

# The Charismatic Movement

## AN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Larry Christenson

### PART ONE: Considering A Remarkable Renewal

In 1959 the charismatic<sup>1</sup> movement burst on the religious scene. In an astonishingly brief span of time it girdled the globe and impacted virtually every denomination and group in the church. As early as 1970 the religion editor of *The New York Times* referred to it as the most vital movement in American religion.<sup>2</sup>

How is the charismatic movement to be understood at the half century mark? How does it relate to the history and theology of the Lutheran church, and to the practice of the many classical church bodies in which it has occurred?<sup>3</sup>

Then, in Part Two, what does it say to the church, moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

#### A Remarkable Historical Phenomenon

Religious movements are often dated from a particular event that pinpoints its outbreak into the public arena. We date the Reformation from the day Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in 1517, or Methodism from the meeting in Aldersgate Street in 1738 when John Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed." The charismatic movement is usually dated from the Sunday morning in 1959 when Dennis Bennett announced to his

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1 The word "charismatic" is widely used in secular speech to describe someone who has personal magnetism, who readily attracts and effectively relates to followers. This is not the meaning of "charismatic" or "charismatics" in literature referring to the charismatic movement.

"Charismatic" is the name that attached to the spiritual renewal movement that began around 1960, somewhat like "Reformation" attached to the movement that began around 1517. The designation comes from *charisms*, the Greek word for "spiritual gifts," because gifts of the Holy Spirit are an emphasis of the movement.

In this article, and generally in literature produced by the movement, a "charismatic" is someone who identifies with the movement — participates in its meetings, reads its literature, shares in teaching, fellowship, and spirituality typical of the movement.

2 Edward Fiske, "Pentecostals Gain Among Catholics," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1970.

3 The author's experience has been in the Lutheran church. Some of his observations and perspective relate particularly to Lutheran background, but for the most part apply to the Christian faith in general. The charismatic movement as such has been markedly ecumenical, resulting in a network of relationships across a broad spectrum of Christian groups and denominations, such as Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Non-denominational, Independent, Roman Catholic, Orthodox.

Episcopalian congregation in Van Nuys, California, that he had been baptized in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues.

In little more than a year similar events occurred in a variety of Protestant congregations in the United States, including Lutheran churches in California, Montana, and Minnesota.

In 1964 the American Lutheran Church (ALC) appointed a study commission to look into the matter of speaking in tongues, which was beginning to happen in some of their congregations. A team consisting of a psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist, and a New Testament theologian was sent to our congregation, Trinity Lutheran Church in San Pedro, California, one of the first ALC congregations where speaking in tongues had been reported. They tested and interviewed a group of 32 people who had received the gift of tongues, and a control group of 32 people who did not speak in tongues. They administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Test, the Rorschach Ink Blot test, and a psychiatric interview; they inquired into our understanding of the Bible and Lutheran doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

Some years later my wife and I attended a seminar at Wartburg seminary in Dubuque, Iowa where the psychiatrist from the team, Dr. Paul Qualben, reported on their research. “We began with two preconceptions,” he said. “We expected to encounter people who were emotionally unstable, and we expected the phenomenon to be short-lived. We were wrong on both counts. The people we interviewed were a normal cross-section of a Lutheran congregation, and today, ten years later, the movement is still growing.”<sup>5</sup>

As pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in San Pedro for twenty-two years, I saw the lives of members and families spiritually renewed. Prayer, Bible Study, Christian stewardship and service, the manifestation of spiritual gifts and ministries came to characterize the lifestyle of many of our people. Getting together to pray was a common social event. During this time we also came into lively contact with other individuals and groups caught up in the same renewal movement, in the United States and in many countries around the world.

In 1970, when the movement was still new and growing rapidly, an ALC bishop in California estimated that “We have charismatics in virtually all our congregations.”<sup>6</sup> Lutheran charismatics would travel across the country on their vacations to attend the annual Lutheran Conference on the Holy Spirit in Minneapolis.

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4 *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 562.

5 *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, p. 863.

6 Bishop Gaylerd Falde (ALC), in conversation with Larry Christenson.

When our family moved to a small community in the northwoods of Minnesota in the 1980s, we found charismatics at the core of groups with evident spiritual life — believers who were seeking and faithful in small congregations, prayer meetings, Bible study groups, retreats, and evangelistic meetings, and this continues to the present day. A Roman Catholic priest visiting with us said, “I find the same thing wherever I travel in the world.” Beginning in the 1990s the charismatic movement in North America and in Europe became more localized. Charismatics continued to be active in their local areas, but the rapid growth of the movement tended to plateau. In the southern hemisphere the movement generally continued its explosive growth.<sup>7</sup>

In 1959 classical Pentecostals numbered about 25 million, worldwide. With the advent of the charismatic movement, Pentecostals and charismatics burgeoned to 553 million by 2005, trending toward 811 million by 2025. They constitute 28% of Christians worldwide, growing at the rate of nine million annually.<sup>8</sup>

“There is nothing quite like it in the history of the church,” said Presbyterian pastor and historian Robert Whitaker. “Earlier movements have been limited geographically and denominationally. This one has penetrated every denomination and is present on every continent of the globe.”<sup>9</sup>

#### A Grassroots Ecumenical Reality

A high point in the movement occurred in 1991 when a leaders’ conference of 3000 charismatics from 110 countries met in Brighton, England. Participants represented the full spectrum of Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Independent denominations. The Brighton conference was a particularly significant event in terms of Lutheran participation.

Lutheran charismatic leaders were paired together in what was called “Prayer Triangles.” Each delegate was assigned to a Prayer Triangle consisting of one North American, one European, and one Third World person. Each Triangle was responsible to pray for one another and support one another in getting to the conference. Through a “miracle of sharing” 350 Lutherans from 33 different countries participated in this conference on *The Holy Spirit and World Evangelization*.

The Brighton conference demonstrated one of the signal features of the charismatic renewal

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7 David Barrett, ed., *The World Christian Encyclopedia, Vol. 1*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 19-20.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Larry Christenson, *Welcome, Holy Spirit* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), p 18.

— a remarkable gift of unity at the grass roots, across the broad spectrum of the church.<sup>10</sup> It is not a unity of lowest-common-denominator doctrinal agreement. Nor a unity that finds a measure of common ground and overlooks differences; not, for example, an evangelical accepting a Catholic *in spite of* his catholicism, but accepting him *as a Catholic*; nor a Lutheran accepting someone from an Independent tradition despite his theology, but as a brother or sister “who has received the same gift God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ” (see Acts 11:17). When charismatic leaders from different traditions get together, you will often hear some raging good doctrinal discussions. What you are likely to notice, however, is an almost total absence of defensiveness or acrimony. Among charismatics unity is a *given*, a palpable participation in the Holy Spirit. Without conscious effort or protocol, they *maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, even while seeking to *attain* to unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God (see Ephesians 4:3,13).

### Spiritual Gifts

The Greek word for “spiritual gifts” — *charismata* — gave the name to the charismatic movement. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly those listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-11, became a popular hallmark of the renewal.

The emphasis on spiritual gifts was prominent to begin with simply because things like spiritual healing, visions, miracles, and speaking in tongues were new for most believers in mainline denominations. Charismatics enthusiastically told their first-hand experience with spiritual gifts and asked, “Why haven’t we heard about this before?” while skeptics scoured the landscape for signs of fanaticism. Over time spiritual gifts became in a sense more ordinary among charismatics. Sharing a vision, or a prophecy, or a prayer for healing became as normal as getting up and going to work. The manifestation of spiritual gifts became a settled reality in their understanding of life, and of Scripture. In one of his famous epigrams, David du Plessis, Pentecostal ambassador-without-portfolio to the historic Protestant and Catholic churches, said, “You must become naturally supernatural.”

In the popular mind, speaking in tongues is the spiritual gift most often associated with the charismatic movement. It is probably the most widely experienced spiritual gift in the renewal, and also the most controversial.<sup>11</sup>

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10 *The World Christian Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, p. 19.*

11 **Larry Christenson, *Answering Your Questions About Speaking in Tongues* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1968, 2003).** This book shows how the gift has been understood and practiced among Lutheran charismatics. See also **Larry Christenson, *Ride the River* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2000)** pp. 201-203, which outlines the difference between Lutheran and Pentecostal teaching on the question of tongues as “initial evidence of baptism with the Holy Spirit.”

The day before the ALC research team concluded its visit in our congregation, Dr. Qualben asked if I would record some speaking in tongues for him. The next morning I turned on a tape recorder during my private devotions and gave the tape to Dr. Qualben before he left.

In time I simply forgot about the tape. About ten years later I received a telephone call from a man who identified himself as Risto Santala, a longtime missionary to Israel from Finland. He was presently visiting the LCMS (Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod) seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where he heard a report on the charismatic movement from a Dr. Paul Qualben. In the course of his lecture, Dr. Qualben played the tape I had given him some years earlier. Santala perked up his ears because he recognized some Hebrew words. He asked Dr. Qualben if he could study the tape back in his room. He played the tape over many times. There were eight separate prayers in tongues. He recognized them as Hebrew, with some admixture of Aramaic. The subject matter was a hymn of praise cast in Old Testament bridal imagery. Santala subsequently published a book in Finland reporting his research on this tape.<sup>12</sup>

Santala's study was objectively interesting, since speaking in tongues is often dismissed as mere gibberish. What struck me more personally, as I read his translation of what I had prayed in tongues, was how different the ideas and imagery were from my normal prayers in English. It was not that the words were outlandish or obscure, just that they were different from my usual way of speaking or praying, less taken up with my own needs and concerns, more focused on God's Kingdom. As I have thought about this since, it has made me more humbly aware that the Holy Spirit leads us into a life profoundly beyond ourselves. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

As a gift to enrich one's prayer life, speaking in tongues is widespread and useful in the charismatic renewal, as prayer itself is widespread and useful. More importantly, it stands representative of a worldwide initiative of God to more fully manifest the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

### The Worldview of Charismatics

Shortly after charismatic gifts began to be manifested in our congregation, I announced an "information meeting" for members who had expressed misgivings about these things. I presented a Bible study showing that things like healing, speaking in tongues, and prophecy were common in the experience of the early church.

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12 Risto Santala, *Armolahjoista armon tasolta* (Helsinki: Karas-Sana Oy, 1978). For a detailed summary of Santala's study, see *Welcome, Holy Spirit* (pp. 409-411), and *Ride the River*, p. 97.

As questioning and discussion got underway one of our members said, “Pastor, it’s *supernatural*, and that’s what scares us!”<sup>13</sup>

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of this simple statement from a disturbed church member. In seven words she put her finger on perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the charismatic renewal: it challenges the antisupernatural worldview of Western culture,<sup>14</sup> and in so doing seriously addresses the question of biblical interpretation and authority.

In his carefully researched study of the worldview of Western culture, Morton Kelsey argues on the one hand against a disdain of the supernatural in the name of reason and science, and on the other hand against a naive belief in supernatural events recorded in Scripture but no expectation that such things could happen today. In the Pentecostal-charismatic movement he sees a realistic alternative to these two ways of thinking: “The basic tenet of Pentecostal faith is that the supernatural experiences described in the New Testament can also happen in the same way in our time . . . they find this happening in visions, healing, prophecy, tongues, and in dealing with the demonic”<sup>15</sup>

Biblical interpretation in the charismatic renewal treats biblical material realistically. Miraculous events are not embarrassing “myths” that must somehow be explained (away!) before modern men and women will take the Bible seriously.<sup>16</sup> They are realistic descriptions of God intervening in life situations — perhaps unusual but not impossible, *whether then or now*.

I remember when Roy Jones determinedly took his turn ushering at our church. He walked with a cane in each hand because he had multiple sclerosis and was beginning to experience its crippling effects. He told me he found the idea of healing through prayer hard to believe. He was an engineer who described himself as a “practical man.” Nevertheless, during a men’s retreat he agreed for some of the men to pray for him and he was wonderfully healed. He passed an insurance physical with a company that had previously rejected him because of the M.S. He took up scuba diving and golf. Today, some 40 years later, he walks free of multiple sclerosis. In the years that followed his healing, he prayed for the sick in our congregation and at the local hospital as a lay chaplain. His understanding of what is “practical” expanded to include healing through prayer. “Even more important,” he says, “it has opened my eyes to the greatest reality in the world, the reality of the *living* Christ. He is not a dead hero; He is a living Lord.”

Kilian McDonnell, a prominent Roman Catholic theologian of the charismatic movement, has used “expanded expectations” as shorthand for describing what the renewal brings to the

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13 *Welcome, Holy Spirit*, p. 150-151.

14 *Welcome, Holy Spirit*, p. 150-155.

15 Morton Kelsey, *Encounter With God* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1972), p. 36-37.

16 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), pp. 36-38.

church. “The church,” he says, “has generally played its melody a couple of octaves to the right or left of Middle C. The charismatic movement expands its reach to some keys that have in considerable measure lain quiet in the church.”

Cyril of Jerusalem saw “expanded expectations” as a necessary consequence of Baptism. In catechetical lecture 21, “On Chrism,” he describes in some detail how the baptized press on to receive *more* of the Spirit. The charismatic movement is very much about that *more*, which is also underscored in the liturgy of Lutheran confirmation: “The Father in Heaven, for Jesus’ sake, renew and increase in thee the gift of the Holy Spirit, to thy strengthening in faith, to thy growth in grace, to thy patience in suffering, and to the blessed hope of everlasting life.”<sup>17</sup>

### Receiving the Holy Spirit

Renewal movements often focus on a particular aspect of the Christian faith. The Lutheran Reformation highlighted justification by grace through faith. The Wesleyan revivals stressed sanctification. Charismatics underscore the belief that followers of Jesus should “receive” or “be baptized with” the Holy Spirit.

The prophecy of John the Baptist that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit is recorded in all of the gospels (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33). Jesus repeated the prophecy before His ascension (Acts 1:5). The book of Acts records several instances of people receiving the Holy Spirit; taken together, they help us understand how this prophecy happened in the life of the early church —

- Receiving the Holy Spirit was a discrete aspect of Christian initiation. It was closely associated with repentance, faith, and baptism but it did not happen automatically when someone believed in Jesus or was baptized.<sup>18</sup>
- It required no particular ritual. Sometimes people received the Holy Spirit in connection with prayer and the laying on of hands, but it could also happen spontaneously.<sup>19</sup>

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17 *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958), 246.

18 When the apostle Paul met a small band of disciples in Ephesus, he asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (Acts 19:2) The very form of the question indicates that “believe” and “receive the Holy Spirit” were discrete aspects of Christian initiation in Paul’s understanding. This was clearly the understanding that prevailed in the early church, see Acts 8:12-17, 11:15-18.

19 Acts 2:4,33; 10:44-47.

- Receiving the Holy Spirit was not a secret or unconscious event in the life of a believer; it was a noticeable, remembered happening. “The effectual presence of the Holy Spirit cannot be assumed simply because a person agrees to correct doctrine. It is possible to hold the doctrine on the Holy Spirit, yet not experience His presence and power. The doctrine must find expression in personal experience.”<sup>20</sup>
- When new believers came to faith and were baptized, but did not receive the Holy Spirit, their initiation into the Christian faith was considered incomplete; prayer was invoked for them to receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

Charismatics do not understand “receiving the Holy Spirit” as a comprehensive term for the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a distinctive happening in the life of a believer whereby the Holy Spirit becomes more manifest.

Today, behind this understanding of Scripture, stand millions of believers around the world and throughout the body of Christ who testify to “receiving” or “being baptized with” the Holy Spirit. Many would describe their life beforehand not much differently than the disciples the apostle Paul met in Ephesus, some twenty years after Pentecost —<sup>22</sup>

*“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”*

*“We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”*

Asked to explain how or why it happened in their lives, charismatics most likely say, “Somebody told me about it.” Faith comes by hearing. The charismatic movement has spread because a neglected truth of Scripture has been proclaimed.

When churches tut-tut that this is nothing new, we have always believed in the Holy Spirit, always had the Holy Spirit, charismatics rightly ask, “Why then didn’t you tell me about it?”

Anyone growing up in the Lutheran church has been urged from earliest memory to believe in Jesus as Savior. The fact that the Bible also presents Jesus as “the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” has not been prominent in Lutheran teaching. It has simply been assumed that

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20     **Larry Christenson, *The Charismatic Renewal Among Lutherans* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976), p. 35.** On “receiving the Holy Spirit,” see Acts 8:18, 10:45-46, 19:6; Galatians 3:2. The English word “receive” is more passive than the Greek word *lambano*, which carries the connotation of “take hold of, choose, make one’s own.” It must nevertheless be underscored that “receiving the Holy Spirit” involves more than a simple decision to make the Holy Spirit more active in one’s life. “The accent on the person of the Holy Spirit [in the charismatic renewal] is linked to the experience of receiving or being filled with His presence. Precisely because He is a person, He must be received.” (see Luke 11:9-13).

21     Acts 8:14-17.

22     Acts 19:2.

receiving the Holy Spirit happens along with faith and Baptism, though Scriptures that specifically address the theme of receiving the Holy Spirit do not support such a notion.<sup>23</sup>

A common charge, when baptism with the Holy Spirit comes up, is that it implies a ranking of believers, a division between those who “have” and “have not.” This can prove particularly troubling when one thinks of believers in past time — a father or mother; a sainted grandmother. Not to mention saints through the ages, whose narratives do not mention baptism with the Holy Spirit.

At a charismatic theological consultation in Schloß Craheim in Bavaria in 1983, Norwegian theologian Tormod Engelsen addressed this issue. Engelsen was a missionary theologian in the Lutheran Mekane Yesus church in Ethiopia, which befriended a large number of people from a persecuted Pentecostal group which the government had outlawed. In 1972 he was appointed to conduct a study of charismatic teachings and experience for the Mekane Yesus church. He observed that the idea that “baptism with the Holy Spirit creates two classes of believers” was normally voiced by those outside the charismatic movement, rather than by charismatics. Charismatics testified about baptism with the Holy Spirit in personal terms: the comparison was not between two classes of believers, but a “before” and “after” description of one’s own life. The testimony of charismatics is not a call to join an elite spiritual group, but the underscoring of a neglected biblical teaching.

Engelsen’s analysis generally tracked with the experience of the other participants in this international Lutheran consultation, both in present experience and in historical perspective. While the *terminology* of “baptism with the Spirit” is not common in Lutheran theology, charismatics have recognized that the reality itself — *a signal anointing of the Holy Spirit* — is present in the church today and throughout history, albeit often downplayed or neglected. My wife remembers a godly couple in her Lutheran congregation in Denver, Colorado. The husband was superintendent of the Sunday School, his wife was an invalid much given to prayer, they tithed their income to the church, their son went into the Lutheran ministry. The wife once told a close friend what had happened to her “when she received the Holy Spirit.” It was an experience she remembered. It changed their lives.

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23 When Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, many people believed and were baptized yet they did not receive the Holy Spirit. When Peter and John came down from Jerusalem and prayed for them they received the Holy Spirit in a noticeable way. *The account of this event in Acts 8:12-17 stands athwart any attempt to collapse “receiving the Holy Spirit” into believing or Baptism, or to represent it as happening automatically.*

### A defining moment

Among Lutheran charismatics, “receiving the Holy Spirit” has been understood with a view to sanctification, or living the Christian life. In 1974 a National Leaders Conference for the Lutheran Charismatic Movement was convened in Ann Arbor, Michigan. One of the guest speakers was the well-known Lutheran theologian, Dr. William Lazareth. He gave a talk on the Lutheran understanding of Baptism. During a question and answer session he made a passing reference to Pentecostal theology, “As Lutherans we do not believe that you can add anything to the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement, such as the Pentecostal belief that in order to be saved you must speak in tongues.” A wave of muttering spread through assembly. “Did I say something wrong?” he asked. A pastor from the Missouri Synod stood up and said, “Dr. Lazareth, we meet on a regular basis with Pentecostal pastors in our local ministerial fellowships. They do not believe that speaking in tongues is necessary for salvation. On justification, they are as solid and biblical as you are.” Dr. Lazareth said graciously, “Apparently I have been misinformed.”

Following the session several of us approached Dr. Lazareth with a proposal: “We would like to have one of us describe how ‘baptism with the Holy Spirit’ happened in his life. Then we would like you to give a Lutheran theological description of the testimony.” Dr. Lazareth accepted the proposal. One of the pastors told how he had received the Holy Spirit, which included a reference to spiritual healing and the experience of speaking in tongues. When asked to comment, Dr. Lazareth said, “What I have just heard, I would call a somewhat dramatic event of sanctification.”

In conversing with him afterward we expressed our agreement with his evaluation. “We are not challenging, changing, or belittling the Lutheran understanding of justification by grace alone. What we are talking about is carrying that same understanding over into sanctification: as surely as we are justified only by Christ’s atoning sacrifice, just as surely we are sanctified only by His life; alone by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit can we live the life to which Jesus calls us.”<sup>24</sup>

This was a defining moment in the charismatic renewal among Lutherans. Participants in the renewal had frequently been challenged on the issue of justification. Critics contended that charismatics compromised the Lutheran understanding of justification by grace alone, tacking “charismatic experience” onto the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement. In point of fact, among

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24 Larry Christenson, “I Will Restore,” in *Back To Square One* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1979), pp. 86-93. This chapter presents the underlying correspondence between justification and sanctification: they both depend on the absolute sufficiency of Christ.

charismatics justification by grace alone is so utterly taken for granted that it scarcely needs to be mentioned.<sup>25</sup>

### A missed opportunity

Nevertheless, Lutheran charismatics must humbly own up to the fact that beneath a formal acceptance of Lutheran doctrine there has often bristled a practical downplay of Lutheran heritage. A charismatic congregation toys with the idea of dropping “Lutheran” from their church sign, for fear people will write them off as formal and dead. In a charismatic conference, a speaker takes a cheap shot at “theology” as a deadening alternative to “walking in the Spirit” or being “Spirit-filled.” A worship leader ploughs through a raft of contemporary songs, seemingly unconcerned that a visitor would be hard put to recognize any part of the service as distinctively Lutheran. The new or spontaneous or popular pushes aside the familiar and traditional, rather than working toward a sensitive blending of the old and the new.

The age-old trap of renewal movements is to become so taken up with a new-found reality that great treasures of the faith get shunted aside. This rouses suspicion and misgivings on the part of church officials. Jaroslav Pelikan, editor of the 55 volume set of Luther’s works in English and a leading Lutheran theologian in his generation, once defined “tradition” as “the living faith of the dead” and “traditionalism” as the dead faith of the living. In many settings, Lutheran charismatics have not exercised the thought and patience necessary to thread that needle. On both sides of the ledger, the Lutheran church and the charismatic renewal have under-valued and under-appreciated one another.

Yet, while one can theorize about different ways the charismatic movement might have developed, the overall narrative testifies to a significant work of the Holy Spirit. I have been personally involved with the charismatic movement among Lutherans for nearly fifty years. When I first began to think and write about it, I made a simple observation: the Bible says, “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:28). Now, God does not do foolish or unnecessary things. If God appointed certain gifts and ministries in the church, it is not for us to weigh whether they are good or necessary, but rather to ask, “Why did God do this? What does He have in mind?”

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25 *Welcome, Holy Spirit*, pp. 186-188. See also Note #10, pp. 398-399, a detailed answer to the charge that Lutheran charismatics give short shrift to the doctrine of justification.

It is also worth noting that the shape or emphasis of the charismatic renewal varies considerably from place to place and from time to time. In one Lutheran congregation the renewal brought a strong emphasis on Bible teaching and theology, including a demanding three-year confirmation course. In the late 1980s, almost overnight, a fresh emphasis on world evangelization spread throughout the entire renewal. In a Lutheran congregation in North Carolina the renewal came to expression in the grandest worship I have ever experienced — an artful and measured blend of high liturgy and spontaneous charismatic offerings. The Holy Spirit is nothing if not endlessly creative!

The charismatic movement, with all its variety, including also faults and missteps, is calling the church to more fully realize its trinitarian faith, to expect and experience in everyday life the presence and work and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

## **PART TWO: The Road Ahead**

A journalist once asked Smith Wiggelsworth, the great Pentecostal evangelist, "What is the key to successful evangelism?" He expected Wiggelsworth to emphasize healing and miracles, which were prominent in the evangelist's own ministry. Wiggelsworth surprised him with this answer: "The key to successful evangelism is the leading of the Holy Spirit in each individual encounter."

"Well, yes, of course. The Holy Spirit. Good trinitarian theology." It's easy to nod formal agreement to Wiggelsworth at this point, then turn right around and head off 180 degrees in the opposite direction, stuffing principles for effective evangelism into our knapsack wherever we find them, failing to recognize how fundamental, all-embracing and radical Wiggelsworth's answer really is.

Try this sometime: ask a random group of married couples who have stayed married twenty or more years, "What advice can you give to married people, or engaged couples? *What is the key to a successful marriage?*"

Watch a horde of general principles line up for their turn at the microphone!

- *Don't try to "change" one another.*
- *Be quick to forgive.*
- *Schedule quality communication-time at least once a week.*

- *Follow the biblical pattern: husband is “head,” wife is “helper.”*
- *Remember, marriage is a partnership.*
- *Flowers! Men don’t understand this, but women need flowers.*
- *[Ernestine Reems at Lutheran Holy Spirit Conference, 1989:] “The reason some of you women can’t hold on to a husband is you don’t butter up his ego. I smear it on every morning, and he just slops it up.”*

Any of these keys might prove helpful advice for a given marriage in a specific situation. But any one of the keys might just as easily completely miss the mark.

If the key to a successful marriage is *good communication*, my father-in-law was a failure. The communication gene was not in his make-up. Yet he became the honored leader not only of his own wife and children, but also a patriarch who provided employment, stability and moral example to a large extended family. Something else than a formula for “good communication” accounted for his success as a husband and father.

The best wedding sermon and marriage advice my wife and I ever heard consisted of just ten words. An 85 year old retired Norwegian Lutheran pastor was presiding at the marriage of his beautiful granddaughter. When it came time for the wedding homily, he moved slightly to his right so that he came face-to-face with the groom. He wagged his finger under the groom’s nose and said, “Ven Jesus tells you to do something, you do it!”

Not “good communication,” “forgiveness,” “flowers on your anniversary,” or any other general principle a husband might put into practice — just the presence and authority of Jesus Himself.

Like Smith Wiggelsworth’s description of successful evangelism, this Lutheran pastor’s description of successful marriage is fundamental, all-embracing and radical. It is based not on a pack of general principles as such, but on the reality of *divine presence*. (And, just as readily, it can be brushed aside as a metaphor, dismissed as a mere theological construct.)

These two anecdotes illustrate the central thrust of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. (For purposes of simplicity, from this point I use “**Holy Spirit Renewal**” to refer collectively to both movements.)

### **The central thrust of the Holy Spirit Renewal**

**The Holy Spirit Renewal sounded a clarion call to “receive,” or “be baptized with” the Holy Spirit.** This was not a catchy figure of speech, or a freshly minted theological abstraction. It

was a practical exhortation that spread powerfully throughout the entire body of Christ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recalling the church to its roots as a fellowship bound together not simply by common beliefs, but by life-union with God. It rested on the biblical precedent that “receiving the Holy Spirit” is a necessary aspect of Christian initiation, discrete from belief and baptism (see Acts 8:12-17).

The aim of the exhortation was not simply to seek consensus on a statement of doctrine. It was a call to personally receive the Holy Spirit, according to the pattern of Scripture. Where the exhortation was received, the presence and authority of the Holy Spirit came to heightened expression in the life of believers and in the life of the church.

The Holy Spirit Renewal thus underscored a fundamental, *but in practice often neglected*, truth of Scripture: the Holy Spirit is not simply a “force,” or a vague impersonal “power to make an ethical decision” (as Rudolph Bultmann put it). The Holy Spirit is a true fellow of the Holy Trinity. Yongi Cho from Korea, pastor of the largest congregation in the world, would set a chair for the Holy Spirit on the stage in his meetings, to underscore the fact that, “The Holy Spirit is a PERSON!”

The Holy Spirit Renewal proclaims the neglected truth that Christian life and ministry depends on believers receiving the third Person of the Holy Trinity. Receiving “the fullness of the Spirit is preparation for living and working as a child of God.”<sup>26</sup>

When Jesus returned to heaven after His resurrection, He did not tell His disciples simply to live by principles He had taught them. What He promised them was *divine presence*: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper [the Holy Spirit] to be with you forever” (John 14:15-16).

### **The Danger of Taking the Holy Spirit for Granted**

One of the careless presumptions that the Holy Spirit Renewal calls into question is the notion that if we have the Holy Spirit in our doctrine, then we “have Him” in full reality and power. I grew up in a congregation where the opening hymn every Sunday reaffirmed our trinitarian faith —

Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty!  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;  
Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!  
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

We were encouraged to pray to the Father and believe in Jesus, but never once were we

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26 Andrew Murray, *The Andrew Murray Daily Reader* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005, from “The Fullness of the Spirit”), p. 74.

encouraged to receive the Third Person of the blessed Trinity. The presumption that we “have” the Holy Spirit sat undisturbed in the narthex of our minds.

This presumption continues to plow a wide furrow outside the Holy Spirit Renewal. An article in a denominational magazine, for example, quotes Acts 1:8, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses...” The article polevaults over the Holy Spirit and immediately begins to harangue readers to witness more effectively; *receiving the Holy Spirit is taken for granted.*

The Holy Spirit Renewal orders priorities differently. The Christian life — at any stage, in any situation — radiates outward from the reality of divine presence. In Scripture, the active presence of the Holy Spirit is not simply assumed or taken for granted. It comes about through a conscious, well-remembered encounter with Jesus, who baptizes His followers in the Holy Spirit.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and father of existentialism, described the Christian life as “a striving born of gratitude.”<sup>27</sup> A mighty sum of exhortation in the church could be cataloged under the rubric, *You should be grateful!* Gratitude surely adorns the profile of a Christian but, as an enduring motivation for behavior, gratitude has a short shelf life. (“What have you done for me lately?”) The Holy Spirit Renewal points rather to receiving the Holy Spirit, and the enduring reality of living by His presence, guidance, and power. And it does not take this for granted.

Wherever the Holy Spirit Renewal has spread, its initial thrust marked a sea change in the life and ministry of believers. The primary motivation and expectation for everyday living moved from man to God — from the study (even scholarly, academic study) of beliefs, doctrines, rules, formulas and methods for understanding and living the Christian life to a heightened awareness of divine presence.

### **The Road Ahead for the Holy Spirit Renewal**

Jesus promised His disciples, “Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the father” (John 14:12). The Holy Spirit Renewal called for a readiness to treat such Scriptures realistically. But the very teaching implies that much more lies ahead.

The Holy Spirit Renewal proclaimed a more robust return to New Testament faith than it actually experienced. Oral Roberts once said to me, “I pray for more people that don’t get well than anyone in America. I figure the Lord touches about 10% of those I pray for. I don’t know about the other 90%. I just try to be faithful to the word the Lord gave me, to bring the word of healing to my generation.” In other words, the Holy Spirit Renewal marked a beginning, indeed a

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27 Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers, Vol. 1, A-E, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967), 433-34.

breakthrough, but more lies ahead.

**Moving forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we should look for the radical reality of *divine presence* to quicken the church, perhaps in unexpected ways.**

What will happen if a heightened experience of divine presence becomes the hallmark of spiritual renewal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Let me suggest TWO REALITIES that provide, as it were, observation posts for beholding and understanding the reality of divine presence:

1) the NATURE OF MAN in the new creation;

2) the authority of HOLY SCRIPTURE.

## **1. The Nature of Man in the New Creation.**

### **The Bible describes the Christian life as a “new creation.”**

From now on we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ — a new creation. *The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.* (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

The “new creation” has been widely mis-understood as a mere modification or improvement on human nature. You get new beliefs: you believe in Jesus. You have a new relationship: you are reconciled with God. You behave differently: you try to obey God. You have a new destiny: you have the promise of going to heaven.

The new creation is more radical. The problem with interpreting the new creation in terms of external changes (even profound changes) is that the old fallen nature is not decisively dealt with. According to Scripture, the old creation is not improved on, it passes away. The old man is not simply forgiven, scrubbed up, and put on a new path. He is *crucified*; he dies.

We know that our old self was crucified with Jesus in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (Romans 6:6)

The change from the old nature to the new nature is not like the change, say, of a sparrow with a broken wing that gets healed so it can fly; that would be an improvement but not a basic

change. The new creation is more like the difference between a sparrow and an eagle — two different natures.

According to Scripture, the new creation produces a different makeup in the human person, a new mode of existence; it involves a change in one’s intrinsic nature, an ONTOLOGICAL<sup>28</sup> change. Scripture indicates that we must think about ourselves in a radically new way —

Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and *be renewed in the spirit of your minds*, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

(Ephesians 4:22-24)

The second letter of Peter spells out how radical this “new nature” really is —

His divine power has granted us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the DIVINE NATURE. (2 Peter 1:4)

**At the very heart of the new creation stands this astonishing declaration: believers in Jesus partake of the DIVINE NATURE.**

### **A Glimpse of the Divine Nature**

Scripture does not offer a comprehensive description of the divine nature, but the relationship between Jesus and the Father gives us a glimpse of the divine nature in action. Jesus described His relationship to the Father in a unique way. He said, “Know and understand that the Father is in me, AND I am in the Father“ (John 10:38). “Do you not believe that I am in the Father AND the Father is in me?” (John 14:10) And praying to the heavenly Father, Jesus said, “You, Father, are in me, AND I in you“ (John 17:21).

A graphic loan-term, to express this divine reality, is the Greek word *perichoresis* (peri-chór-esis): “mutually indwell; share one another’s ‘space’; dance around”.<sup>29</sup>

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28 *ontology*: the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of being. The concept of the Christian life involving an ontological change has been more fully developed in the Orthodox understanding of *theosis* or *divinization*. More recently, Lutheran theologians in Finland have found a similar emphasis in their study of Martin Luther’s works, see Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, editors, *Union with Christ, the New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 182 pages.

29 “This concept in a verbal form was first used by the Church Father, Gregory Nazianzus (329-390), to help express the way in which the divine and the human natures in the one Person of Christ coinhere in one another without the integrity of either being diminished by the presence of the other. It was then applied to speak of the way in which the three divine Persons mutually dwell in one another and coinhere or inexist in one another while nevertheless remaining other than one another and distinct from one another.” (Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 102)

The root word refers to *space* or *room*; or to *making room*. It thus conveys the idea that the Persons of the Trinity inter-penetrate, or share, one another’s “space”; they receive One Another, ‘make room’ for One Another.

Logically, *perichoresis* describes an oxymoron: two persons cannot simultaneously be “in” each other. *Yet this is precisely how Scripture describes the relatedness in the Holy Trinity.* Like the word “Trinity,” the word “perichoresis” does not occur in the New Testament, but serves as a helpful theological shorthand to reference a scriptural truth, namely, *the unique way that Jesus described the relatedness of the Father and Himself.*

Jesus’ depiction of the divine nature does not suggest three separate entities who live and work in close cooperation with one another. That would be the heresy of *tritheism* — [a worship of] three Gods instead of One God. Jesus states this commandingly in His parting words to His disciples, “Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name (not names!) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the theologically compressed, singular name of the one true God, who subsists in three Persons, has three centers of consciousness.

### **Partaking of the Divine Nature**

Now the point is this: Jesus uses the SAME WORDS to describe the relatedness between a believer and Himself that He uses to describe His own relatedness to the Father —

Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, AND I in you. (John 14:19-20)

It is precisely at this point that the central thrust of the Holy Spirit Renewal comes sharply into focus. The Holy Spirit Renewal calls the church to recognize and return to an expression of the Christian life consistent with the full testimony of Scripture —

- Christ is Savior and Lord, whom believers strive to obey: *good*, but there is more . . .
  - Believers have a personal relationship with Christ: *better*, but there is more . . .
  - Christ indwells believers: *still better*, but there is more . . .
  - Believers are in life-union with Christ: *best of all*, now consider the mystery of this life:
- ⇒ Believers share divine life with Christ as Christ shares divine life with the Father: “*The Father is in Me and I am in the Father: You are in Me and I am in you.*”

This is the legacy and trust of the Holy Spirit Renewal. The reality of baptism in the Holy Spirit resists the tendency of the faith to lose touch with its roots and degenerate into a mere belief-system. It calls the church to renewed dependence on what God alone can bring into our lives, *divine presence*. Martin Luther wrote, “Christ and faith must thoroughly be joined together. We must be in heaven and Christ must live and work in us [on earth]. Now, he lives and works in us, not by speculation and naked knowledge, but indeed and by a *true and a substantial presence*.”<sup>30</sup>

While the Holy Spirit Renewal *proclaims* this reality, it does not *possess* it in any exclusive sense. On the contrary, the Renewal contends that the reality has been experienced by believers through the ages.<sup>31</sup> The terminology had been generally unused, the description and the precise shape of experience has been varied, but the substantive reality of baptism in the Holy Spirit — though often neglected and misunderstood, and described in various ways — has been experienced by believers from the beginning to the present day. The calling of the Holy Spirit Renewal is to proclaim the unchanging “promise of the Father” (Luke 24:49) as widely and as winsomely as possible in our day.

The clarion call of the Holy Spirit Renewal to “be baptized with the Holy Spirit” summons the church to enter *a transcendent mode of life* — not by human understanding, will, or effort (which is impossible) but by responding to the reality of divine presence according to the pattern of Scripture, humbly praying for and receiving the Holy Spirit.

Early in the charismatic renewal Francis MacNutt (Roman Catholic) and Tommy Tyson (Methodist) defined Baptism in the Holy Spirit in terms of divine presence: “It is an event in a person’s life by which he or she becomes more continually aware of the presence, Person, and power of the risen Christ.”

This accords with the pivotal role Martin Luther assigned to faith: “Faith, if it be true faith, is a sure trust and confidence of the heart, and a firm consent whereby Christ is apprehended: so that Christ is the object of faith, yea rather, He is not the object, but, as it were, in the faith itself Christ is PRESENT.”<sup>32</sup> A shorthand for this could be: instead of saying, “I have faith in Christ,” say, **“I have Christ in faith.”**

This echoes the most accurate translation of Scripture’s classic definition of faith: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, KJV). The rendering of the Greek *hupóstasis* as “substance,” (substantial nature, essence, actual being,

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30 Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company) p. 344.

31 Evidence from the first eight centuries indicate that Christian initiation included Baptism in the Holy Spirit with the manifestation of spiritual gifts. See Kilian McDonnell & George Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991) 354 pages.

32 Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 134.

reality) and *élechos* as “evidence” (proof) underscores the objective character of faith. Most modern translations focus merely on the subjective or psychological awareness that accompanies faith: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1, NIV). According to the original text, however, faith is part and parcel of the objective reality of which it speaks, palpable proof of an invisible reality. Faith unites us with the objective reality of which it speaks.

A little episode in Luther’s life (probably apocryphal) illustrates the objective reality of faith in his life. A man knocked on the door of his house. Luther answered the door.

“Does Dr. Martin Luther live here?” the man asked.

“No, he died,” Luther replied. “Christ lives here now.”

In the new creation, I no longer exist as a solitary individual. The “new nature” is not an improved version of the old nature, but a new and differently constituted nature — a new nature for a new creation. Jesus became like us, in order that we might become like Him, and Jesus is a Person who BY HIS VERY NATURE is united with His Father. When we partake of the DIVINE NATURE, that is what we partake of — a life that can only be defined and understood in terms of life-union with the living God.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

The operative outcome of the Holy Spirit Renewal — of receiving, or being baptized with, the Holy Spirit — is *heightened awareness and experience of life-union with the Lord*. One “lays hold upon” (Greek: *lambano*) and becomes more acutely aware of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence. The events of everyday life and ministry issue from the miraculous reality that we are adopted into the life of God (Ephesians 1:5). We live in a supernatural life-union with the Lord. We “partake of the divine nature.”

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

In the book, *A Sober Faith*<sup>33</sup>, a recovering alcoholic described the basis for his sobriety in terms of experiencing the reality of divine presence: “The guy who’s running the show isn’t thirsty . . .”

## 2. The authority of Holy Scripture.

### The Holy Spirit Renewal holds a high view of scriptural veracity.

On the one hand, from the outset the Holy Spirit Renewal stood in concert with the historic expression of the faith. You could attend charismatic conferences around the world, visit prayer groups across the spectrum of Christian denominations, read the literature, talk with leaders and people, and never once hear an argument against the cardinal doctrines of the Christian Faith, such as justification by faith, the virgin birth, the atonement, the divinity of Christ, trinitarian theology, or the validity of the moral law. All of these things were accepted without question from the beginning.

Critics have sometimes faulted charismatics for not spending enough time on some of the basics, such as justification by faith, apparently failing to recognize how thoroughly the fundamentals of the faith are believed and accepted in the Renewal.

Other critics have pasted a “legalist” or “fundamentalist” label on the Renewal because it takes the moral imperatives of Scripture literally. It is quite true that the Renewal interprets Scripture “according to its plain sense.” This was the exegetical standard laid down by Luther, and by the Reformation generally. What the Bible says about the behavior of believers is accepted as a given; the basic rules for living the Christian life are not up for debate. This does not mean, however, that believers in the Renewal take refuge in a jaded set of rules and regulations for living the Christian life. What critics largely miss is the attention the Renewal gives to *motivation* and *power* to live the Christian life: the focus falls not on human will and effort, but on the indwelling presence and power of the risen Christ. It’s closer to the cry of the Apostle Paul at the end of Romans 7, than to a meticulous set of charismatic do’s and don’t’s.

When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (Romans 7:21-25)

The Renewal thus takes a realistic stance both toward the basic truths of Scripture, and the appointed means for living them out in everyday life.

On the other hand, the Holy Spirit Renewal stands apart from an anti-supernatural reading of Scripture, whether from the dispensationalism right, or the liberal left.

As noted above, in his carefully researched study of the worldview of Western culture,

Morton Kelsey argues on one side against a disdain of the supernatural in the name of reason and science (the liberal view), and on the other side against a naive belief in the supernatural events recorded in Scripture but with no expectation that such things could happen today (the dispensational view). In the Holy Spirit Renewal Kelsey saw a realistic alternative to both these ways of thinking.

Like Luther, the Holy Spirit Renewal went “back to the beginning,” grounding its proclamation and practice in Scripture. This approach to Scripture, variously described as “biblical realism,” “radical orthodoxy,” “exact exegesis,” or “Holy Spirit hermeneutic” is the antithesis of dead literalism. It is, rather, a description of a very realistic and dynamic understanding of biblical authority that has characterized a century of witness in the Holy Spirit Renewal.

### **The inspiration of Scripture has two sides.**

The Lord inspired those who WROTE the Scriptures. From the beginning, the Holy Spirit Renewal accepted The Bible as normative for faith and life. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Holy Spirit Renewal emphasized the other side of inspiration as well: as surely as the Lord inspired those who WROTE the Scriptures, so also must the Holy Spirit inspire those who READ the Scriptures.

“Through the words of the Scriptures, the one holy Lord of the universe reveals Himself. But it is through the action of the Holy Spirit that the words of the Bible become God’s Word for us. It is the Spirit who takes the human words of the Scriptures and illumines them in our hearts so that they become God’s Word spoken to us here and now.”<sup>34</sup>

### **How does an authoritative Scripture relate to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit?**

One of the great traps in living the Christian life is the tendency to substitute general principles for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We scour Scripture looking for principles we can apply to life situations. In almost any story or text we can ferret out a general principle, a formula for dealing with a life problem. When the formula doesn’t seem to work, well, you have to refine the principle.

“Love one another” doesn’t seem to cut it with that rebellious student? Re-examine your principles. Try the “tough love” formula. There’s a principle for every situation or problem. Keep looking.

The danger in this approach is that it can foster a belief in Scripture that effectively neutralizes the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Lutherans — and evangelicals in general — run the danger of all but handcuffing the Holy Spirit to the “Word.” The Holy Spirit is politely invited to confine His work to inspiring and authenticating the Word, the essence of the “Word” being understood as a series of doctrinal truths that we understand, believe, and by which we order our life. “Just give us an authoritative Scripture, and we’ll take it from there.” We end up with a trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Scripture.

Many things that people do in the world *can* be successfully copied — a good recipe, a scientific experiment, a computer program. Living the Christian life is a different kind of proposition. Here we encounter the paradox of a God who is *reliable*, yet often *unpredictable*. He is faithful. What He has promised, He will surely do. But *how* He will do it, or *when*, we often do not know. He holds His own counsel. He does what He has decided to do in the counsel of the triune Godhead (see Ephesians 1:11).

That is why the Christian life involves more than living by principles. Jesus was much more than “a man of principle.” He said, “The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what He sees the Father doing” (John 5:19). How many sick people did Jesus step around at the pool of Bethesda to speak God’s word to one invalid? (John 5:2) Jesus did not have a “preferential option” for the poor, or the sick, or the disadvantaged; nor for the rich and influential. He had a preferential option for the FATHER!

Jesus did not intend His disciples to be guided simply by commonsense application of spiritual principles. Not even the truths that He had taught them stood alone. He said, “I will pray the Father, and he will give you *another Helper* . . . he will teach you all things, and will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (John 14:16,26)

Christ calls us into a totally new dimension of living. Our life as Christians is not meant to be guided simply by principles, commonsensically applied. Our life is under the direction of a living Person, the Holy Spirit. By His power we partake of the divine nature. *The Lord is in us, we are in Him.*

### **The Problem With Stand-alone Principles**

The Holy Spirit Renewal calls deeply into question the notion that living the Christian life is simply a matter of believing in Christ and then determining to live according to biblical commands and principles. The problem with trying to live simply by principles, even biblical principles, is that we perpetuate our old individualistic life. We make right judgments, we do this or that, we follow correct teaching. Whereas, as we have seen, Scripture points us to a new mode of living altogether. In the new creation, human nature as such “passes away.” The relatedness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit becomes the paradigm of our new nature. We live not simply by

following correct principles, but *by partaking of the divine nature*. This is the reality at the heart of the Holy Spirit Renewal.

The danger of living simply by knowledge has a long and unsavory pedigree. The serpent's lie in the Garden of Eden pitted knowledge against obedience to God.

“The LORD God said, ‘Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’ ” (Genesis 2:16-17). “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?”’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’ ” (Genesis 3:1-5).

A well-stated principle can indeed result from the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction. But when it issues simply from human knowledge and understanding, or if we apply it at our own discretion, it can all-too-easily become a substitute for the work of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Paradoxical Nature of Biblical Truth**

Consider a situation: you exercise spiritual leadership for a group of one hundred people. One of them goes astray. What do you do?

“Why, you leave the ninety-nine and go after the one that has strayed, of course. That's what Jesus said” (see Luke 15:4).

In the same chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus told the story of a father who watched his son go astray, *and just sat there*. The son left home, squandered his money in riotous living, and ended up in a pig sty. The father didn't chase after him. He didn't go down and bail him out. He waited for his prodigal son to come home.

In his film series, *Focus on the Family*, James Dobson tells of a woman who had a twenty year old son. The son went astray. His mother did everything she could think of to relate to the son, talk with him, stay in touch with him. Nothing worked. She asked Dobson for advice. Dobson told her to cut him loose. “Write him a letter. Tell him that you've done the best job you could as a parent. Now, if he wants to rebel against God and go, he'll go.” Dobson cited the story of the Prodigal Son as his text.

What should you do when a person strays from the right path? You love the person. That is assumed in these Scriptures. But how should you *express* your love? That's the question. Should you go after him? Or should you let him go? In the same chapter of the Bible, *both* ways are presented in a positive light. Yet, clearly, the two ways contradict each other. So what are you going to do?

This is not an isolated example. Scripture abounds with contradictory counsel for understanding truth, or putting truth into practice.

- **Enter not into judgment** with thy servant: for no man living is righteous before thee. (Psalm 143:2)  
**Judge me**, O Lord, according to my righteousness, and according to the integrity that is in me. (Psalm 7:8)
- Whoever is **not with Me is against Me**. (Matthew 12:30)  
The one who is **not against us is for us**. (Luke 9:40)
- Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. **You received without pay, give without pay**. (Matthew 10:8)  
Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; **for the laborer deserves his food**. (Matthew 10:9)
- We hold that **one is justified by faith apart from works of the law**. (Romans 3:28)  
You see that **a person is justified by works and not by faith alone**. (James 2:24)
- Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him. (Proverbs 22:15)  
Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart. (Colossians 3:20, NASB)

Really, this is nothing new; many life situations illustrate contradictory axioms:

- Look before you leap.  
He who hesitates is lost.

On the Lewis and Clark expedition, Reuben Fields was chased by a grizzly bear to a cliff overlooking the Missouri River. Which of these axioms was “truth” for him . . . ?

Slogans (including *biblical* slogans) often represent one side of a paradox. The problem is this: the Bible puts the same spin on both sides of a paradox, as we noted in the example of the “lost sheep” and the “lost son.” Either way of responding to a person who goes astray could be right (or wrong!) in a specific circumstance.

I once witnessed to a young couple I had become friends with over a period of several years.

They were not Christians. The husband came to faith and was baptized. The wife, however, was a convinced atheist. When I mentioned God in the course of one of our conversations, she said, “There is no God.” That statement answers to the biblical definition of a fool: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’ “ (Psalm 14:1). Well, that’s an easy one. The Bible is clear: “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself” (Proverbs 26:4). *Give her the silent treatment!* Except the very next verse says, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (verse 5). So how do you respond to a person whom the Bible names a fool?

- *Give her the silent treatment?*
- *Or cut her down to size?*

The Bible offers both pieces of advice, without distinction.

There is no “principle” that tells you how to choose correctly between the paradoxes of Scripture. Here, again, the central focus of the Holy Spirit Renewal stands out: everything in the Christian faith, including the authority and application of Scripture, depends upon *divine presence*. Derek Prince, who had a profound understanding of divine presence, put the right spin on principles: “There’s nothing wrong with a principle — as long as the Holy Spirit is the one who kicks it into gear!” In the situation with my young friend, I sensed the Lord telling me not to pursue the issue any further at this time. This was clearly confirmed over the course of the next several days.

## **CONCLUSION**

The central message of the Holy Spirit Renewal — “receiving the Holy Spirit,” or “being baptized with the Holy Spirit” — calls the church back to its scriptural roots, to a faith defined not simply by its knowledge — doctrinal agreement, however biblical — but by a heightened awareness and experience of life-union-with-the-Lord. Pentecostals and charismatics need steadfastly to live in and declare this central reality that God quickened to the church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: your life and ministry depends upon *divine presence*. Receive the Holy Spirit!

Life-union-with-the-Lord is full of surprise. We are swept into a new world. The Holy Spirit brings with Him the ways of the Holy Trinity. These ways are older than creation, but they are new to human experience. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9).

## CLOSING PRAYER

**“You in me, and I in You.”**

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