

THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT FOR SOCIAL MINISTRY

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Pentecost recurs in surprising ways as God continues to break into history to renew and transform. In 1921 the Spirit descended in a new way on the people of the then Belgian Congo. God appeared in a dream to Simon Kimbangu, a Baptist teacher in a small village near the mouth of the great Zaire river, and told him to preach and heal. After an initial period of resistance reminiscent of the excuses Moses offered to avoid responsibility, Kimbangu obeyed. The news spread like a brush fire: "God has sent us a prophet who heals!" The crowds flocked to Kimbangu for healing and for the renewing word of God.

The colonial government was quick to react, accusing Kimbangu of political subversion. He was arrested and incarcerated 2000 miles from home. This policy of exiling trouble makers had always worked before, and there was no Gamaliel among the colonial masters to warn that they might find themselves fighting against God.

It was an uneven match, for the foolishness of God is wiser than human cunning. As soon as Kimbangu was "put away" other prophets rose up who were also arrested and exiled to prisons in other parts of the colony. Persecution backfired, for instead of containing this outpouring of God's Spirit, the colonial government was in reality paying the travel expenses for a new brand of missionary pioneers. In prisons all over the land they founded cells of Christians filled with the power of the Spirit. Today this indigenous church numbers several million, more than most of the Protestant churches combined.

The colonial rulers lacked the insights of Gamaliel, but they understood in very clear terms the intimate link between Pentecost and social ministry. They knew that a genuine spiritual awakening could not separate the personal from the social, the private from the political. Not only were they "extremely jealous of the apostles" (Acts 5:17), they also perceived that people who are healed create communities of healing which demand a "healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2).

I. PRIVATIZING PENTECOST

We do not normally link Pentecost with political subversion or social transformation. Why? Because we have spiritualized the Gospel? Because we are blinded by the demon of individualism with its selfish and private version of salvation? Or because our place in society would be threatened? Later on I shall suggest several reasons, but whatever the cause, our very terminology belies a formidable gnostic heresy. We speak of evangelism, meaning personal transformation, and social action, meaning social transformation, failing to recognize that there is no biblical or scientific justification for such a linguistic dichotomy. Persons are saved in community or destroyed by communities, and communities are built or undermined by the persons who constitute them. Any charismatic movement that claims the gifts of the Spirit but concentrates on personal renewal (evangelism) to the neglect of public renewal (social action) gives away with the left hand what it seizes with the right, for the garment of life is without seam and the threads of our

personal and social being are inextricably interwoven.

Our dichotomy between the personal and the social dimensions of the Gospel was foreign to the Early Church. Biblical scholars have sometimes maintained that because Jesus didn't lock horns with Rome, his message and ministry scrupulously avoided politics. Juan Luis Segundo and others, however, have pointed out that this view misunderstands the context of Jesus' ministry. Segundo states,

The anachronism in all this . . . consists in localizing the "political element" of the period of Jesus in the structures of the Roman Empire because they are what most resemble a modern political empire. The fact is overlooked that, at that time, the political life, the civic organization of the Jewish multitudes, their burdens, their oppression, their differing social and cultural situation, depended much less on the Roman Empire and much more on the theology ruling in the groups of scribes and pharisees. They, and not the Empire, imposed intolerable burdens on the weak and dispensed themselves from them, so establishing the true socio-political structure of Israel. To that extent, the counter-theology of Jesus was much more political than pronouncements or acts against the Roman Empire would have been.(1)

Jesus' message was clearly social and political, centered on the kingdom of God with good news to the poor, release for the captives, and liberty for the oppressed. Zacchaeus understood instinctively that repentance required a change in his vocation habits, and the rich young ruler went away sorrowful because for him following Jesus required a radical change in lifestyle. This is commonplace knowledge, but worth reiteration because we have so spiritualized these texts as to rob them of any fundamental claim upon us and therefore any renewing power. We even forget that Jesus was murdered because of the political implications of his message.

There is no denying that the Early Church was a socio-political movement which not only transformed personal lives, but did so as a sign of God's inbreaking political kingdom. Jesus articulated his message not in terms of private salvation, but entrance into a new society. When the disciples asked the risen Christ, "Lord will you at this time restore the Kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6) they were asking about a political kingdom. The reply was not what they expected, but it was also unmistakably political. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses . . . to the end of the earth." Three aspects of this reply need emphasis.

First, the Holy Spirit descends not just on individual persons but on communities. That is, the Spirit empowers communities for corporate mission. We speak so much about the gifts of the Spirit to individuals that we neglect the power of the Spirit given to the community for public ministry in the larger society.

Second, passivity is inappropriate. "Will you at this time restore the kingdom . . ." asked the disciples, as if God would do it all. The Risen Christ replied, "YOU--the community of believers--will receive power. . . ." Here the power of the Spirit is promised for the same kingdom building politics which Jesus announced as his own mission in Luke 4:18ff.

Third, the coming kingdom will not be a return to Davidic nationalism but the extension of the rule of God to the ends of the earth. There is no other-worldly, privatized salvation here. The emphasis is clearly on a new society with new kinds

of human relationships grounded in a new relationship with God.

We are all aware of this commonplace exigesis, but do we grasp the fact that what is promised at Pentecost is power for social and political ministry? The Early Church was certainly aware of this. When the Spirit descended in power on the day of Pentecost, Peter spoke to the crowd in words that could only be understood by his hearers in political and social terms: ". . . this Jesus whom you crucified, is the one that God has made Lord and Messiah." Nor were the implications wasted on the High Priest, his companions, and the Sadducean party. Just as the Belgian colonial authorities knew, they knew that healing the lame has public consequences. They recognized that personal transformation would spill over into public life. The lame man whom Peter and John healed became a threat to their authority. The "miracles and wonders . . . performed among the people by the Apostles" (Acts 5:12) caused a public stir. The leaders were forced to choose: either to recognize the lordship of the Risen Christ, with all the consequent social, political, and especially religious changes, or to persecute the Church (Acts 5:17ff).

Times have not changed all that much. Do you know the still-unfolding story, "Faith in a Fight,"(2) about the congregation in Florida which set out to heal the wounds of the migrant workers? They came up against the corporate powers of the fruit growers, the community, and the Presbytery itself, as they demonstrated the intimate link between the needs for personal healing and the requirements of social transformation. In the process, they discovered how theological distortions allow us to deny the Lordship of Christ by restricting the Gospel to the private sphere.

I would offer three reasons why we privatize the Gospel and lose the power of the Spirit for both personal and social ministry: domestication, immaturity and blindness.

1. The Domestication of the Spirit

We all have a limited understanding of the work of the Spirit of God. In fact, any adequate doctrine of the Spirit must affirm our limited understanding, for the Holy Spirit symbolizes the dynamic activity of God, the freedom to do new things in unexpected ways and places. Because the Spirit "blows where s/he wills" we are never able to predict or capture in doctrinal expression the activity of God in the world. Our understanding is always partial and incomplete. But these limits which derive from God's freedom and our finitude should expand not restrict our appreciation for the sphere of the Spirit's activity.

Traditionally, however, predominant emphasis has been placed on the activity of the Spirit in only two arenas: the inner life of the believer and the fellowship of the community of believers. Examine the section on the Holy Spirit at any seminary library and you will discover that theologians concentrate on the work of renewal, reconciliation, comfort, illumination, guidance, healing, sanctification, etc., usually in individual terms. But the Spirit of God is neither the prisoner of the Church nor the private possession of Christians. The Spirit is active in all persons and places. The Westminster Confession affirms that the Spirit is "everywhere present, . . . the source of all good thoughts, pure desires and holy counsels. . . ." (Chap. IV, II).

While the work of the Spirit is disclosed with special clarity in the personal lives of believers and in the Christian community, this activity is not different in kind from the Spirit's activity elsewhere. In fact, says Norman Pittenger, the working of the Spirit "is greater than the specific operation which occurs in the 'religious realm.' The world is the Lord's; the Spirit is active in every nook and

cranny of the creation."(3) The Spirit works not only at the conscious level in believers and in the Church, but also at the subpersonal level of chemical processes, at the subconscious level of hidden forces, and at the suprapersonal level of social movements in history. Any restriction of the sphere of operation of the Spirit, any division between "insiders" and "outsiders" or any separation between the work of the Spirit in persons and in society is dangerous. Any claim by the Church or by Christians to a monopoly on the Spirit is presumptuous and sinful, promoting both pharisaism and the misuse of power. If the New Testament evidence for this is insufficient to convince us of this fact, then Church History should make it abundantly clear.

2. Immaturity

The moral growth process explains why many are preoccupied with personal problems to the exclusion of social issues. Whether it be a young person on drugs, a couple with marital problems, a family on welfare, an executive near bankruptcy, or anyone beset by the various life-crises that accompany the stages of human development, the problems are immediate, personal, and acute. Often the greatest need is for an all-pervasive awareness of the love of God.

Pietism responds to such needs by offering an overpowering emotional experience of the Holy, tied to a simple and clearly articulated recipe for salvation. Fundamentalism diagnoses the disease and prescribes a remedy in the simplest of dogmatic terms. You will not be too quick to criticize if you have friends who have been saved from suicide or quiet despair by such evangelism. A person who is drowning wants a life preserver not a swimming lesson, for the immediate concern is to stay afloat, not negotiate the river. In his epistles, the Apostle Paul served up a lot of meat, but he also recognized the need for milk.

Unfortunately, the milk of religion can be addictive, locking us into a secure but harmful perspective that prevents social ministry and retards the development of a social conscience.

Pietism and fundamentalism are not the only forms of spiritual milk which restrict social ministry. A relevant public ministry requires considerable sophistication, for public compassion and social justice are beset with numerous complexities. Intellectual laziness and the professionalization of ministry avoid these complexities by declaring social issues unimportant or even out of bounds. By restricting Christian morality to the private sphere we are spared the hard work of reading the newspaper, collecting the facts, and debating the issues. We also avoid the risk of conflict or of error, unaware that obedience is always a risk. Thus our immaturity serves as a convenient excuse for ignorance of social issues and an escape from moral ambiguity.

Lawrence Kohlberg's six moral stages which have received wide recognition may help us plot the degree of moral development of individuals and congregations as well.(4) Kohlberg describes three levels with two stages per level: the preconventional level, the conventional level, and the post-conventional or principled level. There is a developmental progression from narrow egocentrism in which rules are obeyed from fear of punishment, to universal ethical principles which embrace the widest possible social concerns. It is instructive to note that ethical concern for society begins in a systematic way only at stage four, midway in the process of moral development.

Jim Fowler of Candler School of Theology has integrated Kohlberg's moral

stages into a broader framework of the stages of faith.(5) Fowler provides us with a developmental approach to the contemporary pilgrim's progress, an approach which also applies in many ways to the development of the social ministry of a congregation. This stage-by-stage analysis shows that sanctification is not an enigmatic mystical happening, but a process which can be critically monitored and consciously nurtured. It also facilitates the evaluation of ethical decisions. Instead of acquiescing in the traditional labels of conservative and liberal decisions, specific issues can be evaluated in terms of alternative solutions of greater or lesser degrees of ethical maturity, and higher and lower forms of religious faith.

3. Blindness

There are two types of blindness which separate personal and social sin as well as personal and social renewal. One is perhaps innocent, but the other is perverse, the result and the expression of sin. In most cases they are combined. Let us examine two examples of blindness.

a) Sometimes we interpret the story of Pentecost in such a way that social ministry is undermined. The fellowship of the Early Church is cited as a reason to avoid public issues which may provoke controversy. "If we drag social issues into the church, we may divide the fellowship. The Holy Spirit came upon the Early Church to overcome division--to reverse the effects of Babel--to break down the walls that separate." This is true, for Pentecost signifies God's intention to unite us as one people. But we must not overlook the fact that even this divine initiative of reconciliation created conflict. The descent of the Spirit at Pentecost rent the church (Israel) asunder. From the martyrdom of Stephen to the imprisonment of Paul, the Book of Acts logs the Church's early voyage of conflict and persecution.

b) Traditional theology has also manifested a certain blindness in regard to the social dimensions of the work of the Spirit. Three aspects of the work of the Spirit have been emphasized: 1) the inspiration of Scripture (both for the writers and the readers/hearers), 2) the justification and sanctification of believers (the gifts of the Spirit), and 3) the creation of a Christian fellowship by removing barriers that separate. To these three--understanding, holiness, and unity--a fourth must be added. This is the ministry of public compassion and social justice.

Two years ago in these pages Shirley Guthrie commented on the famous passage in Luke 4:18-20 and asked the question, "What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit?" He answered the question by pointing to what Jesus did when he declared, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me."

The answer we get is quite different from what we would have expected on the basis of what we usually say about the Spirit. We would have expected to hear Jesus bear witness to the gifts he received when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him: how blessed he was, how much meaning he found in his life, how his worries and anxieties were relieved, how his personal problems were solved, how much love and joy and peace filled his life, how free he was from everything that separated him from God and other people. But instead he speaks, not of various gifts to be enjoyed, but of a task to fulfill. He does not list the benefits he has received but describes a job he has to do. Preach! Proclaim! Heal! Liberate!"(6)

Contemporary theology is rediscovering this social dimension of the Spirit's work.

II. SOCIALIZING PENTECOST

Domestication, immaturity and blindness all produce false consciousness which restricts religious faith to the private sphere and inhibits the social dimension of ministry. The social sciences can help us overcome this false consciousness by clarifying the relationship between three interlocking realities: society, culture and persons.

By now we are all aware that a racist society tends to produce persons who are racists. We have learned that converted racists will not automatically reform a racist society. In fact, conversion sometimes strengthens racism. The "Christian academies" are sufficient proof of this fact. To be successful an attack on racism must be launched on three levels. First, at the cultural level the doctrines and values of racism must be refuted. Second, at the personal level the false consciousness and willful perversity must be altered in a growing number of persons so that more and more people reject racist attitudes and behavior. And finally at the social level, institutional practices of discrimination must be terminated. Continuous action at all three levels is necessary, for the three levels--society, culture and persons--reinforce one another like the sides of a triangle.

This is the process of consciousness-raising, the most widely-used strategy of social change today. Twenty years ago most of us accepted "the woman's role" as subservient to that of men. Leaders of the women's movement have spent themselves in counteracting the sexist doctrines and values of our male-dominated society. Gradually a new generation of "converts" is changing its consciousness and their behavior, so that the movement for genuine and full equality is gathering momentum, despite temporary set-backs here and there. But large-scale progress for everyone requires the legal abolition of sexism in social institutions.

The economy offers one of the best examples of how culture, persons and institutions interact. At the cultural level the cornerstone of our society is the belief that "more is better." Our institutions rise or fall on the "bottom line," that is, how successful they are in maximizing profits. And many would have us believe that this is the only way to organize social institutions. At the personal level many of us consider ourselves failures if our opportunities for expansion are restricted. Thus, this central belief--"more is better"--is built into the very structures of our consciousness as well as our social institutions.

Recently a Panamanian theologian was asked the question, "Why is the Church in Latin America so active in society? What is the secret of your social ministry?" "We are beginnig," he replied, "to exercise a crucial social ministry because we have analyzed the structure of evil in our society. And because we have come face to face with the evil in our midst, we are beginning to draw the outlines of a new society we believe God is creating." Perhaps the reason we experience widespread malaise and powerlessness in the American church is that we have neglected the analysis of sin and evil in our midst, as well as the shape of God's future for us. The first step towards a recovery of the Power of the Spirit for social ministry involves just such an analysis of the cultural, social and personal forces of evil in our midst. As we take that step we are likely to discover what churches elsewhere have discovered, that God reveals the future only to those who struggle with the present.

- (1) Juan Luis Segundo, p. 118 in Claude Geffre & Gustavo Gutierrez, The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith (New York: Herder & Herder, 1974).
- (2) This filmstrip and tapes may be ordered from The Office of World Service & World Hunger, Presbyterian Center, 341 Ponce de Leon Avenue, N.E., Atlanta, Georgia 30308. Rental is \$5.00.
- (3) Norman Pittenger, The Holy Spirit (Philadelphia: The United Church Press, 1974).
- (4) These stages are summarized in Life Maps by Jim Fowler & Sam Keen (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1978), pp. 30-33.
- (5) Ibid., Chapter 2.
- (6) Shirley Guthrie, "The Spirit and Witness: Listening to Luke 4:18-20," in Journal for Preachers, Lent, 1978, p. 36.