



A Strange Kind of Strength

The Work of the Holy Spirit

How important is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures? How important is it to the church? We can get some idea by the space Jesus gives the subject in the gospel of John. After chapter 12, Jesus gave no more public messages; all of his addresses were to his disciples as he prepared them for his departure. Of the remaining nine chapters, three are given primarily to the subject of the Holy Spirit.

The early days of the church were difficult. Persecution first came from the established Jewish religious community, and later from the Romans who ruled nearly all of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. These were powerful opponents, while the church, itself, was weak.

When Jesus spoke the words of John 14, he knew he would soon leave the fledgling church to fend for itself. As he does, he makes this promise, "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever: even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him; but you know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" (John 14:16,17 KJV).

The great resource of the church was to be the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was to be in every Christian. Jesus called the Holy Spirit *the "Comforter"* and said he would guide the Christian "into all truth:" John 14:16; John 16:13 (KJV) According to John 16:13, the truth he would guide the church to, was Jesus Christ, who would be the focus of the Holy Spirit's ministry. "He would not speak of himself, but of Christ." *Comfort* and *guidance* are the two things a struggling, confused, persecuted church needed; these are the things he would give.

In John 14:16, when Jesus said he would send us *another* Comforter, he used a word that means *another of the same kind*. In other words, the Comforter we were going to get was just like the one we already had. So, if you want to know what the Holy Spirit is like, he is just like Jesus. You can read about what Jesus is like in the New Testament.

The promise of the Holy Spirit was reaffirmed after the resurrection and before the ascension, when Christ said, "And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

Then in one final reassuring word, immediately before the ascension Jesus said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The fact that we have troubles here cannot excuse us from caring about others –"to the ends of the earth."

The Apostles went out to do exactly what Jesus predicted they would. All the great powers were against them, yet they succeeded by a power that seemed like no power at all; an unseen power; a kind power. Later, when Peter and John were enabled by the Holy Spirit to heal the lame man they said, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk (Acts 3:12 NRSV)? It was a power that healed, not a power that destroyed. We humans usually win by destroying or by beating our opponent, not by healing him or her. The church would be different; loving even its enemies.

The coming of the Spirit, in the absence of the physical presence of Jesus, marked the beginning of the *Age of the Holy Spirit*. We are still in that age; it is an age where the Spirit of God dwells within every single Christian. It is that age predicted by the prophet Joel in Joel 2:28-29, an age in which the Holy Spirit would take human lives and accomplish God's purpose.

In Old Testament times, Micah stood against the crooked politicians and selfish religious leaders of his day; how? "But truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the Lord, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8).

Paul prayed for the church at Ephesus, saying, "I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3:16,17 NRSV).

It is important to see that Paul connects the Holy Spirit and love; when he talks about a church that is *rooted and grounded*, he again talks about love; rooted and grounded in love, he says.

It is a prayer we must pray for ourselves and for one another, for we too are weak. At Gethsemane, our Lord saw his sleeping disciples and said, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). We Christians sometimes excuse our failures on the grounds of this statement. However, he did not make it by way of excuse, but by way of warning. Jesus knew the weakness of the human heart, when he said to his disciples, "Watch and pray." The fact that the flesh is weak is reason enough to look prayerfully to God for strength.

The power of the church comes from the strength of the Holy Spirit within it. It does not come from our human abilities and skills. Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth saying, "And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom, but on the power of God" (I Corinthians 2:3-5 NRSV).

Again, he wrote in II Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." It is because of God's penchant for turning weakness into strength that Paul wrote, "Therefore I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (II Corinthians 12:10 NRSV).

How can the Spirit of God make such a difference?

First, there is a force that holds the geologic world together; it is called gravity. Christ did not die for the geologic world; he died for the human world. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his brother." What Christ did, was put the world together again. What force did he use? Not gravity, but love. Love is the only force that can pull the human world together. It is the only power strong enough. Many people have tried to hold the world together with violent force, coercion, posturing, intimidation, threat, political power and strategy. These are what we think of when we think of power. This is precisely why Jesus cannot use our strength; he needs, instead, our weakness. No one has ever been successful for long with these human methods. The Holy Spirit uses the force of love. Are you separated from a brother or sister or child or Mom or Dad or friend? Love is the only force that can pull you back together --love generates forgiveness. Instead, we like to talk about, "Getting them straightened out." "Confronting them; showing them where they're wrong."

Second, the Spirit of God makes a difference because the Spirit of God makes people different --he makes us softer. Look at the fruits of the Holy Spirit. "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). The first and foremost power the Holy Spirit gives us is the power of love. He gives us the power to care, the power to suffer, the power of kindness, the power of peace. No wonder Paul said, weakness is strength. We need these in the church. We need them in our lives. The greatest threat to the witness of the early church at Ephesus was not, poor judgment, lack of loyalty to Christ, lack of energy; it was not shaky doctrine, it was a lack of love (Rev. 2:2-5).

Our power is not in large numbers, much money, modern buildings, technology and clever advertising; it is rather, in permitting the Holy Spirit to bear his good fruit in our lives. The power of the church has always been people who are different. The fruit of the church is the heart of the church. The heart of the church moves the hand of the church. The church moves as a result of the power of love, not fear.

In the three Holy Spirit chapters of the gospel of John (chapters 14-16), the word love or friend is used 23 times, while the word abide is used 10 times. The Holy Spirit hides himself in the weak things that God has chosen so that it will be evident to all that His love is the most powerful force in the world. God is, after all, love. The church is his demonstration of that love.

Judges 14:6 says, the Spirit of the Lord came to Samson. By the Spirit, Samson removed the gates of a city, defeated an army and killed a lion. Then one day Samson succumbed to the flirtations of *only one* Delilah, and the Spirit's power left him. The greater tragedy was that he had no idea the Spirit was gone. He had no idea that he had lost his strength. In Judges 16:20 he said, "I will go out as at other times

before." The passage goes on to say, "But he did not know that the Lord had left him." He did not know. Yet there he was, still working and talking for God --just as religious as ever. It is possible to be busy, like Samson, enacting plans and programs, making a stir, planning to conquer and not realize the strength of the Spirit has departed. After all, when the Spirit came to Jesus at his baptism, he descended like a dove; it is not hard to chase a dove away. "Where is the Lord?" Nasty, mean spirits can only chase the dove away.

Paul wrote the Christians at Corinth, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you" (I Corinthians 3:16)?

How do we know if God's Spirit is helping us? Well, how do we live? With love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance? When these qualities are in short supply, you can be sure of one thing; God's Spirit is not working in us. We must resolve to never get our sight off of them; they are our spiritual barometer. There is no other spiritual barometer.

How are we doing? We must match our performance outcome with these words: *Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith meekness, temperance*. Only then can we know if God is working; only then can we know if his power is within us. This is the only list given in the Bible of what are the fruits (the evidences) of God's Holy Spirit in the Church. Be concerned if they are not increasing in your life. Be concerned if you do not see them as God's primary means of ministry in the world. Be concerned if they do not dominate the life of the church. We have no other power by which to make Christ known.

God gives us permission to love; we are under no divine obligation to hate. He gives us permission to have joy and peace; we are under no divine obligation to live in fear. He gives us permission to endure; we are under no divine obligation to quit. He gives us permission to live in moderation; we are under no divine obligation to be radical. He gives us permission to be gentle, good, and meek; we are under no divine obligation to become rough, tough and mean. Our strength is "A strange kind of strength." It is the strength of God's Spirit. It is the power of love. If you hear the "war drums," it is not God who is beating them --that is not the Holy Spirit.