

I Believe in the Holy Spirit

One Pilgrim's Response to Contemporary Beliefs About and
Practices Attributed to the Work and Ministry of the Holy Spirit
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Prologue

My highest goal is to be a Bible anchored, Spirit-led, follower of Jesus Christ celebrating the biblical traditions of the evangelical movement that have nurtured me through the years of my Christian experience. As such, I am committed to the foundations of faith articulated in the Apostles Creed, the authority of Scripture, the historic evangelical model for evangelism and service and the vitality of the Spirit-filled life in my pursuit of a discipleship characterized by a tough mind, a tender heart and serving hands. In keeping with the teachings and practices of the early Church, I believe that the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit are essential to fulfilling my call as a follower of Christ. It is my desire to encourage other members of Christ's body to seek actively the fullness of the Holy Spirit in keeping with the historic evangelical theological perspective of Scripture that I believe to be most consistent with and representative of biblical Christianity.

These reflections are the result of a forty-five year pilgrimage as a disciple of Christ attempting to reconcile my theological beliefs about and personal experiences with the Holy Spirit in ways that find common ground on the essentials while promoting a unity of service and spirit pleasing to my Savior. It is my prayer that those who examine the fruit of this journey will find, as I have, a new freedom in the Spirit that is firmly anchored to Scriptural essentials. The age within which we live and the unprecedented opportunities that are now before us demand that we find such a place of peace and empowerment within and among ourselves. History's greatest spiritual harvest is before us. The cleansing and enabling of the Spirit are the most important resources for bringing in that harvest. I believe we must find a greater unity in and by the Holy Spirit so that we might see the world come to Christ in our lifetime.

Not by Might but by the Spirit

Beginning with the twentieth century and intensifying as the twenty-first century unfolds, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit has reached significant levels in the work of the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ. Numerical growth, evangelism, sacrificial Christian service and joy of worship are characteristic of those groups committed to the ministry of the Spirit. In these days of opportunity, the truth that it is not by our might or strength but by the power and presence of Christ's Holy Spirit is increasingly recognized and appropriated. My own journey along the paths of the Spirit-filled life began nearly five decades ago while a student in a Canadian Bible College affiliated with the Free Methodist Church. These were the gestation days of what is now called the Holy Spirit Renewal Movement when the Lord moved beyond the walls of the earlier Pentecostal expressions to touch "Jesus People" throughout the world.

With the expansion of the Pentecostal into the Charismatic movement, a diversity of views developed around various manifestations attributed to the Holy Spirit. In particular, confusion arose for me over the Wesleyan experience and doctrine of Entire Sanctification, what is meant by the Baptism with the Holy Spirit, the connection between social and personal holiness, the place of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, the validity of ecstatic demonstrations and experiences, the role of public exhortation and testimony, the nature of spiritual warfare and miracles of divine healing. Being called to a "head first discipleship" as a writer, teacher and minister committed to

the nurture of Christians by “teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded,” I needed to reconcile the emotional, “enthusia” dimensions of the Spirit’s expressions with the life of the mind.

I have wrestled systematically through the years with each of these elements of the Spirit-filled life. What follows are my reflections and in-process conclusions about much of what I have seen as a warm-hearted, heads-first seeker of the Spirit’s work within and beyond my theological heritage. It is not my intent to present the definitive work on these sacred things. You may well disagree with my insights based on your own theological convictions and personal experiences with the Spirit. My prayer is that in some way you will find your own journey in this vital area of discipleship stimulated, challenged, stretched, enriched and perhaps affirmed.

Fundamentals of the Holy Spirit’s Ministry

How thankful I am that the Holy Spirit’s ministry involves first the **conviction** of sin (John 16:8-11) and then the **affirmation** that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world (John 16:14). What follows is the Spirit’s **confirmation** of (i.e., witness to) our redeemed relationship in Christ (Romans 8:16, 1 John 3:24) and then the **transformation** (John 20:19-23, Romans 8:9) into the image of Christ through conversion and a distinct in-filling personal Pentecost. In my Wesleyan heritage this is termed **Entire Sanctification**. The evidence of sanctification is a growing life of **holiness** anchored to the revelation of God’s Truth in Scripture that does the work and will of the Father. I have found that this sanctification energizes me to seek the **perfect love** of the **Great Commandment** and participate in the fulfillment of the **Great Commission** for the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel.

The Holy Spirit and Sanctification

Many traditions have a theology centered in the grace of God and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. While each have peculiar nuances, I have concluded that terms used by these various traditions such as the *baptism in the Holy Spirit*, *the fullness of the Spirit*, *the deeper life*, *perfect love*, *entire sanctification*, *total commitment*, *consecration* and *full surrender* seem to describe, for the most part, a common understanding of a distinct crisis encounter with the Holy Spirit following conversion.

For me, John Wesley’s perspectives on the sanctifying work of the Spirit seem to be among the most biblically descriptive of this experience. Paraphrasing Mr. Wesley’s insights, sanctification is a life-long process, initiated at conversion and continued by the Holy Spirit, of daily cooperation with God’s grace in which the believer grows in love of God and humanity, trusts in the sufficiency of God’s grace and rejoices in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Wesley believed that as holiness of motive and life increases, there comes a moment when *the heart is filled with pure love toward God and man*.

He believed that this experience, like justification, comes as a gift from God through faith alone. After this crisis, the Christian continues throughout life to mature in love for God reaching toward the ultimate hope of being fully conformed to the mind and heart of Christ. Wesley believed that this experience of perfect love, described by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, is both process and consummation. For him, sanctification did not denote sinless perfection but signified the believer’s purity of heart and intention releasing the power to live motivated and constrained by God’s perfect love.

Through the infilling work of the Holy Spirit, I have discovered that Jesus' teaching about loving God with my whole being and my neighbor as myself is possible and necessary in order to live effectively for Christ and work productively with others. My individual responsibility then is to use this experience to build up Christ's body wherever God places me in keeping with the Apostle Peter's admonition *have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind* (1 Peter 3:8). Jesus' Spirit is first and finally the Spirit of holiness.

Personal and Social Holiness

Much confusion regarding the relationship between personal and social holiness has been present in the evangelical movement over the past several decades. For too long, the *social* Gospel has been seen as the purview of the liberal expressions of Christian faith. Social justice and concern appear to be inherent in New Testament practices related to the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

I believe, as taught by the Apostle James and modeled by our Lord Jesus Christ, that personal holiness is manifested by a deep concern for the needs of others, particularly the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the unjustly imprisoned and the disenfranchised. The least, the left and the lost are of special concern for the Spirit-filled Christian. Mr. Wesley concluded, in keeping with admonitions of the Apostle James, that there is no personal holiness without a commitment to social holiness. To put it differently, a passion for social holiness is a tangible expression of a commitment to personal holiness. No organization has influenced me more thoroughly on this belief and its practice than that of the Salvation Army. I am committed to modeling a life of Spirit-filled holiness through my service to society in general and the less fortunate in particular.

Spiritual Gifts

Much confusion in my life and among various traditions arose over the nature and place of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In my own life, I desire to exercise these spiritual gifts for the common good of the body of Christ and not just for personal edification. The Holy Spirit gives these gifts, as He wills, to surrendered believers. While each of the spiritual gifts is of importance, some are more helpful in edifying the body of Christ—His Church. These, the Apostle Paul suggests, should be encouraged above the others (see 1 Corinthians 14).

There appears to be little Scriptural support to require that every believer receive or practice any one particular gift of the Spirit as the primary evidence that a personal Pentecost has taken place. However, it does seem clear that the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and particularly perfect love (1 Corinthians 13) are to be cultivated in all believers as the most reliable evidence of the Spirit-filled life.

Ecstatic Experiences

Debate exists in Christian circles regarding the validity and necessity of a wide range of ecstatic experiences often connected to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. While observing these phenomena over five decades and personally experiencing several of them, I do not believe that Scripture encourages believers to seek unusual or ecstatic experiences as essential tests of full surrender to God or as the evidence that the Holy Spirit has total freedom in an individual's life.

Some expressions, such as the raising of hands or exclamations of praise to God, are a part of my spiritual heritage. I do on occasion manifest these practices striving not to interrupt the flow of corporate worship or draw undue attention to myself.

I believe that the Holy Spirit respects the gift of free will given by God to His human creation. Recognizing my dependence upon God's grace to exercise that freedom responsibly and productively, I believe that the Spirit works with our consecrated volition helping us make a full and conscious surrender to God's will. I do not encourage experiences that require the abandonment of God's gift of free will and conscious, volitional choice.

A significant segment of the evangelical tradition is hesitant to accept the practice known as *speaking in tongues* as the Spirit-given gift of languages recorded in Acts chapter two. I recognize that sincere believers throughout the history of the Church have disagreed on this particular manifestation. After prayerful study of the Bible, I believe we must submit our personal experiences and opinions to the authority of that which is both clear and essential in Scripture.

I believe that the gift of tongues, mentioned in Acts, enables communication in an existing human language, at that moment unknown to the speaker, for the primary purposes of witness and evangelism. In some Christian circles a form of ecstatic utterance, described as a *prayer language* or *devotional tongue* based on later references in Acts and I Corinthians, is encouraged. While for me the Scripture does not as clearly support this particular practice, I try to use this expression, and encourage others who believe they possess it, as a gift to exercise in keeping with Paul's directives for the intercessory benefit of the body of Christ.

As to ecstatic experiences in general, let us encourage unity in the essentials of the faith most clear in Scripture and give priority to those elements of the Spirit's ministry that model the Great Commandment and advance the Great Commission. Let us encourage believers to seek perfect love (1 Corinthians 13) and clarity of witness rather than any particular sign gift in keeping with the Apostle Paul's *seek not, forbid not* admonitions in 1 Corinthians 14:39-40.

Public Exhortation, Repentance and Testimony

Within many Spirit-filled circles public exhortation, repentance and testimony are a frequent practice. In some circles it is common to have tongues and interpretation as a significant part of the community worship experiences. I believe that there should be appropriate opportunities for individuals to publicly express what God has placed on their hearts. However, what is shared should be consistent with the teachings of Scripture, be done decently, in order and in harmony with the lifestyles of a community of faith being perfected in love.

We must weigh, however, all public exhortations in the light of the Bible. Other than quoting Scripture, I avoid using phrases such as *thus saith the Lord*, speaking in the first person as the voice of God or exhibiting behavior that would presume to parallel the prophets of the Old Testament. Such practices, I feel, unnecessarily dramatize what is being said and suggest that we are speaking God's words directly, inappropriately placing the communication on equal footing with His holy and inspired Word, the Bible. These prophetic styles often limit discussion as well as the free exercise of discernment needed for validation, clarification or correction.

As to prophetic words of warning and exhortation, those who feel they are led by the Spirit to speak words pertaining to only one or a few individuals should share these privately at an appropriate time. I believe that those who feel God has given them knowledge about the needs,

errors or sins of others should use such insight first for prayer and intercession. The counsel of those in places of recognized spiritual authority should be sought before bringing such a word to an individual or publicly to the body of Christ (Matthew 18:15-17).

Public repentance, confession and related expressions of devotion to Christ appear to be a part of New Testament Christianity and thus are appropriate responses to the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. It has been my practice to use an open altar and times of public testimony and confession in corporate worship. However, before sharing intimate matters, I believe individuals must counsel with the spiritual leadership of their faith community. On occasion I have seen well meaning individuals, overcome with emotion, unwisely confess publicly to things in their past placing the congregation at large in uncomfortable positions both personally and legally.

Spiritual Warfare

The New Testament Church clearly believed that there are malevolent forces at work in the world actively opposing the purposes of God in both creation and humanity. We must take seriously the biblical admonitions to recognize the nature of these spiritual *principalities and powers* standing firm in the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18). In spiritual warfare, however, let us give primary attention to the supremacy of the victorious Christ in contrast to focusing on demonic action or authorship.

Given my convictions about the real presence of evil in the world, I believe we must exercise great caution about embracing any spiritual practice or belief that asks for the abandoning of sanctified reason and/or volition. Such practices have the potential to provide evil a foothold even in the lives of committed Christians. The Holy Spirit seeks to guide our human volition calling us to conscious cooperation with His sanctifying work. By contrast, the malevolent forces seek to possess, overrule and negate the freedom of will, thought and behavior.

Divine Healing

The early Church believed that divine healing is available to those who pray in faith trusting God for the needs of the physical body, the mind and the emotions (James 5:13-15). I believe that God's healing can flow through His direct intervention according to His will and purposes. My wife Nancy and I can give undisputed testimony to such direct interventions in our own lives and that of others.

However, healing comes also by following the understandings God has entrusted to us through Scripture, experience, research, medicine and science. Proper nutrition, exercise, rest, professional and spiritual counsel are significant elements of God's healing ministry. Let us be willing to pray for the sick and encourage those with such needs to appropriate all the means of God's grace including prayer, mature spiritual counsel, qualified professional treatment and preventive lifestyles.

The Holy Spirit and the Life of the Mind

I mentioned at the outset of this reflection that my primary calling is to serve as an instrument to advance the Great Commission challenge to make disciples by "teaching them to obey" all that Christ commanded and modeled. As a result I see my journey as a "head first

calling” anchored to the belief that before the heart can be purified and hands equipped for sacrificial service, the mind must be renewed. Jesus came as a rabbinical teacher consistently challenging His listeners to think differently about God’s nature and intentions. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7) sets forth a way of thought and application that underscores the limitations of the human intellect. Frequently Jesus corrected Scribal misperceptions and misunderstandings, all the fruit of reason without revelation, with the phrase “you have heard it said, but I say to you” (Mt. 5:21, 27, 33, 38 etc.) When He finished teaching (Mt.7: 28 - 29), the crowds were “astonished at His doctrines for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the Scribes (the acknowledged and credentialed intellectuals of that day).

My commitment to understanding and teaching such a Christo-centric worldview is shaped by what is called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” – a model based on the practices of John Wesley to help discern the mind, will and ways of God for the serious disciple. Four components make up the quadrilateral – Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Our efforts to discern truth need to take into account these four sources of insight before concluding that we may have the “mind of Christ”. These sources were first referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in 1964 by theologian/scholar [Albert C. Outler](#) in a collection of works he edited entitled *John Wesley*. **Scripture** refers to the inspired and all-sufficient written word of God, the 66 canonical books of the Bible. Upon this foundation theological and church **traditions** are adopted which agree with the biblical text, (those which are inconsistent are discarded – a hallmark of the Reformation). Next, **reason** is received as a gift intrinsic to the image of God in humanity allowing us to process the insights received from Scripture and interpreted by tradition. Finally, with Scripture, tradition and reason in place, we are prepared to **experience** the reality of God’s intention helping the insights “work” in a real and fallen world.

It is important to take into account Outler’s caution: "There is one phrase I wish I had never used: the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. It has created the wrong image in the minds of so many people and, I am sure, will lead to all kinds of controversy." [1] The problems he anticipated come when the Quadrilateral is seen as an "equilateral," and all four "sources" for authority and decision-making are seen as equally weighted. This was neither Outler's intent nor Wesley's methodology. Rather, I assert that Scripture is to be viewed as the anchor to which all other sources are tethered and subservient.

I find the baseball diamond a helpful metaphor to understand the quadrilateral. Scripture is “home plate”. A run is not scored until each of the bases of tradition, reason and experience are firmly touched and the runner returns to the home plate of Scriptural authority validating the assumptions gathered on the run. While one can start from an initial point of experience, reason or tradition in the search for truth, Scripture must always remain the objective “primary source” against which all other elements are weighed.

An in-depth study of the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17) brought me to the understanding that the Holy Spirit functions as the “coach” to help me run these bases successfully. Jesus, responding to Thomas’ desire to “know”, describes the central role the Spirit plays in the search for truth and comprehension. Using faith as the operative resource (John 14:10-14), Jesus promises a giftedness of insights, applications and demonstrations that would create a “thought and action leader” revolution destined to change the world. Beginning in vs. 26, He then describes the catalytic role of the Holy Spirit as Comforter, Tutor, Companion and ever-present Teacher who helps us understand, appropriate and apply the Truth He reveals. The tutoring nature of the Spirit is further reinforced on the Day of Pentecost when Peter is enabled beyond his natural abilities to present an apologia for the Christian faith so convincing that thousands ascent to and act on the truths they heard. Paul later reinforces the enlightenment

dimensions of the Spirit's work by noting that several of the gifts (wisdom and discernment for example) empower the Spirit-led believer to think, comprehend and teach beyond the limits of human reason.

The words of James 3:13 – 18 summarize, for me, the pursuit of understanding, knowledge and wisdom under the coaching of the Holy Spirit. Those who work in educational settings, particularly those described as “Christian”, should resonate with the truth of the Apostle’s insights. After four decades of service to the academy, I recognize the inherent dangers and frequent failings of a heads first discipleship commitment. However, I also am privileged to work among fellow sojourners in this life of the mind who take seriously the Apostle’s “fruit of the Spirit” admonitions. They daily challenge the depths of my thinking, the motives for my pursuit of knowledge and hold me accountable to seek the “higher education” that transcends the limitations of human intellect and volition.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.
(RSV)

Space will not permit the detailed exegesis and application of this profound passage. I believe that the majority of its cautions, exhortations and promises are self-evident, and for me, painfully and “convictingly” apparent. The Spirit helps me move from the limitations of human thinking to revelation – to “beyond reason and emotion” to deeper, broader and more comprehensive understandings in my fields of learning and application. I cannot achieve my “high calling” to the life of the mind without a continual surrender of pride and prejudice to the enlightening as well as enlivening work of the Holy Spirit.

A Debt of Gratitude

In seeking to live and walk in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, three important references have shaped my journey to date. The first is Charles Hummel’s (former President of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship) Fire in the Fireplace – a powerful and well-articulated metaphor about how the fire (the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit) and the fireplace (the structures, theological frameworks and institutions that provide context for the fire) need one another. A second is the three-volume compilation by J Rodman Williams titled Renewal Theology. This work was commissioned in the early stages of what is now Regent University to provide a systematic theology to guide our understanding of how the Holy Spirit would shape the dreams and visions of a “Renewal Center of higher learning that would prepare Christian leaders, known for their clear minds, compassionate, sacrificial hearts and competent, serving hands to change their world”. Finally Gordon Fee’s (former President of Gordon Conwell Seminary) Paul, the Spirit and the People of God, provided a context for understanding the contemporary expressions and manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s renewing work in a Scripturally-anchored framework.

My greatest debts of gratitude go to so many faithful pilgrims who modeled for me the opportunities and necessities of the Spirit’s calling to my “long obedience in the same direction”. Without their love, correction, personal disciplines and humility to admit that even in their most

enlightened moments they were “seeing through a glass darkly”, my journey as a Spirit-led disciple would be much more difficult.

Our Life in the Spirit: An Exhortation to Unity and Charity

As Spirit-filled Christians in the evangelical tradition, let us recommit ourselves to live in a biblically centered environment for responding to the work of the Spirit. Since we are called by the Spirit to live in Christ-centered community, let us learn from others how God has worked in their lives. With the Holy Spirit’s help let us seek to be both discerning about and sensitive to experiences and beliefs that differ from our own. In this way we may avoid spiritual pride, unnecessarily offending others and grieving the Holy Spirit.

When we find another’s personal convictions and/or experiences differing from what we believe to be biblical essentials, let us address such departures by speaking in love our understanding of the truth. Let us be aware that, like the Apostle Paul, we *see through a glass darkly* knowing, and thus prophesying, in part. In this way we will promote an environment of reasonable and charitable diversity without contributing to a division of purpose or relationship. Let us present our theological views and personal experiences with clarity, charity and humility, always aware of our own limitations and shortcomings as followers of the Christ.

Not By Might but By the Spirit

Let me re-emphasize that my reflections in this paper are a *work in progress*. I would not want to suggest that what I have shared is anything more than my personal but prayerful attempts to understand the work of the Spirit in my own life. This process is producing reconciliation between my personal experiences and theological convictions. It is not my intent to suggest that what I have presented here is the definitive biblical, evangelical or theological view on these matters. Others are better qualified for such a serious undertaking.

What I know is that life in the Spirit is the highest call and most pressing passion for me and those whom I serve. We are living in an age of opportunity, wonder and witness unknown, I believe, since the early days of the Church. Like the Apostolic Fathers we need the discernment and the freedom, the joy and the discipline, the purity and the power that come from the infilling work of the Holy Spirit. Let us encourage one another, as a testimony to the perfect love we proclaim and out of respect for Jesus’ unity prayer in John 17, to unite around the essential, Scriptural mandates of the deeper life for the purpose of knowing Christ and making Him known (Philippians 3:10).