

The Holy Spirit and the Corporate Church

Introduction

This paper will discuss an often overlooked practical application of pneumatology in the local church today: the corporate leadership of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is active and dynamic both in enabling his church and in leading his church, as a particular group or assembly, toward his purpose within their own context. This fact raises many questions concerning the nature and the purpose of the church and its relationship, as the body of Christ, through the Spirit, to the head, Christ himself.

- What is the nature of the New Testament church, as a living organism in relation to their Father?
- What is the role of the Holy Spirit in leading the church?
- How does the Church sense the leading of the Holy Spirit? Does he lead through church leadership? Through congregations? Through institutional or denominational structures?
- Have we individualized some New Testament texts that were meant for corporate interpretation and application?

We will approach these questions in the following format:

Outline

- 1) Introduction
 - a. Proposition
 - b. Questions/Outline
- 2) The Covenant Presence
 - a. The promise to Moses
 - b. The promise to the Church
- 3) The Church Defined
 - a. The nature and function of the Church
- 4) The Corporate Dance
 - a. Keeping in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5)
 - b. The corporate temple
- 5) The Growth of the Young Church
 - a. Unity/Authentic community
 - b. Divine guidance toward Divine purpose
 - c. Does my church have its own DNA?
- 6) Conclusion

The Covenant Presence

When Jesus told his disciples that they were to wait in Jerusalem for the “promise of my Father” (Luke 24:49), he spoke of a New Covenant renewal of the Old Testament promise of the covenant presence. The idea of working together with or being led by the Holy Spirit assumes the possibility of an active relationship or partnership with God. We see this idea clearly in the story of Moses and the children of Israel as they are on the verge of entering into the long-promised land. The scene in Exodus 33 opens with God telling Moses that he will keep his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by giving Moses and the current generation the land. There was only one catch: God would not go with them into the land. What an absolute shock and an uneasy predicament Moses faced. The choice is between the promise and the presence. Moses chose wisely, saying,

"If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Ex. 33:15-16)

The Lord replies that he will indeed go up with them. This is referred to by theologians as the “covenant presence” of God. God promises to be with his people, and this promise is echoed throughout scripture. The principle here is that the presence is more to be desired than the promise. In application to our present culture, what makes us different as individuals, families, churches? What makes us unique as people in our community or as a societal group? The distinguishing characteristic is the presence of God in our lives, both personally and corporately. It is important to notice that God’s promise of his presence was to the covenant people as a whole, as a chosen group. For, as we shall see, God will make this same promise to his covenant people through the writers of the New Testament.

We can see foreshadowings of this promise of the presence as Jesus assures his disciples,

But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. (John 16:7)

and again,

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:16-18)

What a statement it is to hear Jesus say that it is better, to your advantage, more profitable for you that I go – for then I will send the Spirit. The Greek word used here is *parakletos*, which means one called alongside to help. Jesus, as an incarnate human being, cannot possibly be with all of us, all the time. He was a comforter to his

disciples, but he would now send *another* comforter to them. This helper would not simply be with them, but in them, “that he may abide with you forever”.

This new helper would:

- Be a comforting presence
- Speak what he hears from Jesus
- Tell them things that are yet to come
- Guide them into all truth
- Help them do what is right
- Empower them to witness and serve
- Bring glory to Jesus
- Convict (convince) the world of sin, righteousness and judgment

So here we see that Christ will build his church and fully equip it with the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit to fulfill his purpose. But what exactly is that purpose? What is the nature of the church? In what ways is the church to cooperate as workers together with this Comforter?

The Church Defined

It is difficult to define an organism as complex as the church in simple terms. According to Paul Minear, as many as ninety-six images and analogies are used in the NT to refer to the church.¹ Wayne Grudem offers this concise definition: The church is the community of true believers for all time. This community expresses itself in diverse ways: in a house (Rom. 16:5); in a city (1 Cor 1:2); in an entire region (Acts 9:31); throughout the entire world (Eph. 5:25).²

The church is a community of people, bound to God through the covenant that He initiated, called and chosen, like Israel (Peter 2:10) to be interactive with God. The church is God’s family or “household” (Eph 2:19). This imagery conjures up thoughts of marriage (union), bearing children (fruitfulness), authority structures and purpose.

The cosmic, universal Church is not merely an organization, but it is an organism. All of the scriptural metaphors and images that refer to the church suggest life. The church consists of living stones building up into a spiritual house a body (1 Peter 2:5). The church is a body, growing up toward a purpose, an end to which the Spirit is leading us (1 Cor. 12:27). The church consists of branches, taking their vital sustenance from Christ, the Vine. The church is a bride, a family, made up of a confederation of cross

Endnotes

¹ Minear, Paul S., *Images of the Church in the New Testament*; Westminster, Philadelphia, 1960)

² Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity, Leicester, 1994, p. 853

cultural, multiracial, pan-generational people. We do not lead purely solitary lives, nor do we work out our faith in a vacuum.

The practical, functional church, however, is not merely an organism, but an organization. The organized church can be defined as existing “wherever the Word is preached, the sacraments are administered and discipline is enforced.”³

The dialectical tensions of organism and organization must be maintained for the church to function properly. Ezekiel’s army that arose from the valley of dry bones (Eze. 37) required both structure (“prophesy to the bones”) and life from the Spirit (“prophesy the breath”). One can get off track both by holding to the form without the life *and* by holding to the life without the form. Craig van Gelder says it well: “There is a duality within the church’s nature which we must understand if we are to address properly the ministry and organization of the church. The church is God’s personal presence in the world through the Spirit. This makes the church, as a spiritual community, unique. The church also exists as a social reality with human behaviors organized within human structures. But this human behavior, through the redemptive work of God, is empowered by the Spirit. This is the duality inherent in the church’s nature.”⁴

So the nature of the church is that of a living organism, filled, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and organized for a divine purpose. That purpose is both eternal (in conjunction with the purpose of God in every nation and all generations) and contextual (pertaining to the particular environment, needs and divine focus of the individual, local church). For this reason, and for our purposes here in studying the work of the Holy Spirit in the corporate church, attention must be paid to the “breath” or spiritual life of the church. Watchman Nee comments, “It is death to have a wineskin without wine, but it is loss to have wine without a wineskin... It is wearisome to me, if not actually repulsive, to talk with those who aim at perfect outward correctness, while they care little for that which is vital and spiritual.”⁵

The Corporate Dance

Having touched on the definition and nature of the church, we move on to the active role of the Holy Spirit in the church. The Apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia a letter of concern, rebuke and correction regarding their “falling from grace” back into the posture of winning approval from God on the basis of their works. His point could be

³ Doughty, Richard E., *To my Grandchildren and other Barbarians*, Brentwood Christian Press, Columbus, 2001, p. 94

⁴ Van Gelder, Craig, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, Baker House, Grand Rapids, 2000, p. 25

⁵ Nee, Watchman, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, 1980, p.12-13

summarized by saying that the Christian life is more than a list of what to do and what to refrain from. He writes:

“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” Gal. 5:25

Again we see the idea of covenant presence. The Holy Spirit is always with the believer, guiding them in righteousness and toward God’s purpose. Paul’s point is clear: it is the Spirit who gives us life and it is the Spirit who shows us how to live it. Since we have this precious, promised presence, we should make it our occupation to listen, to pay attention, to line up with Him as he leads.

This scripture has often been interpreted and applied as pertaining to individual believers. In other words, I should personally keep in step with the Holy Spirit. John Calvin takes this view: “If God’s Spirit lives in us, let him govern our actions. By “life” is here meant the inward power, and by “walk” the outward actions.”⁶ This may be true by extension, but the obvious context here is to a corporate group (or corporate groups) of people.

Paul is not writing to individuals. He is writing to multiple congregations within a relatively large region of Asia Minor. The Greek word that Paul uses here for “walk” or “keep in step with” is *stoicheo*, meaning to walk in line or in rows, especially in relation to others.⁷ The idea here is that the church as a whole should corporately keep in step with the Spirit. One image that communicates the thought is a military parade with disciplined soldiers lined up in rows, marching in lock step with each other. Perhaps another picture will communicate the nuances of this word, and this process of keeping in step with the Spirit, better: A dance.

One church father, John of Damascus, spoke of the Trinity using the word *peirchoresis* which, loosely translated from the Greek, means “circle dance”.⁸ This can be considered quite an accurate description of the relationship between the members of the Godhead. They always keep in step with one another. They work together in creation, in sustaining this world, in redeeming mankind. They defer to one another, they honor one another, and there is not the least bit of jealousy between them. Theirs is a healthy, vibrant relationship, a co-working community, a living and breathing motion toward the purposes of God.

⁶ Calvin, John; Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries; The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1965, p.106

⁷ Vine, W.E., Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words; Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, 1940

⁸ Dancing with God; George Claddis
<http://www.thehighcalling.org/Library/ViewLibrary.asp?LibraryID=155>

When we apply this to relationship between the church and the Holy Spirit, we see a similar parallel with the metaphor of a dance. When two people dance, such as in ballroom dancing, one has to lead, the other has to follow. The follower has to relax and embrace the role of a follower. Two leaders is a precursor to chaos, and even pain. At times the leader, having knowledge of where the duo is headed and possessing a vantage point unavailable to the follower, will interject a “hesitation” step to prevent a collision. The follower has to remain sensitive and responsive to the direction of the leader. The follower has to “keep in step with” the leader.

Although Paul states that our nature gravitates toward keeping in step with the flesh, the implication of this passage is that this sort of leading/following dynamic is actually possible through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. The stark fact is that the Holy Spirit is the only one who knows what to do. It is the Spirit who knows the mind of God and makes known God’s thoughts to us (1 Cor. 2:9-16).

Paul also instructs the church at Corinth about the corporate aspect of the body of Christ.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? (1 Cor 3:16)

The Greek word used here is *naos* which refers to the actual sanctuary, the place where the deity itself dwelt, not merely the sanctuary in general. The Greek also indicates a plural “you” three times in this verse.⁹ This temple imagery would be easily understood by the Jews as well as the Corinthians. Gordon Fee observes, “The Spirit is the key, the crucial reality, for life in the new age. The presence of the Spirit, and that *alone*, marks them off as God’s new people, his temple, in Corinth.”¹⁰

Once again, this image of the temple, though it has an individual application in the sixth chapter of the same book, here refers to a corporate people – the church as a whole. Fee continues, “This passage has endured a long history of unfortunate misinterpretation in the church. Because the imagery of the temple is reapplied in 6:19-20, to the individual Corinthian who was going to the prostitutes, many have read that usage back into this passage as though it were a word of warning to individual Christians as to how they treat their bodies or live out their individual Christian lives. Both the context and grammar disallow such interpretations, even by ‘extended application’.”¹¹

⁹ Warrington, Keith, *Discovering the Holy Spirit in the New Testament*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 2005, p.111

¹⁰ Fee, Gordon D., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987; p.147

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.149

So we see that the corporate meaning of “keep in step with the Spirit” is not so much about church government/organization (although a particular form of church government may make it easier or harder for the congregation to keep in step with the Spirit) but rather about freedom to follow the Spirit’s lead in advancing God’s kingdom (see Acts 20:28,32).

If we apply this image of the body, and even the image of the dance, to the corporate church, questions naturally arise:

- What is the best posture for the church to be consistently sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit?
- Who hears the direction for the church? What role does church government play?
- How do the many parts of the body function as one toward the Spirit’s purpose?
- Does my local church have a particular role or *DNA* in the larger purposes of God?

The Growth of the young church

The young church grew, according to Acts, by a working together of the people and the Spirit. Our guide in answering the questions concerning the work of the Holy Spirit with the corporate church must be the New Testament. Although it would take an entire other paper to begin to search out the ways that the Spirit led the first century churches, we can summarize a few general areas of importance. It seems evident that the early church received help from the Spirit in the areas of:

- Authentic Community
- Divine Guidance
- Demonstration of Power
- Devoted to truth
- Devoted to Prayer/praise

A few observations on two of these areas are in order.

Unity/Authentic Community

A major theme of the New Testament is unity in the church. It is in the context of close knit groups who shared all things in common that power, grace and growth were evident. This unity was not a cloning, but an appreciation of the individuality of every member, every “living stone” that made up the temple of God. “Church growth requires unity and diversity. Oneness is not sameness. As illustrated by the character of the Trinity – unity can include diversity. The Body of Christ is likewise one, though its parts are many. Just as it would be folly for a physician not to evaluate physical problems according to the health of his organs, muscles, blood, and so on, so also would it be

equally inefficient for us to evaluate the life of the body of Christ without some appreciation of its constituent parts.”¹²

Paul sees not only the unity of the body at Corinth (local church - 1 Cor. 12:12-14), but also the bigger picture of the unity of the Corinthian church with the believers in Jerusalem, as seen in the offering given by the Corinthians to the famine-stricken saints in Jerusalem. (universal church - 1 Cor. 16:3). The picture is clear. The proper understanding of the Christian life is not one of my life, distinct and separate from other believers. The Holy Spirit leads us in relation to others around us.

Divine Guidance toward divine purposes

How does the church hear the Spirit's direction? The work of the Holy Spirit in the universal church is evident in counsel and direction. For example, the first century saw a new frontier opening up, one that was not one the grid of the early church at all - the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles. After much consideration, including a recounting of the sovereign acts of the Holy Spirit with the Gentile believers and a fresh application of the Old Testament Scriptures, the church council was able to proceed in the right direction with a letter of counsel containing the words, "It seemed good to Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28). Again, the Holy Spirit working together with the corporate church is evident. Also evident is that corporate guidance comes through many members, not one person acting alone as the sole hearer of the Spirit's voice.

We also see the early church keeping in step with the Holy Spirit as the gospel goes forth. Milton S. Agnew writes, "Acts 13:2-4 and 16:6-7 establish that sometimes the Spirit says "go" and sometimes "no". The church was under the constraint and the restraint of the Spirit".¹³

Does my church have its own DNA?

It seems that Jesus knew and addressed the individualities of each church mentioned in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. Each of them had strengths and weaknesses, as well as a unique social context. Jesus spoke to them accordingly, giving each church specific directions. It is evident that the social and spiritual outplaying of the gospel is dependent on the context of each local church. It is our calling that clarifies our job description as a church. Jim Petersen states that "the breadth of our definitions must be dictated not by the institutional boundaries that circumscribe certain activities, but by the totality of our calling. The church is people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who is transforming their character and giving them

¹² Moore, John and Neff, Ken, A New Testament Blueprint for the Church, Moody Press, Chicago, 1985, p.117

¹³ Agnew, Milton S., A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology, Vol.1; Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 449

gifts they are to use for service. Every believer is to use whatever gift he or she has to serve one another – and his or her neighbors.”¹⁴

Of course, in the first century, there was only one church in a city. The church may have met in different smaller groups throughout the city or region, but they were identified with one another. Today, the church within a city is splintered and scattered. Still, we can presume that each local church has its own uniqueness, its own sphere of influence, its own calling that works together toward the overall purpose of God. Watchman Nee comments on the local character of the Church – “Since the churches of God are local, we must be careful to preserve their local character, their local sphere, their local boundary”. Once a church loses these, it ceases to be a scriptural church”¹⁵

Conclusion

Length requirements for this paper prohibit us from discussing many other areas that apply here: the role of church government in hearing and following the Spirit; demonstrations of power; the proclamation of truth; the healing that the Holy Spirit does in the context of community. The concept of a corporate church body keeping in step with the Holy Spirit certainly challenges our institutional, cultural and individual paradigms.

One thing is certain; the result of walking in the Spirit is always positive moral action and reaction toward others. Given the mandate of Christ to his followers, our overall vision and direction must be loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves. In the end, how else can true spirituality be measured, except in the context of relationships? The relationship with God through the *paraclete*, is the primary relationship, the one from which all fruits of righteousness flow – individually *and* corporately. This flow then must continue outside the church, for, as the Holy Spirit seeks to draw men to Christ and to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment, he will surely draw the corporate church, in all of its forms, out with him.¹⁶ As

¹⁴ Petersen, Jim, Church Without Walls: Moving Beyond Traditional Boundaries, NavPress, Colorado Springs, 1992, p.171

¹⁵ Nee, p.90

¹⁶ Bloesch, Donald G., The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, 2000, p. 62-63

Karkkainen notes, "Walking the path of the Spirit, even though it is a highly personal journey, is essentially a communal event."¹⁷

¹⁷ Karkkainen, Veli-Matti, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 176

Bibliography

- Agnew, Milton S., *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, Vol.1; Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1983,
Bloesch, Donald G., *The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, 2000
Calvin, John; Calvin's New Testament Commentaries; The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1965
Doughty, Richard E., *To My Grandchildren and other Barbarians*, Brentwood Christian Press, Columbus, 2001
Fee, Gorgon D., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987
Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity, Liechester, 1994
Karkkainen, Veli-Matti, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2002
Minear, Paul S., *Images of the Church in the New Testament*; Westminster, Philadelphia
Moore, John and Neff, Ken, *A New Testament Blueprint for the Church*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1985
Nee, Watchman, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, 1980
Petersen, Jim, *Church Without Walls: Moving Beyond Traditional Boundaries*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, 1992
Van Gelder, Craig, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, Baker House, Grand Rapids, 2000
Vine, W.E., *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*; Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, 1940
Warrington, Keith, *Discovering the Holy Spirit in the New Testament*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 2005