neck out is an almost ludicrous example: when asked to go to Saul his immediate response seems to be that the Lord must be very ill-informed to propose such a dangerous notion, and is told 'Go' (Acts 9:15).

The Jerusalem church seems to have been passive and lacking in vision. Though they were 'the church' to begin with, and also had the apostles resident among them, they seemed in no hurry to go to Samaria, let alone the ends of the earth. It was the Lord who so overruled events that the persecution that arose over Stephen actually forced most of them out of

Jerusalem to Samaria, and as far as Antioch. When Peter baptized Cornelius, it was Christians in Jerusalem who criticised Peter for having anything to do with uncircumcised Gentiles (11:2). The people who started the problem in Antioch were described in Galatians as 'certain men . . . from James' (Gal 2:12) even though James later repudiated them (Acts 15:24, 27). When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third journey, the Jerusalem leaders enlisted him in a scheme to conciliate the thousands of Jews zealous for the Law, and who had heard (quite correctly as it turned out, and as the council had earlier agreed) that Paul was teaching that neither the Law nor circumcision are necessary to salvation. One wonders whether the original purpose of sending Barnabas to Antioch was to check up on dubious matters like Gentiles becoming Christians, or even whether Peter and John were sent to Samaria in the first place to stop it all!

Even Peter, who in the gospels seems anything but cautious, had to be carefully encouraged to go to visit Cornelius. Philip needed the prompting of the Spirit (8:29) before he could be nudged forward to witness to the Ethiopian.

The later church may have been even more reluctant to take on fresh responsibilities, but the early church did not seem in any hurry to claim the promises of Acts 1:8. The breakthrough at Antioch was initiated, not by officially appointed church delegates, but by Cypriot and Cyrenian Hellenistic Jewish refugees. They provide a prototype of the parachurch missionary group: not started by the churches, but none the less blessed by the Lord. The history of mission is that it has rarely been helped by church leaders, as such, and far more often by pressure groups of eager, committed individual believers. The tendency of some in the Brethren movement to look down on these parachurch agencies as unscriptural and a secondbest, because Brethren ought to support their own 'society' (I almost called it 'denominational society') needs some rethinking. Corporate or small group exercise in breaking fresh ground seems to have been the means which the Holy Spirit has used repeatedly throughout the history of the churches, when the churches themselves seem to be stick-in-the-mud and failing to advance.

The whole notion of 'individual exercise' which led to a kind of spiritual individualism, was perhaps, in part, what has been called 'a cop-out' for the assembly as a whole. Instead of whole churches being concerned to lay hands on workers and send them out, it has been left to superkeen individuals to volunteer themselves. An unfortunate side effect of that approach is that it then became unspiritual to screen out unsuitable candidates. The passive church is a terrible problem, but it is not a new one and I have not been convinced that assemblies of Brethren have entirely escaped this passivity and reluctance to get involved. The serious fall off in the numbers of Brethren missionaries over recent years suggests that they have not.

fellow workers. Though they were outstanding as leaders, they were still fallible, sinful people.

2 Corinthians, especially, seems to focus upon the real humanity of the apostles: they could be 'distressed' (1:6); they could 'despair' of life itself (1:8). As they waited in Macedonia for news of the Corinthians they were comforted through the coming of Titus, by God who comforts the 'down-cast' (7:6 NIV; NASB says God comforts 'the depressed'). In chapter 4 human bodies are described as scruffy old earthenware pots, and in chapter 5 as tatty, ragged old tents about to be taken down. The picture of the man of God, in 4:7–12 or 11:23–30, destroys for ever the notion of some kind of apostolic superman, for whom life is one long joyous experience of constant triumph.

All of this should mean that we do not put missionaries on pedestals. Even though greatly used of God and anointed with the Spirit in their ministry, they are still fallible, sinful human beings: they need spiritual direction and pastoral care as much as any other believer. The Brethren approach to missions is very weak in providing leadership and pastoral care. Some might wish to argue that it is the elders of the sending assembly who are in authority. But it is difficult to exercise realistic care, leadership and discipline from several thousand miles away; it is very expensive to send elders out very often; and such elders may have no grasp at all of cultural problems. More, when workers are from different assemblies, different countries and even different language groups, no elders have authority over those sent out by other churches. There needs to be some recognized authority and exercise of pastoral care on the field. Otherwise we have an 'every man did that which was right in his own eyes' situation. Frankly, decency and order is needed just as much in another country as it is in any local assembly. The fear of 'organization' is out of place. It is clear in the New Testament that leadership was exercised by more experienced workers like Paul and Barnabas over Timothy, Titus, and others.

The principle of 'living by faith' is a principle for the recipients of support. It is not a cop-out for local churches who are unwilling to accept financial responsibility for those on whom they have laid hands and sent out as churchplanters. There has to be careful, responsible and realistic giving for support, and this must be planned for prayerfully under the guidance of the Spirit.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the practice of mission

While it is true in a general sense that those engaged in mission, like every other believer, know the help of the Holy Spirit in their weaknesses (Rom 8:26) and flooding love into their hearts (Rom 5:5), they also experience the work of the Spirit in a special sense. In the same letter, Paul speaks of

the power of the Spirit authenticating the message, and sanctifying the unclean Gentiles (Rom 15:19, 16). To the Thessalonians, Paul says that the Spirit not only empowered the missionaries but also worked in the hearts of the hearers (1 Thess 1:5–6). The writer to the Hebrews also speaks of the confirming work of the Spirit: God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit (Heb 2:4). Peter also describes the first preachers in Asia Minor as ‘those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven’ (1 Pet 1:12). Thus the testimony of scripture would encourage us to believe that just as at the first in Acts, the Holy Spirit will continue to spearhead the progress of the gospel. An overemphasis by some on ‘signs and wonders’ should not cause us to throw out biblical verses with charismatic bathwater! Romans 15, Hebrews 2 and Galatians 3:5 all link signs and wonders with the work of the Holy Spirit: and all those of us who have been missionaries know that we can do nothing apart from the sovereign intervention of God in helping us, and leading us to a breakthrough at the start of a new work. This is how missionaries, their sending churches and prayer supporters (Rom 15:30) need to pray.

Conclusion

Many of our problems with congregations which seem to have little or no missionary vision, arise from the human nature of the church. Its carnality is not eager for increased giving and the necessary sacrifice involved. It is always easier to do nothing than to take time screening people and preparing them for overseas service by giving them opportunities in the sending church first. The enemy has a deep interest in promoting indifference to mission.

Thank God, the church is his church, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. We can therefore pray that he will stir us up today as he stirred up the church then. Just as our hope as individuals is the work of the indwelling Spirit, so our hope for the church and its mission is the work of the Spirit in us as congregations corporately.