

GORDON FEE AND THE HOLY SPIRIT
PUSHING FOR A HEALTHY MODEL OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

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REGENT COLLEGE
FALL 2005
SPIR 500: THE CHRISTIAN SPIRIT
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*O God, you are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you,
my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water¹*

*Holy Spirit, all divine,
Dwell within this heart of mine;
Cast down every idol throne,
Reign supreme, and reign alone.²*

Spirituality is a word that is not easy to define both in the church as well as contemporary culture. If someone says they are a “spiritual person” the statement is sufficient enough to assume that they have some belief in the “spiritual realm” – meaning that it is sufficiently ambiguous. Christians do not seem to offer much in the way of response to the ambiguity, most likely due to the fact that in a relative culture it is inappropriate to suggest that someone’s notion of the spirit world may be incorrect. I propose to look at Gordon Fee’s collection of essays in *Listening to the Spirit in the Text (LST)* to give Christians a solid foundation with which to base their definition of “spirituality” so as to make it as precise as possible. This will aid in dialogue between the believer and the not and, most importantly, lead to a proper understanding of Christian piety and response to God’s great gifts.

¹ Psalm 63.1, New International Version

² A hymn of Andrew Reed quoted in Fee (*Presence*, 903). Both epigrams appeared in the conclusion of *Presence*.

DEFINING SPIRITUALITY

A crucial aspect of this paper is to define what exactly “spirituality” means. A popular (read: trendy) online encyclopedia offers this definition: “It may include belief in supernatural powers, as in religion, but the emphasis is on personal experience. It may be an expression for life perceived as higher, more complex or more integrated with one's worldview, as contrasted with the merely sensual.”³ For the Christian, this definition is simply not acceptable, at least according to Fee and, as he argues, Saint Paul. “The point needs to be made in that the word *pneumatikos*⁴, a distinctively Pauline word in the New Testament, has the Holy Spirit as its primary referent.”⁵ This usage of *pneumatikos* by Paul should help guide our understanding and narrow our definition of spirituality. Fee does then go on to give a specific definition that, at first glance, may not seem that specific: “True spirituality, therefore, is nothing more nor less than life by the Spirit.”⁶ The crucial aspect of this statement that does make it specific is the use of the capital “S” in Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit. Spirituality isn’t some vague notion of the supernatural that is based on our personal experience; it is our life in the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

³ *Wikipedia*

⁴ The Greek πνευματικός has various translational values ascribed to it, I only offer a few here: “one who is spiritual”, “from the Spirit”, “spiritual”, “of spiritual conduct”, “not physical”, and “supernatural”. See Louw & Nida’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* sections 12.21, 12.44, 26.10, 41.40, 79.3, 79.6, and others for further information on the semantic range of translational possibilities.

⁵ *LST*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT

It is plainly clear that the contemporary culture cannot hold the same notion of spirituality that Christians should as stated above. Why is it then that many Christians do hold to the “popular” definition of spirituality? “We are empowered by the experience, but not by the empowering presence of God himself.”⁷ We may say that the Spirit is personal, but we don’t see Him as “the one in who and by who we are sharing in the very love and grace and life of God himself.”⁸ That is a very powerful statement. The notion of God as an “empowering presence” that defines our fellowship with the Trinity deserves to be unpacked.⁹ This unpacking best takes form of the recounting of an interaction with a child:

Our [his and wife Maudine’s] good friend MaryRuth Wilkinson was trying to illustrate the reality of “Spirit” by blowing on a piece of paper and letting it “fly” away. The Spirit is like that, she was saying to the children; it is like the “wind,” very real in its effects, even though invisible to us. At which point a six-year old boy blurted out, “But I want the wind to be un-invisible!” I whispered to Maudine: “Of course; what a profound theological moment!” How often we all feel this way about God as Spirit, as Holy Spirit. “I want the Holy Spirit to be un-invisible!” And because he is not, we tend to think of him in nonpersonal terms. At which point our images take over; we think of the Spirit as wind, fire, water, oil – impersonal images all – and refer to the Spirit as “it.” No wonder many regard the Spirit as a gray, oblong blur.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ This topic is the main thrust of Fee’s *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*.

¹⁰ Fee, *Presence*, 6.

Fee goes on to say that the Spirit should be regarded as “none other than the *personal presence of God* himself.”¹¹ Our experience is not what is relevant, it is the relationship to God through the Holy Spirit that can empower us as Christians. “Person, Presence, power: these three realities are what the Holy Spirit meant for the apostle Paul.”¹²

St. Basil the Great maintains that the three persons of the Trinity are all fully God and that the role of the Spirit conveys the “essence of life and divine sanctification.”¹³ Basil does well to remind us of the power of the Spirit so as not to make the Spirit so personal that we bring Him down to our level. Basil goes so far as to say that “when we hear the word ‘spirit’ it is impossible for us to conceive of something whose nature can be circumscribed or is subject to change or variation... All things thirsting for holiness turn to Him... He waters them with His life-giving breath and helps them reach their proper fulfillment.”¹⁴ This appears to be returning to the “images” that Fee is referring to, although I think Basil is actually just taking that argument to the next step. Fee is warning of the (western) desire to understand everything. The Spirit is a mystery for us so we attempt to make Him more real by giving Him names and ascribing images. Fee wants us to recognize the Spirit for what He is (which might include abandoning attempts to understand Him

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 8.

¹³ Basil, XVIII.xlvi.

¹⁴ Ibid. IX.xxii

completely). Basil furthers that notion by saying that we, indeed, cannot understand Him completely and that we should, therefore, not try but glorify Him as God who gives and sustains all life. Fee also affirms the mystery of the Spirit: “For many in the West, of course, this [speaking mysteries by the Spirit] is to damn Paul – and others who so speak to God – because only what passes through the cortex of the brain is allowed value in the age of enlightenment.”¹⁵ Rationalism is not needed (nor necessarily desired) to experience the empowering presence of the Spirit.

PAUL AND SPIRITUALITY

The Apostle Paul is a key figure for Fee and it is important for him to pose a view of spirituality that Paul attests to in his letters. A “careful reading of his letters will reveal that spirituality is crucial to his own life in Christ, as well as being the ultimate urgency of his ministry to others.”¹⁶ While Paul was often concerned with correcting churches with bad theology, the reason he does this is so they have a solid spiritual life. It would be a very legalistic reading to think that Paul was writing just so they always would do the correct thing so they would be good people. He was doing that, but that was not the ends, that was the means. Doing the “right thing” (read: Christly thing) was important, but only as a means to right relationship with the Triune God by way of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁵ *LST*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

It is dangerous for one Christian to say who or who isn't a Christian. Fee suggests Paul outlines what we can do in saying what will distinguish those who believe from those who do not. "For Paul what distinguishes believer from non-believer is the Spirit, pure and simple. God's people have the Spirit, and are by that very fact 'spiritual' (= Spirit people), while others are not, nor can they be 'spiritual' in any meaningful (for Paul) sense of that word, precisely because they lack the one thing necessary for 'spiritual' life, the Spirit of the living God."¹⁷ This is an important statement to make that also needs some clarification: what does living in the Spirit look like?¹⁸ Fee answers this by saying a life of prayer (which includes rejoicing, thanksgiving, and petition¹⁹) and devotion is what marks out those that are truly Spiritual.²⁰ "Thus prayer as rejoicing, thanksgiving, and petition marked Paul's own spirituality (life in the Spirit in terms of personal devotion), and was what he urged, and prayed, for his congregations."²¹ Prayer in the Spirit marks the believer apart from those who have a false spirituality.²²

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

¹⁸ Fee points to Galatians for what it means to live in the Spirit: walking by the Spirit (5.16), led by the Spirit (5.18), an ethical life bearing fruit of the Spirit (5.22-23), behavior in line with the Spirit (5.25), and will sow and reap for and by the Spirit (6.8). See *LST*, 39.

¹⁹ Cf. *LST*, 41ff.

²⁰ *LST*, 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²² On *LST*, 46 Fee comments that "it is difficult to imagine this passage (1 Cor 14.2, 14-16) as arguing that there is no articulation in prayer..." I wonder how Fee draws this conclusion and if he may be offhandedly rejecting that which the Eastern Orthodox practice, that is apophatic prayer. While I am not doubting Fee's conclusions, I think he may be overlooking a rich tradition that aims to, in negative theology, experience more of God by not using words.

SCHOLARLY IMPLICATIONS

An appropriate understanding of spirituality will have deep implications for the Christian scholar as well. “The proper aim of all true theology is doxology. Theology that does not begin and end in worship is not biblical at all...”²³ Christian scholars should never come to the Word without this on their hearts. What is the point of study if the result does not bring one closer to the Everlasting God? Biblical exegesis, as well, should be approached from this vantage point. “To be a good exegete, and consequently a good theologian, one must know the fullness of the Spirit; and that includes a life of prayer and obedience.”²⁴ For Fee, it all comes back to the Spirit and living by Him.

Fee is also aware of the common practice of separating exegesis and spirituality but insists that they can, and should, be joined in purpose. “These two are seen as constantly at war with one another, with the result that piety in the church is – for good reason – highly suspicious of the scholar or the seminary-trained pastor, who seems forever to be telling people that the text does not mean what it seems to plainly say.”²⁵ If exegesis and spirituality are joined, that is, if the Spirit can be evidenced in the work of the exegete, the church is more likely to benefit and not be suspicious of those works.

²³ *LST*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

The scholar's job is to advance understanding of the Word of God, if the Spirit is not there, good fruit will not be produced which consequently damages the church. So "faithful biblical exegesis belongs within the framework of the believing community, with those who follow ... in the train of the original believing communities for whom and to whom these documents were written."²⁶ Fee goes on to propose one way exegesis and spirituality can be joined: "true exegesis attempts to engage in the author's *Spirituality*, not just in his or her words."²⁷ This is a big task as it tends to be easier to engage in the words used compared to determining the spirituality suggested in those words. "I would suggest that we have not entered into the full Spirituality of these texts until we are ready to follow Christ so fully that we can tell those whom we have been given to teach that they should mark our lives, and the lives of those who walk as we do, and those follow our example."²⁸ This is a huge call and burden to place on the shoulders of scholars and teachers. This cultural setting is not very permissive of people telling others to follow their example. It is ok (usually) to suggest living like Jesus, but it is frowned upon to be told to live like a "mere mortal" who is fallen and sinful. But Fee's words ring true, if we are living in the Spirit there is no reason not to live as an example (in humility of course). A complete look at the text will only happen "when we who would be 'spiritual' recognize that true spirituality is not simply inward devotion but worship

²⁶ Ibid., 10.

²⁷ Ibid., 11. Also, this is not just a descriptive task but an empathetic one.

²⁸ Ibid., 13.

that evidences itself in obedience and the same kind of God-likeness we have seen in Christ himself."²⁹

THE CHURCH AND THE SPIRIT

Gospel writer Luke "makes it clear that both the Savior himself and his followers are empowered for the life and ministry of the kingdom by the Holy Spirit."³⁰ The Spirit plays a crucial role in this empowering of us as his followers. Paul also "understands the Spirit's role to be present to create and empower the two-way *koinonia*³¹ (participation / fellowship) between believers and their Lord and with one another as they eat the bread and drink the wine."³² We are empowered by the Spirit in our forming of church. As the Spirit is crucial in the creation of this *koinonia*, He is also crucial to sustaining the church as a "renewal of God's Presence"³³ that produces worship (often in the form of singing praises³⁴) of the Godhead. The wisdom of St. Basil seems appropriate here: "Only the Spirit can adequately glorify the Lord."³⁵

The culmination of all the talk about what the Spirit is and does should lead back to a viable spirituality that directly impacts the mission of the church. Jesus'

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ Ibid., 179.

³¹ The Greek ἐκκλησία usually denoted a congregation or church of Christians (see Louw & Nida sections 11.32, 11.33, and 11.78) whereas κοινωνία implied a fellowship or close mutual association (see Louw & Nida sections 34.5, 57.98, and 57.101).

³² *LST*, 99.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ For greater discussion of worship and the Spirit, see *LST* 100ff.

³⁵ Basil, XVIII.xlvi.

mission proclaimed the coming of the “Kingdom of God” as summarized in Mark 1.14-15.³⁶ “The kingdom of God is an *eschatological* term, belonging primarily to the category of ‘time’ rather than ‘space.’”³⁷ We are in both the “now” and “not yet” of the kingdom and that has specific meaning for our missional church. “What Jesus began ‘both to do and say’ is now the ministry he has left his church until he comes again.”³⁸ That is, we are to both announce the Good News of the Gospel as well as live that life out in the Spirit. This mission, as proclaimed by Jesus, is to the poor. Fee argues that this is not a matter of choosing whether you think this is the economically poor (including widows and orphans) or the spiritually poor but that “mission simply cannot be divided between ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical.’”³⁹ The global mission of the church cannot ignore both the spiritual and physical need of the world. “The fact that the kingdom is still ‘not yet’ does not mean that we simply await God’s completion of what Jesus began. To the contrary, it means that the inaugurated kingdom, the good news of salvation for all that Jesus proclaimed, must be further proclaimed to all ‘the poor’ in every place.”⁴⁰ Fee’s call (as well as the Gospels’) to our church must lead back into the Spirit as well as out into the world. If we do not have a biblical Spirituality, this simply cannot take place. We must “enter

³⁶ Fee discusses Mark along with the other Gospels in terms of the mission of Jesus in his final essay and summarizes the “Kingdom of God” statements in *LST* 165ff.

³⁷ *LST*, 166.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

into discipleship, to deny one's very self, to take up a cross – the place of self-sacrifice on behalf of others – and thus to follow Jesus himself (Mark 8.34)."⁴¹ This is what true Spirituality leads to. It is therefore "*the presence of the kingdom in Jesus that ultimately serves as the basis for the ongoing global mission of the church.*"⁴²

CONCLUSION

Gordon Fee's *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* provides guidelines for approaching a number of important topics in Christendom, I have only been able to briefly look at some in this paper.⁴³ Fee's goal, as well as my own, is to point out the crucial role of the Holy Spirit within Christianity. Spirituality is something that is thrown around very casually in contemporary culture but is something that Christians need to revive and provide a distinct definition for. This will mean living that life of the Spirit marked out by prayer and devotion to the Triune God.

"It was God's intent through the Holy Spirit to take ... salvation to the ends of the earth."⁴⁴ This understanding is what should guide and help us define our Spirituality. One can only be truly Spiritual if they have the Holy Spirit which will

⁴¹ Ibid., 173.

⁴² Ibid., 170.

⁴³ Indeed, some chapters were underrepresented or left out entirely. There is much more that could be said about the Spirit and our relationship to Him. The Old Testament as giving witness to the Spirit and paving the way for the indwelling in Christ is a very interesting discussion that was not able to be discussed here. The Hebrew רִיחַ is very rich in its meaning, especially for the Israelite relationship to God. Implications for gender roles as well as roles within the church in relation to the Spirit are also discussed in Fee's book and definitely warrant further study. This is still an abbreviated list of topics Fee covers in his essays.

⁴⁴ *LST*, 178.

cause a life to be marked by prayer and devotion that desires to further the global mission of Jesus. I will end with Fee's appropriate ending: "May God help us by his Spirit both to will and to do of his good pleasure – salvation for all through Christ."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ibid., 180.

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