

The Spirit-Filled Life of Jesus

Christopher S Webb

I remember the morning well. It was a glorious English summer day in the early 1990s. Hundreds of people had gathered from all across the United Kingdom for “New Wine,” a Christian conference which had been born out of the charismatic renewal then sweeping through the British churches. One of the clergy at the church where I had recently come to faith had been keen to attend the conference with some of our youth group, and I had been rounded up as a “volunteer” to help keep an eye on them. And so, one morning, I found myself sitting on a folding chair under the canopy of a spacious white marquee, erected in the middle of a Somerset farmer’s field, listening to John Mumford talk about healing. John was nothing like I had expected. Walking to the session half an hour earlier, I had pictured in my mind some flamboyant, wild-haired revivalist who would rouse and entertain us with unbelievable tales of cripples tossing away their crutches, lepers being cleansed, and the dead rising from their graves. I was pretty skeptical about the whole concept of divine healing—just accepting the existence of God, and the idea that he might have claims on my life, had taken an age of patient working through only months before. But I was curious, and assumed that, if nothing else, I would come away with some good yarns about the crazy healer.

So I was somewhat startled to find that John, who I later discovered was a Vineyard pastor in London, was very quiet and unassuming, softly spoken and clearly very erudite. Dressed in nothing more flashy than dark slacks and a knitted sweater, he spent a fascinating half hour taking us through the innumerable times the healing ministry featured in the life of Jesus and the early church, picking out the important details about how Jesus spoke with people, how he touched them, the kind of questions he asked, and how he prayed. Occasionally adjusting his glasses to read from the pages of his worn Bible, he drew on the New Testament narratives to construct a model for the Christian healing ministry today. Despite my misgivings, I found myself being drawn in by his warmth and gentleness. As he drew his presentation to a close, he looked up at us and smiled. “Well,” he said, speaking slowly and thoughtfully, “I suppose there’s not much point talking about all this unless we also do it, is there?” He explained that he was going to invite the Holy Spirit to move among us and speak to people in the room, highlighting the areas in our lives which needed God’s healing touch. He invited us to stand. Closing his eyes, he said, “Let’s pray together.” There was silence for a second or two. Again, very softly, he prayed, “Come, Holy Spirit.” And then almost immediately he opened his eyes again, smiled at us all, and suggested that we sit down again. “Has anyone heard from the Spirit?,” he asked hopefully. I remember very clearly thinking: you’re doing it wrong. There had been no emotional appeal, no long verbose prayers, no excited proclamations, no music, no fanfares. Just a simple three word prayer. It didn’t seem like enough.

And then a woman a few seats along from me hesitantly stood. John smiled even more broadly and encouraged her to share what she had heard. “This is very strange for me,” she began. “I’ve never experienced anything like this before. But I saw something so very clearly, and I feel I have to share it.” Then she began to describe a medical condition in the most extraordinary detail. This was no “bad back” or “sprained wrist.” She sounded like a character on a medical drama as she talked about a very particular pain between specific vertebrae over a definite period of time. You could almost imagine she had the x-rays in front of her. But what really caught my attention was something this woman couldn’t see—the face of the young lady sat right in front of her. I swear if her eyes had bulged any bigger they’d have popped right out of her head. As the woman behind continued to speak, the lady in front sat thunderstruck, her jaw dropping. But a few seconds later she came to her senses, turned abruptly and said incredulously, “But that’s me! You’ve just described exactly what I’ve been going through these last three years!” The first woman stopped speaking and gaped back, looking amazed. John simply smiled. “Perhaps you need to pray together,” he said quietly, unassumingly, as though this happened every day. And then he turned to the rest of us. “Did the Holy Spirit speak to anyone else?” I caught my breath. It was that morning that I realized that the Holy Spirit might be more than just a character in a book.

Encountering the Spirit today

As we explore the Spirit-Empowered Life, it is more important than ever to look to Jesus as our example and teacher—because this particular expression of Christian discipleship has caused so much controversy, division, and misunderstanding throughout the history of the Church. From the outset we need to consider one of those controversies head on. There is a strand of Christian theology known as “cessationism” which teaches that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased with the conclusion of the Apostolic era; that once the final pages of the New Testament were penned, there was no longer any need for the confirming

witness of signs and wonders in the life of the Church. This view leans heavily on a particular interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8-10:

“Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.”

Most interpreters understand Paul to be commenting here on the transitory nature of spiritual gifts in the light of eternity, or at least of human existence: when the Lord returns, or when we see him face to face in glory after death, we will no longer have any need for prophecies or words of knowledge. But cessationism interprets this verse as a reference to the writing of Scripture. Once the New Testament was finished (“when the complete comes”) the spiritual gifts (“the partial”) faded away.

For my part, I have to say that I both understand and respect such a view, but find it untenable in the light of both Scripture and history. It seems to me that there is no clear teaching in the Bible that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were intended only for the short period of the New Testament church—there is certainly no implication to that effect either in the book of Acts, nor elsewhere in any of the epistles. And the history of the Church is filled with examples of churches and movements which have expected and exercised spiritual gifts as a natural part of their Christian discipleship. A third century bishop of Neo-Caesarea in Asia Minor had a ministry so centered on healing and miracles that he acquired the nickname “Thaumaturgus,” the “Wonder- Worker.” The Desert Fathers and Mothers, living in the Egyptian wilderness during the fourth and fifth century, frequently had visions, spoke prophetic words, and relied heavily on the gift of “discernment of spirits” (which they understood to mean the ability to discern what was stirring in another person’s heart). The biographies of medieval saints are littered with references to miraculous healings, dreams, and visions; although many of these probably reflect the literary and social conventions of the time, it is hard to believe that there is no kernel of truth anywhere in them—unless we are prepared to discount, for example, the visions of Julian of Norwich, or the reputed healings of Francis of Assisi. In the seventeenth century the early Quakers emphasized the ministry of the Holy Spirit, seeing evidence of both miracles and prophetic words in their meetings. The early twentieth century saw the birth of modern Pentecostalism, which in turn laid the foundations for the charismatic renewal experienced by many churches in our own day.

We may wish to critique these individuals and movements for excesses and wrong turns. Certainly there have been charismatic movements throughout the last twenty centuries that have been derailed by peculiar doctrines, strange practices, or deluded leaders. The second century Montanist movement, to give one example, began as a “Pentecostal” revival and ended as a heretical sect after the leadership became convinced that their revelations held greater weight than Scripture. But we must not let the Charismatic stream be defined by the abuses committed in its name.

It seems to me inarguable that the New Testament plainly describes the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus and of the early Church with the full expectation that this would also be the experience of the Church throughout the ages. I have yet to find evidence that the Holy Spirit has absented himself from the Church, or that he is unable or unwilling to minister to his people in a wide variety of ways, both natural and supernatural. And I do all I can to embrace that ministry, because Jesus embraced that ministry—and the great goal and desire of my life is, by the grace of God, to become more and more like Jesus.

A life soaked in the Spirit

The Bible shows us very clearly that Jesus lived a life entirely soaked in the Spirit from beginning to end. The presence of the Spirit is conspicuous, for example, in the nativity story. Mary, we read, “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18), consistent with the announcement made by the archangel Gabriel: “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son ... the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:31, 35). When Mary visited her relative Elizabeth in the Judean hill country, “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry” (Luke 1:41). Meanwhile, Elizabeth’s husband Zachariah also experienced the Spirit’s touch; when John the Baptist was born, Zachariah “was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them’” (Luke 1:67-68). And after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph travel to the temple in Jerusalem where they meet the old man Simeon who, “guided by the Spirit,” recognizes the infant Jesus as the long hoped-for Messiah of Israel (Luke 2:27-32). The Spirit continued to play a key role throughout the ministry of Jesus. At his baptism the heavens opened over him and the Spirit visibly “descended upon him in bodily form like a dove” (Luke 3:22). Immediately after this, Matthew tells us, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1). After forty day of wrestling with temptation he returns to Nazareth to preach in the synagogue; he reads the words of the prophet Isaiah—

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”—and proclaims to the congregation, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-21).

The gospel accounts are filled with stories of Jesus performing astonishing healings, breathtaking miracles over nature, and dramatic exorcisms of evil spirits. Jesus himself is very clear about the critical role the Spirit plays in these acts of power; it is “filled with the power of the Spirit” that he returns from the wilderness to teach and heal (Luke 4:14), and “by the Spirit of God” that he is able to cast out demons and perform other miracles (Matthew 12:18). As he reflects on the wisdom of Jesus’ teaching and the signs and wonders he performs, Matthew is reminded of another prophecy of Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him ...” (Matthew 12:18, quoting Isaiah 42:1).

On the night of the last supper, as Jesus found himself under the shadow of the cross, he spoke more freely with his disciples about the Spirit, promising to send them “another Advocate, to be with you forever” (John 14:16). He had already assured them that the Spirit would be with them during the persecutions to come, promising that when they found themselves on trial “the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:12). But now he went further, revealing that the Spirit would come and dwell with them, to remind them of his teaching and to “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

And, of course, after his passion and resurrection, Jesus gave one great and lasting gift to his disciples: the very same Spirit that had animated and empowered his own life and ministry. “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you ... As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:19- 23). This gift of the Spirit was, only a few weeks later, to be confirmed and reinforced in the most amazing way in the upper room at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). And in his Great Commission, Jesus sent his apostles out to all nations to baptize them into the life and power of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To become a disciple of Christ is to become a participant in the ongoing ministry and work of the Spirit in this world.

The availability of the Spirit

Just as Jesus lived his life utterly immersed in the presence of the Holy Spirit, so he longs for us to experience a similarly Spirit-empowered life. But here we run into a question which for many has become paralyzing: How can I receive the Holy Spirit into my life?

Unfortunately many well-meaning Christian folk have considerably muddied the waters around this question. In trying to describe our experiences of the Holy Spirit (which is often attempting to express the inexpressible) we have leaned into the biblical texts somewhat harder than we should, and created a complex and impenetrable theological forest within which others have lost themselves in despair. We have disputed the distinction between being “filled” with the Spirit or “baptized” in the Spirit. We have insisted on certain signs of the Spirit’s presence:

the gift of tongues, or falling to the floor under the Spirit’s influence, or shaking and trembling. We have fine-tuned definitions of each of the spiritual gifts drawing on the scantiest evidence from the New Testament itself. And we have been depressingly quick to denigrate those whose understanding differs in even the smallest aspect from our own.

It might be valuable, then, to step back for a moment and turn back to Jesus in the Gospels as we ask again: How can I receive the Holy Spirit into my life? You see, it turns out that Christ’s answer is surprisingly simple, straightforward, and direct.

Ask.

That’s it: nothing more esoteric or complex than simply asking. Jesus speaks very plainly of the availability of the Holy Spirit in Luke’s gospel: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:9-13, emphasis added).

And as he invites us simply to ask God for the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus also reminds us of something vitally important: God is safe. If we ask God to give us the gift of the Spirit, we cannot know what will result. How will we be touched and changed? How will our lives be affected? Will the Spirit come quietly, like the gentle whisper heard by Elijah on the mountain, or dramatically like at Pentecost?

What gifts will the Spirit bring, and what will he call us to be and do? We have no way of knowing, no way of controlling the Spirit or determining how the Spirit will deal with us. But this we do know: God can be trusted. Our heavenly Father loves us more than we can ever imagine, and will only ever give us what is good, what will bring healing and wholeness into our lives. Whatever the Spirit brings into our lives— however unexpected, however uncomfortable—we can be sure it will be good.

In asking for the gift of the Spirit, though, we should be very clear that we are not implying that the Holy Spirit is not already present to us, already at work in our lives. The New Testament is very clear: the Holy Spirit is the gift of God to all who believe. As Richard Foster is fond of saying, “There are no ‘non-charismatic’ Christians.” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” As elsewhere in his letters, Paul shows no sign of equivocation here; there is no indication that there are two classes of Christian, those who have the Spirit and those who do not. When we come to faith, when we are joined to Christ, when we respond to Christ’s call on our lives, the Spirit is given to us as the seal of God’s love and redemption. You, who follow Christ, already have the gift of God’s Spirit.

And yet Jesus invites us to ask for the Spirit. It seems to me that we are being encouraged, not to ask for the absent Spirit to come, but for the present Spirit to come more completely. We are seeking a deeper and richer experience of the Holy Spirit. I have many people who are already in my life: friends, colleagues, family. Some of these people I care for very deeply, and I want a fuller and stronger relationship with them. So I ask for them, I seek them, I knock at their door. I ask them for more of their time, their story, their memories, their thoughts, their feelings, their life. So it is, I believe, with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is already present to us, but often as a stranger, or at most a distant friend. I think Jesus encourages us to ask for more than this. If you, like me, are more “at home” in some of the other Renovaré traditions, and are seeking to take a few tentative steps into experiencing the Spirit-empowered life, I would encourage you to begin in prayer, simply by asking the Spirit to come more fully into your life. Don’t come seeking the gifts, nor the vivid spiritual experiences. Don’t come hoping for an emotional rush, or a spectacular miracle. Seek instead just the companionship of God’s Spirit. Ask to be drawn more deeply into his life, his thought, his feelings, his love. Get to know the Holy Spirit. The exercise of the spiritual gifts can wait a little while.

Bearing lasting fruit

The key work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is the forming of Christlike character in us. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” Paul seems intentionally to blur the distinction between Jesus and the Holy Spirit as he affirms the role the Spirit plays in transforming us, step by step, into the likeness of Christ. We see this same purpose threaded through the teaching of Jesus about the work of the Holy Spirit amongst his disciples. He proclaimed that it is because the Spirit was upon him that he brought good news to the poor and proclaimed release to captives (Luke 4:18). When he discovered that his disciples had the humility of heart to grasp the idea of the upside-down kingdom in which spiritual poverty is wealth and to lose one’s life is to gain it, he “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” (Luke 10:21). Seeing their thirst for intimacy with God, he encouraged them to come to him and drink, offering them water that would satisfy that thirst eternally; John comments that “he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive” (John 7:39). At the Last Supper, he promised that the Spirit would come and “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). Over and over again we see that the Spirit leads the disciples more deeply into Christ-like life: cultivating compassion, deepening humility, drawing them into intimacy with God, and strengthening their understanding of the truth. We often remind ourselves of this, of course, teaching that although the gifts of the Spirit are to be welcomed and exercised it is the fruit of the Spirit which really matters: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 6:22-23). But at the same time we often seem to forget just how fruit is grown. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that these Christ-like characteristics are qualities we have to manufacture within ourselves, the gifts we will create and offer back to the Spirit for his approval. “How can I be more loving?,” we ask ourselves. “In what ways can I be peaceful? What would patience look like in my life? How will I show kindness?” But this is to forget the nature of fruit. A tree cannot decide to grow fruit through its own efforts. It will not produce better fruit—in fact, it will not produce fruit at all—simply by concentrating hard and willing fruit to grow. Instead, the tree simply has to root itself in good soil and fresh water ... and fruit will grow naturally. It is the same for us. Like the wise disciple in Psalm 1, we need to plant ourselves beside the fresh flowing streams of the Spirit, drinking in his presence and life, and allow the fruit of Christ-like character to grow naturally in us.

What might that look like? Imagine this scene: it’s early evening, and a man is arriving home tired from work. The house is in uproar. The eldest son is preparing dinner messily and slowly, while the younger kids are running around yelling and throwing cushions around the living room. Their mother has just got off a long phone call to a friend whose marriage is falling apart, and is

hurrying to be ready to go out to the soup kitchen where she volunteers on Wednesdays. The mail sits on the table; a final demand is conspicuous on top of the pile. We might be tempted to ask: how can the husband show kindness and patience? How could the children be more loving? How might the wife express joy and self-control? But we know very well that asking them to show such character under stress may well be asking for a miracle ...!

What if, instead, we were simply to ask for a miracle? Perhaps the husband might pause just long enough to pray: “Spirit of God, I don’t have it in me to be Christ-like here this evening. But I know you are here somewhere. I know you dwell in me. Where are you, Lord? Help me be attentive to you, and open to your grace.” And with that prayer, he plunges in. It may change everything. It may not.

But if he (or his wife, or his children) slowly develop the habit of praying that way, over time they will immerse themselves less in the turmoil of stress and emotion, and more into the presence of the Spirit in their midst. And the result is fruit— fruit slowly grown, to be sure, but fruit nonetheless. It won’t happen overnight, but it will happen. Peace, love, joy, and the rest, will begin to flourish. The Spirit will bring about a miracle.

The eternal gift

But what about the “real” miracles? What about the spiritual gifts—the healings, the prophecies, the words of power and knowledge, the signs and wonders? Certainly these are part of the Church’s experience of life in the Spirit, although they seem to be more evident in some churches than others, and in some periods of Church history than others. As Jesus reminded us, “the wind [and the Spirit—the word is the same in Greek] blows where it chooses” (John 3:8). Sadly we don’t have the space to fully explore such miraculous gifts here, about which (fortunately) others have written at tremendous length, and with such expertise. But we can remind ourselves that behind every spiritual gift—the astounding and miraculous gifts, and the less dramatic gifts such as teaching, preaching, administration, compassionate care of others—lies a greater and eternal gift, the one gift which above all the Spirit seeks to give: love. One of the most striking aspects of the way the Spirit gives gifts to God’s people is that the spiritual gifts are always given in order to be given again. If the Holy Spirit wishes to give a gift of healing, he rarely gives it to the one suffering from illness or disability. The Spirit gives the gift of healing to another, so that other will have the opportunity to show love to the one who suffers. And so it is with almost every gift: God gives prophecy to one to share with all; he gives insight to this woman to help her counsel this man; he gives wisdom to a child to enrich an adult.

Behind this lies God’s great passion: giving us ever more opportunities to grow in love for him and for one another. And this, in the end, is the truly Spirit-empowered life: the life immersed in love, growing in love, ever more deeply rooted in love. I realized, many years later, that the truly miraculous moment at that Christian healing conference was not when one woman clearly identified the illness of another. It was the moment when the speaker very wisely said to them, “Perhaps you need to pray together.” He understood very well that love, not miracles, was the Spirit’s purpose. It wasn’t about wonders and marvels. God longs above all for us to be formed together into the loving character of Christ. It was all about becoming like Jesus.

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