



Holy Spirit: The Believers Strike Oil

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Last month I wrote about a new creation which begins with the resurrection of Jesus. This new creation is both a reality of history and also an inward experience. According to John, Jesus shared his risen life with the disciples: 'he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit'. According to Luke, the Spirit came with wind and fire.

God's Spirit, his active power and wisdom, present in creation and history from the beginning, was now present in a new way. A new reality was now present in human society. It needed explanation. Sceptical onlookers thought it was a case for the breathalyser (Acts 2:13).

There was the enormous exuberance of new life from death. When engineers first strike oil underground there is often a huge gush of oil which ignites and burns for days. Eventually they get it under control and into the pipes that take it where it's needed. The fireworks are not useful, but they do prove there is oil.

Paul had to remind the exuberant Corinthians that the supreme gift of the Spirit is love which channels all the other gifts into the service of the fellowship. Old Christians sometimes take a sceptical view of the exuberance of new or renewed Christians with their 'tongues' and dancing and clapping. Oil does need to get into pipes to be useful, but the most splendid set of ecclesiastical pipes is no use if there is no oil. We can be thankful that there is.

One of the words often used in the New Testament to describe the Spirit is the word *arrabon*, a Greek shopkeeper's word for a cash-deposit, the advance that a customer pays as pledge that he will pay the full account later. It is not just an IOU but hard cash which can be spent. But it is not just so much cash; it carries the promise of much more to come.

The 'starter' for the kingdom

It is like the 'starter' for a meal — very good in itself, but the point of it is that it whets your appetite for the main dish. The Holy Spirit is the 'starter' for the kingdom of God. There is a real

gift of God's power and wisdom now, but the point is that it makes it possible to believe in, to hope for and to work for the full unveiling of God's rule for the whole creation.

That is why the New Testament also speaks of the Spirit as the witness. It is not primarily our good works or good words that make it possible for people to believe the good news of the kingdom; it is the presence of a new reality, a new society which is a foretaste of the kingdom and the source from which good words and deeds flow.

When the churches in the USSR were forbidden for three generations to speak or act in the name of Jesus they remained faithful in worship, and it was the existence of these worshipping communities that drew countless atheists to faith in Christ. As one of them said to me: 'It was the power of a holy life that drew me'. If that reality is not there, our words and works do not bear witness.

As the Church goes out

In the fourth Gospel Jesus tells us that the Spirit will guide the Church into the truth. This doesn't happen as we sit in an armchair – or even at a study desk. The promise is part of the missionary commission. There is much to be learned beyond what Jesus could teach his disciples in these short months (John 16:12).

The learning will take place as the Church goes out into all the world and the Spirit uses their words and deeds to bring new peoples to Christ. Luke gives us an example of this in the story of Cornelius (Acts 10). Through the faithful telling of the story, the Holy Spirit brings a Gentile family to Jesus, and the Church learns that the commandment of Genesis 17:10-14 is superseded and God's covenant embraces the Gentiles. These new learnings do not lead away from Jesus; on the contrary, they lead the Church to understand that all creation belongs to him (John 16:13f).

'Spirituality' is an in-word today. According to the Christian tradition the devil is pure spirit while God took flesh. The 'spiritual' is not necessarily of God. We have to learn discrimination. The mark of the Holy Spirit, according to the New Testament, is that the world's ideas of religion are turned upside down and the name of Jesus is confessed.

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