

Protagonist's Corner

Pneumaphobia

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Pentecost is the longest season of the Christian year, yet we expend marginal time and energy on its celebration. Why? Why are we loath to emphasize the person and work of the Holy Spirit? Is it our fear of appearing charismatic? Is it that the Spirit threatens our sense of autonomy, our independence? Are we simply afraid of the Spirit? Whatever the reason, we rarely preach or teach about the Holy Spirit. It has been said that the sin of the Old Testament period was sin against the Father; in New Testament times the sin was against the Son; and in our times it is against the Holy Spirit. There is no question but that the person and work of the Holy Spirit is one of the most neglected doctrines in all of Christian theology.

Perhaps one reason for our unease with the doctrine of the Spirit is that the Spirit is not a doctrine but an *experience*. This being the case, we cannot subject the Holy Spirit to the usual litmus tests of doctrinal truth. For example, we cannot expect the Spirit of God to conform to rhetorical or rational criteria such as logical coherence or consistency. The Spirit is *sui generis*. We are left with the inescapable conclusion that the Spirit's presence is a self-validating, subjective experience; that the Spirit cannot be manipulated or controlled — in short, the Third Person is rather unpredictable and certainly unmanageable by any human agency. The Spirit speaks on the Spirit's own terms from the heart to the heart. The Spirit's mode is intuitive as well as intellectual. We have to be receptive in order to be perceptive where the Spirit is concerned. No amount of informed reading or study can prepare us adequately to speak the truths of the Spirit, and for some of us, that puts us on shaky ground.

Nevertheless we can, we should, we must preach and teach the reality and presence of the Spirit. There is no sadder and more tragic state of affairs than that of spiritual ignorance. Without instruction on the Spirit our congregations will deserve the description "God's frozen chosen."

Part of the problem is certainly misinformation and suspicion. I have actually heard the comment, "Give me religion, but don't give me any of that Holy Spirit stuff!" Some of our people are suspicious of the Spirit. They equate the Spirit's presence in all cases with speaking in tongues. They think that they can divorce the work of God and Jesus from the work of the Holy Spirit, and such a view can only be seen as the unforgivable "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit."

This is a dangerous state-of-affairs. Without a knowledge of the Third Person, believers cut themselves off from the very God they claim to worship, serve, and love. To quote Paul:

How then shall they call upon 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?

How shall they hear without a preacher? Scripture makes several forceful claims where the Spirit is concerned. It claims that we are all, every believer of us, charismatic, because each one of us has a spiritual gift (I Corinthians 12:7). There is no such thing as an “unspirit-filled Christian” since all Christians have the Holy Spirit by virtue of their faith, not by virtue of any other experience or “baptism” (Romans 8:9; I Corinthians 12:3). While there is no such thing as an “unspirit-filled” Christian, there certainly are what can be called “spiritually unaware” Christians. These are folk who, for whatever reason, do not consciously depend on God’s presence through the Spirit for their day-to-day living. It may be out of fear, it may be out of ignorance, but whatever the cause it is deplorable but correctable.

Seek the Spirit, preach the Spirit, teach the Spirit, and not only during Pentecost. Rely on the Spirit yourself each and every day. Help your congregation to identify its gifts and challenge them to use them to God’s glory. Only by so doing can we vitalize and energize our churches.

To the Spirit, who works in us and among us without ever ceasing to be God over us, be glory, laud and honor. Amen.