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THE SPIRIT OF GOD

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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There is a good deal of talk amongst Christians these days about the Holy Spirit and so it is worth while to give a little attention to some of the Biblical phrases.

The Spirit of God is frequently mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. God is Spirit; and His Spirit is at work in the world creating the world, and sustaining and bringing everything to perfection. It is one of the most remarkable truths of Christianity that the Spirit of God comes into close and intimate relationship with our spirits; that His personality and ours are in close fellowship. The gift of God's presence, that is to say His Spirit, is a privilege which every Christian participates in.

St. Paul said that if a man has not the Spirit of Christ he is not a Christian, while in the same passage he says that all who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God

(Romans 8). In Old Testament times this close relationship with God, which is described by the Spirit of God dwelling in a person, was not the universal experience of the people of God but it was prospect to be looked forward to. The Old Testament prophets foretold that the time would come when God would give His Spirit to all His people.

The Old Testament frequently speaks of this gift of the Spirit in terms drawn from the pouring out of water. In an arid country like the Middle East water was the revivifying principle of life. So when God promised His Spirit the promise was couched in metaphors drawn from water. For example, in Isaiah 44:3 God promised "I will pour water upon him that is thirsty as streams upon the dry ground. I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring; and they shall spring up among the grass, as willows by the water courses". The same metaphor of describing the gift

of the Spirit in terms of pouring water with its refreshing, revivifying and cleansing power occurs constantly in the Old Testament, e.g. Isaiah 32:15 "Until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high and the wilderness become a fruitful field", and the whole of Isaiah chapter 35.

The same promise of the pouring out of the Spirit is to be found in Ezekiel 39:29 "I poured out my Spirit upon the house of Israel" and in Joel 2:28,29 "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh". The changing, cleansing power of the Spirit of God when He enters into fellowship with a person is compared by Ezekiel to the cleansing of water in chapter 36:25 "I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean. A new heart also will I give you and a new spirit will I put within you. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes".

When we turn to the New Testament we find that the

presence of the Spirit of God in a person's life is described, as in the Old Testament, under metaphors drawn from the manipulation of water. For example, in John 7:37 Jesus invited the spiritually thirsty to come to Him and drink, adding that rivers of living water would flow from the man that believes on Him, and St. John adds "This spoke He of the Spirit which they that believe on Him were to receive".

Baptism with water was a common activity in Jesus' time. Not only were there the ritual washings of cooking utensils and the purification rites connected with the temple, but John the Baptist preaching repentance in view of the imminent coming of the Messiah had been baptising in Jordan those who responded. Jesus took this concept of baptising with water and applied it by way of metaphor to the Spirit, when He promised to His disciples that they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5).

This metaphor is in line with the Old Testament prophecies about the Spirit being poured on God's people in the same way as water was poured on the body at baptism. St. Peter describes this baptism of the Spirit which the disciples had received on the Day of Pentecost as the pouring out of the Spirit, quoting Joel's prophecy, and later St. Peter referred to the similar experience of Cornelius' household as a baptism with the Spirit (Acts 11: 15-17). Thus when Jesus poured out His Spirit on His disciples after His ascension (Acts 2:33) He fulfilled the promise He gave them that He would baptise them with the Holy Spirit. Baptism with the Spirit, and the pouring out of the Spirit are two ways of describing the same experience which all Christians receive when they believe on Jesus as Lord, of God's presence in their hearts.

Another New Testament metaphor to describe the Spirit's relationship to the believer, which is also drawn from the

manipulation of water, is Luke's phrase of being filled with the Spirit. A person may be filled with the Spirit in the same way as a flagon may be filled with wine. This phrase also finds its origin in the Old Testament. In Exodus 31:3 we read of Bezaleel, the manufacturer of the tabernacle and its furniture, that "God has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship". The same phrase is repeated in 35:31. Bezaleel was filled with the Spirit of God, and this filling was manifested in his ability to execute the work entrusted to him.

St. Luke uses the phrase of being filled with the Spirit in a similar way to these Old Testament passages, namely to express the manifestation of the Spirit in enabling the person to exercise some gift or fulfil some office. On each occasion that Luke uses the phrase he adds an indication of the way in which the fulness of

the Spirit's presence was manifested. For example, he writes of Zechariah that he was filled with the Holy Ghost and prophesied, and of Elisabeth that she was filled with the Holy Ghost and blessed Mary (Luke 1), and in the Acts he writes of Stephen that he was a man "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" and of the Seven generally that "they were full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3,5); and of Barnabas that he was "full of the Holy Ghost and of faith" (11:24) and of St. Paul that "Filled with the Holy Ghost", he fastened his eyes on Elymas and condemned him to temporary blindness.

The phrase being filled, or full of the Holy Ghost occurs only once outside Luke's writings, in Ephesians 5:18 where St. Paul used it in a similar way to express a manifestation of the Spirit. He calls upon Christians to be filled with the Holy Ghost, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Characteristically for

St. Paul, to be filled with the Holy Spirit means a manifestation of fellowship.

God gives His Spirit, that is to say His presence, to all His children. This is the wonderful truth of the Christian religion. And His presence in their hearts and lives enables them to fulfil the ministry which God may give them. This enabling is rightly to be attributed to God, that is to say to His Spirit, and as we observe Christians being enabled by God to live a Christian life and to fulfil their Christian ministry we may speak of them as full of the Holy Spirit for this purpose or for that purpose, if we wish to follow the language of Luke, though as we have seen other New Testament writers do not use this phrase of being "full of the Spirit and..." with the one exception already mentioned of Ephesians 5.

The most characteristic manifestation of the Spirit's presence in the Old Testament

is wisdom. This is seen in the case of Bezaleel and again in Proverbs 1:23, where Wisdom says "I will pour my Spirit upon you, I will make known my words unto you". In the famous passage of the promise of the Spirit to the Messiah, in Isaiah 11, the sixfold manifestation of the Spirit is predominantly in the area of wisdom. "The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord". So in the New Testament when God's presence comes into a person's life He brings wisdom as the greatest of His gifts, e.g. I Corinthians 12:7 "To each one is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom and to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith" and so on. It is not surprising that the Spirit of Christ should be the Spirit of Wisdom or that His presence should be manifested pre-eminently in spiritual wisdom and knowledge, for Christ is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).

He is the Word (John 1:1) (the Greek is Logos, which means Reason). God's greatest natural gift to mankind is the gift of intelligence, which distinguishes man from the rest of creation; and the greatest spiritual gift which His presence or His Spirit brings is spiritual knowledge, knowledge of God, which is eternal life (John 17:3).

The Spirit when He comes into our life, uses and strengthens the natural attributes which God has already given us in our natures. Thus Bezaleel would undoubtedly have had technical dexterity through natural aptitude. This the Spirit of God used when He came into his life. So too, different personalities will have different aptitudes. Some will pre-eminently have the aptitude for wisdom and judgment, some for faith and some for enthusiasm, and thus traits will be used by the Spirit so that they become manifestations of the Spirit. All these different sorts of people are needed in the Christian group.

Those who have the gift of wisdom need those who have the gift of faith and also those who have the gift of enthusiasm, while those who have the gifts of enthusiasm and faith need the fellowship of wise Christian companions if their enthusiasm and faith is not to run onto the rocks of sectarian novelties. It is right to desire these spiritual gifts; though some are more to be desired than others, and some have special promises that God will give them to us if we ask for them, such as the gift of wisdom (James 1:5).

God's Spirit is a Spirit of fellowship. His gifts are intended for the benefit of fellowship and the virtues He imparts are virtues on which fellowship is based. Christ promised that our Heavenly Father would give His own presence, His Holy Spirit, to those who asked for this greatest of all gifts and privileges; and the work of the Spirit when He comes into anyone's life or into the community group is to create the character of God as seen in the

character of Christ. St. Paul lists what this means in his famous passage in Galatians 5, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance". As we desire these things let us ask God for His Spirit according to His promise.

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