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THE SPIRIT, THE CHURCH AND THE
DENOMINATION.

BY

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Each of the four gospels emphasises at the beginning of the Lord's ministry that His work would be to baptise with the Holy Spirit, and they put this in sharp contrast to the ministry of John the Baptist, who was baptizing with water.

This promise of baptism by Jesus with the Holy Spirit was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when the small band of Christian disciples - 120 in all - were gathered in the upper room, when Jesus poured out on them His Holy Spirit. Baptism with the Spirit of God is the initial act which makes us Christians. These images of this initial work of the Spirit in the Christian are drawn from water - washing, pouring, drinking, baptizing, bubbling wells, flowing rivers - all are water metaphors, and this imagery is based on the Old Testament where the life-giving Spirit of God is often spoken of in terms of water - a natural metaphor in a dry and parched country.

In 1 Corinthians 12 the work of Jesus in making us Christians through His Spirit is described by the Apostle Paul under a two-fold water metaphor. "We were all baptized with the Spirit . . . and we were all given the Spirit to drink". We should note the universality of this work of the Spirit throughout the Christian body. As the Prophet Joel foretold, every Christian has the Spirit poured out on him, that is, he has been 'baptized with the Spirit' to quote Jesus' words; he has 'drunk of the Spirit' to quote St. Paul in our text. It is this work of the Spirit within which makes the Christian a new man, a new creation; for the Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Creator, and St. Paul says in Romans "If any man has not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His". If we have not been baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit in regeneration and the new birth, then we have not begun to be Christians, we are still in our sins, still lost eternally. The initial step is to respond to the gracious invitation of the Lord "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink".

The fact that every Christian without exception has received this relationship to the Spirit becomes the ground of our unity as Christians, a unity created by God's presence, by the life-giving Spirit of God, so that it is personal; it is fellowship.

Where then does the local church fit into this picture? Or for that matter, where does our denominational organization fit in? The church is a fellowship, and if we reflect on the nature of fellowship we will see that all fellowships create structures through which they express themselves and which assist them in being fellowships.

The great danger is the ever present tendency to regard the structures as important in themselves, especially as they are more visible than is fellowship, which is personal and invisible though the real thing. The danger is that instead of the denominational structures serving the fellowship it comes about that the fellowship is made to serve the structures, and this destroys the fellowship. Structures, too, may become too heavy or out of date, and so injure the fellowship instead of assisting it. They may become authoritarian and centralistic, and so infringe and injure the exercising of those ministries which the Spirit of Christ gives directly to each of His members. The test of any church structure is whether it assists the fellowship of the Spirit and aids the Spirit given ministries of the members.

Teaching is essential in the church, whether the teaching is in the home by the parents, or in the congregation by the minister; for the knowledge of God is the foundation of Christian faith, Christian worship and Christian obedience. The Christian life is motivated by the Christian hope. These things must be taught. We are not born with this supernatural knowledge, we must be taught it from the Word of God. Christ rules our consciences through His Word and the pastor who rules the flock of God must teach the Word, and apply it to the conscience.

This is his only instrument for ruling in the name of Christ. It is not possible to be a pastor without being a teacher, and that is why the Scripture insists that those who are admitted to the office of pastor must be 'apt to teach'. So a church building should be a place of fellowship and a place of instruction designed to serve the fellowship which the Spirit of God creates when He baptizes us into Christ.

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