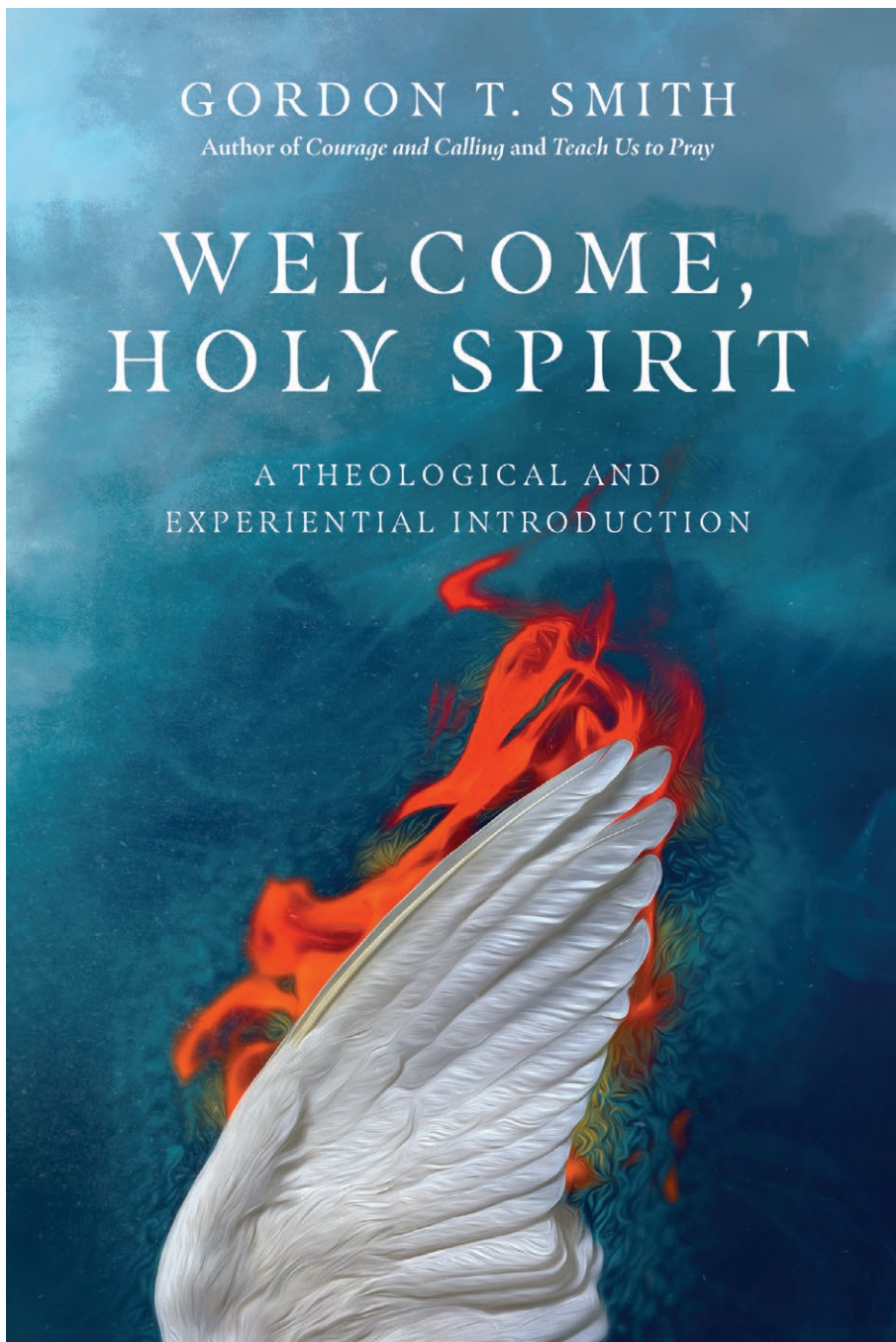


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WELCOME, HOLY SPIRIT

A THEOLOGICAL AND
EXPERIENTIAL INTRODUCTION



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CHAPTER ONE

THE SPIRIT IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND ACTS

The Ascension and Pentecost

ONE OF THE MOST HELPFUL ways to enter into reflections on the ministry of the Holy Spirit is through considering the counterpoint between the *ascension* of the risen Christ and the gift of the Spirit on *Pentecost*, ten days later. It is clear from Scripture that these two events need to be understood in the light of the other. Neither stands alone.

Of course, all the great christological events matter: incarnation, cross, resurrection, and then, following the ascension and Pentecost, the consummation of the reign of Christ at the fulfillment of history. Thus Pentecost can only be understood in light of the incarnation and the cross, and it only makes sense when we view it as the inauguration of a new dispensation of the Spirit that anticipates what is witnessed to in the book of Revelation.

Yet it is helpful to give *particular* attention to the interplay between the ascension and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, to see these events as pivotal to the experience and witness of the church—and more, as central and pivotal *together*. They are distinct but inseparable in our understanding of redemptive history and what it means for the church to be the church.

In particular, we must consider this interconnection between the ascension and Pentecost through the two New Testament books penned by Luke: the witness to Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, and then the book of Acts where we have the story of the early church. In Luke, the Spirit and Jesus. In Acts, the Spirit and the church. Part I of this narrative is the story of Jesus and the Spirit, leading to the ascension as the grand finale with Jesus' words that anticipate Pentecost. Part II is the story of the church and the Spirit, beginning with the ascension and Pentecost. In the Jesus story, we recognize that we can only appreciate Jesus in light of the presence and anointing power of the Spirit. Then we see that, in like fashion, the early church only makes sense when we see it in light of the presence and power of the Spirit. The inflection point between them, at the end of the Gospel of Luke and the opening of the book of Acts, is the ascension and Pentecost.

JESUS AND THE SPIRIT

The Gospel of Luke is a powerful depiction of how, from the incarnation, to Jesus' life and ministry, to the cross and the resurrection, leading up to the ascension, the Spirit is empowering, guiding, and witnessing to the inner life of Jesus. The Jesus story makes no sense apart from the remarkable work of the Spirit.

Before Jesus, the story begins with a group of fascinating characters: Zechariah and Elizabeth and their son, John, and Mary the mother of Jesus. Luke speaks of all four of them in the light of the Spirit's presence and power in their lives and their words.

First, Zechariah is told by the angel Gabriel that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son to be named John—whom we would come to know as John the Baptist—and that his son “will be filled

with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:15). Then Gabriel comes to Mary and announces that “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,” and that the one to be born of her womb will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35). Mary accepts this word and then heads to the hill country to the house of Elizabeth, her cousin. When they meet, Luke makes it a point to record that Elizabeth “was filled with the Holy Spirit” and proclaimed to the young Mary: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1:41-42). Mary’s response is the extraordinary words that we know as the “Magnificat”—her testimony to her Son, whom she magnifies, and who will fulfill the promise of God to Abraham (Luke 1:55). The Magnificat is followed by the prophecy of Zechariah, who “was filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:67), and spoke of the role of his son, John, who would prepare the way for the son of Mary.

Yet another noteworthy player in the arrival of the Christ-child is a man in Jerusalem named Simeon, about whom Luke writes that “the Holy Spirit rested on him” (Luke 2:25). He was guided by the Spirit to the temple on the day that Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus there for the customary dedication rites. Simeon is a classic example of what we mean when we say that the Spirit’s role is to lead us to Christ.

What is impressive in this account is the constant reference to the witness and filling of the Spirit. The Spirit makes it all happen. The human players matter; Mary, for example, must say the words “let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). But it is all in response to the anointing and empowerment of the Spirit. These references help us to see that the Spirit is not merely a by-product of the coming of the Messiah. As we will see in a coming chapter, the Spirit is active in creation and history from

the beginning. And here, the Gospel writer highlights how the Spirit is present and active in the life and ministry of Jesus from the beginning.

Jesus emerges on the scene when John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing. Jesus was also baptized, and we read that while he was praying, “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove” (Luke 3:21-22). This coincided with the voice that also came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved” (Luke 3:22). Father, Son, and Holy Spirit came together, with the Spirit coming upon Jesus and thereby launching his earthly ministry.

As noted in the prelude, the image of the dove is compelling and evocative. In this context, it likely speaks to the idea of a *personal* presence—a hovering and guiding presence—that superintends and guides Jesus. In his ministry, Jesus is dependent on the Spirit and teaches in the fullness of the Spirit. Specifically, the Spirit is “upon him.” The Spirit who came upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism was present at his conception and superintended the events around Jesus’ birth. Then, as Jesus moves into his ministry, Jesus is led by the Spirit, anointed by the Spirit, and empowered by the Spirit. In all of this, Jesus knows the joy that is the fruit of the Spirit’s presence and power in his life and ministry. Indeed, we read that Jesus rejoices “in the Spirit” (Luke 10:21).

Then, Jesus anticipates that this same Spirit will be present to his disciples *in like manner*. Before Jesus arrives and is baptized by John the Baptist, John speaks of how Jesus “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). Later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is speaking and assures his hearers that “the heavenly Father [will] give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:13). The suggestion would seem to be—and we will come back to

this—that the gift is given but that it requires intentionality and receptiveness on the part of the disciples.

At the end of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his disciples that they are to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the gift, which he speaks of as “power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The same Spirit that was with him will now, in like fashion, be with them.

THE SPIRIT AND THE EARLY CHURCH

Part II takes us to the book of Acts, where Luke describes the relationship between the Spirit and the church. Here we have what almost seems like an echo of what we have just witnessed regarding the Spirit and Jesus. There is no reason to force this into a one-to-one parallel—Jesus and the Spirit, and then the church and the Spirit—yet the themes that emerge in the book of Acts certainly reflect what seems to be a counterpart to the experience of Jesus witnessed to in the Gospel of Luke.

The first thing to note is the reference to the *reception* of the Spirit, at Pentecost and then throughout the book of Acts. On Pentecost, Peter’s response to those who heard his proclamation was that they should repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins and thereby would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). It is no surprise, then, that Paul’s conversion includes Ananias coming to Paul with a definite intent: that his sight would be restored, but also that he would “be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17). This is a theme in Acts: that those who come to faith in Christ know the gift of the Spirit and are able to witness to it. Sometimes, the gift is given without intentionality, such as when Cornelius and his household experience their own Pentecost. But more common is what we see when Peter and John went to Samaria and “prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:15).

From the expectation that the Spirit would be given at Christian initiation in Acts 2:38 to the practice of the laying on of hands with the explicit request for the Spirit, we can conclude two things. First, the gift of the Spirit is a birthright—an integral dimension of what it means to come to faith in Christ. And second, it would seem appropriate to formalize the laying on of hands with the invitation, “Come, Holy Spirit, come.” I will speak more to this when we come to chapter 4. The point here is that, just as the initiation of both the life and ministry of Jesus must be attributed to the Spirit, the inception of the church is a Spirit-infused event.

Second, the book of Acts is the story the Spirit creating the church; the church was the fruit of divine empowerment. The beginning of the church could not be explained other than by saying that God had chosen to act in Christ and by the Spirit to bring about a community of faith, learning, and witness that was marked by an awareness of the transforming grace of God in both word and deed.

The early church was receptive, recognized the primacy of the Spirit, and was responsive to the immediate witness of the Spirit. What is described in the book of Acts is not so much a church doing strategic planning as a community that was discerning the intent of the Spirit. Peter went to Cornelius in response to the prompting of the Spirit (“the Spirit said to him” that there were three men that would take him to Cornelius in Acts 10:19), and it was when the leadership of the church in Antioch were in prayer and fasting that “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2), leading to their ministry in Asia Minor among Gentiles. The church was intentionally attentive to and responsive to the Spirit. What is noteworthy, of course, is that the Spirit called

them to cross boundaries—cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic—that moved them beyond their immediate circle and propelled them to missional witness.

Finally, they received the Spirit, recognized the primacy of the Spirit, responded to the witness of the Spirit, and then, no surprise, they also *rejoiced* in the Spirit. The early church was a community of deep and palpable joy (Acts 2:46), and this joy is linked to the presence of the Spirit: “The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). There is no avoiding the clear links that Luke makes between the presence of the Spirit and the resilient joy that marked the life of the church.

Thus we see that the Spirit who is clearly evident in the life and ministry of Jesus finds parallel expression in the life and ministry of the early church. The bridge between them is two defining events: the ascension of Christ Jesus and, ten days later, the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

Let us consider, then, the dynamic between these two events and how to see them together so they can each inform the meaning of the other.

ASCENSION AND PENTECOST IN DYNAMIC COUNTERPOINT

The ascension represents the culmination of the earthly ministry of Jesus. In the moments before he ascends, he assures his disciples that he will return to his Father in triumphant expectation of the consummation of his kingdom. He blesses his disciples and calls them to the ministry of establishing the church and announcing the reign of God. The ascension confirms Christ Jesus as the benevolent Lord of the cosmos, the one in whom and through whom all things are reconciled to God. He has assumed

flesh, encountered death, and triumphed over all that would destroy humanity and the created order. And now, in his full humanity, Jesus is at the right hand of the Father and is the Lord of all creation and the head of the church. The church lives and breathes as the people of God insofar as she is sustained in a dynamic and life-giving fellowship with her ascended Lord. Thus, in one respect, the ascension establishes the church, for she is the body of Christ, with Christ as her head (Ephesians 4:15-16).

But as Jesus anticipates his ascension, he urges his disciples to wait. They cannot do the ministry to which he calls them *except* in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, the one for whom they are to wait. This means that Pentecost is an imperative. The purposes of God in Christ for the church and the world presume the outpouring of the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. Pentecost is the essential consequence, one might say, of Christ's work—from incarnation to the cross to the resurrection and the ascension. It is not that these events are less significant. It is, rather, that without Pentecost the effect, the saving benefit, of these events is not fulfilled. Jesus therefore impresses on the disciples that they need to wait.

Pentecost, then, is not merely a bonus experience. It is not that with Pentecost we have something good but not essential. To the contrary, the ascension *must* be complemented by Pentecost. Christ Jesus only functions as Lord of the church, the cosmos, and the individual believer through the gift that is given on the day of Pentecost.

We are only able to enter into the salvation of God mediated to us in Christ through the grace of the Spirit. The objective work of God in Christ—incarnation, cross, resurrection, and ascension—is made present to us, and thus experienced in our lives and in our world, through the gift given on the day of Pentecost. Thus, to know Christ

and be united with Christ—to, in the language of John 15:4, remain in him as he remains in us—happens through the grace of the Spirit. The apostle Paul puts this bluntly when he writes, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Romans 8:9). This seems hard and uncompromising until we realize that it is in the very economy of God’s salvation that the grace of God in Christ is known to us, in us, and in our world through the Spirit. Thus the risen Christ dwells in us, as Paul puts it, “through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Romans 8:11). Therefore, it is the Spirit that witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16). The apostle is simply affirming that Pentecost is essential, for only with Pentecost can we know the salvation of God.

This finds expression in our worship. Christian worship is christocentric in that the essential content of worship is the adoration of Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord. But it is also trinitarian in that we do this to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11) in the grace and inspiration and empowerment of the Spirit. It is by the Spirit that we, as children of God, bring our unbounded praise and adoration to Christ.

It is by the Spirit that the church fulfills its identity and purpose—in worship, and also in Christian formation and in mission. For the church to be the church, Pentecost needed to happen. This is why Jesus urges his disciples to wait for the promised gift of God. His disciples will know what it means to receive the Spirit, recognize the work of the Spirit, respond to the Spirit, and rejoice in the Spirit so that they can truly be the people of God and the body of Christ in the world. And so they wait until the gift is given.

It is appropriate to ask, What does it mean that the Spirit was given? What are the implications? What difference did it make? Three things need to be affirmed. First, this gift was long

foreseen—as Peter notes in his sermon on Pentecost—and is the culmination of God’s redemptive work. This is the capstone of what God intended to do: God’s very Spirit would animate the whole of creation with redemptive and healing grace. The Spirit of God would infuse the people of God and make them the tabernacle of God. Even more, God’s Spirit would animate and transform each individual human person.

Second, this radical infusion could only happen when the alienation between God and the creation could be overcome—particularly the alienation between humanity and God. This was overcome with the incarnation, death, and resurrection-ascension of Christ.

But then, third, the full meaning of what happened at Pentecost will not be known until the ascended Christ is fully revealed. The Spirit was given as a promise of what is yet to come. The genius of our shared life now, our hope and the focus and discipline of our lives, is that we live now in light of Pentecost. This changes everything, even though the full implications will not be known until Christ is revealed. Those who are women and men of faith live under the benevolent authority of the ascended Lord Jesus Christ in the fullness of the Spirit with intentionality and purpose, knowing that there is more to come. But we must not overstate what has already happened with the gift of the Spirit. We continue to long for the coming of Christ and the full revelation of his grace and power. Confident of that day, we walk in and bear the fruit of the Spirit. Nothing quite states that we are a people confident in the purposes of God as that we live now in the Spirit that God has given us as promise, down payment, and gift.

And with Pentecost, we do not leave the ascension behind. We do not assume that we have come to a higher place or greater

spiritual experience. Rather, the Spirit brings us into a fuller appreciation of the significance of the ascension: now we see clearly that Christ is risen, ascended, and the benevolent Lord of all. We see this in the experience of Stephen: in the power of the Spirit, at the very moment of his stoning, he sees the Son of Man at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55). That is, the Christ event is not behind us but ever *before* us. It is not that the Gospel of Luke was about Jesus and the book of Acts is about the Spirit. To the contrary, Acts is about the gift of the Spirit that equipped and empowered the church to preach Christ and worship Christ. Indeed, the apostle Paul insisted that his passion was none other than to “preach Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Thus it is fitting that the book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31). That is the bottom line. It is done, of course, in the power of the Spirit, but that is precisely what the Spirit does: enable us to see Jesus, preach Jesus, and live lives of devotion and service to Jesus. Or, as Douglas Farrow puts it:

His ascension is a vital part of his priestly work, and his priestly work leaves nothing untouched, because all that he commits to the Father is in turn handed over to the Spirit. . . . We must look . . . to the Spirit, whose task it is in the ascension to present Jesus to the Father as the beloved son and heir, and to present him to us also, in his heavenly session, as brother and Lord.¹

¹Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 263-64, 266. Farrow establishes unequivocally the centrality of the ascension in our understanding of redemptive history and the meaning of the church, demonstrating on the one hand that we only understand Pentecost in light of the ascension and, in turn, that Pentecost is all about enabling us to enter into fellowship with the incarnate, crucified, ascended Lord.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, we are enabled to see, know, love, and live in fellowship with Christ Jesus. In other words, there is not a sequence from the Father to the Son to the Spirit. Rather, from the beginning all members of the Trinity were active in the redemptive purposes of God. This is evident, in part, in the obvious role of the Spirit in the coming of Christ. The Spirit superintended the events around the incarnation, then anointed and empowered Jesus throughout his ministry, all with the view that his disciples would follow him.

But we do not go beyond Jesus when we get to Pentecost; rather, the gift of the Spirit is the means for us to know the grace of God in Christ. Our faith remains radically christocentric. Our vision is Christ ascended; that vision now becomes an existential reality in our lives through the gift of Pentecost. The church now lives in dynamic communion, in real time, with her ascended Lord.

JESUS CHRISTIANS AND SPIRIT CHRISTIANS?

Thus, ascension and Pentecost are necessarily twinned. They are distinct events in redemptive history, but each is only known and only makes sense in the light of the other.

But all too frequently, Christians focus on one at the expense of the other. Some Christians never seem to get to Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is, at best, a secondary figure; Pentecost is an event of the distant past that has no influence in their lives and in the life of the church. Not only is Pentecost Sunday not observed, the Spirit is hardly mentioned either in public worship or in their personal lives and conversations. They are *Jesus* Christians: they affirm and worship Christ risen and ascended; they live intentionally as followers of Jesus. They might even be a bit suspicious of any “Spirit-talk” by those who have a sense of the *immediacy* of

the Spirit in their lives, work, and ministry. They downplay references to the Spirit so much that the Spirit is at best incidental in worship, prayer, and witness. In principle, they are trinitarian; they affirm the three persons in perfect unity, and they recognize that the Spirit was sent by God and brings about the purposes of God in the church and the world. But the Spirit is not an *immediate* presence or power. The Spirit's work is always mediated—through either Scripture (for Protestant Christians) or through the church hierarchy (for Catholic Christians). For many evangelical Protestant Christians, the Spirit was active in the inspiration and writing of Scripture but now, with the Bible in hand, there is no need for an immediacy of the Spirit. Some Christians, it seems, never truly get to Pentecost.

Others, though, definitely get to Pentecost, but the ascension is left in the rearview mirror. They are what we might call “Spirit” Christians. It is evident in their worship, their language—the way that they speak about their spiritual experience—and in their approach to life, work, and ministry. It is all about the Spirit. For them, the high point in the church calendar is Pentecost Sunday. Jesus came, of course, but to the end that God's people would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire! (Matthew 3:11). For all practical purposes, Jesus has become the distant figure—happy with developments, but not immediately present to the church and almost a secondary figure. Their worship and experience has become Spirit-centered.

Neither of these groups is truly trinitarian. They may well speak the language of the Trinity and affirm that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons, one God, for all of eternity. Yet the first are more “binitarian” than trinitarian, in that the Spirit is hardly a significant factor in their lives and worship. And for the

second, the Son—and the Father as well—are secondary figures, at best. These are people for whom “God” is synonymous with “the Holy Spirit.”

The witness of the New Testament and the history of the church suggests that our faith is only truly Christian if we are indeed trinitarian, affirming the full deity of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and that our visceral orientation is toward Christ—that is, that our faith is trinitarian and christocentric. We are only truly “in Christ” when we live as the church and as Christians fully “in the Spirit.” When we do not get to Pentecost, the experience of Jesus in Luke and of the church in the book of Acts are somewhat foreign to us, and the full benefits of the ascension are not known in our lives, bodies, relationships, and work. If we are focused on Christ but have no immediate sense of the Spirit through Pentecost:

- We are biblicists who see Scripture as an end in itself rather than a revelation of the risen and ascended Christ.
- We typically are overdependent on human strategies for personal and church development rather than responsive to the immediacy of the Spirit’s guidance.
- We are overly dependent on structures of authority, which, while important and essential, are often a means of control that is inattentive to how the Spirit is speaking through those at the margins of the community.
- We as often as not lack an appreciation of the emotional character of “life in the Spirit”—and thus are inattentive to the vital place of joy and consolation in Christian experience and worship.

On the other hand, something else goes terribly askew when we become “spirit-Christians” and lose the anchor and vision of

the ascended Christ. As often as not, those of us who are “pneumo-centered” rather than Christ-centered and Spirit empowered are marked by another set of characteristics²:

- We do not take seriously the careful exposition of Scripture along with the vital place of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the life of the church.
- We typically equate the presence of the Spirit with positive and happy feelings rather than appreciating how the Spirit is present to the church in both blessing and suffering, in both joy and lament.
- The focus is often on the person of charismatic figures rather than on the presence and glory of Christ.³
- There is sometimes an undue fascination with the demonic such that all manner of simple human predicaments and challenges are attributed to demonic activity.

But the good news is that we do not need to choose. The answer to a truncated pneumatology is not a pneumo-centric worship or experience. We do not correct an imbalance with another imbalance. Our faith is radically Christ-centered; Christ is the focus, vision, orientation, and commitment of the church. Yet we can only truly be Christ-centered if we cultivate a full and indeed radical openness to the Spirit. We can set our eyes on Jesus, the

²I published a full essay considering this contrast: “Christ Centred or Spirit Centred?: Why the Question Matters; Why the Answer Makes all the Difference,” *CRUX* (Fall 2019): 19-28.

³Christian leaders of this orientation tend to legitimize themselves with their followers by noting how many miracles or demonstrations of unusual grace and power are associated with their ministry or their congregation, but this is very much not what the apostle Paul did. Instead, what marked his ministry and gave it legitimacy was his radical identification with the cross of Christ. See especially his autobiographical reflections in 2 Corinthians where he observes, “We have this treasure in clay jars. . . . We are afflicted in every way . . . always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be visible in our bodies. . . . So death is at work in us, but life in you” (2 Corinthians 4:7-12).

author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), and do so with deep and intentional attentiveness to the Spirit, a thorough dependency on the Spirit, and the humility of knowing the inner witness of the Spirit that witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).

Can we cultivate an understanding of the Spirit that is truly trinitarian and that, in turn, leads us to a dynamic awareness of the presence of the Spirit in worship, witness, joy, and sorrow, in seasons of blessing and times of difficulty and suffering? Can we at least approximate something of what we see in the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and in the experience of the early church in Acts? This is the goal of what follows: to call for a greater attentiveness to the Spirit, not as something that would replace Christ as the focus but as that which brings us into the presence of the living and ascended Christ Jesus. It is to this end that we pray, “Welcome, Holy Spirit.”

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