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The Spirit and the Word: What God Has Joined Together Let No Man Divide

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“Luther Bible babble bubble,” said Thomas Muntzer in derision of Martin Luther.

If Muntzer were alive today, his church would have a dove on its front wall. Or, more likely, no ornament; he would be too busy running “signs and wonders” conferences to worry about a building. Thomas Muntzer was pleased that Luther had unshackled the church from papal authority. He just felt that Luther had stopped too soon. Not just papal authority, but biblical authority itself needed to be loosened. If biblical authority were undermined, the church would be open to the direct working of God in the present day. *Sola scriptura*? Scripture alone? Luther Bible babble bubble.

The charge that today’s Reformation churches are dead because of their lack of emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit is as old as the Reformation itself. And so is one Reformation answer—Luther’s: “Muntzer, I wouldn’t believe you if you swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all!”

Most modern-day evangelicals do not want to swallow feathers so much as ruffle them. Surveying orthodox congregations that appear to be lifeless, they believe that the Holy Spirit is the missing ingredient in church life. Perhaps they have good reason to believe this.

Any thoughtful Christian, when challenged, will agree that a church without the Holy Spirit is a dead church. Moreover, he or she wants to be a member of a living church. We all want to attend churches where the Holy Spirit is active. Who among us would purposely join a church in which the Holy Spirit was absent? The Holy Spirit’s presence is surely on every true church’s “Must Have” list.

When we recognize our need of the Holy Spirit, the first question that comes to mind is “How can we get the Holy Spirit to be active in our church?” This question is not peculiar to the charismatic movement. Christians in Refor-

mation churches ask it as well. The great divide is in how the question is answered by the various churches.

The Holy Spirit As a Power Source

Before we ask how we can get the Holy Spirit active in our church, we need to know what the ministry of the Holy Spirit is. Wrong pictures of the work of the Holy Spirit lead to wrong methods of seeking the Holy Spirit. They lead us to accept as normal much that we would otherwise reject just because it fits with our preconceived notions. They also cause us to miss noticing those manifestations of the Spirit that do not conform to our misguided expectations.

If our primary picture of the Holy Spirit is that of a power source, our goal will be to get people “plugged in” to that power source. The best minister will be the best conductor of energy. A deep encounter of the Holy Spirit might leave a person “amped out.” We will accept as valid any behavior or practice that can be explained in terms of electricity, but we will pay less attention to even scripturally based experiences which do not have to do with energy.

The Scriptures are indeed replete with references linking the Holy Spirit to power. In both the Old and New Testaments, the Spirit comes upon people in power (1 Sam. 10:10; Acts 1:8), and many of the places in the New Testament where power is spoken of, the Holy Spirit is the source of that power (e.g., Luke 4:14; Acts 10:38; Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 2:4; Eph. 3:16). On account of this, it would be pointless to argue that the Holy Spirit is not a power source. Even if we know that the Holy Spirit is a power source, we will still want to know what we are to receive, how to receive it, and what to do with it.

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians is one of the best places to go for a description of the ministry of the Holy

Spirit. It is not an unfamiliar passage to most people, but it is often misinterpreted. It is not uncommon to have the verse “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” interpreted to mean that obeying the letter of the law gets us into a deadly legalism, but obeying the spirit of the law will bring life. When we look at the broader context of Paul’s statement about the letter and the Spirit, we find that he is contrasting not two ways of reading the law, but the ministry of the two covenants:

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory [which was being abolished] ¹, will not the ministry of the Spirit be more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness? For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory (2 Cor. 3:6-10).

The two ministries are the ministry of the letter, which Paul said brought condemnation, and the ministry of the Spirit, which brings righteousness. The ministry that brought death was brought by Moses, the letters were engraved on stone. The ministry of the letter, then, is the law, which the Israelites knew from the Ten Commandments. The ministry of the Spirit that brings righteousness is the gospel (Rom. 1:17). The contrast between the letter and the spirit, then, is not a contrast between a rigid and an easy-going reading of the law, but a contrast between the law and the gospel.

In Paul’s writings, the connection between the Spirit and the gospel is fundamental. Not only is the ministry of the Spirit the gospel, but the glory of the Spirit’s ministry is the glory of Christ found in the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). This has important implications for worship. Because the Holy Spirit

is God, we can and should worship Him. The Nicene Creed teaches this when it says that together with the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is “worshipped and glorified.” While it is proper to worship God for who He is, much of the worship found in Scripture is based on what He has done (e.g., Ex. 15:1-18; Rev. 5:9-10). Our worship of the Spirit ought to include praise for making known to us the work of Christ. We should glorify Him for making known to us Christ’s glory.

Not only is the ministry of the Spirit the ministry of the gospel, but Paul tells his churches that they received the Spirit by the same means they received the gospel. Paul tells the Galatians that they received the Spirit by hearing (Gal. 3:2,5), and he tells the Romans that they received faith by hearing as well (Rom. 10:17). In each case, what they heard was the message of the gospel. By believing the message of the gospel, we receive the Holy Spirit.

This connection between the Holy Spirit and the gospel is often overlooked. How often have we heard of supposed workings of the Holy Spirit that have no connection with the gospel message? One of the stories often used to prop up Charles Finney’s claims to evangelizing under God’s power involves him walking into a factory, and those seeing his face becoming converted by the mere sight of him. I would like to know what they were converted to. The apostle Paul tells us that faith comes from hearing the message (Rom. 10:17). All the factory workers saw was a face. Even if we were to grant for the sake of argument that divine glory shone from it, this would convert no one. Moses’ face shone with glory when he brought condemnation! It is the gospel that is the power of God to him who believes (Rom. 1:16). No gospel—no power to salvation. It is as simple as that.

Who Is Limiting God?

While linking the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the gospel

is not likely to be controversial, binding the Holy Spirit to the Word is. The Reformers are often accused of putting God in a box by denying that the Holy Spirit operates apart from the Word. A comparison will show that our view gives more credit to the power of God than the opposite view.

The test case most often presented to refute the Reformation viewpoint is that of the native in darkest Africa who never meets a missionary. If we say that only those who actually hear the gospel can be saved, are we saying that God cannot reach that individual? Is God really so dependent upon our missionary efforts in saving the souls of the lost? Before answering this case, I want to present another test case to show what the underlying motive is in bringing up the African native.

One class of persons whom the Reformation classifies as eminently suited to receive the ministry of the Holy Spirit is infants. Since we do not believe in free will (so-called), we as Reformation Christians believe that it is always supernatural when an individual comes to faith in Christ. The decisive factor is not the intellect of the individual, but the power of God. Age is no barrier to salvation. As demonstrated by the case of John the Baptist, even infants can be filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:15). They are also capable of faith. Scripture says that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6). Are we to believe that John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit but did not have faith? Does not his leaping for joy at the coming of his Messiah (and this is Scripture’s interpretation of why he leaped, not just mine!) evidence of faith? The Messiah brought joy because He was trusted. So much for the so-called age of accountability—that unbiblical doctrine! Infants can receive the Holy Spirit.

Reformation folk who believe that God can convert even infants certainly do not preach a God who is dependent on human ability. In the case of the savage in Africa, I suspect that many who do not consider the possibility of infant faith

will believe in the ability of the savage to come to faith, not so much because they believe in the power of God to convey the gospel apart from the Scripture, but because they believe that the African native has the spiritual ability to discover the gospel himself. It is not God's ability to speak, but man's ability to hear that is being extolled.

Is this really fair? Trying to read motives is a tricky thing. I do it here only because I have heard the idea of infant faith ridiculed by the very people who would accuse me of putting God in a box. These people believe that God can bring an ignorant savage to spiritual life where the gospel is absent, but that He cannot enliven an infant where the gospel is present. The power of God's gospel is made out to be unnecessary, while the reasoning ability of the individual is made decisive. Those who claim that the Holy Spirit speaks outside of the written Word do not magnify the ministry of God; they belittle it.

To choose a grosser example, I have heard a well-known pastor claim that the "living Word" is greater than the "written Word." At first this sounds as if what is being claimed is that God is greater than the Bible. If that were all that was claimed, who could disagree? The problem is that this pastor claims for himself the ability to discern what the living Word is saying. When he claims that his message comes from "the living Word," he can now place himself in authority over the Bible since he has a more authoritative word. What at first appears to be a defense of the greatness of God is really only an attempt to place man over Scripture.

Captivity to the Word Is Openness to the Spirit

At the Diet of Worms where Luther made his famous stand before church and Empire, Martin Luther declared himself captive to the Word of God. His warnings against seeking the Spirit apart from Scripture were especially stern:

Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil. For even to Moses God wished to appear first through the burning bush and the spoken word (Ex. 3:2,4), and no prophet, whether Elijah or Elisha, received the Spirit without the Ten Commandments. John the Baptist was not conceived without the preceding word of Gabriel, nor did he leap in his mother's womb until Mary spoke (Luke 1:13-42).²

Many Christians are afraid that embracing Reformation truths will bring about a captivity of another sort. Do we worship a God who cannot speak personally to us? It is feared that binding the Holy Spirit to the Word will silence God.

On a day-to-day basis, if we wish to have God advise us personally about our money worries, comfort us when we feel arthritic, or affirm the inner child within, we are likely to be disappointed. God does speak of many things in His Word, many things that may be pertinent in the above instances. The Holy Spirit can illuminate Scripture making it understandable when it has not been before. His timing in illumination will often be remarkably providential. If this is not enough for us—if we want more—Reformation truth will be a disappointment.

For the Christian experiencing anguish of conscience, however, real comfort can be taken in knowing that the Holy Spirit is to be sought in the Word. For this individual, being directed to a voice outside of Scripture is exactly the thing that might drive him or her to despair. Melancthon's words are very insightful here:

It is good to extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise in opposition to the fanatics who dream that the Holy Spirit does not come through the Word but because of their own preparations. They sit in a dark

corner doing and saying nothing, but only waiting for illumination, as the enthusiasts taught formerly and the Anabaptists teach now.³

I hate long waits. Even worse than a long wait is waiting for what may never arrive. I have read literature where the inquirer is left knocking at heaven's gate, but warned that the sovereign Spirit⁴ might pass one by. In such a position, the inquirer might feel that knocking will decrease the likelihood of salvation. Maybe the Spirit will demonstrate His sovereignty by choosing the person who did not knock, passing by the seeker with bleeding stubs for knuckles.

Not only does waiting for illumination burden Christians by making them wait for God, it asks them to look for grace in the wrong place. In his book *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, C.F.W. Walther explains the folly of looking into ourselves for a sense of "inner forgiveness." He says of a book that directs sinners inward to find grace that it is "awful," and of its author:

His advice to cry to God "until you obtain grace" means, as the words that follow show, "until you have a feeling of grace." That sweet sensation which satisfies their hearts is what these people call grace. But grace is not something for which I must look in my heart. It is in the heart of God.⁵

This is the true difference between the Reformation and everyone else. For other Christians, the gospel is something that happens inside of me. Born again Christianity focuses on the new birth—something that happens to the Christian. While it does not deny the new birth, Reformation Christianity focuses on the gospel which brings it about instead.

This outward orientation is not in the least destructive of true inner experience. In Scripture we see the two wedded. King David speaks of the forgiveness of God in very personal terms: "Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not

cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'—and You forgave the guilt of my sin" (Ps. 32:5).

This is true even though forgiveness for his most notorious sin was not found through a sense of "inner forgiveness," but announced through the mouth of another: "Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Nathan replied, 'The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.'" (2 Sam. 12:13).

Thank heaven Scripture points weary sinners to the gospel, and not to their own inner strivings. No dark corners for us, and no long waits. The gospel itself is the power to salvation. Illumination is not something that takes place inside one's head, but from the outside. It is hearing the news that changes us. This might happen when reading Scripture, listening to a sermon, or hearing a small child tell of how Jesus took our sins away. It is not the power of the messenger that accomplishes this, but the power of the message.

It is only when we recognize that the Word is the Spirit's chosen instrument that we will see that captivity to the Word is openness to the Spirit. If, as we proved earlier, the ministry of the Spirit is the ministry of the gospel, then to be engaged in the ministry of the Spirit, we must promote the gospel. It is this message that the Spirit uses to accomplish His work. As Paul says, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). As Paul says this right after describing the difference between the ministry of the Spirit and the ministry of condemnation, he is certainly talking about freedom from the effects of sin. Being chained to the Word is not bondage, but liberty. Being chained to the Word is like being chained to a key which itself unlocks the prison doors of those captive to sin and judgment.

Along with the whole church, the Reformation confesses that the Holy Spirit is a source of power. To have a living

church, the Holy Spirit is necessary. We understand this in biblical terms, however, and not primarily by means of nineteenth-century analogies to electricity. The most direct way to get the experience that some TV preachers promote would be to stick one's finger into a light socket. Their description is not only of power as such, but of tingling, being zapped, and feeling something like electricity. Well, if it looks like, smells like, and feels like electricity, maybe they are having an experience with electricity!

We know of a different kind of power. The Bible tells us that the ministry of the Spirit is the ministry of the gospel, which is the power to salvation. Dead churches are churches in which the gospel is not proclaimed. If the gospel is preached, the church is living. It may be stodgy. It may be tacky. It may be awkward. If the gospel is not being preached, however, everyone could be running around with sparks flying from his hair, and the church would still be dead. Let us have a living church. Let us be connected with the power of the church. Holy Spirit come—and bring the gospel.

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End Notes

- 1 The New International Version translates the bracketed material as “fading though it was,” but this is an inaccurate translation. No lexicon translates the verb as *fading*. All translate this verb as “being abolished.” In this particular case, the King James Version gives us a more accurate translation.
- 2 *Smalkald Articles*, Part III, Article VIII, 11. Biblical references inserted by me. In the original, they were in the footnotes.
- 3 *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XIII, 13.
- 4 If I remember correctly, in spite of his reference to sovereignty, the author of this ghastly piece of advice was an Arminian.
- 5 Walther, C.F.W., *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 145.