

“...But by My Spirit”  
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of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada  
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Being that today’s goal is to “reclaim the blessing of the Spirit,” I’d like to begin by sharing a medley of scriptures for us to consider. Let us open our hearts and minds to the reading of God’s word:

*Genesis 1*

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.

*The prophet Isaiah (42 & 61)*

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations...  
The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed...

*1 Corinthians 2*

My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

*Acts 1*

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

*Galatians 5*

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

*And lastly, Acts 19*

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’

Let us pray: *Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Amen!*

The Holy Spirit has fallen on some hard times: misunderstood, misused, abused, ignored, taken for granted, distorted for dishonest purposes, relegated to an “if necessary” item of the Church. The Holy Spirit indeed has fallen on hard times

I remember a fictional news brief from the satirical, comedic newspaper from Chicago, *The Onion*. The caption of this news brief read: “God Quietly Phasing Holy Ghost Out Of Trinity”; and it read as follows:

February 26, 2003--HEAVEN—Calling the Holy Trinity “overstaffed and over budget,” God announced plans Monday to downsize the group by slowly phasing out the Holy Ghost. “Given the poor economic climate and the unclear nature of the Holy Ghost’s duties, I felt this was a sensible and necessary decision,” God said. “The Holy Ghost will be given fewer and fewer responsibilities until His formal resignation from Trinity duty following Easter services on April 20. Thereafter, the Father and the Son shall be referred to as the Holy Duo.”<sup>1</sup>

Now I’m not sure if a theologian—let alone a *Disciples* theologian—wrote this. But they may be on to something: “...the unclear nature of the Holy Ghost’s duties...The Holy Spirit will be given fewer and fewer responsibilities...” Boy, are they on to something! It seems that this fictional piece of reporting echoes the sentiment of the story of these disciples in Ephesus: “...we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

Now, I’m sure God Creator is not phasing the Holy Spirit out of the Trinity. What we can be sure of is that we as Church—we the comfortable, accommodated, exhausted, over-institutionalized Church—we have been phasing the Holy Spirit out of the Church, out of ministry, out of our lives.

I don’t know if it’s that we have just decided to leave all things Holy Ghost in the hands of Catholic mystics and Pentecostal tongue-speakers. I don’t if it’s that we fear a resurgence of the Cane Ridge barking exercises. Don’t know! But what I do know is that it seems that we are phasing the Spirit out of the Church. We have become like the disciples in Ephesus: *we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit*.

In our failed attempts to grow in numbers and, more importantly, to grow in faith, we run here and there, to and fro, in search for impetus, for renewal, for a strengthening of our hearts and our ministries. We incorporate business principles and management tactics in hopes of faithfully leading the Body of Christ. We read up on “pop psychology” and self-help books in hopes of healing the Body. We hone our marketing skills in hopes of selling our mission statements to the Body. Yet, nothing has worked. And not once, has it crossed our minds re-incorporate the Spirit. Justo González, in his book *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, concurs,

“We try to bring the church out of its spiritual malaise not by grounding our solutions on the Spirit who is the firstfruits of the Reign [of God] but by borrowing some marketing or organizational scheme on which we then put our faith.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems that we do “the church thing” as if *we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit*. And this downsizing of the Spirit has had a negative effect on us as Church. In fact, because of the reduction of the Spirit’s role...

- ...we have come to believe that being successful is the same as being faithful;
- ...we have reduced prayer to a therapeutic act that makes us *feel good* but that has no power to transform us to *do good*;
- ...we have morphed evangelism into a good sales pitch, and making disciples into entertaining a crowd;
- ...we have withered social justice into soul-less politicking and partisan smooching;
- ...we have turned prophetic preaching into the whispering of sweet nothings in people’s ears;
- ...we have reduced the Spirit-drenched, Spirit-animated Body of Christ to a measly institution with programs and coffee.

Upon seeing what we’ve become as Church, it would seem as if *we have not even heard that there is a Holy...* Who or what, by the way, is this Holy Spirit?

I think that if we attempt to define the nature of the Spirit, we run into the same problem we have when we try to describe, say, love. In his book *Works of Love*, the existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard speaks of the “hidden life” of love; meaning that we can never get at the nature, the essence, of love. But he *does* say that we can know love by its fruits, by its works. In other words we cannot know what love is, asserts Kierkegaard, but we can know what love *does*.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the Spirit’s “hidden life”, the *essence* of the Spirit, is a mystery to us; so in reclaiming the blessing of the Spirit, we should focus less on its “hidden life” and more on its works. In other words, we should seek to grasp, not who or what the Spirit is, but what the Spirit *does*.

And what *does* the Spirit do?

*Genesis 1:* The Spirit of God is the *green* Spirit of creation that brings forth life and light out our darkness and chaos, affirming creation with its sustaining presence.

*The prophet Isaiah:* The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of justice, who impassions the servants of God for radical, justice-driven work in the world.

*1 Corinthians 2:* The breath of the Almighty makes our words come alive as we proclaim and preach and witness.

*Acts 1:* This Pentecost Fire empowers the disciples of Jesus to continue the ministry of Jesus from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth.

*Galatians 5:* The Spirit of creation is also the Spirit of new creation, of re-creation, of transformation, of renewal, freeing us so that we may become all that God intends for us to be.

This is what the Spirit does! But not only that! There's more:  
 this caring for the earth,  
 this fighting for justice,  
 this proclaiming of the Word,  
 this witnessing and working in Jesus' name,  
 this newness—

*all this*, and nothing less than this, is also what the church is called to do—to embody, to incarnate—in its being and doing. (No pressure, church!) We are called to do all this, and we are equipped to do all this; not with our own cheap gimmicks and gadgets, not with our shallow wisdom and bumper-sticker insight, not with our child's play and mother-*gooseries*, but with the awesome, life-giving, energizing Spirit of God. In other words, not only is this what the Spirit does: this is what the Spirit does *through us*; and only with the Spirit can we do what we're called to do. In the words of the prophet Zechariah, "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty." (4:6)

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), sisters and brothers in the Lord, the truth is this: this thing called 'church', this thing called 'ministry', is far too great and grand to be left to our own devices, to our insufficient inventions and concoctions. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit."

The truth is this: to be faithful to the *cosmic* mission that has been entrusted to us by Jesus, we need nothing less than the *cosmic* Spirit of creation, of justice, of power, of transformation. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit."

The truth is this: in order to proclaim the good news in a bad news world, to overcome the chaos of sin and oppression and deathly existence, we need nothing less than the same mighty wind that swept over the watery chaos, the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit."

The truth is this: we need more than ever for this revival Spirit to shock the institutional life of the Church; we need more than ever for the Spirit of prophecy to shake us out of our accommodated and comfortable middle-class pieties that ignore the suffering of the world. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit."

The truth is this: we need a fresh outpouring of the Spirit, or as they used to say in my Pentecostal upbringing, "a double dose of the Holy Ghost!"

So where do we begin to tap into this Spirit? How do we inhale this Holy Breath? How do we know in which direction to set our sails so that we can be directed by the Creative Wind of God?

Well, the first step may be simpler than you think. In fact, you *may* get mad at me and feel that I've gypped you this morning once I tell you. It's *that* simple!

Here it goes! The first step is... *awareness*!  
 Simply becoming aware of the Spirit!  
 Regaining our spiritual scope!

Deepening our flattened, secular view of Church!  
 Remythologizing who we are as Church!  
 Reclaim the transcendence of Church in the Spirit!

Unlike the Ephesian disciples who were not aware of the Holy Spirit, we need to re-orient our lives to the reality and indispensability of the Spirit. We need to become aware of our total dependence on the Spirit that transforms, animates, and empowers the Church. *Awareness!*

In his hugely popular book *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg rightly points out that life in the Spirit is above all about awareness and intentionality. He writes, “Spirituality combines awareness, intention, and practice. [It means] ...becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God.”<sup>4</sup> I love the way the great Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar beautifully speaks of this intentionality. He declares, “[The Spirit] is little concerned about whether we pray *to* him, provided that we pray *with* him...”<sup>5</sup> *Not by might...awareness!*

*Now...* you may think that this “awareness business”, this becoming aware of the Spirit, is simply mental games, mind tricks, an illusion, wishful thinking, with no real substance or potential to open us up to the Breath of God. But I ask us...

Which do you think is more of a mental game: believing that it is through our gimmicky tactics and entertainment schemes that youth are reached for Christ? *Or* believing that youth ministry is where we make space for the Spirit of new life to transform our youth?

Which is more of an illusion: thinking that justice work is simply political activism? *Or* that our passionate struggle for justice is *spiritual* activism, albeit with political connotations, that grows out of a lived, vibrant encounter with the Spirit of prophecy, with the same holy fire that descended upon the prophets of old, upon Isaiah, Micah, and Mary?

Which really constitutes the mental game: thinking that a sermon is words on a page? *Or* that the preached, proclaimed word happens when it has been energized and set afire by the Spirit of truth?

Which is the real mind trick: believing that Church is just an institution run on sound business principals? *Or* that Church is an organism, a body—the Body, animated by the resurrecting, unifying, empowering, resurrecting Spirit of God?

Which is the real illusion: thinking that the General Assembly is where business is taken care of, where paper is pushed, and where the movers and shakes do their thing? *Or* that General Assembly is where the Body is re-membered, refueled, re-animated, re-energized, by the Spirit—where the Spirit moves us and shakes us—to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world?

Which is the real wishing thinking here: assuming that at this General Assembly this morning, we are the only ones present in this room, filling this space this morning? *Or*

assuming that this space, this morning, is being filled by holy fire, drenched by holy rain, permeated by holy power, saturated by holy spirit?

Which is the real illusion: believing that General Assembly is where we flex our institutional, intellectual, and political muscle, where we show the world our might? *Or... where... well...* as the prophet Zechariah says, “Not by might, nor by power, *but...*”

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<sup>1</sup> “God Quietly Phasing Holy Ghost Out Of Trinity,” in *The Onion* 39 n7 (February 26, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1990), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper, 1962), 23ff.

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 120

<sup>5</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3, *Creator Spirit* (1967; reprint, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 111.